

Myth of the Scribbler: An Investigation into Hollywood's Self-Constructed Image Through the Portrayal of the Screenwriter

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For most movie-goers, particularly in this country, the symbolism seems to be that of a never-never world inhabited by glamorous creatures, living hedonistically and enjoying their private swimming pools and big estates, attending magnificent parties, or being entertained in famous night clubs. – *Hollywood: The Dream Factory*, Hortense Powdermaker¹

By just standing in any grocery store checkout line, one can look over the rows of magazines, tabloids and newspapers splashed with celebrity photos and headlines. Or simply turn on the news and one can view any number of television programs focused on the life and times of Hollywood, its business and its inhabitants. As a society, we are obsessed with the culture of Hollywood. In a democracy, the Hollywood glitterati are our royalty. Hortense Powdermaker's 1950 look at Hollywood sought to take an anthropological look at Hollywood as a culture unto itself. What were the different jobs within the culture and how did they work together? What type of people inhabited this culture? What is the reality versus the myth of Hollywood, and can they even be separated? Much of the image that we have of Hollywood is a self-constructed image. Much of the myth of Hollywood has been cultivated by the culture itself. One of the ways that Hollywood has cultivated its own mythology is through its actual industrial product – films. Christopher Ames, in his book *Movies About the Movies: Hollywood Reflected*, states that “all Hollywood movies are about Hollywood; some just happen to be set there as well.”² Some films though take a more direct, self-reflexive look at the industry. These are the films that are actually set within the filmmaking industry, movies about making movies. While the history of filmmaking – both the artistic development and industrial practices – has overwhelmingly been

¹ Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood, the dream factory: an anthropologist looks at the movie-makers*, (Boston: Grosset & Dunlap, 1950) 16.

² Christopher Ames, *Movies about the Movies: Hollywood Reflected*, (University of Kentucky Press: Lexington, KY, 1997) 2.

undertaken in reference to Hollywood by scholars such as David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, Janet Staiger, Jane Gaines, Tom Gunning, Richard Maltby and Tom Schatz, just to name a few, and is an ongoing process. Many of these Hollywood histories are portrayed in a more traditional historical style – this is how it was and this is how it worked approach. But how may the history of Hollywood be viewed through its own documenting and creation through narrative films about moviemaking?

In 1995, the Lumière & Company project was released, a project to commemorate the 100 year anniversary of the Lumière Brothers invention. Forty directors were given a cinematograph and asked to make an *actualité* under the same constraints the Lumière Brothers would have been under – no longer than 52 seconds, no synchronized sound, and limited takes. The project itself is an interesting historical document. What do we learn about the history of film and its industrial, technological and artistic changes by forcing ourselves to go back to the beginning? The segment created by French filmmaker Claude LeLouch is a history of film in 52 seconds - looking at the technological and artistic history of filmmaking. In 1998, filmmaking as a viable subject matter for films was still alive and well. Beginning as early as 1908, Hollywood has been making films that looked inward at the industry and the art. What historical view of Hollywood can be gleaned from this self-reflexive, narcissistic point of view? I propose in this paper to look at one facet of the Hollywood myth: the screenwriter and how this image is constructed on the screen. It is through the representation of the screenwriter and the screenwriting process that we most often see the ongoing struggle between art and industry within Hollywood's culture. While Ames wants to look at the myth and the myth's cultural significance, this paper will look at how the construction of the myth of the screenwriter and

screenwriting provides the beginning of an interesting historical document about the mysterious and multi-faceted Hollywood.

While there are many films written about Hollywood, as of 1975, according to Rudy Behlmer and Tony Thomas, the number of films made about Hollywood is around two hundred.³ Clearly more than three decades later this number has increased. As this paper's specific approach is to look at Hollywood through the image of the screenwriter, the films chosen were those that prominently featured a screenwriter character and represented the screenwriting process in some way. As such, interestingly, it is in the 1950s that we see this image begin to emerge. While it is not a consistent image used in films about filmmaking across the decade, it recurs in different times. The films chosen, therefore, come primarily from the 1950s and from the 1990s. I have categorized them in two ways: (1) films set in the time period that they were made and (2) films set in a previous time period. These categorizations will hopefully illuminate this particular aspect of the continuing narcissistic image that "Hollywood" cultivates. The reasons for the clumping of these particular images during a given time period as well as the jumps in time will be addressed further on in this paper.

Christopher Ames says, "Hollywood is difficult to locate or define because the term 'Hollywood' embraces a bundle of associations conveyed by movies and the mass of writing about them."⁴ Many different approaches to writing about Hollywood have been undertaken. One of the historical approaches is to look at how movies are made – the actual production practices. Yet, there is another approach which is not undertaken as often – the creative and intellectual process that accompanies all artistic forms. It is, perhaps, an amorphous process to

³ Rudy Behlmer, and Tony Thomas, *Hollywood's Hollywood: the movies about the movies*. (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1975) 1.

⁴ Ames, *Movies about the Movies*, 2.

define, but it is one none-the-less which people want to know about. How did you come up with that storyline, create that character, decide to use that shadow in that particular way? Not necessarily more so, but in a way that is connected to the development of mass media, the creative process is inextricably connected to the industrial practices of what formed as a business and an art form simultaneously.

In 1915, poet, artist and film-lover Vachel Lindsay wrote *The Art of the Moving Picture*. It is probably the earliest book written about the artistry of filmmaking, a book written to explain from a critical perspective the creative process. He says, “This book tries to find that fourth dimension of architecture, painting, and sculpture, which is the human soul in action, that arrow with wings which is the flash of fire from the film, or the heart of man, or Pygmalion’s image, when it becomes a woman.”⁵ The poetic reverence with which Lindsay writes about filmmaking reveals that there were those who saw this medium as art, at an early stage of the process. While much of Lindsay’s work focuses on the images on the screen and how those images are determined based on story type, images which can be classified through the directing, cinematography, performance, art direction and costume design, but not specifically the writing, others were focused on the art of writing the photoplay. Just three years later, in 1918, Anita Loos and John Emerson, established and successful scenario writers, wrote a series for *Photoplay* magazine titled “Photoplay Writing.” The opening paragraph to the first article of the series stated:

Until quite recently it has been the habit of most writers and stage producers of consequence to decry their artistic endeavor. Of late, however, the motion picture, in spite of the slings and arrows of outraged highbrows, has attained to such vast importance artistically and commercially that these same writers and producers, with compassion

⁵ Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, (Modern Library Pbk. Ed. Modern Library, 2000) 21.

their hearts and eye for the main chance, have stepped forward and in a few well-chosen words of apology have condescended to give the movies a boost – to reach them a helping hand on their wobbly journey toward the Haven of Art.⁶

The film industry was a little over two decades old and already a conflict between whether or not film was an art form or merely an industrial, mass-produced product was underway. It was a struggle that Hollywood would actively cultivate as part of its image. The producers and business executives would cultivate it for profit-purposes – elevating filmmaking to a high art form would bring in a different clientele of people increasing the audience they were already catering to. For the writers, directors, performers and other artistically inclined types within the industry, some of whom had migrated to it from already established artistic mediums, cultivating this struggle meant validating their work as artists.

Much more recently, historians have gone back and looked at how the filmmaking process developed. David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger established that what has come to be known as the Classical Hollywood style of filmmaking emerged by 1917. Their book, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, looks at the development of the intertwined artistic and industrial practices of filmmaking. The development of the narrative film went from what Thompson refers to as primitive to classical. She states that, “the US cinema moved from a narrative model derived largely from vaudeville into a filmmaking formula drawing upon aspects of the novel, the popular legitimate theatre, and the visual arts, and combined with specifically cinematic devices.”⁷ The fact that film narrative’s development into the classical style was rooted in the art of the novel and the play is relevant to that artistic and literary aspect of Hollywood’s self image; equally important though is that

⁶ John Emerson and Anita Loos, “Photoplay Writing,” *Photoplay*, February 1918: 51.

⁷ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, (NY: Columbia University Press, 1985) 157.

Thompson refers to it as a formula which reflects on the industrial aspect of that same self-image.

When Powdermaker undertook her anthropological study of Hollywood, she looked at the people that inhabited the culture, including the writers. In her chapter titled “The Scribes,” she outlines the reasons that writers from other mediums were drawn to Hollywood, primarily for what she describes as “easy and big money.”⁸ Although she does admit that some came because they had “a genuine interest in making movies, a special facility for seeing stories in film imagery, and who are hopeful of utilizing some of the potentialities of the powerful medium.”⁹ In other words they came for money and art, two sides of the same coin that is part of the Hollywood myth. She then proceeds to describe the varied and numerous types of Hollywood screenwriter giving them categorized names such as “Mr. Hopeful,” “Miss Sanguine,” “Mr. Cynic,” and “Mr. Literary.”¹⁰ While this was understood as an anthropological approach to Hollywood at the time, 1950, even Powdermaker contributes to the myth. By whittling down the individual to various labels and classifications, she perpetuates a particular image of what Hollywood is.

As already addressed, Hollywood has been making films about itself since as early as 1908. Many of these early films focused on antics of performers and would-be performers on the actual film stage or set. An early example is Charlie Chaplin’s 1915 film *His New Job*, which shows the antics of a man attempting to get a job as an extra on a film.¹¹ But it is in the early 1950s, the same time that Powdermaker’s book was published, there was a cluster of films about Hollywood which all contained screenwriters as the film’s protagonist – Nicholas Ray’s, *In a*

⁸ Powdermaker, *Hollywood: the Dream Factory*, 131.

⁹ Powdermaker, *Hollywood: the Dream Factory*, 131

¹⁰ Powdermaker, *Hollywood: the Dream Factory*, 136-149.

¹¹ Charles Chaplin, *His New Job*, (General Film Company, 1915) Film.

Lonely Place and Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, both from 1950, and Vincent Minnelli's *The Bad and the Beautiful* in 1952. Within these three films, we see the emergence of certain tropes and character types of screenwriting and the screenwriter. These tropes and character types will reemerge again in the 1990s, in similar and modified ways.

In thinking about the myth of the Hollywood screenwriter, the first image – and sound – that often comes to mind is that of a typewriter. It is at the typewriter that we often think of the screenwriter. For how else would the scripts get written? Joe Gillis (William Holden) in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) is first introduced as a dead body, but the very next image that we see of him he is sitting at a typewriter attempting to write before he is interrupted by repo men come to repossess his car. Later, with the vibrantly autumnal Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) hovering over his shoulder, he again sits at a typewriter working on her screenplay of *Salome*. The interesting distinction here is that Norma's version of the script has been handwritten. We have never seen Norma writing, for she is an actress and not a screenwriter.¹² The screenwriter writes at the typewriter; the dilettante writes by hand. The juxtaposition of these two images begins to define the Hollywood screenwriter, specifically rooted in the technological medium of the typewriter. The two become inextricably linked.

In *In a Lonely Place* (1950), Dixon Steele (Humphrey Bogart), toward the middle of the film, sits at his typewriter having made a breakthrough in a new script he has been assigned to write. The distinctive clacking of the keys almost overpowers the dialogue that occurs between Laurel Gray (Gloria Graham) and Mel Lippman (Art Smith).¹³ James Lee Bartlow (Dick Powell) in *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) sits in a rocking chair before a low table with a typewriter working on a novel. Once he has agreed to come to Hollywood to write screenplays,

¹² Billy Wilder, *Sunset Blvd.*, (Paramount Pictures, 1950) Film.

¹³ Nicholas Ray, *In a Lonely Place*, (Columbia Pictures, 1950) Film.

this exact writing set-up is transported to his studio office in Los Angeles, and the same image is repeated, only this time he is writing a screenplay.¹⁴ This connection between the novelist writing at a typewriter and the screenwriter using the same tool implies that the screenwriter is someone with just as high an artistic standing as a novelist. The combination of image and sound becomes an iconic representation of what it means to be a screenwriter for “the pictures.”

This iconic image has not gone away, even as typewriters have been replaced by computers. The Coen Brothers *Barton Fink* (1991) is historically set in 1941. Clearly, to be ‘historically real’ – which ultimately means the artists’ version of what reality of a past time period would be which in turn is based upon the cultivated myth of the Hollywood screenwriter – a computer could not be utilized. Yet, the choice to set a film about filmmaking in a previous decade says much about how we think about making movies. Barton Fink (John Turturro), not unlike Joe, Dixon and James Lee before him, sits at a typewriter, in a solitary space – a hotel room – and attempts to write his screenplay.¹⁵ It is not only the typewriter but also the image of the blank or partially written page that has become an interlinked idea of screenwriting. The typewriter signifies industry, while the blank page signifies writer’s block to the creative flow of ideas. The Hollywood screenwriter is almost always depicted first as having writer’s block and then making a breakthrough, at which time the hands move furiously over intensely clacking keys. *Barton Fink* (1991) contributes to the ongoing mythology that goes back at least as early as the 1950s. Even in a contemporary films set in the present day, this image has not gone away. The 2002 film *Adaptation*, depicts Charlie (Nicholas Cage) sitting at a typewriter with intense writer’s block and anxiety over that block to his creativity.¹⁶

¹⁴ Vincente Minnelli, *The Bad and the Beautiful*, (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1952) Film.

¹⁵ Ethan Coen, and Joel Coen, *Barton Fink*, (20th Century Fox, 1991) Film.

¹⁶ Spike Jonze, *Adaptation*, (Image Entertainment, 2010) Film.

The connection between writing at the typewriter and the creation of a story as an artistic endeavor remains. But this connection and imagery is an evolution of the ongoing myth and conflict between industry and art. The use of the typewriter in the 1950s would have been a time saving device, not a creative one. Even Friedrich Kittler in his historical analysis *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, makes a distinction between the artistic poet and the scenario writer. He says, “To the poetic intellect, the unassuming media link of silent film and typewriter, image flow and intertitles was nothing short of desecration.”¹⁷ The use of these new technological mediums to create art was anathema to the very idea of creating art. Yet, with the continued use of this imagery to represent the Hollywood screenwriter, the typewriter has become emblematic of the art as well as the industry of writing. It is very possible that as films about film continue to be made and the representative screenwriter ultimately moves from typewriter to computer, a similar process will occur – from a technological tool used for industry to one that ultimately represents the creative process.

The character of the screenwriter is another of the ongoing tropes which has resulted in an iconic image with similarities and variations across films and time periods. These character types are also inextricably linked with the industrial practice of the narrative and genre formula versus the artistic practice of creating a masterpiece. Dixon Steele says, “One day I’ll surprise you and write something good.”¹⁸ This sentiment, not only to write something good but the underlying implication to write something important, a screenwriting masterpiece, is echoed across films across time periods. It is one of the main characteristics of the iconic Hollywood screenwriter image. Barton Fink wants to write about the common man, Joe Gillis is inspired by

¹⁷ Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. 1st ed. Stanford University Press, 1999. Print.

¹⁸ Ray, *In a Lonely Place*.

Betty Schaefer (Nancy Olsen) to work on a character driven piece with depth and heart, and Charlie wants to write about flowers, which has never been done in film before. Across the board, what we see is a character driven to elevate the formulaic screenplay to a creative, possibly literary, and perhaps socio-political artistic creation. These characters, while feeling constrained by the conventions of genre and the classical Hollywood style, often want to break the mode and create something new, something never before seen in the cinema.

One film emphasizes this confrontational battle between the industrial formula and artistic originality through parody and comedy, *Paris When it Sizzles* (1964). Richard Benson (William Holden) has been hired to write a screenplay based on the title alone – *The Girl Who Stole the Eiffel Tower*, but just as his filmic predecessors he has writer's block about what the story should be. In a tirade to the typist, Gabrielle Simpson (Audrey Hepburn) he has hired to work for him, Benson relates the very limited storylines based on generic conventions through which any and all screenplay narratives can be told. Gabrielle, eager to learn, explains that her only filmmaking experience has been with a French filmmaker, a la Jean Luc Godard, who she claims "writes about what doesn't happen."¹⁹ The implied distinction here, and one that Benson, unlike his predecessors, doesn't seem to have a problem with, is one between the commercial films of Hollywood and the artistic films of the French New Wave. This film's ideological approach to the filmmaker is deeply rooted in a shift in film theory in the late 1950s – the introduction of the New Wave cinema in France, Bazin's *Cahiers du Cinema* publication, and American academics adoption of these new critical theories and techniques. This film, while it makes fun of the "artistic" work of the French filmmakers, at the same time makes a statement about its own image, one that it doesn't seem quite comfortable with. Hollywood makes

¹⁹ Richard Quine, *Paris When It Sizzles*, (Paramount, 2001) Film.

commercial films; other places make artistic ones. *Paris When It Sizzles* on the surface has no problem with this, but the very fact that this film is a parody of the industry implies something else entirely. While Benson seemingly has no problem with the perceived formulaic and repetitive process of screenplay writing, the very juxtaposition of his work to that of French “art” film writers and directors implies that Hollywood longs for what it does – the commercial mass-produced film – to be considered art by those mysterious connoisseurs who know what art is.

These filmic versions of the screenwriter also have set types, not unlike Powdermaker’s categorizations. In fact the types that I have outlined in many ways are amalgamations of her much more diverse typologies: the sell-out who has bought into the formulaic system and the industrial practice of Hollywood, the literati who have come with critical acclaim from established literary mediums and believe they are going to continue to write critical, literary material, and the down-and-out who has had previous success but has fallen out of favor and therefore out of work for quite some time. More often than not, the characters in each of these films is combines these three distinct character types. Richard Benson is probably the only one in the films analyzed here who comes close to representing one type only – the sell-out, but even his character by the end of the film wants to write something that will be good. Dixon Steele and Joe Gillis, both characters from films in 1950, represent a combination of the sell-out and the down and out, while Barton Fink and Charlie represent the literati crossed with the potential to be the sell-out. One film expresses the connection between these character types and the struggle between art and industry.

In 2000, HBO Films produced a film about what many consider to be the greatest film ever made and which in and of itself has become an iconic emblem for the art of filmmaking – *RKO 281: The Battle over Citizen Kane*. This is an historical account of the making of Orson

Welles's *Citizen Kane*, and again I use the term historical in reference to Hollywood's self-interpretation of its own history, the perpetuation of its own myth. In this film, the screenwriter character is in fact based on actual screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz, performed by John Malkovich. Mankiewicz is a combination of all three screenwriter types outlined above. Even more important though, the battle over *Citizen Kane* wasn't just one between Welles, the studio and Hearst, but was one between Welles and Mankiewicz.²⁰ Part of the battle was played out in later years between film theorists and critics – specifically Pauline Kael who attributed much of the genius of the film to the writer, Mankiewicz, and Andrew Sarris as well as Peter Bogdanovich who fell along the traditional auteur theory lines attributing the genius to Welles. The representation in this film of the screenwriter as someone secondary to the writer is one that has been cultivated, changed, and yet at the same time held up in actual practice across the decades.

Hollywood has struggled with this image. At times over-emphasizing the importance of the writer, as the Coen's do in *Barton Fink* when Jack Lipnick (Michael Lerner) exclaims, "the writing is king here at Capital Pictures. You don't believe me, get a look at your paycheck at the end of every week,"²¹ and Jonze does in *Adaptation* through the deference that Valerie Thomas (Tilda Swinton), studio executive, gives to Charlie's genius as a writer and his personal process while at a lunch meeting.²² Interestingly, the struggle over the importance of the screenwriter is one that has emerged in more recent movies about movie making. This struggle doesn't appear in the films of the 50s, or even in *Paris When It Sizzles* in 1964. So while the image of the writer has remained somewhat consistent in respect to the individual characters, the way those

²⁰ Benjamin Ross, *RKO 281*, (HBO Pictures, 1999) TV movie.

²¹ Coen and Coen, *Barton Fink*.

²² Jonze, *Adaptation*.

characters are perceived by others in the industry has evolved to present yet another aspect of the “real” and fictional image of the screenwriter.

One final and important characteristic of the representational image of the screenwriter is that he is always male. It has been documented that during the teens, 20s and early 30s one quarter of the screenwriters in Hollywood were women and that between 1911 and 1925 half of all the films copyrighted were written by women.²³ While subsequent research into the numbers of women writers in the later years of Hollywood’s Golden era or even into the 60s and 70s has not been undertaken in great depth yet, something I hope to do in future research, the fact that even in its own creation, Hollywood sees the screenwriter as male. It can be implied that the numbers did indeed decrease from Beauchamp’s statistics, and it can be inferred from more recent research done by Dr. Martha Lauzen at the Center for the Study of Women in Television tracking the number of women working in creative, behind-the-camera positions in film over at least the past decade. The Center’s recent Celluloid Ceiling report showed that in the top 250 films of 2009, 8% of the screenwriters were women, a drop in 4% from 2008, and a drop of 5% since 1998.²⁴ Therefore, it would make sense, of a sort, for the Hollywood artists creating an onscreen vision of themselves to portray the screenwriter as male, especially if the actual screenwriters writing the script for the film were male. And yet, this merely reiterates that Hollywood’s image is very much based in the image that it wants to create. For this particular type of film narrative, the convention seems to be that the screenwriter is male. Not because it was always the case, but because it became the convention. It could be argued that the more prominent portrayal of screenwriters on the screen began after the decrease in the number of

²³ Cari Beauchamp, *Without lying down: Frances Marion and the powerful women of early Hollywood*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997) 11.

²⁴ Martha M. Lauzen, “The Celluloid Ceiling Report,” (Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, 2010).

women writers working in Hollywood. Interestingly, even this portrayal of the male screenwriter is contested within some of these films.

Both *Sunset Boulevard* in 1950, and *Barton Fink*'s 1991 portrayal of 1941 Hollywood have prominent female writer characters, although neither is a working writer within the context of the film. In *Sunset Boulevard*, Betty Schaefer is a script reader at the studio but with aspirations to be a screenwriter. While the down-and-out Gillis whittles away at Norma's impossibly bad *Salome*, it is through Schaefer that Gillis rediscovers his inspiration as well as his desire to write. Through Schaefer's urging, in part because she believes that she needs his help, Gillis and Schaefer begin to write a script of their own.²⁵ *Barton Fink*'s Audrey Taylor (Judy Davis) is the lover of the novelist turned screenwriter W.P. Mayhew (John Mahoney) to whom Barton turns to for advice and mentorship. Ironically, it is through Audrey that he actually receives this, and while never explicitly stated, it is distinctly implied that Mayhew isn't the genius behind his own work at all, but that his last novel and screenplays have actually been written by Audrey.²⁶ While this particular trope is less common historically, across this type of film, it is one that has been utilized by other narratives and genres within filmmaking. The contested space of the role of the woman in Hollywood and in society is an ongoing battle. This particular representation in these two films speaks to Hollywood's own image as a male dominated industry and its reluctance to relinquish that image as well as the issue it takes with the image.

The onscreen screenwriter as part of the myth of Hollywood's self-constructed image is one that has come and gone through various decades. Despite the leaps in time, common tropes and contested ideology about what Hollywood is have remained relatively consistent. It would

²⁵ Wilder, *Sunset Boulevard*.

²⁶ Coen and Coen, *Barton Fink*.

seem that part of what Hollywood wants to construct about its image is that it is conflicted over the image that it has created. When will the newest technology, the computer, become part of the screenwriting image? Are writers revered or second-class citizens? Are they the artistic backbone of the industry or merely factory workers pumping out product based on a formula? Where do women fit into the context of the screenwriting profession? There is no definitive answer to each of these questions, but continuing to evaluate have the iconic filmed image of the Hollywood screenwriter has changed, or more noticeably remained the same, over time in connection with the historical research and current practices in the industry will continue to reveal aspects of what Hollywood is both in reality and in our minds.

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