

Questions of Authorship and Audience:

A Study of Artefacts Related to the Film *Rebecca* (1940)

By Fergus Cook

In this essay, I focused on two main themes: the way in which Alfred Hitchcock's direction influenced the production and the marketing of *Rebecca*; and the film's address of a female demographic. With the materials available to me, it seemed that Hitchcock's style of direction was at odds with the project, and while praise is still heaped on him for *Rebecca*, I wanted to understand how female sensitivities in the film might have shaped its success. The artefacts I consulted at The Bill Douglas Centre led me to appreciate how much David O. Selznick was the true mastermind of the project.

The long and troubled production history of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) – the film generally ascribed in this way to the director – has given rise to critical debate about authorship. Producer David O. Selznick, adamant that the film should remain faithful to Du Maurier's novel, reigned in Hitchcock's desires for the film to reflect his own ideas. However, the producer's contention was not a moral obligation to the author, nor even to the carefully crafted meaning of the text itself, but was a consideration of the readership with which the novel resonated. Upon reading Hitchcock's initial cinematized treatment, Selznick's three thousand-word rebuke

included the lesson, ‘not even the author can say why a book has caught the fancy of the public’ and rallied him thereon to retain the subtleties of the novel; ‘the little feminine things ... which make every woman say “I know just how she feels” ’ (*Memo from David O. Selznick*, 258-259).

Certain artefacts from the Bill Douglas Collection – 1940 editions of *Picturegoer and Film Weekly* previewing and reviewing *Rebecca*, a recent British Film Institute postcard celebrating the re-mastered version of the film, Selznick’s published memos – along with resources elsewhere related to the film’s history, enable us to plough deeper into these discussions of authorship and audience.

Rebecca’s success and critical acclaim signalled the growing appeal of the gothic romance narrative. By the onset of the Second World War, Hollywood had begun to draw upon a heightened anxiety about feminine identity and expression. Diane Waldman reports changes to industry and the economy that inhibited having large families, drew husbands away from the home and led to boredom and emotional depravity for women (‘At Last I Can Tell It To Someone,’ *Cinema Journal*, vol. 23, no. 2, p30). On the other hand, advances in birth control and an increasing openness about sexuality, along with better professional opportunities for women during the war, meant that some women were experiencing unprecedented financial and sexual freedom. Waldman suggests this ‘role definition, frustration and confusion [formed] the background for the gothic romance films of the 40s’ (30). Hollywood moguls like Selznick sought to provide a release for a female demographic undergoing an adolescent-like unrest.

Film magazines from the period, with their preoccupation with fashion and beauty, reflect Hollywood’s feminine address. The tone and content of these magazines show how the film industry shaped and responded to female sensitivities.

Issues 477 and 486 of British publication *Picturegoer and Film Weekly* apportioned over a quarter of their volume to cosmetic advertisements. In one such advertisement, a handsome man tells a beautiful woman, ‘I love you’ and the caption reads, ‘this could happen to you – if you use this amazing new beauty recipe.’ The unashamed



Picturegoer and Film Weekly, issue 486, p2

transparency of this advertisement indicates the power the romantic ideal held over the magazine’s readership. On another point, the framing of the couple – the man bearing down upon the woman – endorses female subjugation in the discourse of romance. The contradictions that engendered feminine unrest in the 1940s are clear to see here; the advertisement promotes traditional

patriarchal values of romance despite selling a product that encourages freer sexual expression.

The adjoining advertisement – using the context of ‘8 hour shifts at the Depot’ to sell long-duration nail polish – promises a sexual, professional and financial freedom to women that is further at odds with the image of the dominating male. Such a promise belies the nature of work on the domestic front, which was devoted to men at war and not to the emancipation of women at home.

In many ways, *Rebecca*’s release fed off similar tensions between romance and freedom of expression, and off the ambiguity regarding women’s role in society. Of fifty-two separate poster designs for *Rebecca* displayed on the Internet Movie

Poster Data Base at <http://www.movieposterdb.com/movie/32976/Rebecca.htm> ,

forty-two frame the romantic leads with Laurence Olivier towering over Joan Fontaine, dictating the gaze of the poster, and only three with Fontaine in ascendancy, despite the greater screen time allotted to the heroine and the greater devotion to her perspective in the film. While there seems to be a focus on locating female identity in the 40s, films like *Rebecca* nonetheless sought to establish that identity within the context of male hegemony and traditional gender roles.

Rebecca begins with the parentless, unnamed heroine pursuing work abroad as a ‘companion’ to the rich and conceited Mrs. Van Hopper, before Maxim De Winter (Olivier) sweeps her off her feet and places her back within a haunted domestic setting in Cornwall. ‘I’ (Fontaine) struggles to find expression in her professional, independent capacity, then again in a new romantic setting, her anonymity conveying throughout her lack of a stable identity. In the mansion at Manderley, she is defined against the sexual and domestic confidence of Mr. De Winter’s dead wife.

Selznick’s memo to Hitchcock on October 11th 1939 expresses disappointment that Hitchcock’s rushes for an early scene – de Winter addresses ‘I’; ‘you little fool, I want to marry you’ – missed a ‘wonderful chance for [...] great humour and great poignancy’ with regards the girl’s reaction ‘I love you dreadfully (etc.)’ (*Memo From David O. Selznick*, 281). Selznick, anxious not to lose the emotional depth of the film’s heroine, asked for more close-ups of Fontaine, indicating that he was aware, as Hitchcock was not, of the resonance of this moment with the contemporary feminine mindset. Whereas sentimentality was not a primary concern of Hitchcock’s filmmaking, the producer was more aware of the empathy such a scene might arouse in a female demographic yearning for romance in a climate of growing independence and isolation.

Commercial interest in the film profited from the anticipation of Hitchcock's Hollywood debut. *Rebecca*'s review in *Picturegoer* comments first upon Fontaine's 'outstanding performance,' then upon Hitchcock's 'intelligent and imaginative direction,' (reversing the order of honours in the preview, which prioritises the 'sensitive and moving picturisation of Daphne du Maurier's book [...] (Hitchcock's) finest directorial work'). Behind the dual marketing of Hitchcock's authorship and Du Maurier's female sensitivities however, lay trends in the director's work that were at odds with a project like *Rebecca*: he preferred irony to sentimentality, image to dialogue, storytelling to characterisation – not to mention such boasts as 'I just forget about the book and start to create cinema' ('James, Hitchcock and the Fate of Character,' Paula Marantz Cohen, *Alfred Hitchcock: centenary Essays*, 17).

While Hitchcock received and continues to receive acclaim for *Rebecca* – the recent British Film Institute postcard advertises the re-mastered version of 'Hitchcock's masterpiece of romance and suspense' – writers such as Leonard J Leff and George Turner have examined the ways in which Selznick had to supervise the director's filmmaking style in order for the film to reach its full potential.

Selected memos from the producer reveal how Hitchcock's methods proved exasperating to him on numerous instances: his initial, much-altered treatment of the novel left the producer 'shocked and disappointed beyond words' (*Memo from David O. Selznick*, 257); his 'cutting-in-the-film' technique failed to save time despite the reduced amount of film it entailed; he gave the camera crew idle time while he rehearsed the stars and vice-versa; he failed to use the principals for off-scene lines during important close-ups; the tempo of the scenes dragged; and Selznick was repeatedly at pains to safeguard a faithful translation of the subtleties of Du Maurier's

characterisation and narration, without which the film might ‘betray just how ordinary the actual plot is’ (261).

Among the central contradictions between Hitchcock’s ethos and the project of *Rebecca*, Leff refers us to Hitchcock’s distrust of performance, preferring instead to ‘[catch] a scene’s emotional tone in his imagery’ (*Hitchcock and Selznick: The Rich and Strange Collaboration of Alfred Hitchcock and David O. Selznick in Hollywood*, 60, 1988). This disregard for the actor can be seen in his terse, often satirical remarks about a list of candidates for the role of ‘I’ in a memo of his own to Selznick: the performers range from ‘pale and uninteresting’ and ‘excellent for Rebecca who doesn’t appear’ to ‘too Russian-looking’ (Dan Auiler, *Hitchcock’s Secret Notebooks*, 307-310). In Leff’s view, because Hitchcock’s British films had been founded on ‘actions and things, not feminine beauty,’ Selznick’s supervision proved invaluable: ‘Selznick had given Hitchcock an auspicious debut,’ he concludes. (62, 84).

Rebecca is still popular with audiences today. The film has been shown three times on the BBC since 2004, and of the novel itself, Alison Light reports ‘thirty-nine impressions and translations into twenty-two languages in as many years’ (‘Returning to Manderley’, *Feminist Review* no. 16, April 1984, p7). The recent British Film Institute postcard of *Rebecca* displays a familiar image from the ‘confession scene’ of the couple in love, with its inherent evocation of female subordination.



British Film Institute postcard, circa 1996

This romantic vision, even after decades of levelling gender roles, continues to draw audiences. Light suggests that romances are too often regarded as ‘stereotyping narratives which invite the reader to identify with a passive heroine who only finds true happiness after submitting to a masterful male,’ and insists that narratives like *Rebecca* ‘query as well as endorse social meanings’ (8). Regardless of whether audiences revel in the subjugation of the unnamed heroine or detect instead elements of social unrest in her narrative, *Rebecca*’s concerns with sexuality and domesticity are seemingly as relevant as ever.

Hitchcock renounced the film as a ‘novelette [...] not a Hitchcock picture’ and answering to Truffaut claimed not to understand the film’s longevity (Turner, *American Cinematographer*, July 1997, p88). Given that he sought from the beginning to appropriate the film to his own style and in doing so risked estranging Du Maurier’s female fan base, it seems appropriate that he should have failed to understand the film’s appeal. *Rebecca* resists authorship, transcends time, and sooner reflects female sensibilities today than it ever did Hitchcock’s own personality.

Word Count: 1637

Artefacts From the Bill Douglas Collection

Rebecca Postcard. c. 1996. Subjects: Laurence Olivier, Joan Fontaine. BDC 11907

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BDC 21924. Issue 486, September 14th 1940. BDC 21930

Memo from David O. Selznick, Ed. Rudy Behlmer. pp 249-287. London: Macmillan,
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