

Name: Mallory Dumelle

Course: Writing and Rhetoric II - 52-1152

Instructor: Rukmini Girish

Title of Paper: Humanity's Relationship with Screenwriting and Story

This work illustrates the learning objectives of the Writing and Rhetoric II course because I took the opportunity to use concepts such as ethos, logos, and pathos from Writing and Rhetoric I and apply them to a research paper. I was able to foster a newfound interest in the process of writing a research paper while diving deep into my own field at Columbia and inserting my unique flair at the same time.

Humanity's Relationship to Story and Screenwriting

I'm going to tell you a story. It's a long one, and like a lot of stories, it's about a love affair. Specifically, this is about the love affair humans have with story itself. One could even go so far as to say story is a part of what makes us human in the first place, and without it our lives wouldn't resemble their current state whatsoever. Ever since humans have roamed the Earth, they have told stories to entertain, to teach, and to leave behind a record of their lives. These stories have taken many forms; they have been splashed across cave walls, told over campfire, today in our social media, and in one of the biggest industries we have - film. As an aspiring screenwriter, story is important to me. I always wondered how important it was to others, when describing a story I wanted to write often felt silly and juvenile no matter the subject. No story is really immune to this feeling, even the best in the world. A story could be about a boy wizard, or a dinosaur park, or a defiant girl ahead of her time. They may be legendary stories, but summarized like that, they sound a bit ridiculous. To the outside world, was I just a silly girl stuck in my youth, playing pretend? But then, in film class, a great truth was thrust upon me. Cinema has no need for story, but it has become expected, because people love story and story sells. Now, I was providing a necessary service to the world, I was creating the product most sought after. The more I looked into humans' relationship with story, the more I saw its

importance. Story has been a part of humanity since the beginning, and scientifically proven to be a part of our neural makeup. With the world changing so quickly, story will endure, shape shifting as new methods of narrative are created through technology. The world will undoubtedly change, but story has always been, and will always be, a part of its very core.

A man takes charcoal and draws on a cave wall during the last few bright hours of the day. He draws bison, mostly. He outlines his own hand, then asks others to place their hands beside his and outlines them too. A simple notion, but thousands of years later the drawings are still there. They tell a story of his life long gone. Romans sit around, consuming any pleasure that may be available. Though this will lead to their downfall, today it is a part of their success. They pass stories from generation to generation about their gods as if they had always been theirs, and yet they had adopted these stories from the Greeks. These stories permeate their culture, so well preserved that they are well known to this day. They often have important lessons to impart, and are beloved by those who now can only imagine the life the ancient Romans would have lived. From the beginning of time stories have been there, whether that was in the way a mother warned her children of dangers or in the way biblical text was written, they are a part of our history, and we tell history in their form.

“Research suggests that anecdotes can be as persuasive as hard data, and that jurors are influenced by the quality of the prosecution's and defense's "stories" when deciding whether to find a defendant guilty. Even in science, we seek explanations, not mere descriptions; in history, we want a good narrative, not a mere sequence of events” (Lambrozo).

Humans have intentionally surrounded their lives with story for subconscious reasons. But why? Why have humans of all kinds been using the same method to deliver information? It appears it

may be a part of our actual chemistry. Or, more specifically, a part of our brains. Research suggests that stories are stored in the brain much the same way as an experience might be. That when descriptive words are used, this fires up not only the language center of the brain, but also the part of the brain that deals with the thing described (Murphy). When sensory metaphor is used such as in the term velvety voice, the language portion of the brain as well as the sensory cortex is lit up on the brain scan. When a subject reads a phrase of action, such as 'Pablo kicked the ball' the motor cortex lights up as if the reader is engaging in the movement, instead of just reading it. Further, the part of the motor cortex that deals with the specific body part, whether that be arm or leg, is the part that is lit up the most. So then it makes sense that we would be affected by stories more than one would think on surface level. We may read about character heartbreaks and experience some part of it ourselves. We may hear the story about the selfish boy who lost all of his friends, and experience some of that loss. We are not likely to forget it, and therefore are more likely to learn our lesson from other's experiences. This would be a key factor in evolution as well; tell me not to eat the poisonous berry and I may try it anyways, but tell me the gruesome story of what happened to the last guy who did, and I probably won't. Stories teach us morals, they impart wisdom about the world, they improve our social skills.

It was reported both in 2006 and 2009 that people who read fiction novels are able to better understand and empathize with, others (Murphy). This was still the case when they considered that more naturally empathetic people were the ones who enjoy reading in the first place. The idea that reading story, especially fictional story, might improve real world social skills and empathy means we are improving ourselves every time we read a good book or watch a good film. We even see patterns of story where they absolutely do not exist, such as in two

triangles moving around a frame (Rose). So then writing stories and dedicating your life to it doesn't sound so crazy after all. Stories have been a part of the human experience since the beginning and we are built to enjoy, learn from, and find them. Stories are placed where they need not be. For example, in film.

Film for a motion picture was first invented in 1885 (Hale). It didn't take long at all for people to use the new technology to tell stories, and by 1905, there were theaters who charged for them. By the 1920's movies had become so culturally important that true 'movie stars' could already be found. People who, seen by so many, shaped some of culture as well. Anywhere there was a writer creating something, there was a beautiful face starring in it.

While the invention of film could have been used to showcase our world, as is, or simply our relatives in our little lives, it wasn't. Story was the basis for silent films, even without any dialogue or sound. As they were relatively short at first, an in-house interpreter would tell the audience what was happening. When the films grew longer, this job was replaced by intertitles that would display text, either narrating parts of the film or showing small parts of dialogue (Twyman). Films eventually moved from the silent era after 1927 and began including sound to enhance their films. Always, as it were, the films were telling stories.

From the research about how reading certain emotions can trigger a real experience for us mentally, we can ascertain a similar thing may happen when we watch film. In fact, watching film makes stories real for us in an entirely different way. While the elements of story, emotionally, physically, are perceived to be real, the experience is actually real as well. So are our responses (Totten). We may flinch if a fist flies our way, or smile at a smiling face. Our

actual instincts come to play when we watch a movie, and in this way, the story becomes even more real, even more intensified.

Great stories are always sought after, and if we find them in places where they aren't, then surely cinema can't exist without story, at least for humans. The industry itself couldn't exist without story because it wouldn't have been a good business were it not for them. As the years went on, stories on film became more complex and more important. As we know, people love stories, in part because even watching and listening to a story can make us feel like it is truly happening, or has happened to us. Story takes film from a visual medium to an experience. It is the reason we leave the theater feeling like anything may be possible, and life is so much grander or thrilling or more romantic than we thought. And the writer of these stories was and is, of course, a screenwriter.

Think of your favorite movie. It might be funny, or thrilling, or sad. It might have some famous lines, and some famous actors, and you probably love the story. Now think of those who starred in it. I bet you can. Think of the director. Since it's your favorite movie, you might be able to think of this too. Directors are often known for certain films and certain styles. Now, think of who wrote it. The person who came up with the story, who wrote those famous lines, who the story couldn't exist without. I bet you can't. Unless the director wrote the script as well, screenwriters often get left in the dust of notoriety. Now, I'm sure this is okay with them. After all, no one is becoming a screenwriter thinking they are going to be on the cover of your magazine. Well known screenwriters get work, get paid well, and are highly regarded in their industry. But I've learned now that story is essential to our very lives, and where would Hollywood be without it? Yet I admit I do not know who wrote most of my favorite films, unless

it was Quentin Tarantino Directed by Quentin Tarantino. This is not exactly my personal fault, this is the way of the industry and our culture.

Screenwriters are not the glamour of Hollywood. They are just some sort of backbone, and there's a difference between who is respected within the industry and who is being followed around by paparazzi. A lot is done to create a film, but it's performers who remain famous for it. This started long ago and continues today. It's Harry Fink and his wife Rita Fink that wrote the famous line we all remember as "Do you feel lucky punk? Well, do ya?" but it's Clint Eastwood we remember for saying it (Fink). The creator of art and the performer of it have long been two very different things, but the performer has a way of staying with audiences much longer than simply a name on the credits. When we talk about story in this context, it's easy to understand why the only time the writer gets the full credit is if they are the star. The star of a novel is the writer, there's no one else between us and the story. There's just words, the person who wrote them, and our internal voice. Once there's someone to perform them, a character saying the words, a face to remember, why wouldn't we remember them? If stories become real to us easily, then the actors in them become the real people experiencing the stories. They bring a story to life before our very eyes, and no lighting guy, no boom operator, no writer, nobody else is seen on that screen.

Being famous makes you a part of pop culture, being respected in your industry means your 'co-workers' understand how important the work that you do is, and that your boss pays you fairly for it. In this sense, screenwriters still aren't exactly getting their fair share. It's a difficult career, and few will become extremely successful. Actors experience the same thing. The difference is how pop culture then rules the industry - movie stars are expected to get multi-

million dollar paychecks, a screenwriter is considered extremely lucky to even get six figures for a screenplay that will be made into a multimillion dollar one (Screencraft). The Best Actor/Actress portion of the Oscars gets a lot of screen time, this year screenwriting may as well have been Best Sound Editing for all the attention it got. Yes, more under-appreciated jobs in film, but this paper isn't about them. It's about story, and maybe a bit about me. Me making money and being comfortable in the future, and how with screenwriting, I might not be. It's about me, currently, in film classes, learning about films and the money put into making them, despite the low salary given to some components of that process.

Big time movies cost hundreds of millions of dollars to make, and often earn much more than that. That's right, I said hundreds of millions. I got an assignment a few weeks ago where my theoretical budget was thirty million, and this was considered 'low budget'. That could make you really ill if you thought about it for too long. Regardless, millions are put at stake for a story, and millions made. As I said, an unknown screenwriter might not even be paid six figures for a script. Everyone from my professors to those in Hollywood agree to even sell it in the first place is lucky. But they are moved by the incessant need, as I have always been, to write stories. One of my professors explains his view on human's love of story like this: "We love stories because we are horribly lonely. We are all trapped in our own heads and can never truly know the thoughts of others. Late night talks, passionate lovemaking, and good stories are all some of the ways we try to escape our prisons. Nothing completely works, but such efforts are the best we have" (Haden). While this gives the general sense of the stereotypical tortured writer, aren't we all? No one need to even suffer at greater-than-normal lengths in order to suffer. Writers write because they are human. Which is to say, they are storytellers, they are lonely, and they are

searching for meaning. Humans who pursue writing are just perhaps better at putting that into words and creating new situations for fictional humans to suffer in. That's a bit of a joke, but only a bit of one. Writing movies is not too much different from writing novels besides the very detailed industry format and the idea that you are only to write what can be seen.

It's actually extremely interesting to think that a whole multi-million dollar industry is built on stories. What's more, that industry then creates a need for schooling to teach its ways. Walk through the film building at this very college and you'll be passing classes teaching people to film story, to light story, to act it, direct it, write it, build it and more. I'll spend three more years learning different facets of film just to have a prayer at finding some success. It's a difficult industry to get into, and making a movie is incredibly intricate, much more than people realize. Millions are spent to make a movie and an individual puts tens of thousands into learning how to do so. All of this money, not to mention time, effort, and dreaming, is built on story.

This fact alone, even without all of the scientific data regarding the brain's story-based wiring, could elevate a love of story from a juvenile pastime to an imperative element to humanity. When my doctor asks what I'm studying in college I used to be a little embarrassed to say film. After all, he's trying to save people's lives or whatever and I'm trying to make movies. But I bet he goes to see movies anyway, and I bet some of the movies he's seen have shaped who he is today, medical degree and all. If stories are imperative, and movies are money powerhouses, and screenwriters are behind both of those somewhere, then it is an important job. The industry might not have to honor them as much as a movie star, and we may not be brought to the cinema because of an advertisement that said our favorite screenwriter was behind the

newest thriller, but we rely on them for movies and for stories. They are important inherently. No less and perhaps no more than any other position in film or in any creative profession.

I like stories and so does everyone else apparently, but I'm the one who chose to write them for others to enjoy. That should be enough, right? But then I think about the future and all of these VR headsets, all of the theaters that are closing. While films are probably not going anywhere anytime soon, what does the future have in store for me? Or for screenwriting as a whole? Computers have changed just about everything since they were created, they've made many professions extinct. What will happen to screenwriting, what will happen to story? Right now we use social media to tell our stories of a non-fictional nature, and sometimes fictional too. We write poems on Twitter, we make mini movies for YouTube, and craft a better version of our day for Snapchat or Instagram Stories. Will film disappear and Twitter reign?

It's my guess that the role of a screenwriter will go through some shifts but never leave. This is supported by all of the research into how much we run on story, are improved by it, and need it. Perhaps one of the reasons we are human is our link to story. With robots in our midst and more on the horizon, scientists are giving them the ability to tell information as story, just so we trust them more and interact with them more easily (Lambrozo). We might put more power towards epic stories told in short parts, such as television, and we may watch our stories as if we are a character, such as in virtual reality headsets, but these still require story. The show Westworld is a good example of how story may take us into the future. In this series there is an amusement park of epic proportions that people go to in order to experience the old west of the United States. There's fake people, robots taken to an extreme realism, and there's even fake horses. But my point is that there are stories in this future amusement park. There's stories

everywhere. Every fake person has a backstory, and is put into new stories when needed. Each 'host', as the fake people are called, runs on this story and can be taken into new versions by guests. The whole point of a guest's exciting experience might be the story they are a part of. The entire park and the entire plot of the series runs on these vast complex stories.

While I hope nothing like Westworld comes to fruition, it's quite possible, and it gives a look at how the future might use story. The fictional park would employ many people just to come up with them. We might find different ways of taking story to the extreme, and frankly for better or worse I'm sure we will. For each new way of communication that pops up, we use it to create new types of narratives (Rose). And while everyone always worries a robot might someday soon take their job, it doesn't seem to be a possibility for screenwriters right now. Ross Goodwin, an NYU artificial intelligence researcher teamed up with film director Oscar Sharpe, to see if an AI fed a lot of science fiction screenplays could come up with one of its own. The result is an almost comprehensible film, due to great acting and direction, and some lines of dialogue that kind of makes sense. The AI even wrote lyrics to a song that they had made and put into the film. It doesn't make sense, but it does mimic the way humans seem to communicate and the types of things they say to each other. For instance, one exchange between characters goes like this:

"I don't know what you're saying."

"That's right." (Benjamin)

It ends with a large monologue of nonsense, the female character seemingly describing an interaction with a man. One of the most logical things she says is that "he will throw me out of his eyes". This, to me, proves that I don't have to worry I'll finish school just to be replaced by a

robot, but it also makes me think about the possibilities. Right now, AI isn't perfect, but it's being improved every day, and one day, the randomness of computer-made conversation paired with a higher accuracy in copying human speech may allow robots to write brilliant screenplays. Let's hope that being human is far too complex for that to happen in our lifetimes. I don't know about you, but I'm pretty content with the stories being written today, good and bad, by real people with real experiences.

Likewise, for every change in human experience, in human existence, there is a story written. Even as I write, I can feel the Earth under my feet trembling with uncertainty and change. In this type of political climate people seek stability, in the form of good natured stories rooted in humanity - family and love. They seek stories of dystopian futures, to compare their current environment with the worst possible outcome. They seek a better future, a world that is advanced without being scary, in science fiction form. While experiences are what humans write about, they also decide what humans write about and when. No one wants to see a war movie during real tensions about the breakout of war. Everyone is in need of fantasy when real life is getting increasingly scary. Story is an outlet and a remedy, and as things change both now and far into the future, it will continue to be used as such in whatever mode of entertainment we have.

It's a surprise to learn how our brains interact with story. But on a grander scale it makes perfect sense. Sitting in the backseat of my mom's car, looking out the window and telling myself stories should have told me my brain ran on them. I'd tell the same story again and again, changing details and finding new chapters each time. I did it for entertainment, and I learned stories in school for knowledge. My mother told me stories for safety, and my friends told me stories for our understanding of the world, or for our understanding of our classmate's sinner

workings. Nomads told stories to maintain their history, and people today write stories to warn about the potential future consequences of our actions. People of the future will use story to understand us, and to make future generations understand them. Whether watching story on TV in our pajamas or on Broadway, whether writing a story to scare people or to enlighten them, we are engaging in something we were meant to do. Something we were created to love. I might have chosen my career path because I like movies, and writing is fun, but I had a brain and the entire history of humanity to thank for the fact it was even an option. The stories we tell are about us even when they don't seem so on the surface, and the greatest story we will have told is our love affair with story itself.

Works Cited

Gopnik, Adam. "Can Science Explain Why We Tell Stories?" *The New Yorker*, 18 May 2012.

<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/can-science-explain-why-we-tell-stories>.

Accessed 27 Mar. 2017.

Gottschall, Jonathon. *Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. *HMH Books*, 2012, pp.

52-53. Accessed 27 Mar. 2017.

Haden, Justin. "Interview with A Screenwriter." E-mail interview. 6 Mar. 2017.

Lambroza, Tania. "Is Story A Key To Human Intelligence?" *NPR*, 13 June 2016. [http://](http://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/06/13/481827994/are-stories-a-key-to-human-intelligence)

www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/06/13/481827994/are-stories-a-key-to-human-intelligence Accessed 27 Mar. 2017.

Marks, Justin. "My Life a Screenwriter You've Never Heard of." Editorial. *Hollywood Reporter*,

15 May 2013. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/my-life-as-a-screenwriter-520979> Accessed 27 Mar. 2017.

Murphy Paul, Annie. "Your Brain on Fiction." *The New York Times*, Mar. 2012. [http://](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html)

www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html. Accessed 28 Mar. 2017.

Fink, Harry, and Rita Fink, Writer. *Dirty Harry*. Performance by Clint Eastwood, *Warner Bros.* ,

1971, www.imdb.com/title/tt0066999/?ref_=nm_knf_t1. Accessed 10 May 2017.

Rose, Frank. "Art of Immersion: Why Do We Tell Stories." *Wired*, Mar. 2011. [https://](https://www.wired.com/2011/03/why-do-we-tell-stories)

www.wired.com/2011/03/why-do-we-tell-stories. Accessed 27 Mar. 2017.

Totten. "New Research Explains." *89.3KPCC*, 4 Dec. 2004. www.scpr.org/news/

2014/12/04/48457/what-watching-movies-can-tell-us-about-how-our-bra/. Accessed 11

May 2017.

Twyman, Debbie. "Film Appreciation." *Twyman-whitney.com*, edited by Debbie Twyman, Self

Published, Apr. 1999, www.twyman-whitney.com/film/genre/westerns.html. Accessed 11

May 2017.

Screencraft. "How Much Do Screenwriters Really Make?" *Huffington Post*, Oct. 2015 [USA] ,

www.huffingtonpost.com/screencraft/how-much-do-screenwriters_b_8309474.html.

Accessed 27 Apr. 2017

an LSTM RNN Artificial Intelligence, Benjamin (formerly known as Jetson), Writer. Sunspring.

performances by Thomas Middleditch and Elisabeth Grey, Youtube <https://>

www.youtube.com/watch?v=LY7x2Ihqjmc. Accessed 27 Apr. 2017.