

# To Genre or Not To Genre? Typecasting the Screenwriter

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Abstract:

*Typecast*

*verb*

1. assign (an actor or actress) repeatedly to the same type of role, as a result of the appropriateness of their appearance or previous success in such roles.

"he tends to be typecast as the caring, intelligent male"

2. represent or regard (a person or their role) as fitting a particular stereotype.

*Typecasting in the film world is an expression typically applied to the actor. This paper will discuss how typecasting for the screenwriter should be seen as a positive shorthand enthusiasm for the work from that screenwriter that has resonated.*

*The psychology of the narrative surrounding typecasting is ordinarily one as something that should be resisted "if you don't want to be typecast, then you need to fight it every step of the way and never give up." (Cooper, B. 2013)*

*Whereas it should really be seen as an advantage, as something that gets the screenwriter the job. "It's a type of "typecasting" that is actually great" (Miyamoto, K. 2011)*

*Genre is a shorthand method of communicating with your audience and to be typecast as an 'action' writer, or 'comedy' writer is what has led to the incorporation of the script doctor 'polish' typically associated, often negatively, with Hollywood big budget productions. The script doctor is no recent phenomenon. By investigating selected screenwriters and through analysis of their thematic concerns, psychological interests and career performance trajectory, this paper will argue for a*

*positive reframing of typecasting for the screenwriter.*

*"and don't worry about being typecast until you've gotten a movie made"*

*Writer, (Go, Big Fish, Charlie's Angels) John August. (2007)*

**Keywords:**

Storytelling, Authorship, Typecasting, Characterisation, Psychology

**Introduction**

In his introduction to Augusto Boal's seminal book *Games for actors and non-actors* translator Adrian Jackson describes participants in Image Theatre creating a series of stills. These groups then suggest titles or themes, before going on to "sculpt three-dimensional images under these titles" (Boal, xix).

As a writer for screen and stage myself this idea is analogous of the transition from the script to screen or page to stage. The thesis of this paper and the focus of a book being developed by its author is that there are a lot of parallels between the actor and the screenwriter. The way both professionals utilise craft, for example the employment of emotional intelligence when developing a psychological approach to character development, spatial awareness and physical embodiment of character are parallels drawn by the author of this paper in the book. The specific focus of this paper is typecasting. In this instance though the approach is that unlike the negative attitude to typecasting often associated with acting, typecasting for the writer is a good thing and a testament to the writer's craft, skill and thematic concerns and not something that needs to be fought "every step of the way." (Cooper, B. 2013)

Screenwriter tutor James Ryan describes a realisation he came to, which was that many of his students didn't understand "how to

create complex and specific characters.” (Ryan, 2000, Introduction, 7) The reason for this “lack of dramatic skills was that none of these students had ever studied acting.” (Ryan, 2000, Introduction, 7)

To further the analogy with the acting profession the parallel with casting actors is going to be briefly examined. Bernie Telsey, founder of Telsey + company a New York casting office, stated “Our job is to try to get inside the imagination and inside the brain of the people we’re casting for.” (Grant, 2016) Switch *casting* for *writing* and you have one of the key jobs of the screenwriter, where *writing for* should be seen as the immediate audience and the exhibition audience. The screenplay is both a literary document and a technical template (Ayodeji, 2012) and as such has to turn ideas into sentences ready for turning into visual expressions of those original ideas.

When discussing the casting of Anonymous Contents’ Mr Robot, a TV series that premieres on USA Network, casting director Susie Farris said “That’s part of the reason we end up doing what we do, you just have a sensibility and you can instinctually feel when you have the right one” (Mancuso, 2016)

In similar ways as other key above the line talent in filmmaking, screenwriters have agents and managers. Screenwriter Stephen Rebello states “Most writers don’t have the sort of nature that lends itself to self-promotion. Today’s writers and agents are teaching writers how to be better self-promoters; and that’s making a major decision in why some scripts sell”. Frensham (2008, 275). The auditioning process as understood for actors isn’t something that writers will formally do. As Directors of Photography, composers, production designers will do, it is common that the screenwriter will take meetings to get a feel for the project and its participants. Whilst this isn’t as formal as the audition is for actors, the role of agents and managers for screenwriters has some similarities to how an agent will often have to act for the actor they represent, in that they will often have to *soft pitch* that writer to that producer/studio in order to attach the writer to the project. As such career management, through agents, managers, PR representatives require the writer to pay attention to this aspect of the industry.

Online magazine [www.scriptmag.com](http://www.scriptmag.com) has a section on the site devoted to marketing and branding as a screenwriter. The text that kicks off this section of the website reads

“Knowing how to market yourself as a writer and create a personal brand is essential to bringing exposure to your work and self. It takes more than a screenwriting agent to get your work noticed. You need to be your own agent and own PR company to promote your screenplays.” ([www.scriptmag.com](http://www.scriptmag.com), 2017)

In an interview with Podcaster Ashley Scott Myers, producer Dallas Sonnier had the following to say on how he chooses writers to work with

And try to give yourself a reason to be more valuable than just a writer. What’s the angle, what’s your bio that’s. What’s the part of your bio that’s interesting. Where you a Marine. (sic). You know, did you grow-up in a foreign country? What’s your life’s story, that’s going to help you? Did you lose a family member early on and it’s really affected your writing? All kinds of stuff, there’s all different ways. But, you got to have a way to pitch it, you got to have a way in. (Scott Myers, 2017)

Sonnier went on to discuss how producers pick projects “In the independent world, you have to pick your lane. You got to pick your lane and move your niche right?” (Scott Myers, 2017). The same sentiment can be argued for how screenwriters should see typecasting.

The adaptation focus of Hollywood, defined broadly as an approach that goes some way to mitigating financial risk, focusing on projects with some level of existing pre-awareness or some sense of an established audience. This might be through the adaptation of a novel or the prequel/sequel spin-off from a previously released film. The multiple rewrites, script doctor, script polish culture that underpins mid to high level Hollywood filmmaking couldn’t exist without the idea of the writer being typecast. There are those writers who are seen as being good with family issues, those good with dialogue, those good with comedy, etc, etc. Playwright and screenwriter Tom Stoppard in an interview with journalist Mark Lawson from 2010 described script-doctoring work on Hollywood films. “The second reason for

doing it is that you get to work with people you admire. The first reason, of course, is that it's overpaid." (Lawson, 2010) A number of obituaries<sup>ii</sup> for Carrie Fisher discussed her script doctor work as well as her credited screenplays and acting roles.

The Hollywood studio system in its golden era, typically seen as 1925-1948, systemized this multiple writers approach. It was typical for multiple screenwriters to be working on the same project, often at the same time, unaware that alternative drafts were being produced contemporaneously. The overtly political writer, as exemplified by the prosecution, conviction and subsequent blacklisting of ten Hollywood writers in the 1950's is one example of the screenwriter being typecast. Nine of the ten were screenwriters. Their blacklisting is an example of people unable to separate the writer, as individual, from the work the writer produced. One of screenwriter careers examined in terms of typecasting that this paper studies is one of the Hollywood Ten, screenwriter John Howard Lawson. These examples will seek to demonstrate how typecasting should be seen as a shorthand communication, mostly positive, that demonstrates recognition and enthusiasm for the work from that writer, that has managed to resonate in the industry. As Abraham Lincoln is reputed to have said 'character is like a tree and reputation its shadow.'

### **Write What You Know: Life as the elevator pitch**

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle. (Tzu, S. 1991)

This section is the *have something to say* section. So you've heard about the mythical elevator pitch scenario? The chance encounter with someone who can transform your career and you only have the time it takes the elevator to get to the top floor to tell her/him about you, your latest project, and to tell it *memorably!*

In a discussion at his alma mater screenwriter Anthony Peckham (Sherlock Holmes, (2009); *Invictus*, (2009)) said "The

people you are pitching to, at least in Hollywood, never have enough time. You've really got 10 minutes to sell something" (Anonymous, 2013). Sure that's a long time to be in an elevator but hopefully you get the idea that either rehearsing your story, or even better having conviction about the type of writer you are and the type of stories you wish to tell would be useful when soft-pitching in the mythical elevator.

The Writer naturally concentrates on the creative work, spends hundreds of hours writing a script, but almost none on marketing themselves. But when you're out in the marketplace, you're not just selling a piece of work, you're selling yourself too. The way you come across and are perceived is often more likely to bring you work than what you write, assuming you write reasonably well in the first place. Julian Friedmann, Literary Agent. (Frensham 2008, 238)

The collaborative nature of filmmaking means it is essentially typically about a relatively small number of key creative relationships, relationships where the skills required to do any particular job can be difficult to evaluate. In these instances, prior experience can be the defining factor as "the challenges that occasions typecasting, i.e matching candidates with the jobs for which their skills are most appropriate" (Zuckerman, 2005, 175) crash against typecasting fears, i.e. that "the constraints imposed by typecasting are quiet specific: they restrict the sets of matches for those workers who could potentially succeed in many different types of work" (Zuckerman, 2005, 175).

Zuckerman details an actor who states that to avoid typecasting one should career manage by "thinking beyond the current project" (2005, 179). This paper argues that as a distinct career strategy one should in fact seek to be typecast, certainly initially in one's early career, but potential for a longer period of time. Zuckerman (2005) argues that the typecasting approach can be seen as one of maximising efficiency. In such a resource intensive creative practice maximising efficiency can be seen as being incredibly beneficial.

So how to develop having something to say to then be in a position to become typecast? Having something to say might also be described as developing a voice. "Speak in

your own voice and your originality will shine through. The craft can always develop later. Tony Marchant, Screenwriter.” (Frensham 2008, 10)

So how does one develop a voice? Ryan says “purpose” (Ryan, 2000, 19). This author says perseverance. As Lee states “fundamentally, the essence of producing good writing is understanding of psychology, your own and that of others, the two being indivisible.” (2013, 9). Beker talks about writers needing to “draw their stories and characters from personal experiences and knowledge.” (2013, 3). Personal experience and knowledge is often translated as the *write what you know* motif suggested by Sublett in Screenwriting for Neurotics where he states “A lot can be said for personal stories. They’re unique. They feel ‘real’- the specificity, sincerity and depth of understanding shine through.” (2014, 14). He later goes on to discuss the benefits of this whereby the personal story allows a more unique story to be written with the result that better, i.e. more involving, unique, writing samples are then available for the writer to circulate to interested parties. The screenplay should be celebrated as research Palimpsest. It should be both taught and written as the key document from which the writing has been partially or wholly erased to make room for another text, the visual, the actor, the Director and that as such it is the core research text that defines the basis of the research.

To again make the parallels with actors, acting and screenwriters, there is a YouTube series called The Conversation<sup>iii</sup> hosted by the Screen Actors Guild. After watching a number of these ninety minute or so interviews where well-known actors, including Kevin Costner, Octavia Spencer, Jennifer Aniston, Robin Williams, Leonardo DiCaprio, Kenneth Branagh, talk about how their career developed, what is striking is the talk about their craft, perseverance and the search for the truth of any given situation, is a constant. A similar YouTube series hosted by Film Courage<sup>iv</sup> has a dedicated screenwriting section. Listening to screenwriters talking about their career similar concerns are voiced, craft, perseverance and writing from a place of truth, for this is how the voice develops. Writing to find the truth of a situation, however specific this truth might be,

because this specific truth allows access to the universal truths of life, family, ambition, disappointment, frustration, love and loss. Truth might, in this instance, be usefully aligned to the Lacanian psychological sense of agency as repressed truths provide some sense of agency for the characters that define the script thematically.

In Global Scriptwriting Dancyger discusses the “basic universal elements that transcend national boundaries: relationships, the individual in society, the influence of politics on the individual, and the family.” (2001, 218) as universal non-nationalistic themes. As is often the case Dancyger describes the films he discusses as the *Director’s* film, e.g. “Sam Mendes’ American Beauty” (2001, 224), and “Mary Harron’s American Psycho” (2001, 226) not Alan Ball’s American Beauty or Brett Easton Ellis’ American Psycho, yet there is enough thematic connections between the cited work of these writers and their other work to make a strong case that the themes existed before the named directors input, especially when thinking about American Psycho of which the novel was published nine years before the film was released. Horton describes Writer/Director Robert Bresson stating “Be the first to see what you see as you see it.” (2004, 30). This, one argues, is a much more useful way of the *write what you know* adage. The screenwriter should be seen as someone who is “fostering a shared language” (Conor, 2013, 52) readying the script to be in a position so that it is “speaking forward- to collaborators, to audiences, to financiers and to other screenwriters.” (ibid)

So recapping, one develops one’s voice by speaking of universal themes, with specificity, as seen through the writer’s eyes. “Speak in your own voice and your originality will shine through. The craft can always develop later. Tony Marchant, Screenwriter. Frensham (2008, 10)

### **Who the hell wrote this thing anyways? Subtitled “Where the hell were you when the page was blank?”**

Where the hell were you when the page was blank was reputedly uttered by Arthur Miller, writer to Elia Kazan, director. (Horne, 2006, xvi). A writer asserting creative authorship.

This section will selectively highlight three writers, examine typecasting of them, examine its impact on their careers and speak to the creative idea of authorship in filmmaking.

Writer/Director Peter Bogdanovich wrote an acclaimed book 'Who The Devil Made It?'. A series of interviews initiated in the 1960's the book, published in 1997, was soon seen as throwing a valuable light on somewhat forgotten classic golden age Hollywood Directors. In Roger Ebert's review of the book he describes film directing as "an art form created out of pragmatism, experimentation, instinct and luck." (Eberts, 1997). As a professional writer myself as well as academic, it is easy to recognise that this combination of factors also applies when writing screenplays.

Adaptation of existing material forms a significant part of the filmmaking industry. Novels, books, films, board games etc are all properties that exist in one medium that can be translated to the screen, for example the stageplay that becomes a film, West Side Story originally staged in 1957, film adaptation released 1961; books that become films, Trainspotting original novel published in 1993, film adaptation released in the UK 1996; mobile applications that become films, Angry Birds app released in 2009, film adaptation release in UK in 2016) are longstanding examples of a tradition that has existed since the commercialisation of film as an industry. Existing properties all have some level of that magic ingredient for the producer, pre-awareness. There is an audience that already exists for this property which can then be used to estimate some level of likely revenue should this property be adapted. Typecasting is pre-awareness and these screenwriter examples demonstrate its potential impact.

If you know of Writer, Director, Producer, Actor Mel Brooks then no doubt you'll be thinking of comedy. You may or may not be aware of his, at the time of writing, 43 writing credits<sup>v</sup> in any great detail but you'll be thinking of comedy. The recipient of the BAFTA Fellowship award in 2017 this award is a celebration of lifelong achievement in film, television or games. Brooks has worked as a writer, actor, filmmaker, composer and songwriter. In 2012 author Alex Symons wrote a book examining how Brooks had "survived working in the cultural industries

from 1949 to date." (Symons, 2012, 1).

Symons main thesis is that Brooks is more than the "bad-taste comedy auteur" (Symons, 2012, 3) he is typecast as. Brooks he argues is an expert proponent of adaptation. This "personal strategy" (Symons, 2012, 1) of remediation, adapting works from one medium to others, film to television, radio to television, film to theatre, and sometimes the same property to multiple media, has led to Brooks' career longevity.

In complete contrast to typecasting resulting in the longevity to sustain a career over five decades, screenwriter John Howard Lawson's typecasting led to the end of his career. Lawson was a communist, a founder member of the Screen Writers Guild and contributed financially to the Communist Party. Horne describe Lawson as "a man who came to be known as the communist cultural commissar of Hollywood and Broadway." (Horne, 2006, viii-ix)

Early on his career, when working as a playwright Lawson formed the Workers Drama League aiming to produce revolutionary plays. After joining the communist party in 1934 Lawson mixed film and theatre, writing political works, such as Success at Any Price (1934), Blockade (1938) and Counter-Attack with less political works such as Sahara (1943) and Action in the North Atlantic (1943).

Horne argues essentially that Lawson's lifetime of activism, exemplified by his being one of the founders of the Writers' Guild in the face of resistance from the Hollywood studios, when coupled with the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) focus on communist infiltration of the entertainment system allowed a systematic undermining of the position of screenwriters. Horne describes Lawson writing that "For some reason we have been reluctant to grant that the Hollywood screenwriter was as responsible as the Hollywood director for the quality and expressiveness of the films made there." (Horne, 2006. xv) The idea that the screenwriter is the instigator of authorship of a film and therefore deserves appropriate financial creative and artistic recognition, advocated as part of the *raison d'être* of the Screen Writers' Guild, acted against Lawson and others as this was used to accuse writers of subversive, insidious communist propaganda. This paper will not

concern itself with repeating the prolific number of anecdotes that can be found about ill treatment of writers on film sets throughout the history of the production of film. Biskind (1999), Boorman (1985) and Bach (1986) are merely a few authors who detail examples of poor treatment of writers at the hands of 'the system', furthermore there exists a wealth of academic and other studies of this period on the work of HUAC and its consequences on Hollywood individuals, organisations and filmmaking culture. This paper suggests that the accurate typecasting of Lawson as a political writer, as his work and political activities were examined in this new political context meant attitudes he was previously lauded for were now attitudes he was reviled, imprisoned, typecast and blacklisted for. Unlike others such as Dalton Trumbo, Edward Dmytryk or Michael Wilson, Lawson as "the originator of the class-conflict film" (Horne, 2006, 61) into Hollywood, as founder of the Screen Writers' Guild for which he was also initially temporarily ostracised, as an overtly political writer was never rehabilitated into the Hollywood filmmaking community before his death in 1977.

Frank S. Nugent, was soon typecast as the writer of westerns following his Cavalry Trilogy of films directed by John Ford, starring John Wayne. *Fort Apache* (1949), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *Rio Grande* (1950) to modern sensibilities are somewhat problematic in their depiction of native American but at the time Nugent was noted, in *Fort Apache's* original source material in particular, as toning down the virulent racist attitudes. Nugent was a New York Times journalist writing film reviews before being hired to become a script doctor for Fox Studios. *Fort Apache* was his first screenplay and of his twenty-one screenplays, eleven were westerns with six of those screenplays directed by John Ford films. Nugent's first and last produced screenplays over a nearly twenty-year career were westerns with *The Searchers* (1956) screenplay in 2011 being voted one of the top 101 screenplays by Writers Guild of America, West.

This section could have easily have looked at Billy Wilder, or Michael Wilson, Paddy Chayefsky, Thornton Wilder or any number of screenwriters. Contemporary

screenwriters such as Drew Goddard, Alan Ball or Charlie Kaufman will get lots of calls when independent producers/studios need a superhero reboot, Goddard, a gay character written, Ball or a quirky, meta scenario devised, Kaufman. Patterns produce an opportunity for recognition, either industry recognition or industry-related, for example journalists or film-related blogsites. To repeat the dictionary definition of typecasting "*represent or regard (a person or their role) as fitting a particular stereotype*".

### **Conclusions.**

When raiding pirates on the sea boarded boats they often had hooks on ladders to aid the transfer from their boat to the other. Each script is a hook on the ladder. The screenwriters' ladder is their perseverance, their hard work, their bit of luck. Their works are the hooks that enable them to struggle their way on board. The analogy is a little over the top as perhaps the people on board the film industry boat are not actively fighting to stop screenwriters from getting on board the way crew would seek to stop a raiding party, but the film ship isn't waiting for them either, it ploughs on full steam ahead. You need a pirate mentality to get on board. In his discussion of the difficulty in assessing an individual's contribution to the success of past projects (Bielby, 2009) creates two distinct recruitment practices that were frequently referenced by Wreyford's research participants in her study. (Wreyford, 2015, 90) The first of these methods was recommendation. The second method "was a reliance on people they already know." (ibid). The important of a relationship was also an important factor.

When asked what they looked for in a potential screenwriter, the employers who I interviewed almost universally answered: trust. (Wreyford, 2015, 90)

Sublett states that if producers had to choose between a good story and a good writer they'd choose the good writer because then that writer could then be hired to write any number of their properties (2014, 15).

The Writer naturally concentrates on the creative work, spends hundreds of hours writing a script, but almost none on marketing themselves. But when you're out in the

marketplace, you're not just selling a piece of work, you're selling yourself too. The way you come across and are perceived is often more likely to bring you work than what you write, assuming you write reasonably well in the first place.

Julian Friedmann, *Literary Agent*. Frensham (2008, 238)

The film industry is a relationship business. The importance of agents is the reputational shortcut they provide. Homophily, or the tendency of like-minded individuals to associate and bond with each other, has arguably always been the key recruitment factor. Wreyford (2015) discusses Roger's 2007 survey of the UK film industry whereby "50 per cent of writers of British films had a previous working relationship and 42 per cent had a personal relationship with the producer, director or production company responsible for their hiring."

The work is the most important thing. The primacy of the script has too many adherents to mention here. Following hard on the heels of the work as regards importance is the meeting. The work, initially isn't likely to get you the work. When you've done enough, then when vouched for by the past collaborator, at that point the work might get you the work. Literary Agents talk about the factors they rely on to take on new clients. The ability to have made some initial industry headway, perhaps winning competitions, or having some produced theatre work, a novel or radio play might then make the agent take a look at your screenwriting samples (Stott, 2013). They want you to be better than their current clients. A selling shorthand where the answer in the affirmative to the Producer's question 'Will this person do what I want?' this will get you the work.

Typecasting provides pre-awareness. It allows your prior work to act as agents working on your behalf. This agent won't ask for 15%, will act on your behalf for your entire career and can speak for you longer than any human representation can.

As screenwriter John August said "Don't worry about being typecast until you've gotten a movie made" (August, 2007)

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Rio Grande (1950) Directed by John Ford. Republic Pictures & Argosy Pictures. USA  
The Producers (1967) Directed by Mel Brooks. Crossbow Productions, Springtime Productions, U-M Productions. USA

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i [www.scriptmag.com](http://www.scriptmag.com) is part of the Writers Store division. The Writers Store is a long established Hollywood screenwriting resource. The organisation sells screenwriting software, runs online writing classes and hosts magazine scriptmag.com.

ii The following links are but two links that discuss Fisher's script doctor work.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/carrie-fisher-dead-star-wars-script-doctor-a7497951.html> & <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/movies/carrie-fisher-secretly-hollywood-best-script-doctors-article-1.2925689>

iii You can find the YouTube playlist of video uploads of The Conversation series by the SAG-AFTRA Foundation's channel here

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTKUQPif\\_Ofv\\_wfk5l82RRUG2y64Af7RD](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTKUQPif_Ofv_wfk5l82RRUG2y64Af7RD)

iv The link will take you to the screenwriting section. The Film Courage site has sections on acting and directing also. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLez8jOvskc-PzKXJkv3hBU6vkPCvEYcgx>

v Internet Movie Database credits for Brooks can be found here.

[http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000316/?ref\\_=tt\\_ov\\_dr#writer](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000316/?ref_=tt_ov_dr#writer)