

# Introduction

## Recontextualizing Hitchcock's Authorship

DAVID BOYD AND R. BARTON PALMER

"AFTER YEARS OF BEING STUCK IN the backwaters of the academy," asserts Thomas Leitch in a recent survey of the field, "adaptation studies is on the move." In part, this movement is a retreat from, at least in principle, the approach that has dominated the field since the beginning of serious academic study of the cinema, what Leitch terms "fidelity discourse," or critical analysis devoted to measuring, and evaluating, the relative faithfulness of an adaptation to its literary source. Instead, scholars have begun to focus more on "Bakhtinian intertextuality," acknowledging that adaptations, like all other texts, are "afloat upon a sea of countless earlier texts" from which they "cannot help borrowing" (63). So transformed, adaptation studies would offer a way in which both literary and film scholars might radically transcend a traditional focus on unitary, self-sufficient individual texts and the supposed one-to-one relationship between sources and secondary versions. The study of adaptations would direct itself instead toward accounts of the unlimited, multiform permeability of intertextual relations, perhaps even finding ways, Leitch muses, to dispose of any substantial consideration of an adaptation to its official, acknowledged, and (in some fashion) perpetuated "sources."

But perhaps this celebrated reorientation of the field is just wishful thinking, at least in part, because adaptation studies remains "haunted" in Leitch's view by "the assumption that the primary context within which adaptations are to be studied is literature." That context constitutes a

“dead hand” impeding fruitful progress toward understanding adaptations in themselves rather than as secondary, less valuable versions of honored originals (64). Most scholars working in adaptation studies today would agree, as do we. Although they otherwise take up a variety of critical approaches, the contributors to this book do uniformly reject any literary paradigm that might be summoned up to organize this series of essays and case studies. With its focus clearly on cinematic rather than literary authorship, *Hitchcock at the Source* aims to help loosen the grip of the “dead hand” of literature and of literary study on the field. This is entirely appropriate for the subject at hand. For Alfred Hitchcock’s cinema is by no means a “literary” cinema. The mostly popular, rather than highbrow, novels, plays, and short fiction that provided the source material to be reworked in his films bear limited cultural cachet. These cinematic versions are valued for the most part because of their connection to Hitchcock’s authorship. With a notable exception or two (*Rebecca* immediately comes to mind), Hitchcock’s films do not circulate now as adaptations, nor were they marketed as adaptations during their initial releases. Quite the contrary. In order to promote Hitchcock’s authorship, the connection of these films with their written sources has been quite deliberately occulted.

This is somewhat exceptional in that Hitchcock did sometimes work with canonical literary texts. We must remember that few commercial screen adaptations of honored fiction and drama are not marketed as such. In the course of a long career in Britain and then in Hollywood, Hitchcock produced adaptations of works by such acknowledged modern masters as Joseph Conrad, W. Somerset Maugham, and Sean O’Casey, and by writers considered important in their own time such as Daphne du Maurier and Patrick Hamilton. But Hitchcock was unlike directors with stronger, deeper literary interests, such as his Hollywood contemporary John Huston. Huston built a long and productive career by screening the fiction of an amazing number of celebrated authors, including Dashiell Hammett, James Joyce, Flannery O’Connor, Stephen Crane, Malcolm Lowry, Herman Melville, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, and Rudyard Kipling. Unlike Huston, however, Hitchcock never conceived of himself as a literary adaptor, nor did he want his public to perceive him as one, even though undeniably the majority of his films are literary adaptations. This fact, we submit, has not been sufficiently recognized by Hitchcockians. But is it important that they do?

By adopting a cinematic rather than a literary perspective, *Hitchcock at the Source* proves able to address a central definitional problem that many scholars barely acknowledge. While the term *adaptation* seems fairly straightforward, it turns out in practice to be more complex. To be sure, any text that borrows centrally and substantially from another

text (including, most often, taking over its “identity” in some fashion) is what is generally understood as an adaptation. As Julie Sanders remarks, “adaptation . . . constitutes a more sustained engagement with a single text or source than the more glancing act of allusion or quotation, even citation, allows” (4). So much is clear. The correlative of this definition is also beyond argument. Not all intertextual connections or relations are “sustained,” and therefore not all intertextual connections are equal. We would surely not want to use the term adaptation to describe allusions and minor borrowings.

It is certainly true, as Leitch reminds us, following a central development in modern theory, that all texts, cinematic and literary, including (and perhaps especially) adaptations, can be usefully understood as constituted by a multiplicity of other texts. But, as a way of offering a given text an identity, adaptation is a relational term, privileging one particular intertextual relation. Adaptations in this sense are always reworkings of preexisting texts, whose cultural mode of being they continue in some other form. In this regard, it becomes crucial to discriminate between two different meanings of adaptation. On the one hand, adaptation is a matter of textual ontology, a result of, in Sanders’ terms, a derivative text’s “sustained engagement with a single text or source.” On the other, adaptation is a feature of textual rhetoric, a matter connected not only to formal transformations but also to “branding” or reception. Adaptations are not always circulated and consumed as adaptations. Identifying a film as an adaptation is in effect a protocol of reading that directs viewers’ attention toward the film’s connection to its source, inviting them to engage in what Sanders appropriately terms “the ongoing process of juxtaposed readings that are crucial to the cultural operations of adaptation, and the ongoing experiences of pleasure for the reader or spectator in tracing the intertextual relationships.” Adaptations not positioned to be appreciated as such thus deny consumers “the connected interplay of expectation and surprise.” They do not invite readers to share in the same kind of “ongoing experiences.” The several generations of filmgoers and critics who have taken pleasure from viewing Hitchcock’s films have for the most part not been invited to indulge this “inherent sense of play” since such an invitation is a matter of rhetoric rather than ontology. As Sanders suggests, this play “is produced by the activation of our informed sense of similarity and difference between the texts being invoked” (25). But neither Hitchcock himself nor the majority of those writing about his films have done much to activate (and elaborate upon) that “informed sense of similarity and difference.”

A connecting thread in the chapters of this volume is an exploration of the various reasons that Hitchcock’s films have not been understood as the adaptations they in fact are. And the central theme of the book

is the recovery and anatomizing of those hitherto occulted relationships. *Hitchcock at the Source* is very much *dans le vent* of contemporary adaptation studies in privileging a cinematic paradigm, reversing the customary directionality of inquiry, which begins with the page and ends with the screen. But in Hitchcock studies this book also breaks new ground by restoring to critical focus the shaping power of the director's literary sources, which constitute an important element of his cinematic authorship. We hope that the exciting work collected here will contribute substantially to the ongoing reevaluation of Hitchcock as an auteur begun by scholars such as Tom Ryall, who justly complained in 1986: "Auteur criticism has wrenched films and their directors from the historical circumstances of production and has defined the expression of the author's consciousness as responsible for the shape, form and meaning of a text" (1).

Ryall demonstrates how Hitchcock's authorship can be usefully measured by invoking the film cultures within which he worked, which provide "the critic with an overarching sense of a context for cinema, an indication of the options available in principle to a film maker at a particular point in time" (2). He is much in agreement with Charles Barr, who has recognized, speaking of Hitchcock's early work in the British cinema, that these "options" include ideas, values, and themes current in literary culture, as well as the particular texts in which these are embodied:

A film criticism centred on directors . . . has not been concerned to follow up Hitchcock's statements . . . of indebtedness to English literary figures. Still less has it been concerned to explore the influence of his predominantly English source materials or of his English scriptwriters, to whom Hitchcock was far less inclined to give credit. His readiness to claim full authorship of the films, at the expense of his collaborators, can be seen as an unattractive egoism or as an astute marketing ploy, or as a mixture of both, but there is no reason for critics to continue to go along with it unquestioningly. (8)

Much the same, of course, may be said of Hitchcock's work for the Hollywood cinema, which is better known but equally misunderstood in terms of its literary context. Here also is a well-known body of films that can usefully be claimed for an "ongoing process of juxtaposed readings," problematizing the received fiction of Hitchcock's "full authorship" but also enriching our understanding of these works in their cultural context and of artistry exercised by their director in transferring the written word to the screen.

Somewhat paradoxically, then, this volume, while privileging in a traditional fashion the role of Hitchcock as an honored auteur, also directs critical attention away from the films in themselves as products of his undoubted genius. Simply by reading Hitchcock's films as adaptations, the chapters in this volume reject the customary neoromantic construction of Hitchcock as a self-sufficient genius, bringing into critical focus the director's engagement with literary sources, including his collaborative work with screenwriters. *Hitchcock at the Source*, to be sure, promotes a different model for adaptation studies, one that privileges the cinematic over the literary. But our aim here is also literaricizing, in the sense that this volume explores the deep roots of Hitchcockian cinema within Victorian and modern literary culture. Or, to put this another way, this book explores the often complex interconnections between the terms *Hitchcockian* and *adaptation*, problematizing but enriching the sense in which we understand his films to be authored.

"Hitchcockian . . . Characteristic of  
or Resembling Sir Alfred Hitchcock,  
British Director of Suspense Films  
(1899–1980), or His Work"

The authority of the *Oxford English Dictionary* notwithstanding, up until the mid-1930s the work which members of the British filmgoing public would probably have thought most characteristic of Alfred Hitchcock was not suspense films but rather literary adaptations: more specifically, as Thomas Leitch points out in the opening essay of this volume, theatrical adaptations, screen versions of recent hits by such West End luminaries as John Galsworthy, Noël Coward, and Ivor Novello. But with the release of the "thriller sextet" that established his international reputation, starting with *The Man Who Knew Too Much* in 1934, Hitchcock was transformed forever into the "Master of Suspense." Interestingly enough, this career redirection was managed through a deep engagement with a then-popular literary and cinematic series: the spy thriller.

Two of the British thrillers, in fact, bring to the screen notable literary sources: W. Somerset Maugham's *Asbenden* (1928) and Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent* (1907). But these literary connections are carefully downplayed as the films in question, through a retitling that emphasizes genre, were not marketed as adaptations. Both released in 1936, *Asbenden* emerged as *Secret Agent* and *The Secret Agent* as *Sabotage*—a confusing bit of nomenclature musical chairs that was perhaps deliberate. In any event, Hitchcock continued throughout the remainder of his career to be a Master of Adaptation—and to do his best to deny any dependence of literary sources. Of the fifty-four feature-length films that he directed,

forty-one were based on previously published or produced works (see appendix). His involvement with adaptation, furthermore, both preceded and extended beyond his feature films. As Leitch points out, the twenty films on which Hitchcock worked in various capacities prior to his directorial debut were all, without exception, adaptations. And the great majority of the seventeen episodes of his television shows *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* that he himself directed between 1955 and 1962 were also derived from previously existing works (including no fewer than four from stories by Raoul Dahl).

Why, then, have Hitchcock's adaptations generally received so little attention *as* adaptations? After all, as we have suggested, the adaptation of literary works to the screen has been the subject of increasing, and increasingly sophisticated, critical and scholarly attention in recent years. But with a few notable exceptions, such as Charles Barr's *English Hitchcock*, already noted, relatively little notice has been taken of Hitchcock's sources. Possibly part of the reason lies in the diverse nature of those sources, ranging as they do across the sociocultural spectrum from the highest of highbrow (*The Secret Agent*, an established classic of modernist fiction), through middlebrow bestsellers such as *Rebecca*, to the lowest of lowbrow (a short story published in *Dime Detective* magazine). Many, perhaps most, of Hitchcock's important and successful films were adapted from the lower end of that spectrum, but the attention of film scholars has generally tended to focus on the upper end. *Rear Window*, for instance, based on that story from *Dime Detective* magazine, is only one of more than two dozen films (from France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Argentina, Brazil, and Japan, as well as Hollywood), adapted from the works of Cornell Woolrich. But there is as yet no volume of essays on "Cornell Woolrich on Film" sitting on library shelves alongside those addressing the screen versions of fiction by Jane Austen and Charles Dickens.

The sources, furthermore, are often obscure; certainly the nature and extent of Hitchcock's indebtedness is not always adequately indicated in the screen credits of the films. *Secret Agent* is ostensibly based on a Somerset Maugham novel, but *Ashenden* is actually a collection of short stories, several of which were, it seems, turned into an apparently unproduced stage play of the same name (now unfortunately lost). This initial remaking likely influenced Charles Bennett's screenplay decisively, but in ways that are now beyond recovery. The credits for *Spellbound*, to take another example, inform us that Ben Hecht's script was "suggested by Francis Beeding's novel *The House of Dr. Edwardes*." That vaguely suggestive "suggested" is perhaps fair enough, given the radical nature of the transformation involved (although no more radical, surely, than those involved in some other Hitchcock films, such as *The Birds*, which

takes little more than its narrative premise from the Daphne du Maurier story on which the film's screen credits unproblematically announce it is based). In other cases, though, the credits for a film leave its ultimate origins not merely obscure, but wholly unacknowledged, as Matthew Bernstein demonstrates in tracing the relationship of Hecht's screenplay for *Notorious* to a long-forgotten story that appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*.

In still other cases, the influence of particular texts extends far beyond the films for which they serve as acknowledged sources. For instance, Hitchcock directed only one film openly based on a novel by John Buchan, *The 39 Steps* (1934), but he frequently acknowledged Buchan's wider impact on his work. And quite rightly: Mark Glancy convincingly demonstrates the extent to which *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, released the year before *The 39 Steps*, was influenced by Buchan's novel *The Three Hostages*, and many critics have pointed out that *North by Northwest*, putatively based on an original script by Ernest Lehman, is virtually an updated and Americanized version of *The 39 Steps* itself. Similarly, Marie Belloc-Lowndes's influence on Hitchcock extends beyond his 1926 version of her novel *The Lodger* to inform, in a general way, many of the director's exercises in female Gothic in the 1940s, and in a very specific way *Shadow of a Doubt*, which picks up not merely the general narrative premise of a family home invaded by a serial killer but such telling details as a landlady remarking on the money left strewn on the killer's bedside table. Any adequate attempt to deal with Hitchcock's relationship to his sources has to confront those sources in all of their diversity: highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow; acknowledged and unacknowledged; direct and indirect. That "sea of countless earlier texts," to invoke Leitch's canny formula, upon which the director draws for his films includes those to which he returns again and again.

But that diversity is not the only reason for the relatively scant attention that this subject has previously received. If from the mid-1930s on it became increasingly difficult to think of Hitchcock as anything other than a "director of suspense films," with the rise of the auteur theory in the 1950s, it became increasingly difficult to think of him as anything other than a director of "Hitchcockian" films. His films came to be seen as constituting, in effect, a genre in themselves. And understandably, of course, since no filmmaker has ever produced a body of work more coherent (narratively, thematically, and stylistically) than Hitchcock's. But the idea of directorial authorship so firmly imposed itself on the study of Hitchcock's films that it tended to suppress alternative or complementary approaches. Any film demands to be understood in more than a single context. *Psycho*, for instance, may most immediately present

itself for understanding in terms of its parallels with other Hitchcock films stretching back to *The Lodger*. But it also holds a pivotal place in the history of the horror film, and it therefore needs to be considered within its generic context; it marked a shift in the history of American film production, from the studio system to the package system, so it can be useful to look at it within an industrial context; and, not least, it is based on a novel by Robert Bloch, and it can therefore be illuminating to examine it, as Brian McFarlane does here, as an adaptation.

Moreover, the study of Hitchcock's films in relation to their sources can help to illuminate more than the individual films. As noted earlier, studies of adaptation have often tended to privilege literature over film simply by virtue of taking the literary sources as their starting point and their organizing principle. This volume reverses the common pattern, and rather than examining the centrifugal process by which a given author is adapted into a variety of films by different filmmakers (*Austen on Film*, *Dickens on Film*), it considers the centripetal process by which a diversity of literary sources are transformed into a coherent body of work by a single filmmaker. In other words, it raises the question of how works by authors as utterly different as, say, Joseph Conrad, Daphne du Maurier, and Cornell Woolrich all manage to end up transformed into films as unmistakably Hitchcockian as *Sabotage*, *Rebecca*, and *Rear Window*.

According to Hitchcock himself, there was nothing in the least mysterious about this alchemy: the sources, he explained to interviewers whenever given the opportunity, were of no real importance at all. "What I do is to read a story only once," he told François Truffaut, "and if I like the basic idea, I just forget all about the book and start to create cinema." But as the essays in this volume demonstrate again and again, it was not the books that Hitchcock tended to forget, but rather his indebtedness to them. That is not to say that his films are ever simply recyclings of their sources, any more than Shakespeare's history plays are merely retellings of Holinshed's *Chronicles*. The radical process involved in Hitchcockian remaking often moves beyond adaptation proper to what Julie Sanders usefully terms "appropriation," which "frequently effects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain." (26). Nevertheless, what survives from page or stage to screen is, however radically transformed, generally something more than just "the basic idea." The conditions under which Hitchcock went about "creating cinema," furthermore, as he himself frequently complained to interviewers, often played as crucial a role in the process as his own artistic vision.

The process of adaptation, as Robert Stam concisely describes it, is always "mediated by a series of filters: studio style, ideological fashion,



political constraints, auteurist predilections, charismatic stars, economic advantage or disadvantage, and technology” (68). Hitchcock’s films were no exception. It was the interference of studios and censorship boards, for instance, that transformed the murderers in *The Lodger* and *Rebecca* into falsely accused men and that denied Hitchcock the darker conclusions for *Suspicion* and *The Birds* that he claimed he would have preferred. The importance of these various filters varied, naturally, from film to film, as did the nature and extent of the changes involved (changes of tone, style, and point-of-view, as well as of character and event). Accordingly, the authors in this volume differ in the approaches that they take and the matters on which they focus. Collectively, however, they offer a view of the relationship of Hitchcock’s films to their sources which reflects both the diversity of the sources and the complex coherence of the films.

### Works Cited

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