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Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*: The Replacement Wife

Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, *Rebecca* is a free adaptation from the eponymous 1938 Gothic novel by Daphne Du Maurier. Protagonists of the story are a newly-wed couple settling down in Manderley, the husband's luxurious mansion; here, the memory of his beautiful first wife Rebecca, the suspicious circumstances of her death by drowning, and the presence of a sadistic housekeeper make his second wife feel deeply inadequate in her role as the new Mrs de Winter. She will eventually redeem herself as the mystery of Rebecca's death is uncovered and Manderley is destroyed by fire.

Released in 1940, this black-and white film was rewarded the following year with eleven Academy Award nominations, winning two of them: for Best Picture and Best Cinematography. *Rebecca* is the first movie made by Hitchcock in the United States: 'The American influence on it is obvious', he admitted himself in his famous interview with François Truffaut; but he also added, 'it's a completely British picture: the story, the actors, and the director were all English' (in Truffaut 1983, p. 128).

David O. Selznick (1902-1965) was the Hollywood producer of four of Hitchcock's films of which *Rebecca* was the first; it was released soon after another one of Selznick's productions, the enormously successful *Gone with the Wind* (1939). A control-freak who also happened to feel passionately about psychoanalysis, Selznick had such an influence on *Rebecca* that some consider it as the least personal of Hitchcock's movies. When Truffaut asked him, in the interview already referred to: 'Are you satisfied with *Rebecca*?', Hitchcock replied: 'Well, it's not a Hitchcock picture...' (in Truffaut 1983, p. 127). A statement which, like most of his other statements, should not be taken too literally.

Hitchcock, who died forty years ago in 1980, was born in the East End of London in 1899, and by the time he emigrated to Hollywood he had already directed in Britain more than twenty films, including *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), *The 39 Steps* (1935), *Sabotage* (1936) and *Jamaica Inn* (1939). He was then to settle in America, where he would direct some thirty more films – including such masterpieces as *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by North-West* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), *The Birds* (1963) and *Marnie* (1964) – all combining great artistic integrity with considerable popular appeal. His *Spellbound* (1945), also produced by Selznick, has as its main character the improbable psychoanalyst Ingrid Bergman seducing her improbable patient Gregory Peck and rescuing him from the accusation of being a

murderer, as well as from his own amnesia and paranoid fears of persecution. The film, famous for Salvador Dali's design of the dream sequence, contributed to spread in the United States a popular, but incorrect, view of psychoanalysis. As Hitchcock himself confessed, *Spellbound* is 'just another manhunt story wrapped up in pseudo-psychoanalysis' (in Truffaut 1983, p. 165).

It was only from the 1960s, and thanks to the French critics and filmmakers writing on the influential journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, that Hitchcock's stature in the history of cinema was properly recognized. With an international reputation as the undisputed master of suspense, he was notorious (if I can borrow from the title of another one of his movies) for his perfectionism, for having an in-depth knowledge of all aspects of moviemaking, for being an innovator (for instance he made the first all-talkie British movie [*Blackmail* 1929]), and for using special effects with such skill that their presence went mostly unnoticed; for instance, the mysteriously atmospheric Manderley mansion in *Rebecca* is in fact just a miniature. He also devised original camera movements, such as the 'forward point-of-view tracking shot' which he used in *Rebecca* for the first time (see Wood 1989, p. 240).

Most of Hitchcock's films are not 'whodunits', detectives or gangster stories, but are concerned with normal people getting stuck into impossible situations: being accused of crimes they have not committed, or finding themselves involved in espionage or political intrigues they know nothing about, and trying to disentangle themselves from them. However, none of this applies to *Rebecca* where, instead, the 'normal people' are a socially and psychologically badly-assorted couple, painfully incapable to satisfy each other's emotional needs.

Hitchcock had already adapted a novel by the English author and playwright Daphne Du Maurier (1907-1989) in *Jamaica Inn* (1939), and would use another one of her stories in *The Birds* (1963). Other filmmakers, such as Nicolas Roeg with *Don't Look Now* (1973) and more recently Roger Michell with *My Cousin Rachel* (2017), have also adapted Du Maurier's stories. *Rebecca* (with some help from Hitchcock's film of it) remains her most successful novel.

Starring in *Rebecca* in the lead roles are two almost legendary actors: Laurence Olivier (1907-1989) and Joan Fontaine (1917-2013). By the time he played the part of Maxim de Winter in this film, Olivier was already a celebrity for his Shakespearean roles on the stage; his main screen parts (by then, in some fifteen films) included *As You Like It* (1936), *Fire over England* (1937) and *Wuthering Heights* (1939). Olivier was later to act in some seventy more movies, while also being celebrated as the most brilliant stage actor of his generation.

The other main lead in *Rebecca*, playing the difficult part of Maxim de Winter's anonymous second wife, is Joan Fontaine. Known for the rivalry with her sister Olivia de Havilland, Fontaine was nominated for an Academy Award for *Rebecca* and won one for *Suspicion* (1941, also directed by Hitchcock). Although she then starred in many films in a

career spanning nearly sixty years, those two are the ones she remains best known for.

Minor and yet important roles in *Rebecca* are those played by George Sanders as the slimy dandy Jack Favell, and Judith Anderson as Mrs Danvers, arguably one of the most despicable women - alongside Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) - ever to appear on the silver screen (in Ben Wheatley's remake of *Rebecca* [2020] the part of Mrs Danvers is played by Kristin Scott Thomas). In the novel, Du Maurier portrays Mrs Danvers as 'tall and gaunt, dressed in deep black, whose prominent cheek-bones and great, hollow eyes gave her a skull's face, parchment white, set on a skeleton's frame' (Du Maurier 1938, p. 74). Very scary indeed.

Film critic David Thomson describes *Rebecca*, perhaps Hitchcock's most literature-impregnated work, as 'a mixture of romance, mystery, obsession, and even horror, [but also] a very sophisticated entertainment' (Thomson 2008, p. 715). To me, as well as all the above, *Rebecca* is a movie primarily concerned with the enormous power that memories have in affecting people's lives – sometimes comforting, other times disturbing. This is one of the reasons for this film's relevance to psychoanalysis.

Rebecca opens with a woman's voice-over describing her dream of returning to Manderley, while the camera travels across a rusty gate and along a disused drive through a wooded, foggy park under the moonlight, towards the by-now decrepit grand manor. 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again...' are the iconic opening words in both the film and the novel (Du Maurier 1938, p. 1).



"Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again."

About one year earlier, in the south of France, an attractive, somewhat naïve young girl has

a chance meeting with a handsome, super-rich socialite, Maxim de Winter (a name perhaps suggesting a certain frostiness...), just when he was about to kill himself by jumping into the sea from a high cliff. By calling him out she saves his life, but he shows her little gratitude and sends her away (this whole scene is not present in the novel). But then they meet again, by chance, in the lobby of the luxurious Princesse Hotel in Monte Carlo, where he invites her to share the lunch table with him. From their conversation we learn that her mother had been dead a long time and that her father, who had passed away the previous summer, was a painter of just one single tree, over and over again, as the tree kept changing its appearance. She learns that Maxim has been feeling depressed since the death of his first wife Rebecca, with whom he had lived for the few years of their marriage in his Manderley mansion.

Maxim's courting of her has more in common with the attitude of a rather stern father towards his teenage daughter than with the kind of sexually-coloured flirting one may expect from an adult man towards a beautiful young woman. However, she is clearly not indifferent to his attentions. We watch Mr de Winter and the girl spending much time together, enjoy dances in the hotel and go for rides in his car. (The next rides to be found in a Hitchcock's movie, also along the Grand Corniche in the French Riviera, will feature Grace Kelly and Cary Grant; but in that film, *To Catch a Thief* [1955], it will be the lady to be at the wheel of the open car).

As their relationship intensifies, even if remaining mostly formal and somewhat detached, she sketches a portrait of him and he asks her to call him by his first name and sends a bunch of roses to her bedroom with a 'Thank you for yesterday' card. He also informs her, quite abruptly, never to wear black satin or pearls. 'Yes, Maxim', she obediently replies – and we can only wonder whether she is aware of his reasons for making such an odd request.

By now we can easily guess that she is falling in love with him. And he with her? That remains far more doubtful. Then, unexpectedly and in the least romantic possible way, Maxim de Winter offers her to marry him and go to live in Manderley with him – a proposal arrived only minutes before what would have been her departure to New York to accompany Mrs Van Hopper, the loud gossip American lady for whom she worked as her 'paid companion'.

Even if our girl can already predict that she does not 'belong in his sort of world', she cannot resist his proposal. In a rush, they celebrate a low-key civil wedding at the local Mairie and even forget to collect the marriage papers, a 'parapraxis' which Freud would have described as a telling instance of 'everyday life psychopathology'. Three months later she will already have to admit that 'my marriage was a failure... We did not get on. We were not companions. We were not suited to one another. I was too young for Maxim, too inexperienced, and, more important still, I was not of his world' (Du Maurier 1936, p. 260).



Laurence Olivier as Maxim de Winter with Joan Fontaine as his second wife

They arrive in Manderley under the rain, where the mansion's numerous staff is lined up to greet them. The new (or second) Mrs de Winter, as we should now refer to her, finds it all most intimidating, especially having to meet Mrs Danvers, Rebecca's nanny who had moved with her to Manderley at the time of her marriage to Maxim de Winter, and who has since become the manor's housekeeper. In Manderley, surrounded by obsequious servants, precious furniture, oil portraits of ancestors and memories of the late Mrs de Winter, our newly-wed girl feels utterly out of her depth – isolated, insecure, inferior, clumsy. Maxim, whom she loves, does nothing to make her feel more at ease; he is often absent, and only formally affectionate when with her.

Most of the film, as well as Du Maurier's novel, is set in Manderley, the mansion described as 'secretive and silent' and with 'its perfect symmetries'. It was, as Hitchcock put it, 'one of the three key characters of the picture' (in Truffaut 1983, p. 131). The invisible ghost of Rebecca is another one, absent from the screen but for that very reason a more central character than anybody else, as her memory floats eerily throughout the film, contributing to that sense of *Unheimlich* so vividly described by Freud in his essay on the 'uncanny' (1919). It is then most appropriate that that the movie's - and the novel's - title should be *Rebecca*.

A remarkable feature of the film, and one that gives its audiences a rather unique emotional experience, is the disturbing (and paradoxical) *presence of absence* – what Lacan would have described as *manque* – which seems to characterize a number of only apparently unrelated aspects: the film's title is the first name of a dead woman whom we never see on the screen; its central character is a woman whose name is never mentioned; another important character, Mrs. Danvers, is someone whose identity we know nothing about and whose existence we only notice when she uncannily creeps up in a frame; nor are we offered any clues as to the

geographical location of Manderley, other than a passing hint that it may be in Cornwall and our knowledge that Du Maurier's inspiration for this typical Southern England country estate was probably *Menabilly* in Fowey, Cornwall, a house she much liked.

All of the above contributes, with its deliberate vagueness, to give *Rebecca* an almost fairy-tale quality – *Once upon a time, in a magic castle in a far distant land, lived a beautiful princess...* ‘All of children's literature is linked to sensations and particularly to fear, [and] anything connected with fear takes us back to childhood’, says Truffaut when discussing *Rebecca* with its director (Truffaut 1983, p. 131). We could suggest here that an important function of narrative and cinema (indeed, of all art...) is to represent in an externalized, aesthetically pleasant and sublimated form the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ internal objects, the conflicts arising among them, and the anxieties they provoke in readers and viewers, thus helping them to tolerate them. Putting spectators in touch with our primitive, infantile fears (as well as with our suppressed desires) is then what Hitchcock's cinema, perhaps *all* cinema, is ultimately about.

The second Mrs de Winter is only too aware that she is constantly being compared to the deceased first one. ‘I suppose you married me’, she once tells Maxim with unexpected insight, ‘because I was dull, gauche and inexperienced’ – implying: by comparison to his first wife. Rebecca's prominently displayed initial ‘R’ (an indirect reference, perhaps, to the ‘scarlet letter’ in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel?) can still be found everywhere in the house – embroidered on the cover of a nightdress, a handkerchief, a blanket or a napkin, or printed on a notebook or an address book – and makes our girl feel upset every time she comes across it. At the same time, though, she also becomes curious to find out more about her husband's first wife, especially after she learns from Maxim's agent Frank Crawley (played by Reginald Denny) that Rebecca had died at sea in rather mysterious circumstances and that her body was only recovered and identified by Maxim two months after her disappearance.

‘What was Rebecca really like?’, she once asks Frank. ‘I suppose...’, he answers after some hesitation, ‘she was the most beautiful creature I ever saw’. Everyone who had come across her would have probably agreed. We can already guess, though we'll only have it confirmed later in the story, that dark secrets were concealed under such beauty.

A psychoanalytically interesting concept relevant here is that of the ‘replacement child’. This term refers to a child conceived in order to replace another one who had recently died as a way for the parents to avoid properly mourning their tragic loss. Such replacement children often grow to become unhappy and insecure adults, having been expected to live up to the idealized image of their dead sibling, to a sort of ghost with whom they are constantly being compared (Sabbadini 2014, pp. 13-30). In our film, of course, we have in the Joan Fontaine's

character a 'replacement wife' rather than a replacement child, but the processes involved are clearly similar. What she says about Rebecca ('I feel at such a disadvantage. All the time whenever I meet anyone... I know they are all thinking the same thing, they're all comparing me with her') is identical to what a replacement child could say about her dead sister.

The second Mrs de Winter decides to explore Rebecca's own private and grandiose bedroom overlooking the sea and secluded in the west wing of Manderley – a reference perhaps to the forbidden and dangerous room in the story of Bluebeard's castle. Mrs Danvers follows her there and, as she had already done several times before, takes this opportunity to scare her new employer by creeping up on her. On this occasion, she humiliates Mrs de Winter by sadistically inviting her to admire wardrobes full of Rebecca's beautiful clothes and furs and underwear in order to provoke the girl's sense of inferiority and presumed envy.

We may speculate that Mrs Danvers' extreme closeness (in her mind, if not also in reality) to Rebecca when she was still alive must have been built partly around the fantasy of an idealized mother-daughter relationship and partly as a perverse identification of this old, unpleasant and bitter servant with her young, elegant and successful mistress. The film and the novel offer us no information about Mrs Danvers' past, but we may speculate that such an identification with a maternal figure (the beautiful late Mrs de Winter) may be rooted in some earlier experiences, probably dating back from childhood. In particular, these would include the primitive, oedipal fantasy of being allowed the same intimate closeness to her 'father' (Mr de Winter) as the one to which the object of her identification (Mrs De Winter) had access. We can guess that Mrs Danvers was most likely secretly in love not only homoerotically with her, but also with him. Significant in this regard is that she must be (or at least have been) married, as she is always referred to as 'Mrs' Danvers, though no indication is ever given as to the identity, or indeed existence, of her husband. We may furthermore suggest that the second Mrs de Winter, as well as a 'replacement wife' to Maxim was also a 'replacement daughter' to Mrs Danvers after the loss of Rebecca - the first, beloved child in her care.

After Rebecca's mysterious disappearance, Mrs Danvers' uninterrupted attachment to her memory displays clear morbid features, including fetishistic ones for all the objects, clothes etc. that had belonged to her late employer. Such perversities will then be enacted in Mrs Danvers' relationship to the second Mrs de Winter, constantly if not explicitly blamed for not being her predecessor.



Joan Fontaine as Mrs de Winter with Judith Anderson as Mrs Danvers

Here we can also identify Mrs Danvers' unconsciously motivated sadistic attempts to magically bring back to life her first mistress (and 'daughter') by killing off her second, and to her mind inadequate, one. As we shall see, she will try do so in reality (twice, though both times without success), and not just in her imagination. Children who have lost their mother may also fantasize, or even attempt, to kill their father's new partner with the same unconscious intent – a situation well portrayed in Carlos Saura's film *Cria Cuervos* (1976) (see Sabbadini 2014b, pp. 44-47).

We can also observe here an unexpected, but perhaps not so unusual, reversal of roles, whereby it is the new lady of the manor to be at the mercy of, and having to obey to, her own employee, rather than the other way around. A similar famous filmic instance of such a perverse relationship can be found in Joseph Losey's *The Servant* (1963) where, however, the homosexual theme plays a central role. Of course, such a component cannot be ruled out also in the case of our movie: as noted above, it would be reasonable to suggest that Mrs Danvers' pathological attachment to Rebecca and, as its (il)logical consequence, her irrational hatred for the second Mrs de Winter for not being the first one, may have clear homosexual connotations.

At one point in the story, perhaps in an attempt to emerge from her own isolation and depression and to make at long last an affirmative gesture, the second Mrs de Winter decides to organise a costume ball, as Rebecca used to do with much success every year. She wears for that occasion, as a surprise for her husband, a gown shrewdly recommended by Mrs Danvers. But when Maxim sees her in that outfit he becomes furiously angry: years before Rebecca herself must have worn that same costume for him and, for reasons we spectators may not fully understand yet, he cannot tolerate being reminded of her. (Incidentally, this episode might have been the inspiration for a similar one in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Phantom Thread* [2017] – a

film also centered on an oddly-assorted couple). ‘I shall never forget,’ Mrs de Winter will later recall, ‘the expression on [Mrs Danvers’] face, loathsome, triumphant. The face of an exulting devil. She stood there, smiling at me’ (Du Maurier 1938, p. 240). Mystified, remorseful and feeling very upset, our heroine barely manages to resist Mrs Danvers’ attempts to convince her to jump from a balcony to her death.

The story ends with a series of dramatic, somewhat implausible (but does it matter?), twists. In this case however, unlike in other Hitchcock’s films, the plot with its suspenseful elements remains less interesting than the psychological characterization and emotional vicissitudes of its protagonists. Events precipitate when a boat is found by a diver at the bottom of the sea, with Rebecca’s corpse in it: ‘I put her there’, Maxim confesses to his second wife. The drowned girl he had identified as Rebecca two months after her disappearance from the beach, thus diverting investigations that may have led to the truth, was, as he well knew, someone else.

Mrs de Winter tries to comfort her confused, guilty but unrepented husband, to convince him not to reveal the truth about Rebecca’s death, and that believing in her love for him would be enough to see him through his predicament. But... ‘It’s too late, my darling’, Maxim says, ‘Rebecca has won... Her shadow has been between us all the time, keeping us from one another’. *Her shadow*: in his paper on *Mourning and melancholia* (1917), Freud uses this metaphor to refer to the shadow of someone who has died falling upon those closer to him or her, with powerful consequences on their current grief experience. In the case of *Rebecca*, her shadow seems to fall on everyone at Manderley, and indeed on the mansion itself. Most affected by it are two women: Mrs. Danvers – Rebecca’s housekeeper who, as we have seen, had developed such a morbid attachment to her former mistress; and the second Mrs de Winter who, under the spell of the memories left behind by Rebecca, seems unable to assert her identity other than by trying, and inevitably failing, to identify with her predecessor.

‘I hated Rebecca!’, Maxim de Winter confesses. His wife is shocked by this revelation, convinced, as we spectators and readers were, that he was in love with her. ‘She had the three things that matter’, Maxim explains, ‘Breeding, Brains and Beauty, but... she was incapable of love, or tenderness, or decency... Our marriage was a rotten fraud’.

He goes on to recount that when he realized that Rebecca was having many lovers and had spitefully told him that she was pregnant from one of them, Maxim, blinded by a jealous fury, had lost his mind and struck her. Rebecca stumbled, hit her head on a heavy piece of tackle and died. Then, in a state of controlled panic, he had locked her body inside the cabin of her sailing boat, drilled holes in the plank from the inside, and made the boat sink to the bottom of the sea. It was there that a diver now found her, something that Maxim had feared every day and night ever since: after a crime, even an apparently ‘perfect’, *i.e.* undetectable, one, nobody (with the

exception of some extreme psychopaths) can escape the persecutory voice of one's own superego. It is sometimes claimed that one of the closest relationships among human beings is that of a murderer to his victim...

Enters slimy Jack Favell, a seductive master in the art of sliding intrusively into people's personal lives: into Maxim's marriage having been Rebecca's favourite cousin, as well as one of her lovers; into the second Mrs de Winter by climbing into Manderley from an open window when her husband was away; into Maxim's car, where Favell now tries to blackmail him by threatening to reveal the truth about the circumstances of Rebecca's disappearance, while helping himself, uninvited, to their lunch...

A Coroner's inquest follows. The avuncular Chief Constable (played by Nigel Bruce) cannot believe that such a charming gentleman as Maxim de Winter could also be an uxoricide – even when all the evidence points in that direction. The improbable theory is then allowed to emerge that Rebecca may have committed suicide by locking herself inside her boat and making it sink, a theory this one made somewhat more credible after Dr Baker, her physician in London, reveals that she was not pregnant after all, but affected by terminal cancer and 'therefore' would have wanted to drown herself. The simplistic solution presented by the film is that if Rebecca was pregnant then Maxim had a valid reason to murder her, but if she had cancer then she must have killed herself. The truth, rather, seems to be that yes, she was affected by cancer, but that Maxim had murdered her - or at least was the direct cause of her death and guilty of concealing the evidence - because he was convinced that she was pregnant.

Maxim, we are told, was only responsible for Rebecca's death, but if he had intentionally murdered her and got away scot free the Hollywood code of ethics would not have permitted Hitchcock's film to be released. Literature, however, did not have the same moralistic limitations as cinema: in the novel, the cause of Rebecca's death is unambiguous: 'When I killed her she was smiling still. I fired at her heart', as Maxim confesses to his second wife, 'The bullet passed right through' (Du Maurier 1938, p. 313). This is murder, not manslaughter.

In a kind of Gothic-horror finale, we are shown from some distance Mrs Danvers eerily walking with a candlestick behind the glass windows of Manderley and setting the whole place on fire. The second Mrs de Winter miraculously survives; we feel relieved to watch her running in tears to hug her worried husband as he arrives by car at night to his burning mansion. The one to die will be the despicable arsonist herself: perhaps Mrs Danvers was trapped by the flames, but it is more likely that she had remained inside Manderley quite deliberately.

The theme of suicide emerges as a recurrent one in the film's narrative. Let us remind ourselves that the second Mrs de Winter had first met her future husband at the very moment when he was ready to jump to his death from a high cliff; that Mrs Danvers had almost

succeeded to convince her second mistress, at a time when she was much distressed, to throw herself from a balcony; that Rebecca had drowned herself (or so it was falsely alleged...) after being diagnosed with a terminal condition; and that Mrs Danvers may have chosen to burn herself to death inside the mansion she had set fire to.

The melodramatic destruction of Manderley may leave some spectators upset for the loss of such an imposing, beautiful manor with all the precious objects and memories it had contained. However, such fire, loaded with powerful, primitive, unconscious associations, has also a cathartic effect, opening up the potential for a happier relationship between the two protagonists by liberating them from the curse of a past dominated by the shadow of Rebecca. Indeed, the counterpart to us spectators' deceptive impression on the happy, if brief, married life between Maxim and Rebecca, is the belief that his second marriage was doomed to be an unhappy one – when in fact the new Mrs de Winter's 'love' for him, as well as the destruction of the mansion and of its evil housekeeper, may give us a glimmer of redemptive hope.

...and they lived happily ever after? Hollywood has never resisted the temptation to present his audiences with a fairy-tale ending.

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