

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Hitchcock in Hollywood: Examining the Master of Suspense's Career with *Rebecca* and *Psycho*

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This project examines the production histories of two films that Alfred Hitchcock directed, his Hollywood debut *Rebecca* (1940) and the memorable *Psycho* (1960). The first chapter explores how Hitchcock succeeded and failed at influencing the picture as he, despite directing the movie, had to follow the vision that his producer, David O. Selznick, wanted for their adaptation of the bestselling Daphne du Maurier novel. The chapter considers their relationship at each stage of the process of making *Rebecca*, and places the roles of Hitchcock and Selznick within the larger context of the American film industry during 1940. The second chapter considers how Hitchcock, as an established director and formidable celebrity twenty years later, created an innovative film with *Psycho* that resonated with its audience. It explores how he adapted the Robert Bloch novel as he, now acting as his own producer, saw fit, and how the marketing campaign that he and Paramount devised turned the low-budget shocker into a highly profitable spectacle. Ultimately, this project offers a way to examine Hitchcock's career with films he directed both before and after he became a well-known Hollywood director.

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Hitchcock in Hollywood: Examining the Master of Suspense's Career with *Rebecca*
and *Psycho*

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Matthew S. Flanagan

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing English

Director of the School of Writing, Literature, and Film

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Matthew S. Flanagan, Author

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Introduction

In his book-length interview with Francois Truffaut, Alfred Hitchcock jokes about adaptations as the directors discuss Hitchcock's Hollywood debut, *Rebecca* (1940). Hitchcock quips, "You probably know the story of the two goats who are eating up cans containing the reels of a film taken from a bestseller. And one goat says to the other, 'Personally, I prefer the book!'"¹ By the time the interview took place in 1962, Hitchcock had established himself as a top Hollywood director and thus had the luxury to dismiss the source materials for his adaptations. He had recently taken liberties with *Psycho* (1960), an adaptation of the Robert Bloch novel, which resulted in the most profitable film of Hitchcock's long and respectable career. However, when he arrived in Hollywood to adapt *Rebecca* from the bestselling Daphne du Maurier novel of the same name, Hitchcock found his hands tied while working for David O. Selznick, a heavily involved producer with a competing idea for how best to adapt literary works for the silver screen. Consequently, changes in Hitchcock's clout as a director, amid larger changes in Hollywood's setup, made the respective productions of *Rebecca* and *Psycho* very different, particularly regarding how faithfully the movies adapted their respective source novels. While Hitchcock had relatively little influence over *Rebecca*, which did well critically and financially, he created a box office sensation with *Psycho*, a project over which he had complete creative control.

This thesis examines *Rebecca* and *Psycho* because they mark major points of Hitchcock's career as a director and occur on both sides of this shift in Hollywood. With *Psycho* and other memorable films including *Vertigo* (1958) and *The Birds* (1963), Hitchcock remains one of the most recognizable directors in history. This fame stems primarily from his ability to work

¹ Francois Truffaut, *Hitchcock: The Definitive Study of Alfred Hitchcock by Francois Truffaut* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 1984), 128.

outside of Hollywood's studio system and from his aptitude at self-promotion. With the exception of a few movies that he directed in Britain and early in his Hollywood career, including *Rebecca*, Hitchcock never consistently worked for one specific studio and thus never regularly had to adjust his style to fit a specific studio's brand. Consequently, Hitchcock was better prepared than any director, both as a filmmaker and as a businessman, for the new Hollywood structure after court rulings and the rise of television doomed the studio system during the 1950s. Because of his general freedom from tight studio oversight, even during the studio system, Hitchcock was able to direct movies in a style that audiences found distinct when his Hollywood contemporaries had less creative luxury. Hitchcock was especially ahead of the curve once the studio system declined and directors gained more clout in Hollywood. As a result, the Hitchcock name is now more recognizable than anyone he worked with on his 57 feature films. This, however, does not mean that Hitchcock always had more control over the movies that he directed than these collaborators.

This is the case with Selznick during the production of *Rebecca*, which the first chapter of this thesis addresses. It provides a production history of the only Hitchcock-directed movie that won the Academy Award for Best Picture. Even though Hitchcock is now more widely remembered than Selznick, the producer deserves much credit for the movie's acclaim because of his authority, including creative authority, over the director when making *Rebecca*. This is not to say that Hitchcock had no input of his own during the process, as he sometimes forced his overextended producer to make concessions. The first chapter of this thesis examines the relationship between Hitchcock and Selznick as they struggled for control over the picture. It explores the nuance of their creative input at the various stages of the film's production, including writing its screenplay, casting and shooting the picture, and editing and marketing the

movie. The first chapter also considers the respective careers of Hitchcock and Selznick at the time of their first collaboration. Further, it takes into account the financial stakes *Rebecca* held as a product of the independent Selznick International Pictures instead of a major studio.

The second chapter examines how, twenty years later, Hitchcock financing *Psycho* himself and not having to answer to a producer enabled him to create an innovative film that resonated with its audience. It explains why Hitchcock's name remains recognizable to this day and identifiable with *Psycho* despite the movie's lack of a large budget or major stars. The chapter also examines the publicity campaign for *Psycho*, which was inventive in its own right and thus fitting for such a unique film. The chapter demonstrates how the movie itself and the spectacle that the marketing created around its release cemented *Psycho* as the quintessential Hitchcock film. The chapter also considers how Hitchcock's reputation and previous success as a director in Hollywood make this movie unique in his filmography. Additionally, the chapter considers why *Psycho* was an unprecedented experience in Hollywood and how changes in the industry helped the movie succeed even more at the box office.

Rebecca and *Psycho* also lend themselves well in an examination focused on a director as well-known as Hitchcock because both are adaptations of novels that had very different readership upon their respective publications. As a result, the adaptation processes for these two movies were very different. The first chapter of the thesis explores how the conflicting adaptation methods that Selznick and Hitchcock preferred guided their attempts to control the picture. Selznick, wanting to add to his studio's brand of prestige pictures, believed the best course of action was for the adaptation of *Rebecca* to remain as loyal to the novel as possible because of its popularity. By contrast, Hitchcock cared little about fidelity to the book and wanted to take the movie in his own direction. These ideas and the two men's attempts to have

their visions fulfilled often underlined the tension between them as both sought control of the movie.

In respect to adaptation, the second chapter examines how Hitchcock adapted Bloch's work without interference from a hands-on producer. It considers what made *Psycho* innovative for the medium when the changes Hitchcock made to the novel were minimal. In other words, the chapter explains why Hitchcock is better remembered for *Psycho* than Bloch is, despite the latter being the original author of the tale. Complicating matters on this issue is that Hitchcock remained rather loyal to the book, particularly considering his normal practice of disregarding the source material when allowed. The most apparent reasons for Hitchcock receiving more credit than Bloch for the movie's innovations are that the director was already a huge celebrity while Bloch was not and *Psycho* the book was not widely known, whereas du Maurier's *Rebecca*, by comparison, was a bestseller twenty years prior. The publicity blitz for *Psycho* further ingrained the film with Hitchcock's name and celebrity, and indelibly linked the director with the story. While the chapter explores these factors more fully, it also examines how the movie was groundbreaking for a Hollywood film while the book, despite possessing the same plot twists, presented nothing new or extraordinary for horror fiction.

Together, the chapters offer an examination of Hitchcock at two key points in his career, the beginning of his Hollywood tenure with *Rebecca* and the peak of his career with *Psycho*. The production histories of these films demonstrate the complicated process, in the case of *Rebecca*, between Hitchcock and his producer in regards to filmmaking input and, for *Psycho*, how an experienced Hitchcock acting as his own producer was able to create an innovative movie and sell it as a spectacle. This thesis also focuses on how adaptation influenced the productions of these films and their respective receptions upon release. It also situates *Rebecca* and *Psycho*

within industry history and the changes in Hollywood's structure between 1940 and 1960, as well as tracking how Hitchcock navigated the industry during this time period. Overall, the thesis offers a way to consider Hitchcock's career on and off screen as he paid his dues in Hollywood before outmaneuvering its dying structure to become and remain a household name.

A Clash of Egos: The Adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* by David O. Selznick and Alfred Hitchcock

Following the unprecedented success that *Gone with the Wind* (1939) brought Selznick International Pictures (SIP), *Rebecca* earned producer David O. Selznick his second consecutive Best Picture Oscar. While Alfred Hitchcock was nominated for Best Director, John Ford won the award instead for *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). Commenting on the Best Picture win for *Rebecca*, François Truffaut tells Hitchcock, "I believe that's the only Oscar you've ever won." Hitchcock replies, "I've never received an Oscar...The award went to Selznick."² While awarding the Best Picture Oscar to the producer is standard practice, presenting the award to Selznick instead of Hitchcock is especially fitting in the case of *Rebecca*. As Donald Spoto remarks, "It's hard to reflect on *Rebecca* as if it were a Hitchcock film. The production values were entirely Selznick's, the crew was Selznick's, the casting was entirely overseen by Selznick."³ Movie studios of the time usually had more control over the movies they released than the directors working for them. While Hitchcock had grown accustomed to working without interference from producers in Britain and would go on to establish himself as a capable independent director in Hollywood, he did not have this luxury to begin his career in the United States. This production history of *Rebecca* highlights the tensions between Selznick and Hitchcock as the two attempted to cast their respective influence on their adaptation of the bestselling Daphne du Maurier novel.

First, however, an understanding of the careers of Hitchcock and Selznick leading up to their collaboration is necessary for exploring their relationship as they worked on *Rebecca*. After

² Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 133.

³ Spoto, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock: Fifty Years of His Motion Pictures* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 83.

Hitchcock's first two directorial features in Britain, *The Pleasure Garden* (1925) and *The Mountain Eagle* (1927), were critically and financially unsuccessful, Hitchcock established himself as a director with *The Lodger* (1927). Following the success of *Blackmail* (1929), one of the first British pictures to incorporate new sound technology, Hitchcock lost much of his control to select the stories for the next few films he directed. Producer Michael Balcon then came to Hitchcock's aid, and the director signed a five-picture deal with the Gaumont-British Picture Corporation. The first two films Hitchcock directed for the company, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) and *The 39 Steps* (1935), fared well, and Hitchcock cited a lack of supervision from Balcon as the reason these directorial efforts received acclaim. The two films not only showcased Hitchcock's talents as a director but also told compelling stories that fit well with the filmmaker's interests, elements lacking in the forgettable films he had directed since *Blackmail*.

In addition to proving himself as a competent and innovative director, Hitchcock also used the press to endear himself to the public. The director met with reporters individually because he found himself less efficient when talking to groups. Leonard Leff describes a typical visit that a journalist would have when interviewing the director during his employment at Gaumont-British:

A reporter who climbed the four flights to Hitchcock's flat probably expected to see the director in his business clothes... Instead, the five-foot-eight Hitchcock wore a dressing gown over a pair of deep-dyed Chinese silk pajamas, no doubt exaggerating his weight yet also lending an air of informality, perhaps even conspiracy and intimacy, to the meeting of writer and subject. He seduced journalists not only with his pithy opinions on cinematic style but [also] his manner—the snapping black eyes, drawling voice, and expressive hands, surprisingly gentle and soft.⁴

His unusual and charming method for talking with members of the press helped the director's reputation grow while under contract with Gaumont-British. The American press began to cover

⁴ Leonard J. Leff, *Hitchcock and Selznick: The Rich and Strange Collaboration of Alfred Hitchcock and David O. Selznick in Hollywood* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1987), 13.

the director as well, which, in addition to the successful films he was directing, helped pique Hollywood's interest in him.

While making a name for himself in Britain, Hitchcock praised Selznick in a November 1937 issue of *Film Weekly*. In "Directors Are Dead," Hitchcock describes the dying breed of hands-off producers unfamiliar with film production—those who concerned themselves only with the financial side of the business. Hitchcock writes that for the industry to work effectively, the "splitting of authority" between producer and director must stop. Instead, he argues that "there must be one man at the helm. This man should be the producer. He should see the picture through from beginning to end. He must know all the sides of the business and be a complete technician."⁵ He cites Selznick as the foremost example of a "writer-producer," the "ultimate ideal...a man who creates the story with the material around him—in his case, the studio personnel, just as the painter has his brushes and canvas."⁶ During the following year, with speculation at its peak that the director would move to Hollywood, Leslie Perkoff interviewed Hitchcock for *World Film News*. After Hitchcock discusses his frustrations over British censors objecting to material he wanted to include in *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Perkoff asks Hitchcock about his plans to go to the US, and "did he expect to have better facilities there for expressing himself?" Hitchcock responds, "That matter is still in the air. But if I do go to Hollywood, I'd only work for Selznick."⁷

Hitchcock speaking highly of Selznick is a testament to the career that the producer had cultivated. After working at MGM, Paramount, and RKO, Selznick proved his capability in the

⁵ Alfred Hitchcock, "Directors Are Dead," in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. Sidney Gottlieb (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 183.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁷ Leslie Perkoff, "The Censor and Sydney Street," in Gottlieb, *Hitchcock on Hitchcock*, 194.

industry while serving as a unit producer during a second stint at MGM. Thomas Schatz notes that while working for his father-in-law, MGM CEO Louis B. Mayer, Selznick “proved he could turn out profitable first-run product.”⁸ Leff concurs, explaining that Selznick’s involvement in movies such as *Dinner at Eight* (1933) and *David Copperfield* (1935) “made him one of the film capital’s most esteemed producers.”⁹ Selznick’s success and reputation from these prestige pictures allowed him to secure enough funding to launch his own studio in 1935 without investing any of his own money in the venture. At the age of 33, he became SIP’s president, CEO, and only producer.

As he rose through Hollywood’s ranks, Selznick developed a reputation for his eccentric, controlling behavior, which running his own company amplified. Because of the small size of his studio and its limited output compared to major studios, which released upwards of fifty movies annually, one picture flopping at the box office could ruin SIP. Given his studio’s situation and his tendency to overwork himself, Selznick’s daily routine was more rigorous than the typical studio head’s. Leff notes that Selznick’s wife, Irene, later remarked, “Work was only real work...if it was done at ungodly hours or under intense pressure.”¹⁰ To maintain his pace, Selznick embraced the new and controversial stimulant drug Bensedrine, which he would always carry and offer to his staff. “Wondering whether the experimental drug could harm him,” Leff relays, “he wrote his physician to report that ‘I am practically living on the stuff and would prefer that I do not explode for a couple of years.’”¹¹

⁸ Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 277. Much of the history in this chapter comes from Schatz and Leff.

⁹ Leff, *Hitchcock and Selznick*, 5-6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

Considering his strenuous work ethic and the pressure that each SIP production placed on his studio, Selznick was prone to micromanagement. Schatz describes Selznick during the early years of SIP as “a disorganized, impetuous perfectionist” who “was supremely confident and equally insecure; he relished a challenge and took on impossible tasks, yet no script was ever quite ready for production, no picture was ever quite ready for release.”¹² Consequently, SIP failed to produce the expected eight-to-ten films annually that Selznick originally planned; however, he learned that his studio, because of its small size independent status, would be more profitable if it instead released only one or two movies each year as long as they were hits at the box office.

To ease the burden on himself, Selznick sought a director who could make movies with minimal supervision. However, he found himself in an internal conflict, torn between wanting extensive authority and creative control on one side, and needing a competent director to help improve SIP’s output on the other. Though he generally did not interfere with his directors on set, Selznick’s desire for maximum control over a picture made big-name Hollywood directors the studio targeted unexcited to work for him. With directors such as Frank Capra, John Ford, and Gregory La Cava passing on offers to work for SIP, Hitchcock became all the more appealing to Selznick. The two met during the director’s first visit to the US in August 1937. After a lengthy negotiation process, Hitchcock signed an exclusive seven-picture deal with SIP on March 3, 1939.

The 39 Steps, an adaptation of the 1915 John Buchan novel, was among the movies that made the director attractive to American studios. Spoto observes that the 1935 film “marks a major shift in [Hitchcock’s] career. In his previous seventeen films, he had been seeking a style

¹² Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 179.

and a vision that were uniquely his own; with this film, he established the terms of the style and the beginning of a consistent vision.”¹³ Hitchcock was able to choose the project because of the success of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and he had the freedom to adapt it as he saw fit because of the flexibility Gaumont-British offered. Unlike some of his adaptations, Hitchcock was actually quite fond of the source material in addition to seeing its potential for the silver screen. The director tells Truffaut, “Buchan was a strong influence a long time before I undertook *The 39 Steps*...What I find appealing in Buchan’s work is his understatement of highly dramatic ideas.”¹⁴ Spoto explains that Hitchcock and Charles Bennett’s scenario “simplifies everything in the novel,” which he describes as “interesting but distressingly complicated.”¹⁵ The success of *The 39 Steps*, an adaptation over which Hitchcock had creative control, reinforced the director’s belief that his adaptations were better when he was free to deviate from the source material at his discretion.

Hitchcock expected to direct the disaster film *Titanic* as his first project at SIP, but “Selznick informed me that he’d changed his mind and had acquired the rights to *Rebecca*,” Hitchcock tells Truffaut. “So I said, ‘All right, let’s switch.’”¹⁶ The process, though, was not as simple as Hitchcock insinuates.¹⁷ Selznick sent a memo to Hitchcock on September 7, 1938, that said he would like Hitchcock to direct *Rebecca* “if this is all right with you.”¹⁸ Regardless, this

¹³ Spoto, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock*, 42.

¹⁴ Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 95.

¹⁵ Spoto, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock*, 42.

¹⁶ Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 127.

¹⁷ Skepticism is necessary when considering Hitchcock’s comments in interviews because his persona often favored playfulness and humor over accuracy.

¹⁸ David O. Selznick memorandum to Alfred Hitchcock, 7 September 1938, in *Memo From: David O. Selznick*, ed. Rudy Behlmer (New York: Grove Press, 1981), 253.

was all right with Hitchcock, as he had been interested in purchasing the rights to *Rebecca* while working for Gaumont-British. The property's high cost forced him to abandon the project, or so it appeared at the time. Instead, Selznick ultimately won a bidding war against Sam Goldwyn of MGM for the film rights to *Rebecca*, and he used the prospect of Hitchcock directing as a bargaining tool during negotiations. The parties agreed on \$50,000, the same amount SIP paid for the rights to *Gone with the Wind*. The novel *Rebecca* had already sold well during its first two months of release; by the time SIP released the film version of it, *Rebecca* was "the second-biggest hit in modern publishing annals after *Gone with the Wind*."¹⁹ With work already underway on *Wind*, SIP releasing an adaptation of another bestselling book next was a logical choice for the studio.

Another reason that *Rebecca* made sense for the studio was that it fit the brand of prestige pictures that SIP was trying to establish. Because of the studio's adjusted plan to produce just one or two films each year that would dominate the box office, Kyle Dawson Edwards writes that an SIP release "had to be more than a night at the movies, it had to be an event that could invoke both 'good feelings' from an audience and the desire to see current and future SIP releases again and again."²⁰ Lacking the vertical integration of major studios, SIP had to rely on its competitors to distribute and exhibit its films, which added to the importance of these few releases being a spectacle for audiences. Profit for studios at this time in Hollywood meant the ability to sign more stars, create more films, and simply remain in business. To help accomplish this, studios "sought to develop an identity—a 'brand'—that could help them cultivate

¹⁹ Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 291.

²⁰ Kyle Dawson Edwards, "Brand-Name Literature: Film Adaptation and Selznick International Pictures' *Rebecca* (1940)," *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 36.

relationships and maintain good will with...cinema audiences.”²¹ During the late 1930s, SIP shifted its strategy from adapting classic literature to contemporary bestselling novels. *Gone with the Wind* was the first of these, and the studio turned it into the most expensive film production in the history of cinema. *Rebecca* would follow *Wind*, and although its resource allocation was slim in comparison, the studio’s marketing campaign attempted to tie the two Selznick pictures together. Edwards writes, “To solidify that association” between *Wind* and *Rebecca*, “the company invoked the brand-concept of prestige, an aura that it relentlessly evoked and attached to itself and its films.”²²

For Selznick, adding *Rebecca* to his studio’s prestige brand demanded strict adherence to the novel despite his director’s inclination to do otherwise. Told in first-person, the novel follows an unnamed heroine who meets the rich and classy Maxim de Winter in Monte Carlo while she works as a companion for the older and condescending Mrs. Van Hopper. The protagonist develops a relationship with de Winter that results in their sudden engagement and subsequent marriage. Before quitting the services of Mrs. Van Hopper, the old woman informs the unsophisticated narrator that she will not be able to fill the shoes of the extravagant and lovely Rebecca de Winter, who supposedly drowned in a boating accident on the waterfront adjacent to the de Winter estate, Manderley. Upon the newlyweds’ arrival at Manderley, the bride finds herself out of place among its splendor and luxuries. Mrs. Danvers, the head caretaker of Manderley who preserves the deceased Rebecca’s room, worsens the narrator’s feelings through her resentment of de Winter’s new wife. Mrs. Danvers’ ill feelings toward the protagonist come

²¹ Ibid., 33.

²² Ibid., 37.

to a head when she convinces the oblivious narrator to dress as Rebecca when the de Winters host an extravagant party.

Although friends of the de Winters regard the former Mrs. de Winter highly, Maxim eventually reveals to his new wife that Rebecca had affairs with other men and teased him about it. The novel's conclusion reveals that Maxim fatally shot Rebecca after she denied his request for a divorce and revealed that she was pregnant with another man's child. He then sank her boat with her corpse inside of it to prevent being charged with murder. Upon the discovery of her corpse in the wrecked ship, Maxim believes that Rebecca has succeeded in her quest to destroy his life, but the inquest that follows clears him of any wrongdoing. After a doctor reveals that Rebecca was not pregnant and that she was dying of cancer, her death is incorrectly ruled a suicide. Mrs. Danvers, upset that Rebecca withheld the information of her cancer from her close friend, burns down Manderley.

While Hitchcock appreciated from afar the control and quality that Selznick administered in the films his studio made, he resented his boss' autonomy once he began working on *Rebecca* at SIP. Hitchcock's role in his final years working in Britain, after all, was similar to Selznick's position as a producer in Hollywood. Despite the control that Hitchcock previously held over the movies he directed, "Selznick influenced everything he touched" at SIP, Leff writes, "and he touched nearly everything, from the acquisition of the literary property to screenplay development, pre-production, production, post-production, distribution, exhibition, [and] rerelease."²³ Consequently, Hitchcock had to be tactful when attempting to insert his own influence over SIP's adaptation of *Rebecca*.

²³ Leff, *Hitchcock and Selznick*, 4.

Adapting the Screenplay of *Rebecca*

The earliest and perhaps most noteworthy example of the power struggle between the producer and director in their adaptation of *Rebecca* occurred during the process of writing its screenplay. In Britain, Hitchcock had generally collaborated with his wife, Alma Reville, and his assistant, Joan Harrison. Ideally, the screenwriting for his Hollywood debut would be an in-house project. Under Hitchcock's supervision, Harrison and Philip MacDonald, a British thriller writer, coauthored the initial treatment of the picture. Selznick's reaction to the treatment, however, proved that this would not be the in-house writing project Hitchcock desired. In a memo to his director from June 12, 1939, Selznick begins, "It is my unfortunate and distressing task to tell you that I am shocked and disappointed beyond words by the treatment of *Rebecca*. I regard it as a distorted and vulgarized version of a provenly successful work, in which, for no reason that I can discern, old-fashioned movie scenes have been substituted for the captivatingly charming du Maurier scenes."²⁴ Clearly, Selznick would hold in check Hitchcock's directorial freedom, especially on the matter of fidelity to the bestselling source material they were adapting. Because of the hierarchy between the producer and the director, Schatz writes, "the 'master of suspense' adjusted his own style to the story, rather than adjusting the tale to suit his own interests and skills as a director."²⁵

As the beginning of his memo to Hitchcock indicates, Selznick would relentlessly insist that the production remain faithful to the du Maurier novel. "We bought *Rebecca*, and we intend to make *Rebecca*," Selznick admonishes Hitchcock in the June 12 memo. "The few million people who have read the book and who worship it would very properly attack us violently for

²⁴ David O. Selznick memorandum to Alfred Hitchcock, 12 June 1939, in Behlmer, *Memo From*, 257.

²⁵ Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 280.

the desecrations which are indicated by the treatment.”²⁶ Selznick explains that his experiences prove that fidelity is key when adapting a popular work. He writes, “I have made too many classics successfully and faithfully not to know beyond any question of a doubt” that an adaptation “will succeed in the same manner as the original succeeded if only the same elements are captured and if only as much as possible is retained of the original... This is why I have kept warning you to be faithful.”²⁷ He argues that creativity is appropriate for an original work, such as his production of *A Star Is Born* (1937). It is also acceptable when the source material lacks a strong reader base, such as the SIP adaptation of *Made for Each Other* (1939). Unnecessarily diverting from a successful work, though, would risk alienating the large fan base that constituted much of the target audience. Unwilling to take that risk, Selznick tells Hitchcock, “I don’t think I can create in two months or in two years anything as good with the characters and situations of *Rebecca* as du Maurier created; and frankly, I don’t think you can either.”²⁸ Even though Hitchcock felt comfortable taking liberties with du Maurier’s novel, Selznick considered such an attempt unnecessary and too risky for his studio.

While Selznick’s criticisms of the initial treatment span from minor plot details and character treatments to broader aspects pertaining to tone, all focus on staying true to du Maurier’s novel. The first issue the producer raises is the treatment assigning a name to the narrator, proposed as “Daphne.” Selznick notes that “one of the most talked-about things in connection with the book was that the principal character had no name.”²⁹ He cites Orson Welles’ recent radio adaptation of the novel on this point, noting that “the ten or fifteen million

²⁶ Selznick memorandum to Hitchcock, 12 June 1939, in Behlmer, *Memo From*, 257.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 258.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 259.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

people who were fascinated by the story on the air also know that the leading lady character never appeared by name.”³⁰ The radio adaptation was the first episode of Welles’ new *Campbell Playhouse* series and aired on December 9, 1938, mere weeks after the Halloween broadcast of Welles’ infamous “War of the Worlds.” The “Rebecca” episode ends with a brief phone interview of du Maurier conducted by Welles and Margaret Sullivan, who voiced the lead in the radio adaptation. After Welles and Sullivan ask du Maurier the name of the protagonist, the novelist thanks them for their radio production and hangs up without answering. Welles then claims that a cryptogram delivered by a carrier pigeon on behalf of du Maurier explains that the heroine’s name is “Mrs. Max de Winter.” Recognizing the success of the bit, Selznick had no intention to assign a name to the protagonist in his adaptation of *Rebecca*.

As for the plot itself, Selznick claims, “The opening of the book is excellent, and why it requires any change for motion pictures or any other medium I am sure I don’t know.”³¹ As such, the proposed change of comically introducing de Winter smoking a cigar and making the other passengers ill would not find its way into the adaptation. “If there is any humor left on the screen in seasickness,” Selznick admonishes, “let’s for God’s sake leave it to the two-reel comedies.”³² Beyond wanting to preserve the source material as faithfully as possible, Selznick wanted to prevent Hitchcock from adding his own touches—in this case, his trademark sense of humor—that would undermine SIP’s prestige brand. For reasons also inexplicable to Selznick, Hitchcock and his team had placed Maxim in a speedboat visiting friends on a yacht despite the leading man’s supposed isolation and suicidal feelings. The scene prompted Selznick to ask, “Whatever

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 260.

³² Ibid., 259.

happened to the construction that we discussed and agreed upon—that we were going to follow his moods and his being difficult and distant exactly as in the book[?]³³ Although he goes on to cite several other specific incidents that bother him, the recurring theme through virtually all of Selznick’s criticisms of the treatment are that they diverge from the original work, which could potentially damage how fans of the novel receive the movie.

The sum of the alterations that Hitchcock’s writing team made to the story and characters of *Rebecca* in their treatment was that the essence of the novel was no longer recognizable to Selznick. At various points in his criticisms, the producer reveals this larger issue he has with the treatment. He writes:

As for Manderley, every little thing the girl does...are all so brilliant in the book that every woman who has read it has adored the girl and has understood her psychology...We have removed all the subtleties and substituted big broad strokes which in outline form betray just how ordinary the actual plot is and just how bad a picture it would make without the little feminine things which are so recognizable and which make every woman say, “I know just how she feels...I know just what she’s going through.”³⁴

For *Rebecca* to be profitable, Selznick believed the writing team would need to be changed in order to capture and preserve the “things that have made this book the most successful love story next to *Gone with the Wind* that has appeared in the last five years.”³⁵ Considering that Hitchcock became accustomed to having relative freedom when adapting literary works in Britain, it is of little surprise that he would want to deviate from a story he describes to Truffaut as “old-fashioned” and “lacking in humor.”³⁶ However, not wanting to establish a reputation of being difficult—particularly with the threat of war looming and studios potentially scaling back

³³ Ibid., 260.

³⁴ Ibid., 260-261.

³⁵ Ibid., 261.

³⁶ Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 127.

productions as a result—Hitchcock was not in a position to challenge his producer much for control of the picture.

As a result, Hitchcock, Harrison, and MacDonald revised the treatment and followed Selznick's instructions. Satisfied, Selznick was then ready to move forward with *Rebecca* and, about two weeks before shooting began, hired American playwright Robert Sherwood to script the revised treatment. The producer would meet regularly with Sherwood and Hitchcock in late August 1939. Leff describes the nature of their collaboration:

Working with the producer always tested an artist's mettle. At late-hour conferences in his office or summerhouse, Selznick ran on adrenaline (and speed), Hitchcock and Sherwood on liquor. By three o'clock one morning, with Selznick still roaring, Hitchcock fell asleep and Sherwood, having drunk too much, tried to sail away in the model boat in Selznick's pool. When they came to, the script's third act...still awaited them.³⁷

One major scene in particular from this final act posed difficulties for the trio. The Hays Code forced them to change the novel's reveal that de Winter murdered his former wife, even though Rebecca provoked him into doing so. The code mandated that a male character could not murder his wife without facing legal or moral consequences. Therefore, instead of maintaining the reveal that Rebecca manipulated Maxim into shooting her, the writing team opted to make Rebecca's death a suicide in an attempt to frame Maxim for her death. With his contract winding down, Sherwood drafted a new scene that Hitchcock liked, and Selznick eventually approved it.

Ultimately, *Rebecca*'s shooting script was the result of the give-and-take dynamic between producer and director, with Selznick doing more of the taking and Hitchcock more of the giving. The writer-producer role for which Hitchcock praised Selznick before moving to Hollywood was mostly alive and well during the scripting of *Rebecca*, though the producer did relinquish complete autonomy at times. Despite his position that adapting a bestselling novel

³⁷ Leff, *Hitchcock and Selznick*, 53.

demanded strict adherence to the source material so as not to disappoint fans of the book, Selznick also recognized that, beyond changes the Production Code necessitated, some modifications were required simply for cinematic purposes. For Selznick, fidelity to the novel was less of a hard-and-fast rule and more of a guideline, albeit a very prominent one. He could support invented scenes for the picture as long as they captured the essence and tone of du Maurier's work, and as long as the most important and best remembered scenes from the book made it into the picture with limited alterations. Overall, because the producer demanded that the screenplay remain as loyal as possible to du Maurier's original work, Hitchcock had little room to influence the adaptation during the writing process.

Casting and Shooting *Rebecca*

Prior to his arrival in Hollywood, Hitchcock displayed on record the confidence he had in his ability and vision for coaching talent. An interview between the director and J. Danvers Williams of *Film Weekly* published on March 4, 1939—the day after Hitchcock signed with SIP—explores how the director envisioned his career with his forthcoming transition to Hollywood. Under the title of “What I’d Do to the Stars,” Hitchcock discusses the changes he hoped to see after leaving the British film industry. “Working under new conditions with an entirely fresh crowd of people will be like a tonic,” the director tells Williams. “I am itching to get my hands on some of those American stars.”³⁸ When asked why he was excited to work with these American actors, Hitchcock explains, “Some of them are so efficient...that it’ll be a pleasure to direct them; and there are others I should very much like to debunk.”³⁹ Regardless of an actor’s level of talent, however, Hitchcock remarks, “There is scarcely a star in Hollywood

³⁸ J. Danvers Williams, “What I’d Do to the Stars,” in Gottlieb, *Hitchcock on Hitchcock*, 90.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

whose appeal I would not try to alter or develop, according to the part they were playing.”⁴⁰

Reflecting his keen aptitude at self-promotion, the interview reveals Hitchcock’s confidence, perhaps to the point of arrogance, in his aptitude for directing the actors he would come to work with in Hollywood. Selznick would take Hitchcock to task on this matter after Joan Fontaine, cast as the second Mrs. de Winter as a result of Hitchcock’s influence on the casting process, slowed shooting.

Overall, casting for *Rebecca* went more or less smoothly in respect to the relationship between the producer and director. Hitchcock possessed a relatively heightened autonomy in casting that stemmed in part from SIP’s small size. Leff explains, “A director at one the of the five major studios generally secured actors from the pool of contract players...Selznick International, which had only a few actors under contract, sometimes required its director to look beyond the administration building’s white colonnades.”⁴¹ Adding to Hitchcock’s autonomy over this matter, Selznick “generally supported his director” when it came to casting.⁴² However, the two disagreed when it came to casting the female lead, which later led to issues during shooting. For the leading role of the second Mrs. de Winter, Selznick wanted British actress Nova Pilbeam to play the part because of her performance in a previous film that Hitchcock directed, *Young and Innocent* (1937). The producer believed that Pilbeam would portray well the narrator’s “gauche behavior, awkward movements and general immaturity,” and that she had the potential to be a “great star for the world market.”⁴³ Hitchcock, however, disagreed with Selznick; she

⁴⁰ Ibid., 94.

⁴¹ Leff, *Hitchcock and Selznick*, 48.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 49.

would be a good fit for portraying du Maurier's heroine as depicted in the novel, Hitchcock conceded, but would not work well for the direction he wanted to take the adaptation.

Because of Selznick's desire to stay true to the novel, Hitchcock's appeals fell on deaf ears. Selznick made plans to sign Pilbeam and went so far as to draw up a five-year contract for her. Leff explains the producer-director tension underlying this casting decision:

Selznick's attempt to sign the young actress not only suggests his adamance about leaving intact du Maurier's book, heroine and all, but constitutes his implicit statement about the boundaries of Hitchcock's authority. By contrast, Hitchcock had agreed to render his services "pursuant to Producer's directions, instructions, and control." If Hitchcock could not veto casting selections, though, he could still twist arms.⁴⁴

Twist arms he did, as Hitchcock drafted several memos to Selznick during the final months of 1938 that offered a range of criticism over Pilbeam's abilities. In one instance, the director references Ronald Colman's concern that the heroine's role would overshadow his if he played Maxim. Despite being the first choice of both Hitchcock and Selznick for the role, Colman declined the part. If Selznick casted Pilbeam, Colman had no reason to worry, according to the director, because "[w]ith Pilbeam as de Winter's wife, the picture will be his."⁴⁵ Eventually, Selznick retreated from the idea of casting Pilbeam as *Rebecca's* leading lady. A breakdown during contract negotiations appears to be the main reason Selznick changed his mind, but Hitchcock's persistence in trying to avoid working with Pilbeam on the picture may have influenced the producer as well.

Once Pilbeam was no longer in the mix, Hitchcock asserted some authority over the casting of the second Mrs. de Winter. Laurence Olivier, now cast as Maxim, pushed for the part to go to *Gone with the Wind* star Vivien Leigh, whom he would marry in 1940 and who was

⁴⁴ Ibid., 51.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

already under contract with the studio. Hitchcock, however, had pleaded with Selznick since he began working at SIP to cast an American actress for the part. Doing so, Hitchcock argued, would emphasize the character's isolation at Manderley, an English domain. After negotiations with Pilbeam broke down, Selznick agreed with his director. The three leading candidates as production approached were Fontaine, Margaret Sullivan, and Anne Baxter. Selznick deliberately waited to see what shape the treatment would take before casting the heroine. Once the writing team eliminated the comedic elements from the initial treatment, Sullivan became less desirable for the part, leaving the relative unknowns of Baxter and Fontaine.

With Hitchcock favoring Baxter and Selznick preferring Fontaine, the two consulted with George Cukor, a director at MGM and an industry expert on evaluating female talent for the silver screen. Cukor concluded that Fontaine's personal insecurities and acting inexperience would help her perform in the role of the second Mrs. de Winter. While his analysis favored Selznick, it also helped change Hitchcock's mind in the decision, making the casting of Fontaine ultimately a mutual selection between producer and director. Although Fontaine was not the director's first choice, Hitchcock's successful plea for the part to go to an American actress suggests he had at least some influence in the casting process.

SIP gave *Rebecca* a relatively meager budget of \$698,238—*Gone with the Wind's* budget was \$4.25 million, an unprecedented figure in the industry—and planned for a 36-day shoot, beginning September 8, 1939. While Selznick was largely preoccupied with finishing *Wind*, he and Hitchcock still had their issues during principal photography over control of the adaptation. Selznick monitored the production of *Rebecca* from off set, watching the daily rushes and looking over the log that included information about each day's shoot. This allowed him to be

certain that Hitchcock, who disliked any interference from higher-ups, returned to an acceptable pace after production fell behind schedule during the film's first two weeks of shooting.

The source of tension between producer and director during the production of *Rebecca* stemmed in part from the casting process. A memo Selznick drafted to Hitchcock on September 19, 1939, reveals the frustrations the producer felt over the lack of progress on *Rebecca*. The impending outbreak of World War II made completing *Rebecca* as soon as reasonably possible necessary for SIP. Selznick even looked into insuring the picture in the event the studio could not complete it if Britain ordered Laurence Olivier, George Sanders, or other English cast members to report for service. Taking into account this situation in his memo to Hitchcock, Selznick writes, “[W]e are faced with the probability of a large loss on *Rebecca*...it is no longer a matter of better time being desirable, it is a necessity.”⁴⁶ Near the conclusion of the memo, Selznick explains, “My fondness for you personally, and my respect for your abilities, cannot blind me to my responsibility to the people who are financing these pictures, and to the employees whose jobs depend upon efficient shooting on the stage.”⁴⁷ Selznick never sent the memo to Hitchcock, which was not an uncommon practice for the producer, who often allowed his dictation to function simply as thinking aloud. Instead of sending the memo, Selznick relayed his concerns to his director through SIP studio manager Henry Ginsberg. Despite remaining unsent, the memo reveals several points of contention between Selznick and Hitchcock during principal photography of *Rebecca*.

One major source of tension was Selznick's frustration with Hitchcock complaining about the performance of Fontaine as the heroine. This is especially of interest because

⁴⁶ David O. Selznick memorandum to Alfred Hitchcock, 19 September 1939, in Behlmer, *Memo From*, 278.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

Hitchcock had lobbied for an American actress to receive the part, agreed with the final casting choice, and bragged to the press about his ability to coach American talent. With the production of *Rebecca* behind schedule, Selznick raises the issue of Hitchcock's proficiency in directing his actors. In the unsent memo, Selznick acknowledges that weak performances can cause delays, but he does not consider it a valid excuse. He cites that such difficulties occur during virtually every production, and that the experienced cast of *Rebecca*, including Olivier, should help the situation. Selznick writes:

[Fontaine] requires work—but so has every other girl who has been aimed at stardom and who requires an enormous amount of work in her first big opportunity. Your difficulties in shooting this picture are a great deal less than the difficulties on the usual picture. And in most studios you wouldn't have anything like the cast you have now: you would have a great deal cheaper actors, and you would have great difficulties with many of your roles...and you would be expected to make about twice the time you are making.⁴⁸

Because SIP signed an American and because Hitchcock consented in the casting of Fontaine, Selznick was likely even less patient with the director's lack of progress during the first few weeks of shooting and use of Fontaine's lack of ability as an excuse. To the credit of both director and actress, Hitchcock picked up the pace on the production and Fontaine's performance improved during the third week of principal photography.

Selznick, however, found another fault with Hitchcock's filmmaking process, one that subverted the producer's control over the picture. Schatz notes that "the director's ability to 'cut with the camera'...had implications for Hitchcock's control of not just shooting but postproduction as well, and that genuinely disturbed Selznick."⁴⁹ Hitchcock deviated from the standard approach of shooting a scene from various angles and lengths, allowing the scene to be constructed with some flexibility during the editing process. Instead, the director "carefully

⁴⁸ Selznick memorandum to Hitchcock, 19 September 1939, in Behlmer, *Memo From*, 277.

⁴⁹ Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 283.

conceived and preplanned his pictures” and “shot very little coverage, getting only what he envisioned as essential to the final cut.”⁵⁰ Hitchcock explains to Truffaut, “One doesn’t set the camera at a certain angle just because the cameraman happens to be enthusiastic about that spot. The only thing that matters is whether the installation of the camera at a given angle is going to give the scene its maximum impact.”⁵¹ Deciding the most effective angles during preproduction increased Hitchcock’s efficiency once shooting began on a picture.

Feeling Hitchcock’s method undermining his control of the adaptation, Selznick addresses his director’s pre-cutting style in the same memo that discusses Fontaine’s performance slowing down *Rebecca*’s progress. Selznick concedes that “reducing the number of angles required is highly desirable, and no one appreciates its value more than I do; but certainly it is of no value if you are going to give us less cut film per day than a man who shoots twice as many angles.”⁵² Beyond the producer finding Hitchcock’s method being ineffective in the case of *Rebecca*, Schatz proposes that the memo “reveal[s] Selznick’s growing realization that Hitchcock was a filmmaker whose work he could not prepare, control, and reshape to suit his own tastes. After finally signing a top producing director, Selznick was facing the necessary consequences.”⁵³ Hitchcock was providing Selznick with the product that the producer had hoped to receive—the production of a picture that demanded little involvement from Selznick. The producer eventually accepted this. With the speed of production picking up following Fontaine’s improved performance, Selznick saw little else he could do to increase the pace of shooting without sacrificing the quality that Hitchcock was slowly but surely providing.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 103.

⁵² Selznick memorandum to Hitchcock, 19 September 1939, in Behlmer, *Memo From*, 277.

⁵³ Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 284.

Despite focusing on the post-production of *Gone with the Wind* as its premiere neared, Selznick still offered his input on *Rebecca* by sending memos to Hitchcock consistently after viewing the daily rushes. One such memo to the director, dated October 23, 1939, critiques two elements of the production; however, the language Selznick employs makes his comments appear more as suggestions rather than directives. The first point the producer makes deals with actors not reading their own lines during close-up shots of other characters in a scene. Selznick opens the memo by asking, “Don’t you think it’s awfully unfair, and damaging to the performances as well, for the principals not to stand in and read the off-scene lines...instead of having the script girl read these lines?”⁵⁴ He then compliments the performances of Fontaine and Olivier during the confession scene, but he suggests they would have acted even better had they read their own off-scene lines. Selznick, though, ultimately defers to his director, closing the subject by telling Hitchcock, “Use your own judgment about this...but I do think it would help in important scenes.”⁵⁵ The producer uses similar language when addressing his complaint of Olivier’s “habit of throwing away lines too much,” a trend Selznick recognizes as a “modern style of acting, but it’s also a modern style of losing points!”⁵⁶ Despite his issue with Olivier, however, Selznick still concludes in a manner less than forceful, noting, “I’d appreciate it if you would be on your guard about it in the remaining sequences.”⁵⁷

The language of the memo is strikingly different from his tone in the one he did not send, where Selznick is far harsher and more direct. In one instance in the unsent memo, the producer claims that some of Hitchcock’s “infantile” approaches to filmmaking needed quick correction

⁵⁴ David O. Selznick memorandum to Alfred Hitchcock, 13 October 1939, in Behlmer, *Memo From*, 283.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

“because nobody in Hollywood would stand for them.”⁵⁸ His calmer and more calculated phrasing in the later memo suggests that Selznick recognized he would not have the level of control over *Rebecca* that he wanted; using restrained language would be the more effective approach to gain influence over the picture during production and avoid alienating his director. Hitchcock, therefore, managed to have more freedom than he would have had if Selznick had not been preoccupied with finalizing *Gone with the Wind*. Additionally, Hitchcock managed to have more say in the casting process than he would have had working for other studios, and his pre-cutting technique allowed him to garner some influence over the *Rebecca* adaptation during its production.

Wrapping, Marketing, and Releasing *Rebecca*

After the completion of principal photography on *Rebecca*, the next step for SIP was editing the film and correcting any issues. As Schatz and Leff explain, Selznick primarily undertook this task and regained some control over the finished picture that he had lost during production when he was focused on finalizing *Gone with the Wind*. Through his pre-cutting, Hitchcock generally accounted for editing during preproduction of films he directed and had primary control over. By contrast, Selznick was “an inveterate tinkerer,” Leff writes, who “experimented a great deal during post-production, which concluded only when chief editor Hal Kern said, ‘This is it; you cannot have that film anymore. Out it goes.’”⁵⁹ In addition to controlling the editing process, Selznick marketed *Rebecca* alongside *Gone with the Wind* to help develop his studio’s prestige brand and make the scale of the du Maurier adaptation appear more extravagant and enticing to the public.

⁵⁸ Selznick memorandum to Hitchcock, 19 September 1939, in Behlmer, *Memo From*, 278.

⁵⁹ Leff, *Hitchcock and Selznick*, 78.

While many changes the producer called for during postproduction involved rerecording dialogue, Selznick took issue with Hitchcock's handling of the scene in which the heroine and Mrs. Danvers meet. Hitchcock had only shot the two characters in close-ups, but Selznick believed reshooting the scene at an additional angle would help maintain the movie's steady pace—a tempo similar to *Wind's*. The added coverage would also highlight the characters' emotions and draw less attention to the cuts in the scene. These changes adhered closely to classic Hollywood conventions, which Selznick naturally favored more than his director did. Although Hitchcock had less input in editing the picture than his producer, Selznick did follow suggestions from his director regarding the scene of the inquest that follows the discovery of Rebecca's corpse.

An additional scene that Selznick decided to reshoot was the movie's final scene in which a fire consumes Manderley. Here, Edwards argues, Selznick diverged from the strict letter of the novel for the sake of building SIP's brand. Selznick saw the potential that a similar incident in *Wind* offered for the screen—the scene in which flames engulf Tara, the Georgia cotton plantation where protagonist Scarlett O'Hara and her family reside. While Margaret Mitchell devotes only a slim portion of her novel to the scene—about five pages of more than one thousand—Selznick opted to turn the sequence into a cinematic spectacle, taking further advantage of shooting *Wind* in Technicolor. Consistent with how SIP prioritized the two films, the fire scene in *Rebecca* would not rival its counterpart in *Wind*. However, the movie version of *Rebecca* still places far more emphasis on the burning of Manderley than the novel does. Edwards summarizes the differences between the respective scenes in the source material and the adaptation:

While the novel concludes by suggesting the possibility that Manderley is in flames in the distance, SIP's adaptation depicts the burning of Manderley in a spectacular climax that

results in the death of Mrs. Danvers, the reunion of the [de Winter] couple, and a slow pan through Rebecca's bedroom followed by a dramatic, track-in shot that closes the film on Rebecca's trademark 'R' engulfed in flames.⁶⁰

Despite his usually strict adherence to successful source material, Selznick recognized that scenes could be highlighted more in adaptations when they offered viewers a memorable cinematic experience. The link between *Gone with the Wind* and *Rebecca* that their respective fire sequences provide was also important in enhancing SIP's brand because *Rebecca's* evocation of its predecessor added to the movie's aura of prestige despite its significantly smaller budget.

Also of note regarding the closing scene of *Rebecca* is Hitchcock's later claim that the last shot of the embroidered "R" was his idea. Not only did Selznick approach the director with something less discreet in mind, Hitchcock found his producer's suggestion laughable. In a 1971 interview, film students at Columbia University asked the director why he changed the ending to his film *Topaz* (1969). Hitchcock cites disagreements he had with those financing the picture. He then recounts the earlier incident with Selznick on *Rebecca* as an example of how he approached creative input from producers:

[Selznick] said, "When the house Manderley is in flames and smoke is rising into the sky, wouldn't it be a good idea for the smoke to form the letter 'R'?" What do you say, you know? Very embarrassing. You have to go around it some way. I thought it out and said, "Look. I've thought that thing over and I think it would be nicer and more realistic if you go into this Rebecca's room and the sheets are initialed, and you close in on the flames consuming the initial." He said, "Yes, yes, that might be good, too."⁶¹

Although Hitchcock's facetious tendencies make the validity of the account questionable, the anecdote offers a glimpse into how the two men interacted when collaborating on *Rebecca*. If the

⁶⁰ Edwards, "Brand-Name Literature," 42-43.

⁶¹ "Interview with Alfred Hitchcock," in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, Volume 2, ed. Sidney Gottlieb (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 147.

story is true, it also reveals a major contribution the director had on the final film. Finally, the tale illustrates Selznick's ability to recognize when his director had the better filmmaking instinct, even if it lessened his control over the picture.

The final scene was not the only instance of Selznick deviating from his otherwise strict adherence to the novel in order to market *Rebecca* more effectively. These other changes, however, pertain to how SIP portrayed the character Rebecca in merchandising campaigns before the movie's release rather than in the film itself. In an attempt to add to the prestige brand that SIP wanted to cultivate, film tie-ins for *Rebecca* included lines of expensive furniture, wallpaper patterns, and paint colors, the last of which came about before the studio opted not to shoot *Rebecca* in Technicolor. The studio also concocted "Rebecca Luxury Wardrobe" and "Rebecca Makeup Kit" lines that added to the prestige brand, promoted the film's release, and provided SIP income. The lines played up to the mysterious but glamorous aspects of the character Rebecca, who never appears in the novel. Instead, other characters' memories of her and physical items in *Manderley* offer the only characterizations of the first Mrs. de Winter. While early representations of her in the narrative portray her classiness, elegance, and charm, later depictions expose her actual nastiness, vengefulness, and spite.

The studio, taking advantage of Rebecca's ambiguous descriptions, marketed these lines with the novel's early, favorable opinions of her. Edwards explains, "SIP used this detail of the novel—this is, her vague but palpable presence—to project thousands of would-be Rebeccas into commercial culture...the 'Rebecca Luxury Wardrobe' and Rebecca look-alike contests seized upon the ambiguity of the character's identity and allowed anyone to be as glamorous, mysterious, and beautiful as the original Mrs. [de Winter.]"⁶² Although Selznick insisted that his

⁶² Edwards, "Brand-Name Literature," 38.

adaptation stay true to the novel, he bent his own rule when it came to the marketing strategy his studio employed for *Rebecca*. Because these interpretations of the unseen Rebecca did not influence the film, SIP managed to use the character to help build its brand without sacrificing du Maurier's authorship of the story that Selznick was determined to protect.

An additional way SIP marketed *Rebecca* was Selznick's decision to release its trailer in tandem with *Gone with the Wind's*. The earlier SIP production, though it had only been playing for a little longer than two months, had already grossed a staggering \$5 million. On February 20, *Wind* won a record-breaking ten Academy Awards, including Best Picture. In early March, as Selznick finalized *Rebecca*, the studio produced two packages of trailers, each containing trailers of both *Wind* and *Rebecca*. Even though audiences already recognized the prowess of *Wind*, *Rebecca* would actually receive a wide release before its predecessor. Therefore, SIP designed one trailer package for theaters that were already exhibiting *Wind* and another for theaters where both films would eventually play. Edwards notes that the bundling of the trailers allowed the studio to brand *Rebecca* as a prestige release ostensibly on par with *Wind*. He explains, however, "[t]he fact that *Rebecca* took far less time to produce, cost one third as much, and recycled many of the sets and wardrobes from *Gone with the Wind* was of course not elaborated on in publicity materials."⁶³ By packaging the two trailers together, however, *Rebecca* fell in line with the SIP prestige brand that the studio's previous adaptation of another bestselling novel developed.

To his credit, Selznick was evidently correct in believing moviegoers would be more interested in *Rebecca* because of the success of *Wind* and the popularity of the novel, and less because of Hitchcock's involvement in the project. An informal survey at a San Francisco theater during the opening weekend of *Rebecca* revealed that less than 10 percent of attendees were

⁶³ Ibid., 44.

drawn in because of Hitchcock. Meanwhile, more than 40 percent of moviegoers claimed that they had read the source material and that brought them to the theater. Additionally, and perhaps most notably, approximately 70 percent of those surveyed said that they went because they were fans of SIP productions—the survey referenced Selznick by name—and that motivated them to see *Rebecca*, indicating that packaging the two trailers together paid off. Similar polling at an advanced screening of *Rebecca* also revealed that audience members generally found that the movie, despite the necessary changing of the confession scene, followed the book remarkably well. Selznick, therefore, appears to be correct in his recognition of what *Rebecca*'s audience wanted from the adaptation. Refusing to subvert du Maurier's original work and marketing the film alongside the much bigger *Gone with the Wind* helped fuel *Rebecca*'s success.

After *Rebecca*

Upon winning a Milestone Award from the Screen Producers Guild in 1965, Hitchcock reflected on his arrival to Hollywood during his acceptance speech. In it, he jokes about the micromanaging of Selznick during their collaboration on *Rebecca*. Hitchcock remarks:

I came to these shores 26 years ago to make a picture for David Selznick. Naturally upon my arrival Mr. Selznick sent me one of his interoffice memos. I completed reading that memo yesterday. I shall act upon it at my earliest opportunity. Actually, it wasn't bad reading. In fact, I may make it into a picture. I intend to call it "The Longest Story Ever Told."⁶⁴

Although the interference Hitchcock found from Selznick as he began his career in Hollywood bothered him, the director was somewhat fortunate that the independent SIP allowed him more flexibility than the studio system of the time generally permitted directors. His experience with Selznick, from both filmmaking and business perspectives, prepared Hitchcock better than any

⁶⁴ Alfred Hitchcock, "After-Dinner Speech at the Screen Producers Guild Dinner," in Gottlieb, *Hitchcock on Hitchcock*, 54-55.

director for the changes the industry would experience once studios lost their clout because of court rulings and the rise of television.

Rebecca ultimately exceeded its budget by about \$300,000, costing SIP a total approaching \$1 million. The film generated \$700,000 in profits for the studio at the box office, but this figure disappointed Selznick, who hoped for a blockbuster. His reaction is somewhat understandable given the success of *Gone with the Wind*, which became and remains the highest-grossing film of all time when inflation is considered. However, a major studio, which controlled its own distribution and released far more movies, would have considered *Rebecca's* earnings a success. In fact, SIP was the most profitable studio in 1940 despite only having three pictures playing that year. *Intermezzo* (1939), *Wind*, and *Rebecca* netted SIP approximately \$10 million in profits for 1940; MGM earned the second most with \$8.7 million, though most of the sum came from its distribution of *Wind*. This highlights a larger issue for SIP beyond its lack of a channel for distribution and exhibition moving earnings to other studios; because of SIP's small size, it could not reinvest its profits widely enough to avoid paying heavy taxes. Consequently, after *Rebecca*, Selznick chose to liquidate the studio, take time off after several stressful years, and replace SIP with the more streamlined David O. Selznick Productions, which would later become Vanguard Films.

One strategy that this new company used that allowed it to function more effectively, especially with Selznick taking a break from the business, was loaning out its employees to other studios for profit when they were not currently working on a production. Hitchcock was among these employees Selznick loaned out, a matter agreed upon before the dissolution of SIP. Hitchcock worked for the independent producer Walter Wagner upon the completion of *Rebecca* and directed *Foreign Correspondent* (1940); the deal earned Selznick \$2,250 each week that

Hitchcock worked for Wagner. Free from Selznick's tight supervision, Hitchcock reverted back to the action-first style of film he usually made in Britain. *Foreign Correspondent* was nominated for Best Picture in the same year as *Rebecca*; the more traditional Hollywood film defeating the director's pet project reflects the important shift Hitchcock took as his career progressed. Leff notes a fundamental change that Hitchcock's collaboration with Selznick brought about in the director's style that would develop over the next decade of his career. He writes that because Selznick "persuaded Hitchcock to explore the psychology of Maxim and his second wife," the result was that while "British Hitchcock had been emotionally thin, *Rebecca* was robust."⁶⁵ Working for Selznick on his first Hollywood picture added a psychological depth to Hitchcock's filmmaking that, while not as evident in *Foreign Correspondent*, would develop soon and throughout his career. While Hitchcock resented Selznick's micromanagement in the making of *Rebecca*, his career ultimately benefited from his producer's influence on his Hollywood debut.

After *Foreign Correspondent*, Hitchcock directed several more movies on loan before Selznick returned to the movie business. Among the movies he directed during this span were *Saboteur* (1942) and *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), which helped Hitchcock establish himself as a director with a distinct and appealing style for American audiences. When Hitchcock directed his next film for Selznick, *Spellbound* (1945), the producer recognized the value that Hitchcock now held in Hollywood. Selznick chose to market the film with Hitchcock's name appearing larger than Selznick's above the title, though still smaller than Ingrid Bergman's and Gregory Peck's. After *Spellbound*, Hitchcock directed two more films for Selznick, *Notorious* (1946) and *The Paradine Case* (1947), but none of the movies matched *Rebecca*'s success. *The Paradine Case*

⁶⁵ Leff, *Hitchcock and Selznick*, 54.

fares the worst, likely due to Hitchcock having the least amount of influence over the picture than the previous movies he made for Selznick. *The Paradine Case* heralded the end of Selznick's career as a producer, as his desire for total control over productions finally fell out of fashion. After having a taste of working outside of a studio contract, Hitchcock would use production collaborations that were becoming common in Hollywood to vault a career as an independent director.

These changes in the setup of Hollywood and in television's growing prominence led to Hitchcock having a more successful and memorable career than Selznick after 1940. Although the director did not consider *Rebecca* a "Hitchcock picture," his collaboration with Selznick on the adaptation influenced his later work. Spoto describes *Rebecca* as "a dangerously literal kind of filmmaking to which Hitchcock would rarely return," crediting this to "Selznick's insistence on strict adherence to the novel."⁶⁶ However, Spoto also notes that *Rebecca* allows audiences "to understand the meaning of gothic romance, and for this fidelity to a vanishing genre, we have to thank the classy Selznick management as much as Hitchcock's intuitive understanding that there's real horror in thinking that someone dead may be watching and inviting your doom."⁶⁷ Hitchcock would return regularly to this theme that his Hollywood debut explores, perhaps most notably with *Psycho*, an adaptation made without the constraints of a producer interfering with his vision.

⁶⁶ Spoto, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock*, 85.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

Alfred Hitchcock's Adaptation of Robert Bloch: *Psycho* as the True "Hitchcock Picture to End All Hitchcock Pictures"

As Hollywood shifted away from the studio system after court rulings stripped Hollywood studios of their clout and as more Americans stayed home from movie theaters to watch television, Hitchcock found himself in a better position than any director in the US. As Schatz observes, Hitchcock's career had been unique in that he "was the only major producer-director from the studio era who had never worked as a house director under long-term studio contract."⁶⁸ In addition to this forcing him to cultivate a savviness in the industry behind the scenes, he also developed a distinct filmmaking style that audiences recognized and appreciated. "By the 1950s," Schatz continues "a 'Hitchcock picture' was a known commodity in the movie marketplace, a story type and narrative technique that had become familiar to millions of viewers."⁶⁹

Schatz also observes that Hitchcock's career from 1955 to the release of *Psycho* in 1960 is indicative of what the changes in the film industry and media consumption offered major directors. First, the television series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* began airing on CBS in 1955 and quickly became popular. Originally opposed to the idea, Hitchcock agreed to partake in the show at the suggestion of his agent, Lew Wasserman of MCA. The anthology series featured Hitchcock framing the episode in opening and closing segments, but his involvement in its production was otherwise minimal. His foray into television was similar to other, smaller-scale publicity ventures. Short story collections and mystery magazines appeared with Hitchcock's name and likeness attached even when he otherwise had nothing to do with their publications.

⁶⁸ Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 482.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Second, with the help of Wasserman, Hitchcock assembled a constant filmmaking crew that would move with him between studios; members included cinematographer Robert Burks, editor George Tomasini, assistant director Herbert Coleman, and composer Bernard Herrmann. Hitchcock film productions also now generally possessed larger budgets and bigger stars, and allowed the director to shoot more frequently on location and in Technicolor. With *North by Northwest* in 1959, Hitchcock went \$1.2 million over his budget of \$3.1 million and 20 days past the scheduled 60. MGM permitted it because Hitchcock and star Cary Grant virtually guaranteed box office success. Such an approach, Schatz notes, reflects the decline of studio clout and the rise of stars and directors. With its large budget and star power, *North by Northwest* screenwriter Ernest Lehman described the movie as “the Hitchcock picture to end all Hitchcock pictures.”⁷⁰

Following *North by Northwest*, however, Hitchcock found himself trying to determine what to do next after 46 feature films and three seasons of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. According to Stephen Rebello, Hitchcock began “to quiz his associates—everyone from his limousine driver and barber to agents and studio executives—as to how profitable they thought a first-class, low-budget shocker by a major director might be.”⁷¹ In this regard, he would be following the precedent of established directors going on to make decidedly B-pictures, including Howard Hawks, Charles Lughton, and Mervyn LeRoy with *The Thing from Another World* (with Christian Nyby, 1951), *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), and *The Bad Seed* (1956), respectively. More notably, French director Henri-Georges Clouzot followed up *The Wages of Fear* (1953) with the internationally-acclaimed *Diabolique* (1955), based on the novel *She Who Was No More* by Pierre Bouileau and Thomas Narcejac. Clouzot had defeated Hitchcock in purchasing the

⁷⁰ Ibid., 486.

⁷¹ Stephen Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2012), 37. Rebello’s book, along with Schatz’s, provided much of the history for this chapter.

rights to the novel, and Hitchcock instead bought the rights to *The Living and the Dead* by the same authors, which became *Vertigo*. Although the British Film Institute named *Vertigo* the greatest film of all time in 2012, the movie fared poorly at the box office upon its release. Consequently, Hitchcock's desire to reinvent himself and attract a younger audience remained, opening the door for *Psycho*.

Although Hitchcock had now been directing in Hollywood for 20 years, Paramount was skeptical of Hitchcock's decision to adapt *Psycho*, a 1959 Robert Bloch novel. In addition to *Vertigo*'s troubled fate at the box office, financial success had eluded Hitchcock's recent ventures into more experimental territory for his comedy *The Trouble with Harry* (1955) and his docudrama *The Wrong Man* (1956). Despite these box office struggles, the still-recent successes of *Rear Window* (1954), *To Catch a Thief* (1955), and the remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956) made Hitchcock confident that Paramount would approve *Psycho*. He had recently acquired the property and believed it would be his *Diabolique* after *Vertigo* flopped. A lack of confidence about the project from Paramount executives, however, forced Hitchcock to make concessions in order for him to be able to adapt *Psycho*. The studio refused to fund the project, so Hitchcock became the film's sole producer, waiving his \$250,000 director's fee in exchange for 60 percent ownership of the negative. He shot the picture in black and white at the Universal-International lot with the production crew from his television series, and Paramount distributed the picture. While Hitchcock risked taking a substantial financial hit in order to make *Psycho*, producing the picture himself afforded him the freedom to adapt Bloch's novel as he saw fit—a move that would pay off sizably.

As adapted, the story begins with Marion Crane and her boyfriend Sam Loomis ending a weekday afternoon tryst in a Phoenix motel room. After returning to work, Marion steals

\$40,000 from her employer's client and flees town, trading cars while on the lam. She checks into the desolate Bates Motel outside of town, where she shares a homemade dinner with motel clerk Norman Bates. Marion then retires to her room and takes a shower, when a cloaked figure, ostensibly Norman's mother, stabs her repeatedly; Norman then disposes of her corpse, her car, and her other belongings, including the stolen cash that he fails to discover.

In conjunction with private investigator Milton Arbogast, Sam and Marion's sister, Lila, try to determine what happened to Marion and the money. After speaking to Norman, Arbogast sneaks into the house behind the motel to interview Norman's mother, where the same cloaked figure stabs him to death. Sam and Lila meanwhile learn that Norman's mother and her male lover were poisoned, and that she has been dead and presumably buried for 10 years. After the pair enters the Bates home, Lila discovers the mummified corpse of Norman's mother, and Sam intervenes when Norman attempts to attack her. The film concludes as a psychiatrist explains to Sam, Lila, and doctors that Norman has two personalities, his own and one he created for his mother; the latter is responsible for the murders. In voiceover, Norman's mother explains she would not harm a fly as Norman sits in a straightjacket.

Paramount had good reason to be skeptical of the story, as it deviated far from the norm of a Hollywood movie, particularly from Hitchcock's previous film for MGM, *North by Northwest*. "Here was," Schatz writes about *Psycho*, "a first-run feature that perverted the themes of heterosexual romance and mother love, that implicated the viewer as a sensation-seeking voyeur, that killed off its lead character barely halfway into the story, and that freely mixed low-grade telefilm values with dazzling cinematic techniques."⁷² In his interview with Hitchcock, Truffaut remarks, "it occurred to me that *Psycho* was for a new generation of filmgoers. There

⁷² Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 489.

were many things in that picture that you'd never done in your earlier films." Hitchcock responds, "Absolutely."⁷³ He succeeded in reaching this audience, as *Psycho* was the most profitable film of the director's career and was the second highest grossing release of the year after the MGM blockbuster remake of *Ben-Hur* (1959), which had a budget more than 15 times larger than *Psycho*'s. Through the innovations that the movie offered its audience and the marketing campaign that tapped into the director's celebrity, Hitchcock's determination to adapt the Bloch novel, and his ability to do so without interference from producers, established and cemented *Psycho* as the quintessential Hitchcock film, with Bloch's novel often being forgotten in the process.

Hitchcock Adapts Bloch's Novel Without Interference

Financing the picture himself allowed Hitchcock to apply his desired "ruthlessness" in his adaptation of *Psycho*. Because the recently published novel was relatively unknown, Hitchcock was adapting the story that *Psycho* tells rather than *Psycho* the book itself. That is, Hitchcock was not subject to disappointing or enraging a large fan base, so fidelity to the novel was especially unimportant to him. However, the changes Hitchcock actually made to the source material are relatively minor. Instead, what makes the movie more memorable than the novel is that the content on screen was innovative for its medium while the written work broke no new ground in horror fiction. The result is that the adaptation of *Psycho* is distinctly and unmistakably Hitchcock's despite Bloch being the original author of the story.

Among the reasons that the movie became more memorable than the novel is the technical accomplishments Hitchcock achieved in concealing plot twists. Truffaut remarks that "one of the things that bothered" him about the novel "is that it cheats. For instance, there are

⁷³ Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 268.

passages like this: ‘Norman sat down beside his mother and they began a conversation.’ Now, since she doesn’t exist, that’s obviously misleading, whereas the film narration is rigorously worked out to eliminate these discrepancies.”⁷⁴ Perhaps the most notable difference in this aspect between the novel and the movie is found in the shower scene, for which *Psycho* the movie is best remembered. Disguised as his mother, Norman repeatedly and fatally stabs Marion as she bathes in her motel room. With Mary having just “turned both faucets on full force” in her shower, the corresponding scene in the novel reads:

That was why she didn’t hear the door open, or note the sound of footsteps. And at first, when the shower curtains parted, the steam obscured the face.

Then she *did* see it there—just a face, peering through the curtains, hanging in midair like a mask. A head-scarf concealed the hair and the glassy eyes stared inhumanly, but it wasn’t a mask, it couldn’t be. The skin had been powdered dead-white and two hectic spots of rouge centered on the cheekbones. It wasn’t a mask. It was the face of a crazy old woman.

Mary started to scream, and then the curtains parted further and a hand appeared, holding a butcher’s knife. It was the knife that, a moment later, cut off her scream.

And her head.⁷⁵

While the movie’s depiction of the scene is not a large departure from the novel’s account of the murder, the difference in the medium made presenting the attack on the screen more difficult. Hitchcock faced the considerable challenge of shooting the scene without revealing that Norman, disguised as his mother, is the one committing the murder. The novel did not face this difficulty to the extent that the movie did because a written description, as Truffaut points out, can conceal the mother’s true identity more easily than visuals can. This is particularly true because Bloch presents this chapter, which ends in her death, through the point of view of Mary via limited

⁷⁴ Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 268.

⁷⁵ Robert Bloch, *Psycho* (New York, NY: Overlook Press, 2010), 41. Note that the movie changed the heroine’s name to Marion because a real-life Mary Crane lived in Phoenix.

third-person narration. The novel's perspective returns to Norman in the following chapter while maintaining the limited third-person narration, advancing the plot's misdirection in the process.

This subsequent chapter recounts Norman's actions during the time that his mother ostensibly murders Mary. He only "discovers" the murder when he drunkenly peeps into Mary's room from his office and finds her lying on the floor as the shower sprays her corpse. With less of a risk of inadvertently revealing that Norman is the true killer, Bloch deceives readers while Hitchcock only obscures, and does not actually conceal, the killer's identity. This is not a criticism of Bloch, as he took advantage of the medium of *Psycho* the novel in order to misdirect readers as much as possible. Additionally, the quality or literary merit of Bloch's writing is irrelevant for this examination. The issue at hand lies with the lack of innovation on his part for the medium in which he created *Psycho*; his murder scene was no aberration from standard horror fiction, rendering what became such an iconic scene for Hitchcock largely unremarkable in Bloch's novel.

That Hitchcock, via the medium, faced more technical obstacles than Bloch is not what solely makes the adaptation of *Psycho* more memorable than its original version. The scene had to be effective for it to resonate with viewers, which it accomplished by presenting something new to moviegoers. To be able to present the murder to the audience—rather than having it occur off-screen—Hitchcock had to make sure the scene would pass the Production Code. He had already pushed the envelope earlier in the scene by flushing a toilet on screen, a Hollywood first. The director shot extra, gorier footage of the shower scene that he had no intention to include in the final picture—he was not one to shoot superfluous takes, after all—so that it would appear to the Production Code office that he was making concessions. To appear that he was bargaining with the office, he cut this extra footage and got approval for the shower scene he wanted, one

that was new to its audience and that would become iconic. The director, Rebello claims, “simultaneously succeeded in titillating and shocking the viewer while concealing the nudity of the victim and the true identity of the attacker. Most crucially, the impressionistic montage so stylized and abstracted the action that the sequence was to devastate rather than nauseate the audience.”⁷⁶ Considering the challenges Hitchcock faced in adapting the murder effectively, the shower scene becomes even more impressive considering what 1960 American audiences were accustomed to seeing on screen.

Beyond *how* Norman murders Marion, *when* the attack happens in the story also shocked audiences because of its lack of precedence. The difference in the timing of the murder between the two versions of *Psycho* is significant when considering the medium conventions of the novel and the movie. In the film adaptation, the killing of Janet Leigh’s character at the hands of the disguised Bates occurs about 45 minutes into the movie, not even halfway through its 109-minute runtime. The corresponding scene in the novel, however, occurs earlier, about one-fourth of the way into the story. A horror novel killing a character was certainly no innovation in literature in 1958, but Hitchcock retaining the idea to murder a main character in the middle of the adaptation was groundbreaking for Hollywood. Characters in written works of fiction are, of course, far more expendable than Hollywood stars, who earn sizeable paychecks for their box office draw. While Hitchcock did not devise this key plot point of *Psycho* himself, he presented something new to unsuspecting moviegoers in adapting Bloch’s novel for the silver screen.

In addition to changing when the attack occurs, Hitchcock also changed another key point from the novel that added to the surprise of the shower scene. The novel introduces Norman Bates, his mother, and the motel in the first chapter of the book and switches to Mary in the

⁷⁶ Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, 153.

second chapter, telling their stories concurrently until her murder. By contrast, the movie begins with Marion's tryst with Sam and tracks her story until she checks into the Bates Motel, when Norman is then introduced. This adjustment in the movie adds to the surprise of the murder, as Hitchcock fools audiences with his trademark red herring. Hitchcock explains to Truffaut how he made Marion's murder more impactful:

We purposely made that beginning on the long side, with the bit about her theft and her escape, in order to get the audience absorbed with the question of whether she would or would not be caught...

You know that the public always likes to be one jump ahead of the story; they like to feel they know what's coming next. So you deliberately play upon this fact to control their thoughts.⁷⁷

Because of how the movie begins, viewers expect the story to be entirely about Marion's theft, which turns out to simply be misdirection because her death transfers the focus of the movie to Norman and his curious relationship with his mother. The "game with the audience was fascinating," Hitchcock tells Truffaut. "I was directing the viewers. You might say I was playing them, like an organ."⁷⁸ While Hitchcock's changes to the source material were less "ruthless" considering his other adaptations, the touches he adds to *Psycho*, however minor, are unmistakably his.

Reviewers thusly credited the innovations of *Psycho* to Hitchcock, often overlooking Bloch and dismissing the source material as being inferior to the movie. Bloch later claimed, "Most film 'historians'...wrote that *Psycho* was a short story in a cult magazine or that Hitchcock took this little thing and blew it up into something bigger."⁷⁹ These critics, Bloch argues, attributed to Hitchcock elements of the story that the novel includes—Norman practicing

⁷⁷ Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 269.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, 218.

taxidermy, the heroine dying early, and Norman's mother persona murdering the leading lady in the shower. Bloch's complaints are valid to an extent in that he perhaps deserves some credit for how well Hitchcock adapted the novel's conceptions for the screen. However, regardless of how much credit for *Psycho* the movie Bloch may or may not deserve, the reviewers helped cement *Psycho's* legacy as the quintessential Hitchcock film, even though the director and Paramount risked alienating them by not offering advanced screenings for critics.

Although he did not create the story of *Psycho* or make many major changes to the novel when he adapted it, Hitchcock rightly receives more credit than Bloch for the on-screen innovations of *Psycho*. The reasons for this extend beyond the more obvious point that more people saw the movie than read the book because a Hitchcock movie, though not immune to box office disappointments, would attract a wider audience than a recent novel that was not already a bestseller. Elements of Bloch's story would have permitted many filmmakers to be innovative if they were willing to murder their leading lady not even halfway through their movie. Hitchcock took that risk, which, coupled with the modifications he made in adapting *Psycho*, led to the movie being an unprecedented experience and a box office sensation.

Selling *Psycho* and the Hitchcock Brand

Finding the promotional campaigns for recent releases *Vertigo* and *North by Northwest* to be too artistic, Hitchcock felt the need to take a different approach in promoting *Psycho*, particularly since it was a different kind of movie. He also took the opportunity to tease eventual moviegoers to help illicit the response he wanted when they eventually saw *Psycho*.

Consequently, Hitchcock worked with the sales and publicity department at Paramount, headed by publicity director Herb Steinberg, to develop an unusual and impressionable marketing campaign that sought to arouse the suspicion of potential viewers. However, they had to play up

the surprising twists—the murder of Marion and the reveal about Norman’s mother—without giving away too much of the content, for that would lessen the movie’s impact. The campaign also took into account the habits of moviegoers of the 1960s, and the release of *Psycho* anticipated the norms of today’s theater attendance. Additionally, Hitchcock capitalized on his established persona from the cameos in his films, his media appearances, and his appearances on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. The show in particular, Schatz explains, “delivered Hitchcock to millions of viewers, week after week, transforming him into a veritable culture industry unto himself and his name into a trademark that was more meaningful in the media marketplace than that of any studio.”⁸⁰ The integration of his persona into the promotional materials of the innovative marketing campaign helped the film succeed at the box office, further adding the Hitchcock brand to *Psycho* in the process.

The first taste Hitchcock offered viewers that indicated *Psycho* would be a different kind of picture was the trailer, which made the most of his celebrity and linked the director’s persona directly with the movie. The preview begins with Hitchcock standing in the Bates Motel parking lot with a tune playing similar to “Funeral March of a Marionette,” the theme song from *Presents*. Text on the screen explains to viewers, “The fabulous Mr. Alfred Hitchcock is about to escort you on a tour of the location of his new motion picture, ‘PSYCHO.’” Hitchcock then announces in his trademark drawl, “Good afternoon. Here we have a quiet little motel, tucked away off the main highway and, as you see, perfectly harmless looking, when, in fact, it has now become known as the scene of the crime.” He then gives viewers a limited tour of the Bates property, beginning with Norman’s and his mother’s respective bedrooms in the attached house before moving on to the motel lobby. Hitchcock alludes to plot details without being specific

⁸⁰ Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 485.

enough to reveal fully or truthfully the twists of the movie. Keeping in the tradition of the trailers for classics such as *Gone with the Wind* and *Citizen Kane* (1941), the preview shows no footage from the actual movie. At the end of its runtime of more than six minutes, the trailer concludes when Hitchcock pulls back a shower curtain in the motel bathroom to reveal a screaming Vera Miles, which further misdirects viewers. Text then describes *Psycho* as “[t]he picture you MUST see from the beginning / Or not at all! / for no one will be seated after the start of / ‘PSYCHO,’” which promises to be “Alfred Hitchcock’s Greatest Shocker.” While Hitchcock’s very presence and his name being attached to the picture would already draw many fans to the box office, the offbeat trailer reflects and markets the unique *Psycho* appropriately.

In addition to playing a role in the trailer, Hitchcock’s likeness appeared in the *Psycho* promotional materials that Paramount sent to theaters as well. The director described to exhibitors his plan as “a vital step in creating the aura of mysterious importance this unusual motion picture so richly deserves.”⁸¹ With support from studio executives Y. Frank Freeman and Barney Balaban, and sales strategist George Weltner, Hitchcock insisted that theater managers follow a strict policy that no moviegoer be permitted to enter a screening late. Rebello explains how the practice deviated from the norm:

Ticket buyers were accustomed to casually dropping in and out in the days when movie houses opened at 10:00 A.M. and double-features, short subjects, and previews of coming attractions ran continuously through late evening. Owners of several major theater chains feared that patrons would rebel at being told when and how they could view a movie—even by the mighty Hitchcock.⁸²

To prevent these owners from boycotting *Psycho* to protect their customers’ interests, Hitchcock assured them that he was “playing my game with the public” and that if the owners followed his

⁸¹ Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, 194.

⁸² *Ibid.*

instructions, the movie would be an “Event.”⁸³ The publicity team also sent elaborate instruction manuals to exhibitors with tips that would maximize *Psycho*’s effect on the public, with the promise that the effect would lead to more ticket sales. While such a promotional tactic had been common during the 1930s and 1940s, by 1960, it was generally only employed for larger spectacles, such as 3D releases or widescreen Cinemascope features. This marketing method thus helped emphasize that despite its small scope and budget, this new Hitchcock picture would be unusual, exciting, and, most importantly, profitable.

Included with the instruction manuals were promotional materials featuring Hitchcock’s likeness meant to assist in managing a crowd unaccustomed to theaters restricting them from entering a screening late. To add to the spectacle, the manuals also suggested that theaters hire Pinkerton guards for crowd control. To further help in the matter, cardboard cutouts of the director and a recorded message from Hitchcock explained the unusual screening policy to the public. These reaffirmed that it was in viewers’ best interests for theaters not to permit late admittance because it would “kill” their viewing experience. To ease the process, signs also redirected the foot traffic of patrons already holding tickets to the next showing of *Psycho*, with the time clearly displayed, in order to keep the lobby and box office clear for new arrivals to the theater. Hitchcock, via the text on his cutout, reiterated to viewers, “We don’t want you to cheat yourself,” so no one would be admitted after a showing started, “not even the manager’s brother, the President of the United States or the Queen of England (God bless her)!” The humor perhaps helped ease the transition for moviegoers into the novel practice of having to arrive at a certain time to see a film.

⁸³ Ibid.

Employing the same humor, Hitchcock pointed toward the policy's success after the movie fared well in its initial limited release. In the August 6, 1960 issue of the *Motion Picture Herald*, under the heading "A Lesson in PSYCHO-logy," Hitchcock pleads:

We cannot over-emphasize enough the proved efficiency of our policy in selling tickets and enhancing the importance of *Psycho*. Even the reviewers, a hard-bitten clan, were intrigued by such quasi-humorous messages as 'please don't give away the ending, it's the only one we have' to quote them here and there in their glowing praises of the picture and the policy.

...

Paramount and I have set up these minimum showmanship standards for your patrons' complete enjoyment of the show—and to start them talking as soon as they leave the theater. Please do not attempt to alter, change, transform, mutate, modulate, vary or qualify these requirements without prior consultation with the highest authority—and I leave you to guess who that might be.⁸⁴

The comments about the reviewers is of particular interest considering Paramount opted not to offer advanced screenings for critics. The studio feared reviewers would reveal plot twists to the public, hurting the experience of first-run audiences and the ensuing word of mouth. According to *Psycho* screenwriter Joseph Stefano, at least one critic reviewed the movie negatively because he had to see the movie with the general public and was subjected to the attendance policy.

Despite initial mixed reviews, *Psycho* became a sensation and the most profitable picture of the director's career. According to Hitchcock, the production of *Psycho* stayed within its budget of \$800,000. (Note that twenty years prior, *Rebecca* ended up costing about \$200,000 more—before accounting for inflation). At the time of Hitchcock's interview with Truffaut, *Psycho* had grossed about \$15 million. Hitchcock told Truffaut that his "main satisfaction is that the film had an effect on the audiences...It wasn't a message that stirred the audience, nor was it a great performance or their enjoyment of the novel. They were aroused by pure film."⁸⁵ His

⁸⁴ Alfred Hitchcock, "A Lesson in PSYCHO-logy," in Gottlieb, *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, Volume 2, 94-95.

⁸⁵ Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 282-283.

adaptation of the novel as well as the publicity in promoting the picture led to the financial and, ultimately, critical success of *Psycho*. Considering the film medium and Hollywood history, Hitchcock's adaptation of Bloch's novel was innovative, which made the film a sensation among its 1960 audience.

Ernest Lehman's earlier claim that *North by Northwest* would be the "Hitchcock picture to end all Hitchcock pictures" proved to be more fitting for *Psycho*. It could also be said that *Psycho* was the Hitchcock picture to end the studio system, or at least herald its end. For his productions after *Psycho*, Hitchcock consolidated his operations but no longer had a consistent production unit or pool of collaborators. He also never rivaled the success of *Psycho*. Schatz notes that "as Hitchcock was being canonized by critics and historians" in the 1960s, "his output suggested...creative freedom and control were of little value without the resources and the constraints that had been basic to the old system but were sorely lacking in the New Hollywood."⁸⁶ After Hitchcock worked outside and ahead of Hollywood's structure for two decades, the new system that he helped usher in led to a decline in the director's career, with no later Hitchcock picture being able to compete with the success of *Psycho*.

⁸⁶ Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 491.

Conclusion

Hitchcock is now among the best known directors in history, and this study offers a way to consider the director's Hollywood career alongside changes in the American film industry from 1940 to 1960. Hitchcock's ability to work outside of standard Hollywood business practices for the better part of his career, both during the studio system and immediately following its decline, helped make him a more unique and memorable director than his contemporaries. The changes in Hitchcock's clout between 1940 and 1960 also meant that he had more control over his later projects, so his ability to adapt works with far more freedom permitted him to create an innovative film with *Psycho*. By contrast, he made the Best Picture-winning *Rebecca* virtually risk-free because his boss, Selznick, financed the picture and had strong, not inaccurate convictions of what a mainstream American audience wanted to see in his studio's adaptation of the popular novel.

The chapter on *Rebecca* provides an examination of the intricacies of a Hitchcock production before the director established himself in Hollywood and had to work under tight control from his producer. The often tenuous relationship between Hitchcock and Selznick, with their conflicting ideas about how best to adapt the du Maurier novel at the forefront of the tension between them, shaped the production of the film at each stage of its development. While Hitchcock managed to exert some influence at these various points, he always had to answer to Selznick, whose micromanagement was lessened to some degree by his finalizing of the mammoth *Gone with the Wind*. In addition to this giving Hitchcock more of an avenue to exercise some control over the picture, that Hitchcock worked for an independent studio in SIP also allowed him a little more freedom. Had he worked for a major studio during the time, he would have been forced to direct a movie that fit that studio's style. Even though Hitchcock had

to ensure that *Rebecca* satisfied the brand Selznick wanted for his studio, the director at one of the major studios would have been given a smaller budget and less control in selecting and shaping his product. Working for SIP also allowed Hitchcock to develop his talents as a Hollywood director. Aided by his filmmaking experience in Britain, the production also helped vault Hitchcock to a successful career working largely on the fringe of Hollywood as an independent director while the studio system continued into the 1950s.

The second chapter offers an explanation as to how *Psycho* allowed Hitchcock to cement his Hollywood fame after court rulings and the increased popularity of television diminished the studio system. Having already avoided working continuously with one specific studio, Hitchcock was more prepared than any other director working in the US for this new era of Hollywood. However, Hitchcock wanting to try something new meant funding *Psycho* himself after Paramount, hoping for a safer box office bet on par with *North by Northwest*, balked at the project. The chapter considers how this lack of involvement from a studio or producer gave Hitchcock absolute freedom in adapting Bloch's novel. Hitchcock being able to adapt freely led to an innovative movie experience that remains memorable while the novel is all but forgotten. Hitchcock and the publicity department at Paramount also used his celebrity to market the movie and make the experience of seeing *Psycho* in theaters a spectacle. The chapter explains how *Psycho* allowed the director to reach a new height in his career that he would not be able to return to with his later films.

Hitchcock is often credited as being the main force behind the movies he directs, but this project seeks to complicate that assertion within the context of the director's career as well as within American film industry history. While Hitchcock became a household name later in his career, in 1940, he worked for a producer in Selznick who was more well-known to Americans

than the British director. After 1940, however, Hitchcock often worked as a producer-director while most Hollywood directors worked for one specific studio and made movies that satisfied that studio's brand. This allowed Hitchcock to develop his own filmmaking style and become savvy in the industry before the demise of the studio system. After his television series significantly grew his celebrity and studios allocated greater resources to his movies, Hitchcock cemented his legacy with *Psycho* in 1960 on the basis of his own filmmaking and likeness instead of star power or a big budget. A consideration of the changes in Hollywood help explain how Hitchcock later became a household name after having little freedom with his Hollywood debut in 1940.

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