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**Corporate Fictions: Film Adaptation and Authorship in the Classical
Hollywood Era**

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**Corporate Fictions: Film Adaptation and Authorship in the Classical
Hollywood Era**

by

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**Corporate Fictions: Film Adaptation and Authorship in the Classical Hollywood
Era**

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ABSTRACT

“Corporate Fictions: Film Adaptation and Authorship in the Classical Hollywood Era” examines the adaptation of literary fiction by select United States motion picture studios—in reality filmmaking corporations, and analyzed as such in this study—in the 1930s and 1940s. Based largely on research culled from archival resources, each chapter of “Corporate Fictions” analyzes individual instances of and long-term strategies toward film adaptation within several firms through recourse to company memoranda, budgets, marketing campaigns, the literary and cinematic texts themselves and other contemporaneous materials.

Analysis of these materials reveals that film adaptation is part of a larger cultural adaptation that takes place when a studio acquires, produces, and releases a literary property—in this process, characters, stories, and even literary authors are dramatically

transformed as they are re-projected through such domains as product tie-ins, print, film and radio advertisements, newspaper serializations, movie editions and novelizations, and the primary literary and cinematic texts themselves.

Each of the case studies that comprise this dissertation seeks to explain *why* and *how* a particular filmmaking corporation would choose to acquire, adapt, and produce a work of literature at a particular moment in its history. In the process, “Corporate Fictions” challenges traditional assumptions that have guided investigations in this field by demonstrating the complexity of film adaptation, a process subject to myriad influences and pragmatic choices, as well as the sophistication by which the companies under scrutiny developed distinctive conventions that guided their approaches to literary acquisition, story development, production, marketing, and exhibition.

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CHAPTER 1

*

Introduction: Film Adaptation in the Classical Hollywood Cinema

In November 2005, on the eve of the United States release of *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), a major controversy was brewing involving, of all parties, the Jane Austen Society of North America. A version of the film to be released in American theaters featured passionate kissing between Elizabeth Bennett (Keira Knightley) and Mr. Darcy (Matthew Macfadyen). Austen scholars contended the “sexed-up ending” of the film “blasphemed” the book by effacing the characteristic “subtlety” with which Austen built and evoked “sexual tension” in her novels.¹ The protestations of the Austen aficionados drew national attention and became a hot topic on Pemberley.com, a site devoted to Austen’s works and an online community for the author’s fans.

While the groups devoted to the study and adoration of Jane Austen and her literary works expressed their commitment to preserving the cultural value and literary integrity of the author through their castigation of *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), the debate piqued interest in the film. After the criticisms lodged by the Austen devotees became public, British audiences complained that the controversial ending, cut from European versions of the film, had been unfairly denied to them. Subsequently, the American version was re-released in select countries in late November. Despite or more likely because of the

¹ Alessandra Stanley, “Critic’s Notebook: Oh, Mr. Darcy ... Yes, I Said Yes!,” *New York Times*, 20 Nov 2005,

controversy, *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) performed respectably in the United States and abroad at the box office. It was a critical success as well: the film received five Academy Award nominations and was recognized by numerous critical organizations (in the United States and England) in year-end awards ceremonies and top ten lists.

As *New York Times* writer Alessandra Stanley observed at the time, claims about the quality of this latest film adaptation were open for debate and should be based upon the expectations of the target audience for this particular film adaptation, a demographic likely outside traits of members of the Austen Society:

Pride and Prejudice has been made and remade so many times ... that no version is definitive. ... The Keira Knightley version is quite faithful to the spirit of the novel, even if the ending was tailored to cheesy teenage tastes. That just leaves room for yet another revision down the road.

The crucial phrase invoked by Stanley is “faithful to the spirit of the novel,” an attribute she perceives in *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) and the Austen Society of North America does not. The disagreement on this point should be no wonder, for terms like “faithfulness,” “definitive,” and “spirit of the novel”—often used in descriptions of a film adaptation and literary source in both popular commentary and academic scholarship—are merely vague descriptions inferring a form of loyalty to mimetic reproduction of, if not the denotated plot, dialogue, and settings featured in a work of literature upon which a film adaptation is based, then the more ambiguous and disputable themes and meanings.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/20/weekinreview/20stanley.html?ei=5070&en=d6e022b7f5d2d8c2&ex=1148356800&pagewanted=print>> (21 Nov 2005).

As the long history of literary scholarship suggests, the meaning communicated by a work of literature, as well as its cultural value, are open for debate, constantly in flux in accordance with the preferences and tastes of a historically positioned audience. Due to the more numerous texts, producers, readers and spectators, entertainment media, and time periods involved in the production and consumption of film adaptation, even less stable would be the perception of an adaptation's "faithfulness" to a source, an aspect that is always in question, regardless of the correspondence of the scenes, dialogue, characterizations, and narrative of a film adaptation to those of a prior literary work. While terms like "fidelity" and "faithfulness" become arbitrary and lose significance when viewed from this perspective, the controversy over *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) demonstrates the continued currency of such language in both academic (by the Austen Society) and popular (the *New York Times* writer Stanley) discussions of film adaptation.

Pride and Prejudice (2005) was merely the latest of dozens of film, television, and radio versions of the 1813 novel to be released over the preceding decades. Among recent entries were *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), a contemporary comedy (in a somewhat dizzying series of textual associations) culled from an eponymous book that itself was inspired by both the Austen novel and a 1995 BBC film adaptation; and *Bride & Prejudice* (2004), an elaborate Bollywood musical set in India. With the constantly growing corpus of texts claiming a connection with Austen and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), clearly the set of allusions conjured by the title "Pride and Prejudice" and the moniker "Jane Austen" had expanded, and the cultural status and social relevance of the text and author had changed course several times in the nearly two centuries between the

original release of the book and the first decade of the twentieth-first century. In this crowded and diverse field of texts, the ability to identify a single source upon which a contemporary film adaptation is based (literary, cinematic, or otherwise) becomes increasingly difficult. Nevertheless, very few scholars and critics explore such matters as the meanings, associations and limits of a film adaptation's source (or sources), the reasons for its designation as the point of origin for such a project, or the context in which film adaptation is produced and released.

By 2005, adaptations of the literary works of Jane Austen were, like those of William Shakespeare, a cottage industry that guaranteed a worldwide, built-in audience and a modicum of cultural prestige. Despite these advantages, this ubiquity also posed a problem for the development, production and marketing of such films: even if the Austen name was a bankable commodity, the sheer volume of *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations demanded that any new film distinguish itself from previous entries in some way, whether that be in setting, genre, production values, casting configurations, or a “sexed-up ending.” This fact raises into question not only the methods by which film adaptations differentiate themselves in these situations, but also the motives of the relevant parties producing and releasing such film adaptations. Once again, the formulation, marketing, and authorship of film adaptation represent fertile ground for inquiry, and with the multitude of parties holding a vested interest in its success or (as would seem to be the goal of the Austen Society) failure, film adaptation represents a significant site of struggle between the individuals, institutions, corporations, and other entities seeking to claim ownership, authorship, or influence over a film, its source materials, and the

products related to the release of the film in question. However, by and large these issues have fallen outside the purview of film adaptation scholarship to date.

The sheer prevalence of film adaptation as a practice and its relevance to larger questions related to other academic disciplines (most notably literary and film studies) makes both the paucity and the limited scope of extant academic studies of film adaptation seem curious. According to estimates, around half of the films released by Hollywood filmmaking corporations in the sound phase of the Classical era, a roughly twenty-year period spanning from the late 1920s to the late 1940s, were produced from previously published source materials such as novels, short stories and theatrical plays, and perhaps even more so in the silent era.² Despite the predominance of this practice, scholarly examinations of the approaches adopted by film studios (or entities referred to in this dissertation as Hollywood filmmaking corporations) with regard to the acquisition of literary properties and their development into and commercial theatrical releases as

² Carolyn Anderson, "Film and Literature," in *Film and the Arts in Symbiosis*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 97-132. Anderson uses the years 1930 and 1948 to demarcate this period. This percentage expands when all previously published materials, such as plays and short stories, are taken into consideration. In his analysis of Warner Bros. Pictures, Robert Gustafson reveals that during this same period nearly half of the studio's releases were based on "pretested" sources, around 20 percent were culled from "recycled" story materials (a category that should also be called film adaptation), and a mere 14 percent were original stories generated by the Warner Bros. screenwriters (*The Buying of Ideas: Source Acquisition at Warner Brothers, 1930-1949* [Ph.D. diss, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1983], 19-20).

Film adaptation has been considered only to include previously published novels, short stories, plays, and works of nonfiction, but can be stretched to include unpublished and uncopyrighted materials; characters and storylines from comic books, video games, and radio and television programs; theme park rides and commercial merchandise. For example, Disney's series of films in 2002 and 2003 based on several attractions at its own theme park, Disneyland—*Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, *The Country Bears*, and *The Haunted Mansion*—represent the most visible recent examples of this trend. A September 2003 *New York Times* article by Evelyn Nussbaum, "Coming Soon to a Theater Near You: the Moviemercial" (21 Sept 2003, Section 3), cites contractual agreements between toy merchandiser Mattel and Hollywood studios to base a series of films on the Hot Wheels and Barbie product lines.

films are scarce.³ Even fewer studies connect the emergence and codification of filmmaking corporations' individual studio styles to their strategies toward film adaptation.⁴ This dissertation attempts to fill this critical gap by investigating the factors that led filmmaking corporations to obtain the rights to certain literary properties and to adapt those properties for the screen in a particular way. By so doing, I examine some of the widely held assumptions that predominate in film adaptation studies (some introduced above and discussed on more detail below) and demonstrate the conflictual process by which industrial forces assume, inhabit, revise, and then project sources and related film adaptations for broad consumption into the commercial marketplace.⁵

LITERATURE REVIEW: FILM ADAPTATION STUDIES

Existing studies of adaptation and of film in general, most often emerge from one of two critical-institutional perspectives. First, media studies, which by way of a communications-based producer-text-receptor model, typically examine the industrial

³ I prefer to use the term “corporations” to describe the major filmmaking companies that are more often called “studios.” For stylistic continuity in this dissertation, company is occasionally employed as a synonym for corporation. Most often, the term studio signifies the site of operations, usually in Southern California, where film production and other internal processes occur.

⁴ That is, the tendency of Hollywood filmmaking corporations—because of economic constraints, the pragmatic need to use contracted actors, directors, and production units in successive films and/or the desire to repeat the success of previous releases—to develop and reinforce audiences' knowledge of a particular type of talent combination or genre with a specific studio. For example, MGM, with its deep pockets and vast repertoire of stars, focused on elaborate musical and ensemble pictures. See Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Holt, 1996), and Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), for further discussion of the industrial motives behind studio style. Schatz's book intermittently considers adaptation; the subject does not fall under the domain of Gomery's economic history of the Hollywood studios. In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson also refer to the dependence on literary and theatrical properties in the filmmaking process.

⁵ Here, I explicitly recall Pierre Bourdieu's application of the term “conflict” in “The Field of Cultural Production; or: The Economic World Reversed,” in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and*

origins of the film and its source, the response of an audience to those texts, or both of these perspectives. Examples of such studies include Rudy Behlmer's production history of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and Peter Lev's production history of *The Big Sleep* (1945).⁶ These essays, by two well-known and respected film historians, chronicle Warner Bros.' acquisition of the novels, development of the respective narratives into suitable scripts, casting, and film production. However, Behlmer and Lev refrain from analyzing the thematic differences between the film texts and their sources, instead reducing the transformations in each novel into two oft-told anecdotes. The first: for the adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon*, director John Huston pasted the pages from Dashiell Hammett's novel into a script notebook, and then asked his secretary to convert all of the novel's dialogue and actions into script format dialogue and scene direction. The second: during production of *The Big Sleep*, director Howard Hawks and screenwriter William Faulkner contacted author Raymond Chandler after being unable to determine the culprit of one of the story's murders; apparently, Chandler himself did not know. In these accounts, the conversion from literature to film is either, in *The Maltese Falcon*, simplistic and objective or, in *The Big Sleep*, arbitrary. By implication, the choices made in the adaptation process represent a pragmatic, impartial series of decisions that bear minimal relation to the meanings and cultural values expressed by each text and their authors.

Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 29-73. According to Bourdieu, "[The] generative, unifying principle of [cultural production] is the struggle" (34).

⁶ Rudy Behlmer, "'The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of': *The Maltese Falcon*," in *The Maltese Falcon: John Huston, Director*, ed. William Luhr (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1995), 112-126; Peter Lev,

The second popular approach to film adaptation adopts a perspective and interpretive strategy more common to literary studies. Most likely because of the lingering critical and pedagogical influence of the New Criticism, literary critics often “read” film adaptation texts on their aesthetic and narrative merits, and determine the value of the film under review based on qualitative parameters, such as its thematic or narrative “fidelity” to its source. Early informal studies of adaptation by humanists or screenwriters often invoked this perspective to derogate film as a commercial mass medium or to protect the integrity of artistically sensitive writers, many of whom earned substantial wages working for Hollywood studios. For example, a 1923 article entitled “Screen Dealings with Dickens and Hugo” accuses the film industry of “criminal stupidity” for its callous, heavily “censored” adaptations of *Artful Dodger* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.⁷ In his 1945 short essay, “Writers in Hollywood,” Raymond Chandler accuses the Hollywood factory system of handcuffing screenwriters to budgets and the profit motive, thereby discouraging creative experimentation.⁸ Clearly, these writers had an ambivalent relationship to the movies, which they represented as a medium with latent artistic potential that was seriously compromised by filmmaking corporations and their commercial interests. Also at issue is the minimal control these

“*The Big Sleep: Production History and Authorship*,” *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Spring 1988, 1-21.

⁷ *Literary Digest*, 17 Feb 1923, 29-30. Other examples of this suspicious attitude toward film adaptations include the account of Theodore Dreiser’s litigation against Paramount for its 1931 adaptation of *An American Tragedy*—“Dreiser on the Sins of Hollywood,” *Literary Digest*, 2 May 1931, 21; the analysis of contemporary films by Sidney Dark in *The Saturday Review*, in which the author cites adaptations as nearly “always unsatisfactory”—17 Dec 1932, 640; and the assessment by *The New Republic*’s Stark Young of current adaptations in release—(12 Sept 1934, 131-32).

authors and screenwriters held over the stories they either developed for or sold to filmmaking corporations. Dreiser is one of many writers who publicly comment on the quality and fidelity of the film adaptations to their original texts.⁹ Whether that commentary consists of praise or scorn, these authors and screenwriters tacitly refuse to relinquish authority over the content, meaning and cultural value of the stories and characters they conceived, but which legally are no longer their own and now circulate through another medium with alternate aesthetic, economic, and ideological goals and imperatives.

George Bluestone's *Novels Into Film* (1957) is widely credited as the first book-length study of film adaptation.¹⁰ Using the tools of close reading, Bluestone compares the thematic content, narrative perspective, and tonal qualities of several contemporary films to their literary counterparts, offering his analysis of a film adaptation's "fidelity" or "faithfulness" based on his assessment of "the key additions, deletions, and alterations revealed in the film," which allow him to identify "particular problems" inherent in adaptation.¹¹ The approach of scholars like Asheim, Lev, and Behlmer downplay the

⁸ Chandler, *Atlantic Monthly*, Nov 1945, 50-54. For another early examination of this topic, see Frances Taylor Patterson, "The Author and Hollywood," *North American Review*, Autumn 1937-Winter 1938, 77-89.

⁹ Recent examples include Louis Begley's short essay on the adaptation of one of his novels in the 2002 film *About Schmidt*—"My Novel, The Movie: My Baby Reborn; 'About Schmidt' Was Changed, But Not Its Core," *New York Times*, 19 Jan 2003, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/19/mov.../19BEG.html>> (20 Jan 2003)—and Michael Cunningham's discussion of casting decisions in *The Hours*, the 2002 adaptation of his novel of the same name—"For 'The Hours,' An Elation Mixed With Doubt," *New York Times*, 19 Jan 2003, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/19/mo.../19CUNN.html>> (20 Jan 2003).

¹⁰ Bluestone, *Novels Into Film*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1957). Numerous scholars acknowledge Bluestone's book as a seminal work in the academic study of film adaptation. For example, see Brian MacFarlane, "It Wasn't Like that in the Book," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Fall 2000, 163-169; Sarah Caldwell, "About Time: Theorizing Adaptation, Temporality, and Tense," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Spring 2003, 82-92.

¹¹ Bluestone, x-xi.

importance of the artistic and narrative differences between literature and film, but Bluestone's work also ignores the historical and industrial contingencies that affect the adaptation process and the audiences that consume literature and film. The close readings by Bluestone illuminate numerous important structural and thematic divergences between the two media, but he has difficulty explaining *why* such changes occur beyond those elements internal to the texts themselves. For example, he explains that *Madame Bovary* illustrates the tendency of film to "suppress ... the attributes of language ... in favor of plastic images." Not only does this failure represent a problem in the 1949 film adaptation of the novel, but it also highlights the expressive deficiencies of film in general.¹² While Bluestone accuses two individuals, director Vincent Minnelli and screenwriter Robert Ardrey, of ignoring the cinematic possibilities present in Gustave Flaubert's novel, by the critic's own logic Minnelli and Ardrey are merely victims of the shortcomings of the medium in which they labor (and the corporations that exert influence over that medium). Bluestone's appeals to "fidelity" reveal the preferred status of literature in his heuristic.¹³

Bluestone's approach persists in scholarship on adaptation in part due to the rise of the auteur theory in the 1950s and 1960s, which coalesced with the publication of

¹² Bluestone, 199-206. The language employed by Bluestone to compare literature and film—film, composed of artificial, "plastic" components, "suppresses" the literary material it has promised to present—betrays the author's assumptions about the limited artistic capabilities and value of the medium of film.

¹³ Caldwell's 2003 essay uses Bluestone's discussion of tense in *Novels Into Film* as a starting point for her own comparative investigation of temporality in film and literature.

Andrew Sarris' *The American Cinema* in 1968.¹⁴ This critical model identified the director as the film's author, whose "personal signature" could be detected despite the "maze of conventions"—such as censorship, attempts to appeal to a broad audience, and studios' profit and public relations motives—imposed by studios and the film industry in the rigidly regulated and systematized Classical Hollywood era. Sarris explicitly describes the auteur theory as an evaluative model and theory of film history designed to align film studies with the interpretive system of literary studies and to counteract the hegemonic control exercised by film studios in the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁵ As it distills film into a more manageable unit of inquiry and elevates directors to a status similar to those held by authors of literature, auteur theory grants control over "successful" film texts to individuals rather than the companies that invested in, produced, and marketed those films, as well as (it should not be ignored) hired those directors for specific reasons that suited its own corporate goals, values, and imperatives. While the director exercised considerable control over the filmmaking process, he was only one of many employees who labored on and influenced film projects under the employ of a specific studio. If the logic of auteur theory were extended, film texts could contain numerous authors who imposed their personal signatures on the products exhibited to audiences. By extension, and following Bourdieu's model of linguistic reception to be discussed below, those audiences would affect the texts and their producers as well, as would the myriad cultural and industrial factors exerting pressure at that historical moment.

¹⁴ Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968*, (New York: Dutton, 1968). The influence on 1950s auteurism is visible in Bluestone as well, who in *Novels Into Film* is more likely to examine the relationships of the directors, rather than the producers, of the films he studies.

Sarris and other auteurists refuse such a broad application for the very reasons auteur theory was initially developed: to locate an individual, rather than a corporation, to whom responsibility for the artistic qualities of a film might be assigned; and, to make film a manageable, expedient unit of critical study. Therefore, it should be no surprise that film became suitable for inquiry to literary scholars perhaps eager to ignore the explicit marks of corporate control over films produced in the Classical Hollywood era.¹⁶ While the publication of Bluestone's *Novels Into Film* in 1957 laid the groundwork for the rise of auteur theory, the critical apparatus articulated by Sarris and others allowed literary critics to take film seriously, to imagine literature and film as two separate but related "artistic" media, and to devote attention in the following decade to the textual strategies employed by both fields. For example, Keith Cohen's *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange* and Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structures in Fiction and Film* offer influential theoretical accounts of the relationship between literature and film. These studies posit rigorous narratological comparisons of the two media, while they de-emphasize the cultural and economic imperatives (in both the publishing and film industries, and in culture more generally) that affect the development

¹⁵ Sarris, *The American Cinema*, 19-20, 30.

¹⁶ I believe this academization of film was encouraged by, and perhaps only possible because of, the fact that, by the early 1950s and after, filmmaking corporations were forced to relinquish their monopolies over film production, distribution, and exhibition. This legal mandate, the *Paramount Decree* of 1948, required that studios divest themselves of theatre holdings, the physical points of interaction between consumers and the studios and their products. Concurrently, many directors, actors, and producers, no longer under long-term contracts with studios, opted to package film projects independently and later bring a filmmaking corporation in to finance production and distribution. The combination of these two developments allowed spectators to interpret these stars and especially the directors as the authors of the films on which they worked, just as studio control over the creation and exhibition of those films visibly waned.

and production of the aesthetic and formal features of these texts.¹⁷ More recent, and less theoretical, examples include three edited volumes, *Cinema and Fiction: New Modes of Adapting, 1950-1990*; *Film and Literature: Points of Intersection*; and *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*.¹⁸ Once again, these books, because of their very organization as collections, are unable to articulate a coherent critical model for the study of adaptation that can remain consistent across multiple contexts and thus reveal the broader implications of this process for larger issues applicable to literature and film.

Some scholarly approaches to film adaptation investigate production and reception from the economic, historical, or industrial point of view of the film studio and do not take up the meaning and implications of the film text and its source, while others closely read the nuances of each text, but in so doing ignore the outside influences on the acquisition, adaptation, production, and commercial release of books and films.

However, several studies have remained attentive to both perspectives, including Lester Asheim, who addressed some of the industrial contingencies impinging on film when he investigated the “patterns” of adaptation in Hollywood in his sociological study, *From Book to Film*, published in four parts between 1951 and 1952.¹⁹ Asheim compares 24 “classic and ‘standard’ novels” with their film counterparts in an attempt to discern the motivations behind alterations in the source texts. He finds that such Hollywood

¹⁷ Cohen, (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1979); Chatman, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1978). Bruce Kawin’s *Telling It Again and Again: Repetition in Literature and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1972) is an earlier example of humanist scholarship that addresses literary and film narratives.

¹⁸ John Orr and Colin Nicholson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1992); Phebe Davidson (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997); Deborah Cartmell (London & New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁹ “From Book to Film: Simplification,” *Hollywood Quarterly*, Spring 1951, 289-304; “From Book to Film: Mass Appeals,” *Hollywood Quarterly*, Summer 1951, 334-49; “From Book to Film: The Note of

institutions as the star system, the Production Code Administration and audiences' desires for universal themes, happy endings, and straightforward narratives influenced adaptations.²⁰ The results of such pressure, according to Asheim, produced films that seriously compromised the aesthetic and narrative idiosyncrasies of their literary sources by condensing and simplifying them into bland commercial products palatable to the "14-year-old mind" that represents the intellectual capacity of the average moviegoer.²¹ As this assertion implies, Asheim is deeply cynical about the motives of filmmaking corporations (and his study introduces an aesthetic value system utilized a few years later by Bluestone): any narrative difference from the original source represents a form of infidelity on the part of the adaptation and exposes a willingness to pander to anything-but-artistic motives. Asheim does acknowledge the myriad pressures on films, but he engages those influences only as barriers to a successful adaptation. Once again, the literary text is primary and assumed to be free from external limitations and constraints, while the film adaptation struggles against industrial and commercial barriers in an attempt to achieve the standard set by its predecessor.

More recently, critics have chronicled the contingencies that affect film adaptations and their sources while detecting the implications of those imperatives in the narratives themselves. Jeffrey Sconce in "Narrative Authority and Social Narrativity: The Cinematic Reconstruction of Bronte's *Jane Eyre*" and Richard Maltby in "To Prevent the Prevalent Type of Book: Censorship and Adaptation in Hollywood, 1924-1934" have

Affirmation," *Quarterly Review of Film, Radio, and Television*, Fall 1951, 54-68; "From Book to Film: Summary," *Quarterly Review of Film, Radio, and Television*, Spring 1952, 258-73.

²⁰ "From Book to Film: Summary," 267-68.

offered two engaging, historically based examinations of adaptation in the Hollywood studio era.²² Both of these articles use archival documents to chronicle the economic and cultural imperatives that influenced aesthetic decisions—Maltby, the significant role played by the Catholic Legion of Decency in determining the elements of particular literary properties, such as the depictions of crime, sex, and religion, as well as the use of profane or blasphemous language that would be unsuitable for translation to the cinema; and, Sconce, through a production history of *Jane Eyre*, the elements of that novel that proved desirable for adaptation by David O. Selznick and his independent studio, David O. Selznick Productions. While Sconce and Maltby focus on film production as well as the texts themselves, neither engages adaptation more broadly as a conscious corporate strategy that can extend across multiple studio releases (as I do in this dissertation). Sconce and Maltby highlight film adaptation as a particularly productive site of convergence between literature, film and other culturally vital media. However, by and large, adaptation as a practice remains understudied, despite the interdependence of various forms of entertainment media throughout American cultural history.

A few scholars do explore this interdependence: an additional strand of adaptation criticism bears tangential relation both to the narratology of Cohen and Chatman and to the historicism of Maltby by addressing the historical and cultural relationship between

²¹ “From Book to Film: Simplification,” 292-93.

²² Sconce, “Narrative Authority and Social Narrativity: The Cinematic Reconstruction of Bronte's *Jane Eyre*,” in *The Studio System*, ed. Janet Staiger (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1995), 140-162; Maltby, in “To Prevent the Prevalent Type of Book:’ Censorship and Adaptation in Hollywood, 1924-1934,” Reprinted in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2000), 79-105. More recent books about the subject, such as *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2000), and *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ:

literature and film. Studies of this kind include John Fell's *Film and the Narrative Tradition*, Judith Mayne's *Private Novels, Public Films*, and Kamilla Elliott's *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*.²³ Fell, Mayne, and Elliott chronicle the artistic, cultural, and industrial evolutions of film and literature, respectively, in order to investigate the history of critical interest in and engagement with film and literature, or to explain the reasons why each medium developed, artistically and industrially, in specific ways. These inquiries offer historical insight to scholars interested in the relationship between literature, film and other entertainment media. For this reason, they are valuable for any study of adaptation; however, because Fell, Mayne, and Elliott each position literature and film in a hierarchical relationship, they are reluctant to envision the interconnections between literature and film beyond the historical inception and nascent development of the cinema in the early twentieth century. What's more, their work displays a decreasing level of applicability to contemporary media and the companies responsible for producing and disseminating their products in an increasing variety of formats and exhibition outlets.

INTERVENING IN ADAPTATION STUDIES

AUTEURSHIP, CORPORATE AUTHORS, AND AUTHORSHIP

As Andrew Sarris admits in the introduction to *The American Cinema*, the auteur theory was developed to rescue films from the "studio system" and to establish an "academic tradition" that regarded the cinematic medium as art rather than mass

Prentice Hall, 1999), by Timothy Corrigan, intermittently shift attention toward the cultural and economic interdependence of film and literature and may signal renewed scholarly engagement in the field.

communication.²⁴ The cultural dissemination of this critical apparatus has made celebrities of directors and helped to solidify the presence of film studies in academia, but it has not articulated how and why movies get made. Nor has it enabled an explanation of the sustained dominance exerted by the oligopoly of major filmmaking corporations and other lesser companies over their employees in the Classical Hollywood era; instead, this power is taken for granted, even lamented, as auteur scholars search for a few independent-minded individuals who bravely expressed themselves despite this structure. Auteur theory also necessarily discounts the collaborative nature of filmmaking and, by narrowing the study of film to the level of individual agents and texts, avoids a discussion of the industrial and commercial contexts in which film is immersed. However, film is not produced by artists or Hollywood studio executives in isolation, but rather by companies with significant resources in an extended process that pragmatically instantiates a series of decisions according to economic, social, and artistic factors.

I insist that filmmaking corporations rather than individual auteurs are the authors of films, and I apply the frame of corporate authorship to the case studies of this dissertation. First, these entities—and not the screenwriters, producers or directors they

²³ Fell (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974); Mayne (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988); Elliott (New York: Cambridge UP, 2003).

²⁴ Sarris, *The American Cinema*. British cine-structuralism (also called auteur-structuralism) attempted to reintegrate auteurs into their material surroundings in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Grounding auteur criticism in structuralist theory and methodology, cine-structuralists identified codes of meaning implicit in the oeuvre of specific auteurs. John Caughie offers an historical summary of the movement from Auteur criticism to cine-structuralism in “Introduction: Auteur-Structuralism,” *Theories of Authorship: A Reader* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 123-130. The book reprints many important essays that defined and elaborated auteur theory and auteur-structuralism. In “The Time Warner Conspiracy: *JFK*, *Batman*, and the Manager Theory of Hollywood Film,” Jerome Christensen offers a brief but persuasive argument against auteur criticism and for the assignation of corporations as the authors of film texts (*Critical Inquiry* 28 [Spring 2002]: 591-617).

employ on a “work for hire” basis—are the legally defined and protected “authors” of the films they develop, produce, and market.²⁵ Second, highlighting the corporate status of these companies calls attention to their business motives. This fact has traditionally been used to draw skepticism to the intentions of filmmaking corporations and their ability to craft unique, innovative products. (For example, auteur studies perceive studios and their corporate offices as obstacles to individual agency and artistic inclination, industrial histories of film often isolate the profit motive as the overriding concern guiding the decisions at Hollywood studios, and adaptation studies use the commercial concerns of these companies to place qualitative limits on a film adaptation, thus erecting a hierarchical relationship between a source text and a subsequent adaptation.) However, as I demonstrate at multiple points throughout this study, the profit motive is merely one of many concerns used to formulate and execute company policies and to carry out the adaptation process—among these other motives are the desires for corporate longevity, for a unique corporate identity that consumers may attach to the company and its products, for productive relationships with industry partners and competitors, and, in the film industry in particular, for quality products, for efficiency in operations, and for harmony and cooperation within the company and between employees. Decisions made according to these objectives may not always accord with the profit motive, but they all play a part in the operations of the company and influence the film adaptation process.

²⁵ For further explanation of United States Copyright Law as it pertains to legal authorship, copyright ownership, and work for hire, see “Circular 9: Works Made for Hire Under the 1976 Copyright Act,” *U.S. Copyright Office*, Dec 2004, <<http://www.copyright.gov/circs/circ9.html#who>> (19 July 2006).

Third, commercial concerns preclude neither innovation nor artistic expression, for each filmmaking corporation is a unique entity capable of distinct objectives and ideological positions (this is in accordance with the manner in which they and their expressions are legally defined and protected under the United States Constitution), which are inflected through the development, production, exhibition, and dissemination of their products. This perspective rests in opposition to studies that imply or explicitly state that the influence of major commercial studios transforms the development and production of each film into a mechanistic procedure that severely restricts quality and creativity. In fact, the films produced by each filmmaking corporation are in themselves produced for reasons and through methods that vary radically from company to company. In this sense, standardization represents a practice used by many filmmaking corporations to increase efficiency and raise the potential for a return on investment, yet each company utilizes standardization for specific reasons, through varying means, and to different ends.

Investigation into the film adaptation process also provides a perspective into the multiple functions of *authorship* produced, implied, and invoked in the movement from the literary to the cinematic. When viewed through the prism of film adaptation, authorship also shifts and breaks free from the assumption that it is the product of a single producer and, by so doing, becomes apparent as a locus of struggle and negotiation between individuals, corporations, and institutions.²⁶ The explicit, legally protected role

²⁶ In *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), Jack Stillerger demonstrates the collaborative nature of artistic works and argues for the adoption of a model of “multiple authorship” by exposing the numerous contributors instrumental to the production of literary, theatrical, and cinematic texts. My argument adopts a similar perspective and goes further by

of author held by a novel's writer and a film's producer becomes complicated, confused, and occasionally contentious in the context of film adaptation, where multiple parties—e.g., publishing companies, writers, readers, filmmaking corporations, spectators, or other institutional observers—may claim creative participation in, ownership of, or demand influence over a title, narrative, and fictional characters circulating through several discursive, media, and cultural channels over an extended time period.

In such environments, authorship can become a lucrative position, capable of yielding immense monetary revenue and cultural prestige, as a case study examining Warner Bros. acquisition and use of scenarios and characters featured in *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) and writer Dashiell Hammett's subsequent litigation to procure the right to utilize these same characters will illustrate. In other examples of film adaptation, such as Universal Pictures' exploitation of the name and reputation of Edgar Allan Poe in the development and marketing of a series of horror films, authorship represents a position from which to distinguish the filmmaking corporation and its generic specialties, while the role of "author," played in this case by Poe, is merely a vacillating signifier that may be deployed in order to graft a series of desired cultural and thematic associations onto a specific film. In placing the term "author" in quotes, I am attempting to distinguish between the legally defined author, in this case assumed by Universal Pictures, and the historical figure, in this case Poe, who holds no legal control over a film adaptation, yet still has a relationship, or an "author-function," to a film adaptation for which he is

exploring the myriad, and perhaps competing, perspectives, arguments, and messages that such texts express.

assigned partial responsibility for originating.²⁷ In the context of film adaptation, the distinction between these two terms, as well as the functional properties of authorship, become apparent, yet rarely have such phenomena been addressed in previous studies of film adaptation.

*FILMMAKING CORPORATIONS OF THE CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD ERA AND
THEIR CORPORATE STRATEGIES*

Each chapter of this dissertation is devoted to the investigation of a single filmmaking corporation operating during a period often referred to as the Classical Hollywood Era, a finite epoch in which several companies (the so-called major Hollywood studios) matured to exercise a monopoly over the United States film industry through vertical integration—that is, the simultaneous control of production, distribution, and exhibition of their products. In this period, major, major-minor and minor studios, as well as major independents, maintained long-term contracts with producers, actors, directors, and crew members, enabling them to develop and exploit the skills of their employees, limiting the down-time during which those employees would still be paid, and presenting the opportunity to produce a steady level of projects on which those employees could work. The presence of similar cast and crews over time also allowed film studios to maintain continuity between productions and develop a recognizable style and a cadre of “stars” that helped distinguish their products for consumers. Thus, each studio became adept at producing certain genres or styles of films—often consisting of familiar cast and crew

²⁷ The term “author-function” is introduced by Michel Foucault in “What Is An Author?,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977). See Chapter 3 for further discussion of this concept and the manner in which Poe’s name, image, and reputation were exploited by Universal Pictures.

combinations, production designs, and diegeses—that meshed with its economic and industrial imperatives and tended to align with its ideological beliefs.²⁸

For a span of roughly twenty years, five corporations—Fox (later 20th Century-Fox), Paramount, Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO), Warner Bros.-First National (Warner Bros.), and Loew’s-MGM (MGM), known as the “majors” or the “big five”—controlled all three levers of this scenario, thus maximizing control over their employees and their products. Three others—Universal Pictures, Columbia, and United Artists, the “major-minors” or “little three”—controlled production and distribution but did not own their own movie theaters. These three companies were capitalized to a lesser degree and depended upon each other or upon their major competitors to gain access to desirable exhibition markets. Additional studios operated outside the oligopoly—among these were the Poverty Row studios, such as Monogram Pictures Corporation and Republic Pictures Corporation, which specialized in low-budget productions releases that they distributed to rural areas; and major independents, including Samuel Goldwyn Company, Walter Wanger Productions, and Selznick International Pictures, which produced pictures to compete with the majors and, due to this desire, depended on other companies to secure distribution deals and theater bookings.²⁹

²⁸ For longer discussions of the industrial organization of the Classical Hollywood Studio system and the development of studio style, see Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, and Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*.

²⁹ While major independents appeared to be at the mercy of the oligopoly of major firms controlling nearly all first-run exhibition outlets, the latter often depended on the former to supply commercially promising A-level pictures that could keep theaters filled and profitable. Nevertheless, the steady cooperation between and monopolistic practices of the majors—who often shared studio talent and placed each other’s films in desirable exhibition markets—put major-minors, minors, and independents at a significant competitive disadvantage.

The regularized system of production, distribution, and exhibition achieved by the majors and most other companies during this period is often referred to as the “studio system.” These corporations produced and released their products with a regularity and efficiency that resembled the assembly-line manufacturing more common to other industries. Despite the high level of stability and control achieved by filmmaking corporations during this era, one should not assume, as many film scholars do, that this “system” and these companies’ common desires for profit, power, and longevity implies that they also shared the same corporate goals, motives, or practices.³⁰ Because of the requirements of product differentiation, the distinctive skills and preferences of the personalities laboring for each studio, its management structure and the unique industrial positioning of each company, each of these companies practiced highly different approaches in achieving their objectives.

Jerome Christensen makes a similar case in his recent article, “Studio Authorship, Warner Bros., and *The Fountainhead*.”³¹ There, Christensen positions studios as corporate authors, whose agents and unique histories produce an intention visible in the products they create, and argues convincingly for the influence of strategy on the

³⁰ In *The Coming of Sound* (New York: Routledge, 2005), Douglas Gomery cites the profit motive as the singular objective of all filmmaking corporations, a supposition that informs the research and analysis featured in that volume, as well as his many other studies of film history and economics, including *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: BFI, 2005). In their foundational study, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson argue that studio organization and its prevailing system of production after the mid- to late-1910s led to the standardization of product formulation and assembly that in turn created consistent, rarely deviated norms of narration and aesthetic style. (Because of this perspective, this book has occasionally been accused of constructing film history as an inevitability of mechanical determinism.) As has been discussed above, the assumption that commercial concerns override all other considerations in the development, production, and release of films by Hollywood filmmaking corporations has colored a significant portion of extant studies of film adaptation.

“subjects, ... forms, and ... meanings [that each studio’s films] communicated to their various audiences.”³² If MGM and Warner Bros. are both major, vertically integrated filmmaking corporations operating under the same “system,” then why do they make drastically different decisions in the face of similar industrial obstacles, why do they handle their employees differently, why do their studio styles differ so markedly? Such queries could continue without interruption, and for Christensen, the answer to each would boil down to corporate strategy, the distinctive “pattern,” unique to each company, that not only provides “unity and coherence to the decision-making process,” but also “gives the firm its identity, its power to mobilize its strength, and its likelihood of success in the marketplace.”³³

Corporate strategy, in its own right a “system” of preferences and tastes, guidelines and policies by which a company operates (in fact, this is the term Warner Bros. used to refer to its the implementation of its strategy at its Hollywood studio), differs from the factory system said to dictate the decisions at studios during this period. The former is contingent upon the conditions at each company, while the latter merely gestures toward a template of production that regularizes output and ensures product uniformity. Viewed internally, corporate strategy bears similarities to such a scenario, for it formalizes policy and operations, quells behavior perceived to lie outside the objectives and standards of the firm, and creates a “consistency” throughout the organization—in other words,

³¹ Christensen, “Studio Authorship, Warner Bros., and *The Fountainhead*,” *Velvet Light Trap* 57 (Spring 2006): 17-31.

³² Christensen, “Studio Authorship, Warner Bros., and *The Fountainhead*,” 18.

accusations often levied against the oligopoly of firms (especially by auteur theorists and many scholars of film adaptation) that dominated the Classical Hollywood Era. Viewed externally, these same measures allow a company to adapt to “constantly changing business conditions,”³⁴ imbue it with an identity that distinguishes it and its products from competitors and encourage the attribution of anthropomorphic qualities, a notion of personhood, to the corporate entity—that is, strategy also individualizes, thus making a company seem entirely unique.

In each of the case studies of this dissertation, I demonstrate the manner in which the industrial positioning of individual filmmaking corporations is instrumental to the formulation and implementation of the broader strategies that guide the long- and short-term decision making within these organizations. In effect, the formulation and successful execution of strategy depends on the organization and on the current vertical boundaries of each filmmaking corporation. For example, Selznick International Pictures, a major independent, was severely limited by its lack of control over the distribution and exhibition of its films. For that reason, it was forced to create a strategy that influenced its decision-making at every turn, not only from the relationships it attempted to build with potential distributors and exhibitors but also to the formulation of its production schedule, to the budgeting restrictions of those films, to the mode of

³³ Christensen, “Studio Authorship, Warner Bros., and *The Fountainhead*,” 20, quoting Kenneth A. Andrews, *The Concept of Corporate Strategy, Revised Edition* (Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin, 1980), 13.

³⁴ David Besanko, David Dranove, Mark Shanley and Scott Schaefer, *Economics of Strategy, Third Edition* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 66.

production employed, to such aesthetic factors as production design and story development, to the marketing campaigns it would use to publicize each of its releases.

A model of film adaptation criticism that incorporates strategy accounts for the range of decisions and goals running concurrently in the daily operations of and the long-range planning at all filmmaking corporations. Strategy also acknowledges both commercial and artistic aspirations, and the seemingly disparate desires for profit, prestige and public goodwill, without necessarily discounting the existence or consequence of any of these impulses. Finally, this perspective demands that any film release be perceived as one entry within the continuing trajectory of the corporation—such as a cycle of films developed and released by the studio or a series of decisions formulated by studio executives and implemented throughout the company—rather than as an independent unit without relation to previous or future releases by that studio. As the literature review above clearly demonstrates, adaptation studies has suffered from the continuing assumption that the story development and production of a film adaptation is initiated exclusively from an attributed literary source, a hermeneutic that denies the myriad factors influencing the adaptation process and often leads to comparative studies that limit the application of this field to traditional academic disciplines. Alternatively, this dissertation positions film adaptation as a crucial practice through which corporate strategy is executed, while it argues that an examination of the process whereby source materials are acquired, developed, produced, and marketed provides an especially rich location from which to perceive the industrial positioning and goals of filmmaking corporations.

TEXTUAL FIDELITY AND SOURCE

The application of qualitative terminology such as “faithfulness” and “fidelity” in critiques of film adaptation often establishes a hierarchy of textual relations between an attributed literary work, a text that may or may not represent the primary source for story development, and a film adaptation. While these approaches have the effect of decontextualizing the two texts in question and ignoring the range of influences that influence the film adaptation process, inquiries into textual fidelity continue to dominate academic studies of film adaptation, especially those that emanate from literary studies. In addition, strict focus on the production history of a film adaptation necessarily assumes the source text represents a stable and unitary property, often isolates the production process from the broader cultural imperatives pressuring adaptation at various moments prior to and following these stages, and occasionally loses sight of the film adaptation’s aesthetic qualities.

I contend that “fidelity” is a term without constructive application to the study of film adaptation; and the “based on” acknowledgement used to signify a literary source in a film’s title credits and publicity is merely an attribution that helps to distinguish a marketing campaign rather than the previously published work from which that film originates and, as adherents of textual fidelity might argue, to which it aspires. While this position interjects an inherent instability into the series of texts, agents, and conditions that factor into the film adaptation process, the case studies of this dissertation lay bare the fact that an attributed source—for example, the 1842 short story, “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” that serves as the credited “inspiration” for the 1932 Universal film *Murders in*

the Rue Morgue—is rarely a unitary artifact. Rather, it is merely a signifier representing (and often concealing) a series of textual iterations, with dispersed meanings and cultural implications for a vast readership, of whom the filmmaking corporation responsible for a film adaptation is one.³⁵ When one examines the film adaptation process in detail, the source expands from a single work into a broad, amorphous category, which comes to include not only a literary text but also previous films produced by a filmmaking corporation, contemporaneous commercial and aesthetic trends that offer further forms of profit for the release and by extension its producer, the future goals of the filmmaking corporation in question, as well the accumulated textual corpus (including studio story materials, related film, radio and theatrical adaptations, the publication history, and the cultural value of the text in the various fields in which it circulates) that has gathered around the recognized literary work by the time the adaptation process is undertaken.

DISCOURSE

While I hope to dispel the traditional notion of the film adaptation source as an artifact with clear boundaries in its meaning and application, filmmaking corporations do utilize pre-existing works, not only in story development, but also in the production and marketing of the film adaptation process. Nevertheless, the case studies of my study reveal that the range of corporate imperatives and the corpus of texts that inspire and

³⁵ In this sense, filmmaking corporations are not only producers but also readers. This conception of film adaptation as a response by a uniquely situated reader bears similarities to the interpretive framework of reader-response criticism, which seeks to use the actual responses of readers to explain why and how individuals purchase, read, and then construct meaning out of texts. An exceptional example of such research is Janice Radway's investigation of the romance genre and its devoted readers ("always already situated within an interpretive context," according to Radway) in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). Radway

influence adaptation far exceed a single work to which a film might be attributed. To this broad, amorphous collection of texts and iterations that constitute the source materials for film adaptation, I assign the term discourse. As described by Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), discourses signify formations around which have gathered “a number of ... objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices.”³⁶ According to Foucault, discourses are powerful ideas that originate through a complex set of conditions, and in the ensuing years they gradually but irregularly expand in their meaning, application, and popularity in various fields. Such is the case with the textual materials and the cultural and industrial conditions from which filmmaking corporations initiate the film adaptation process and make decisions in subsequent stages of casting, production, and marketing. Understanding film adaptation sources as discursive formations introduces a complexity and volatility into this category of materials, demands a rigorous investigation of the context from which film adaptation emerges, and, once again, discourages the use of “fidelity” as a critical inflection point in the study of adaptation.

While the discursive formations that serve as the source materials for the film adaptation process are highly variable and less stable than many may believe, in the release and marketing of film adaptation, filmmaking corporations still have a profound influence over the meaning, cultural associations, and significance of the discourses they adapt. For example, the invocation of the discourse related to the literary work

asserts, “Literary meaning is not something to be found *in* a text. It is, rather, an entity produced by a reader in conjunction with the text’s verbal structure” (11).

Frankenstein (1813) (and including the other literary, cinematic and theatrical works, events, and popular semantic constructions that fall within this domain) in Universal Pictures' 1931 film *Frankenstein* has had a lasting impact on the scope, direction, and cultural relevance of that discourse. Nevertheless, one should refrain from the quick assumption that these effects represent an irrevocable and negative alteration on a particular discourse or that film adaptation inevitably stifles the cultural esteem or the relevance accrued in the preceding years. In Foucault's formulation, discourses (with their long histories and deeply engrained as they are in public memory) are too powerful to enable such modification.

While some critics may object to the disciplining influence exercised by these corporations in the film adaptation process, as Foucault observes, this mechanism functions in a diffusive rather than a restrictive way with respect to the discourse. Film adaptation acts as a process of disruption where renewed vitality and interest, as well as wider application and new modes of delivery, are introduced into the existing discourse.³⁷ In different ways, such a phenomenon occurred in each of the case studies that comprise my study. And it is in clear evidence in the anecdote that introduced this chapter: in its protests against *Pride and Prejudice* [2005], the Jane Austen Society attempted to regulate the constantly shifting meaning and functionality related to Jane Austen and "Pride and Prejudice" in accordance with its own purposes. Perhaps against the intentions of its membership, the public criticisms of the Austen Society became a facet

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

³⁷ Foucault discusses the concept of doctrines in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 225-231.

of the reception of the film and only expanded awareness of the discourse, which the group hoped to confine to its preferred usage, as well as the film it sought to suppress.

METHODOLOGY: FIELD, PROFIT, AND MARKETS

Important to my employment of discourse as a category replacing the traditional notion of the singular, stable film adaptation source is that the diverse nature and discontinuous series of invocations that characterize the history of any given discourse produces a formation without an inherent core of meaning and or a clear, consistent cultural significance. Based on this fact, discourse can only be properly understood, according to Foucault, by examining its “external conditions of existence,” a methodological approach I adopt in each of the case studies of this dissertation.

Rather than from the inspiration and intentions of an individual author, the production of meaning in film emerges from the complex conditions, or “field,” within which film and literature are developed, produced, and released. Pierre Bourdieu uses this term to distinguish the “social universes” of cultural production within which individuals act and from which film and literature emerge. “Fields are .. endowed with particular institutions and obey specific laws,” according to Bourdieu, and they may be independent from such familiar arenas as politics and economics because each possesses distinct parlances, “rules of evaluation,” goals, and methods for defining, accumulating, and exerting power. In one field, power might be accumulated in the form of political control or the accumulation of capital; in another, power might found in the expression of intellectual

acumen or literary prestige.³⁸ According to Bourdieu, individuals within each field seek profit, but the form of profit desired may differ radically depending on the field and the agent's position within it. Those forms of profit that fall outside of the generally recognized forms, like capital and political power, are "symbolic."³⁹

Understanding profit as a multi-dimensional term with wide application allows for a reconfiguration of the perceived objectives of filmmaking corporations. Whereas a return on monetary investment is desirable in the production and release of any film, symbolic forms of profit are preferred and even required to maintain solvency and legitimacy. Filmmaking corporations operating in the Classical Hollywood Era needed to accumulate capital to sign talent, produce pictures, and remain solvent; simultaneously, they sought to develop a reputation that could help them cultivate relationships and maintain goodwill with prospective and current employees, industrial counterparts, and cinema audiences.

Bourdieu's rigorous model of sociological inquiry maintains that all elements of the field have a profound influence on all of the other elements, and I contend that the study of film adaptation—a category in which a multitude of individuals, corporations, institutions, and cultural fields interact—demands such thorough inquiry.⁴⁰ Film

³⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, "Field of Power, Literary Field, and Habitus," in *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), 161-175.

³⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language & Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 65-68.

⁴⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the speech genre bears structural similarities to Bourdieu's field. Bakhtin argues that all linguistic utterances fall into genres, through which they can be understood, responses can be anticipated, and dialogic communication can ensue. Bakhtin expands the applicability of speech genres from the level of interpersonal communication to cover entire discourses; for example, the tacit rules, expectations, and functions of literary discourse differ significantly from those of scientific discourse ("The Problem of Speech Genres," *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986], 60-102). With the field, Bourdieu introduces a broader and more concrete cultural component into this scenario, which allows for an exploration of the manifestations and functions of power as they may play out in the studio era.

adaptation is not an event; rather, it is a process, consisting of a range of decisions by multiple parties, each with an interest in the fate and direction of that process, and subject to a broad array of cultural, artistic, and commercial imperatives. The acquisition of a literary property depends on numerous factors, as does the filmmaking corporation's determination of appropriate story development, casting, marketing, and aesthetic presentation. In this light, no film adaptation can be analyzed as an independent entity; instead, it must be assessed as one among a range of decisions by the corporation and the broader fields in which literature and film circulate.

While it plays a less explicit role in this dissertation, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic markets," which refers to the fact that all utterances express numerous and sometimes competing goals across multiple discursive fields, is important to the methodology I employ in my investigation.⁴¹ According to Bourdieu, a rigorous investigation of context is required to begin to understand the motives, meaning, and effects of a discursive exchange. Examining the connections between markets and literary and film texts produces a fruitful critical engagement with the adaptation process, because it refuses to prefer one medium over another and requires that texts within those media be interpreted as both aesthetic and industrial—artistic and commercial—expressions of their respective producers. Moreover, a cognizance of symbolic markets

⁴¹ See Bourdieu, *Language & Symbolic Power*, especially Chapter 2, 66-89. Bourdieu's use of the term market signals his attentiveness to three components of discourse: first, the transactional, producer-receptor nature of the linguistic scene; second, as his concept broadens from the individual utterance to include entire vocal and written texts, discursive forms often assumed to be immune to personal or commercial self-interest (hence, the use of the term profit to represent the multifaceted set of goals one hopes to achieve through the linguistic exchange); and, third, the fact that a speaker merely enters into, rather than creates, the scene of discourse.

in a critique of film adaptation demands an account of the entire discursive exchange—not only of producer, message and receiver, but also of those conditions that motivate and shape the actions of these entities and the texts they produce and encounter.

A NOTE ON PRIMARY SOURCES

In this dissertation, I investigate the industrial and cultural contexts of adaptation through the analysis of documents contemporary to the scene of its utterance. Whenever possible, I have culled corporate memoranda, budgets, scripts and advertising materials (most of these available at archival repositories) to determine why a film studio has interest in a literary property and chooses to translate that story to the cinema in a certain style and manner, and why and where it should invest money into production and promotion of the film adaptation. The communications between film studios, publishers, and outside persons, organizations, and institutions reveal how these corporations chose to respond to external input and mandates. I also examine more widely circulated contemporaneous documents such as book and film reviews that evaluated and interpreted these texts in the mass media; films, books, and other cultural events or trends that may have motivated publishers and film studios to acquire and release a literary property at a specific moment and in a specific manner of presentation; finally, other published materials that express the impression of, interest in, and currency of film studios, publishers, and the texts they released. I believe my inquiries into these documents should establish a convincing case for the strategies in play at the filmmaking corporation in question and an industrial, historical, and artistic basis for the analysis of, not only the film adaptation text. They also provide a vivid picture of the practice of

adaptation, which offers points of entry to concurrent and often competing discourses and the struggles for cultural and industrial legitimacy and power that coalesce in a process that spans media formations, historical epochs, and commercial markets.

WHY EXAMINE ADAPTATION IN THIS MANNER?

I have selected this method of inquiry and these specific filmmaking corporations for analysis because, together, their differing modes of organization offer a broad view of the film industry during this period and a vivid depiction of the influence of industrial positioning on film adaptation. Many adaptation studies have successfully examined a single film adaptation and its credited literary source, but I have chosen to address multiple films in each chapter to indicate the ways in which film adaptation is part of a larger strategy and that each release exists within a larger strategy and along a longer continuum that is influenced by previous and future film releases. Intense focus on a single film also loses sight of the larger context influencing the film adaptation process and creates, intentionally or not, the disparity of value between a literary source and a film adaptation that predominates in many extant studies of this category. Finally, I could have concentrated exclusively upon popular “types”—such as short stories, novels, theatrical properties, or poetry—or on generic categories of adaptation—like the biopic, the comedy, the historical epic, and so forth. By so doing, I may have detected general trends across historical epochs or offered focused narratological observations on literature and film. However, I also would have been forced to ignore, first, the reasons why such adaptations were acquired, produced and marketed; second, the entire range of influences that pressure the adaptation process; and, third, the unique cultural status of these source

materials, as broad or as narrow as their meanings and corpus of texts might be during the adaptation process.

CASE STUDIES

Chapter Two, “Sound, Horror, and the Adaptation of Cultural Discourses at Universal Pictures; Part 1: *Dracula* (1931) and *Frankenstein* (1931),” expands the traditional understanding of a literary source by exposing the disparity between a unitary literary property and the diverse resources upon which many film adaptations are based. This investigation also reveals the myriad market vectors—including a filmmaking corporation’s industrial positioning, institutional forces that seek to accommodate film content to the taste of a general audience, constantly evolving generic parameters, and a studio’s technical proficiency—influencing the film adaptation process.

In the early 1930s, Universal Pictures inaugurated the sound-era phase of the horror genre with two film adaptations, *Dracula* (1930) and *Frankenstein* (1931). The novels that provided the titles for these films not only were well-known; they were also in the public domain, a fact that presented the cash-strapped Universal with an opportunity to attract an international audience already familiar with these iconic characters and storylines, all the while avoiding literary acquisition fees. Even more important for Universal was the fact that these literary works existed within larger cultural discourses that exceeded the literary field and transcended local interest. (By “cultural discourse,” I refer to a broad, fluid field of texts, trends, social practices, linguistic idioms, and artistic forms that cluster around and give meaning to a specific object of study.)

Two such discourses—which I dub the vampire and frankenstein discourses,

respectively—served as the unacknowledged sources for Universal’s horror adaptations. For example, the novel *Frankenstein* (1818) spawned a massive cultural wave that by the early 1930s came to include numerous theatrical productions across Europe and the United States, various presentations in book form, several film adaptations, and even common turns of phrase in which the name “Frankenstein” emerged as a common noun and the hapless Creature became mistakenly known as Frankenstein. These distinct cultural discourses, identified and expertly exploited by the studio in advertising campaigns and the film adaptations themselves, represented instantly recognizable yet highly malleable materials from which to base these films. Moreover, the notoriety of specific characters—most notably, Frankenstein’s Monster and Count Dracula—allowed Universal to convert these individual film releases into series, thus ensuring the longevity, ascent, and profitability of the horror genre.

* * *

Chapter Three, “Sound, Horror, and the Adaptation of Cultural Discourses at Universal Pictures; Part 2: The Poe Adaptations,” chronicles the development of the horror genre at Universal as it was inflected through a series of adaptations based loosely on the literary works and the biographical legend of Edgar Allan Poe, yet another discursive field that I refer to as the Poe discourse.

In late 1931 and early 1932, *Frankenstein* clearly had become an even bigger commercial success than *Dracula*, integrating dialogue and sound effects more seamlessly into the film narrative, and featuring more complex camera work—all of which belied the fact that the film was produced for a smaller production budget than its

predecessor. The studio's third horror release, *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932), issued the following year and also featuring *Dracula* star Bela Lugosi, cost even less to produce. *The Black Cat* (1934) and *The Raven* (1935), two "all-star" features starring Lugosi and Boris Karloff (who had gained instant fame as Frankenstein's Monster), included production budgets that were even more minuscule than their predecessors'.

Such are the benefits of genre production: as the studio's horror production unit cut costs by reusing sets and props, developing scripts quickly to match the conceits of the genre and more easily managing the technical demands of sound production, Universal was becoming widely known as the "master of horror" and its contracted stars famous (and more valuable) for the grisly characters they portrayed. Moreover, the public notoriety and the controversial subject matter of the adaptations—industry censors constantly battled Universal over the acceptability of images and sound effects in these films—enabled the filmmaking corporation to more easily secure theater bookings in the most lucrative urban markets, where the studio owned no theaters, had minimal visibility, and thus depended upon the demand for Universal horror and the cooperation of the oligopoly of majors to secure access. The increasing efficiency with which Universal adapted these cultural discourses to the horror genre assured a significant return on investment for each of its releases.

The demands of genre production not only fit the literary works by Poe into the narrative and visual conceits associated with horror; they also absorbed the author into the storylines and attached the extant meanings and cultural associations of the Universal horror genre to the Poe discourse. With each adaptation of Poe, the biographical legend

and Poe discourse became a more central element of the plot and themes and their counterparts in the original literary work receded in importance. This pattern culminated in *The Raven* (1935), where a brilliant physician, Dr. Richard Vollin (Lugosi), believes himself to be a spiritual descendent of the author—not because of his literary acumen, but because of the level of intelligence, the obsession with torture, and the history of romantic disappointment he believes he shares with the famous writer. Insisting that he is avenging the wrongs against both Poe and himself and carrying out the wishes of the author (which Vollin believes are communicated in the eponymous poem and other literary works), the psychotic physician attempts to carry out an elaborate revenge fantasy using torture devices he has meticulously reconstructed from descriptions contained in Poe short stories. As are the villains in all Universal horror films, Vollin is ultimately thwarted and the threat of violence he posed is eliminated, but *The Raven* nevertheless had a lasting effect on the cultural reputation of Poe, who was fashioned as a lovelorn, sadistic genius and as a result was ensconced as the master of horror. His literary works, which according to the film are riddled with scenes of betrayal and torture and, in a more harrowing possibility, have the potential of transforming a curious reader into a villain on the magnitude of Vollin. And the Poe discourse, which Universal guided in a manner that ascribed to its prevailing approach to film adaptation, met the current expectations of the horror genre, and implemented the corporate strategy that it had formulated, refined, and implemented in previous releases.

* * *

Chapter Four, “Efficiency and/in Film Adaptation at Warner Bros. Pictures,” demonstrates the manner in which strategy, in this case industrial efficiency, can influence all areas of a major filmmaking corporation’s policies and practices, including film adaptation. Beginning with a discussion of the development and widespread adoption of scientific management and efficiency throughout American culture in the first three decades of the twentieth century, Chapter Four goes on to explore its influence in the seemingly divergent fields of modernist literary culture and the Hollywood film industry. The 1930 novel *The Maltese Falcon*, written by Dashiell Hammett with the tenets of literary efficiency in mind, and Warner Bros.’ three adaptations of the source between 1931 and 1941 represents an extended episode of the film adaptation process, in which those seemingly exclusive precepts about the meaning and application of efficiency would meet.

Outlined in a series of papers by industrial engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor, scientific management found an audience not only in the industrial world but also, after the release of several notable books and essays arguing for the larger value of efficiency in all areas of life, in American popular culture. Within a few years, efficiency had become a buzzword with multiple connotations, ranging from strict self-discipline, to scientific determinism, to modern machine-age prosperity, to inhumane labor policies instituted by greedy industrialists. Even literary modernists incorporated the ideals of efficiency into their aesthetic practices. Poet and critic Ezra Pound proclaimed that the careful application of such principles offered a path to literary concision and stylistic innovation, and widely-known literary modernist writers such as Ernest Hemingway,

William Carlos Williams, and others put those tenets into practice. So too did Dashiell Hammett, known primarily for his short stories in pulp detective magazines such as *Black Mask* before he put literary efficiency into practice in *The Maltese Falcon*, his third novel. Hammett hoped this mode of formal and stylistic innovation would provide a path to commercial success and literary credibility, an elusive distinction bestowed to a scant few writers toiling in the mystery genre.

Warner Bros. Pictures, the major filmmaking corporation most committed to the policies of resource management and waste elimination associated with the efficiency movement, acquired the movie rights to *The Maltese Falcon* in June 1930 with a very different application of efficiency in mind. The four brothers—Harry, Sam, Abe, and Jack Warner—who ran the studio and its corporate headquarters believed in producing cheap films with lots of action, formulaic plots, and relevance to current events. Under Jack Warner’s leadership, Warner Bros. also achieved a temperament of efficiency that guided the decision-making of studio personnel, pervaded operations throughout the company (described as “the system” by production head Darryl Zanuck), and seeped into its studio style. That corporate strategy became even more important in the mid- and late-1920s, when Warner Bros. began purchasing regional theatre chains and achieved vertical integration. The suddenly larger and more complex company sought a way to distinguish itself from its major competitors, and so Warner Bros. invested heavily in sound production and exhibition technology. The niche market worked in one regard—the studio experienced a string of hits with talking pictures and had a head start on its

competitors when sound production and exhibition became the industry norm—but it also left Warner Bros. heavily in debt.

In response to this dire situation, Warner Bros. formalized its practices of resource management and waste elimination to an even greater degree in the early 1930s by, for example, cutting employee salaries and retooling many of its existing story materials in a practice known as recycling. *The Maltese Falcon*, already produced to modest success as an eponymous film adaptation in 1931, was one of the stories to which Warner Bros. studio writers and executives turned in order to execute this strategy. Earlier story summaries and scripts were recalled and new synopses commissioned in order to refashion *The Maltese Falcon* into a screwball comedy that could capitalize on the recent success of *The Thin Man* (1935), a comedic adaptation of another Hammett novel, produced at MGM. While this second film version of the literary work, *Satan Met A Lady* (1936), failed to garner critical praise or box office success, it allowed Warner Bros. to continue the policies of recycling and resource management at minimal risk. *Satan Met A Lady* cost much less to produce than *The Maltese Falcon* (1931) and exploited the value of Bette Davis, a top studio star who, at the time, was severely underpaid and thus a more attractive resource for studio executives to assign to as many productions as possible before her contract expired.⁴²

Warner Bros.' strategy of efficiency led the company to take up the story materials related to its previous adaptations of *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) in studio archives

⁴² *The Maltese Falcon* (1931) and *Satan Met A Lady* (1936), a romance mystery and screwball comedy, respectively, also contradicted the distinctive Warner Bros. studio style that emerged in the early 1930s and solidified by the middle of that decade.

(which I refer to as *Falcon* in this chapter) a third time in 1941, when studio writer John Huston requested that he direct a third adaptation. In his directorial debut, Huston wrote the script in a manner that fit studio style and kept production costs low; he also managed the production efficiently, completing the shoot early and under budget. *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) was deemed a success not only because of its positive critical reception and strong showing at the box office but also because it groomed a young director indoctrinated with the desired studio temperament and possessing the ability to execute Warner Bros. strategy, built the star value of yet another modestly paid contract actor, Humphrey Bogart, and raised the commercial appeal of *Falcon*, a studio-owned literary property. The company could exploit all of these achievements in its future exploitation of these resources (including subsequent film releases), and, true to its policy of maximum productivity and minimal costs, it did so with relish.

* * *

Chapter Five, “Brand-Name Literature: Selznick International Pictures, Prestige Marketing, and the Blockbuster Adaptation,” demonstrates how a filmmaking corporation’s industrial organization might encourage it to use film adaptation in order to build a brand identity and gain competitive advantages. Such were the goals of major independent Selznick International Pictures (SIP), which acquired and produced *Rebecca*, the 1940 adaptation of a best-selling novel by Daphne du Maurier, to distinguish itself as the unparalleled producer of spectacular, culturally significant films, rather than as some disinterested, invisible sponsor. As an independent studio lacking both distribution and exhibition capabilities, SIP depended heavily on the perceived quality of its products to

ensure favorable terms with theatre owners and distributors. The young company hoped to match the profitability, long-term viability, and public visibility of its vertically integrated counterparts by exclusively producing ‘prestige’ films, which usually used well-known actors, elaborate sets and costumes, and recognizable historical, social, or political storylines. In the process, the company would make itself indispensable to those major-owned exhibitors by ensuring that an SIP film not only guaranteed strong box office and kept theaters full; it also represented a “movie event” of the kind no other studios could consistently release.

SIP formulated an elaborate marketing campaign around *Rebecca* that sought to heighten consumer awareness of both the film adaptation and the company itself through newspaper serializations, radio adaptations, and diverse product tie-ins such as furniture, interior paints, and clothing. With the *Rebecca* line of women’s apparel, lingerie, and accessories released in department stores and on display in the film, SIP curiously encouraged readers and spectators to re-experience the story themselves by donning the tasteful clothing that the title character—who is constantly discussed but never directly encountered in the novel or film—“would have worn.” A corporation’s reading of texts, much like an individual’s, involves its own past, present, and future in interpretation and retelling, and as such, reveals in sometimes fractured and sometimes transparent ways what or who the reader was, is, and will be, and in each of the re-projections of *Rebecca*, the meaning and implications of the story and its characters shift and expand in a manner that coheres with the desired corporate image of Selznick International Pictures.

Even as SIP subtly modified *Rebecca* with its broad marketing campaign, the company publicly and privately professed a commitment to producing a “faithful” rendering of the novel. Despite such proclamations in press releases and corporate memoranda, SIP’s adaptation operated from more than one source text—Daphne DuMaurier’s 1938 novel and SIP’s own adaptation of *Gone With the Wind*, completed in 1939 and released just a few months prior to *Rebecca*. In adopting many of the visual, narrative, and marketing elements of its predecessor, *Rebecca* ensured a substantial audience (and thus profitability) while it used the lessons learned from *Gone With the Wind* to limit production inefficiencies and to capitalize on exploitation and tie-in opportunities (not available for the previous SIP film because of a financing arrangement with MGM). With these two films, SIP reinforced its brand identity—through lavish prestige motion pictures supported by intense publicity—for audiences and competitors, and demonstrated the broad measures an independent studio needed to take to gain a foothold in the classical Hollywood Studio system. Moreover, *Rebecca* (along with later films by David O. Selznick’s companies) demonstrates an early instance of how filmmaking corporations can present a prospective film adaptation to consumers through a marketing campaign that revises the meanings, critical value, popular appeal and cultural implications of the source text in a manner that reveals much about the interests of that company.

* * *

“Conclusion: Future Research,” the brief final chapter of this dissertation, addresses the potential application of my methodological framework to additional filmmaking

corporations operating during the Classical Hollywood Era. To present a broader picture of this period and to further document the influence of industrial positioning on corporate strategy and the various ways in which film adaptation is used to gain a competitive advantage and express a company's industrial, artistic, and cultural motives, I introduce the cases of major MGM—which in the late 1940s culled several film adaptations from works of literary modernism and presented them as self-conscious, pedantic “social problem films”—and minor Monogram—which in the mid- to late-1940s produced and released a cycle of film adaptations based on the popular detective character Charlie Chan.

The former example illustrates the methods by which MGM attempted to emphasize its continuing relevance to American culture in the late 1940s, when the power of the major studios was in jeopardy and the Classical Hollywood Era was in a state of decline. In response to eroding audience figures, competition from television, radio and other forms of entertainment, and a judicial decree that ordered the major, vertically integrated filmmaking corporations to divest themselves of theater holdings in order to break the monopoly they had held over the American film industry for over three decades, MGM—traditionally known for the multitude of marquee stars under contract and on display in its lavish, big budget productions—used film adaptations such as *Intruder in the Dust* (1949), based on a 1948 novel of the same name by William Faulkner, to release a cycle of social problem films that both modified the company's studio style and informed audiences, implicitly and explicitly, that the cinema was still the most vital site of commercial entertainment in America, and that major film studios like itself, rather than

independents or television and radio broadcasters, were the only producers capable of delivering that value on a consistent basis.

The latter example explores the means by which minor filmmaking corporations like Monogram adapted to their significant fiscal and industrial constraints through the use of film adaptation. In so doing, they were often able to exploit opportunities that other, larger filmmaking corporations could not. Such was the case when Monogram chose in the 1940s to produce films based on Charlie Chan, a character originally introduced in a series of popular novels by Earl Derr Biggers and then presented in a long cycle of films produced and released by Fox (and under its subsequent moniker Twentieth Century Fox) in the 1930s and early 1940s. As I'll explore in more detail in Chapter Six, the limited resources with which Monogram was forced to operate, its reputation for producing B-level pictures and its presence in rural markets, where many big-budget films took months to reach (or never screened), enabled the company to extract value from the Chan character in a manner that Twentieth Century Fox, with greater resources and clear competitive advantages over Monogram in other areas, could no longer sustain.

In conjunction with the primary case studies of this dissertation, these examples attest, on one hand, to the primacy of film adaptation to all filmmaking corporations of the Classical Hollywood Era and its sustained use throughout this period, and, on the other hand, to the distinct manner in which this practice was deployed by each company in accordance with its unique positioning, motives, and areas of expertise.

CHAPTER 2

*

Sound, Horror, and the Adaptation of Cultural Discourses at Universal Pictures;

Part 1: *Dracula* (1931) and *Frankenstein* (1931)

The meaning of a work (artistic, literary, philosophical, etc.) changes automatically with each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader. The effect is most immediate in the so-called classic works, which change constantly as the universe of coexistent works changes. –Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production”⁴³

*Whence did I come? What is my destination? –Victor Frankenstein’s Creature, *Frankenstein*⁴⁴*

Filmmaking corporations choose to adapt texts based on a broad set of factors, of which the cultural prestige and commercial appeal of the source are only two that must cohere with other economic and industrial considerations unique to the corporation’s own history, present, and future goals. Such a dynamic is visible in Universal Pictures’ use, development, production, and marketing of film adaptations in the early 1930s, when the company translated culturally significant texts into a series of sensationalistic, controversial, and commercially lucrative horror films upon which Universal built its reputation within and beyond the film industry.

This chapter addresses, first, the history of Universal from its beginnings to the late 1920s and early 1930s; second, the emergence and widespread adoption of synchronized

⁴³ Translated and reprinted in *The Field of Cultural Production*, 30-31.

production and amplified sound exhibition, or talking pictures, in the late 1920s and early 1930s; third, Universal Pictures' development and release of a series of film adaptations that spawned and elaborated the sound era horror genre. *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931) and three adaptations of literary works by Edgar Allan Poe, *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932), *The Black Cat* (1934) and *The Raven* (1935) demonstrate an evolving dependence upon elements beyond the (explicitly cited) literary source—including associated myths, earlier adaptations of the original literary work, the iconic status of their authors, characters and storylines, and the prevailing conditions at Universal and within the film industry at large. Two emerging industrial factors that influenced these films were the presence and increasing power of the Production Code Administration and the widespread adoption of synchronized filmmaking practices.

Acknowledging these industrial conditions in the film industry and within Universal is crucial to understanding and analyzing appropriately the strategies employed by Universal Pictures and the films it released during this period. As I contend throughout this dissertation, an analysis of film adaptation cannot ignore the past experiences, the present industrial, cultural and economic positioning, and the future aspirations of the filmmaking corporation, whose unique corporate strategy profoundly influences the acquisition of a literary source and then the adaptation, production, and release of a film adaptation.⁴⁵ In this spirit, this chapter simultaneously tracks the development and

⁴⁴ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1818 (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), 125.

⁴⁵ The “tissue of citations,” a concept Roland Barthes posits when arguing for the intertextual nature of literary texts, is especially vivid, explicitly and implicitly, in the case of film adaptation, which lays bare a lineage leading from source to adaptation while it offers a field from which to investigate broader questions in literary and film studies. Barthes, “Theory of the Text,” in, *Untying the Text: A Post-structuralist*

proliferation of the horror genre, which depended heavily upon pre-existing source materials to generate story materials, iconic characters, and publicity strategies.⁴⁶ The first entry in that cycle of horror films, *Dracula*, allowed Universal to distinguish a highly valuable class of literary properties: well-known and -received stories (in theatre, literature, and popular culture) that featured iconic, mysterious, and frightening primary characters. But the literary sources identified by Universal were more than just well known and culturally respectable, they were also in the public domain—i.e., their copyrights had expired and thus Universal was not required to pay acquisition fees. While several scholars have examined *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and other 1930s Universal horror films and noted that many were adaptations, few have observed that a high proportion of these films were adapted from public-domain sources.⁴⁷ Universal did not indiscriminately choose to adapt any and every public domain work; selection depended on a number of factors, most importantly the fact that the literary works were embedded within an immense cultural discourse that had accumulated around the text, its author, characters, and various iterations in numerous fields.

Reader, ed. Robert Young (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 31-47. In “Theory of the Text,” “The Death of the Author” and numerous other essays, Barthes denies the primary status of author, understood since the Romantic period as a figure who invents the work and holds the key to its true meaning.

⁴⁶ In *Hollywood Genres: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Holt, 1996), Thomas Schatz introduces these terms to describe the inception, development, and proliferation of film genres (34-36).

⁴⁷ To my knowledge, no one has investigated how these public domain source texts and their famous authors encouraged Universal to develop an industrially unique *mode* and *style* of adaptation that can be traced through the cultural status of the source texts, story development, casting, production, and promotion. Schatz notes Universal’s reliance on previously published materials in Chapter 6 of *The Genius of the System*, as does Douglas Gomery in “Economics of the Horror Film” (in *Horror Films: Current Research on Audience Preferences and Reactions*, ed. James B. Weaver, III and Ron Tamborini [Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996], 54-57).

In one way or another, these sources all had achieved an iconic status that contributed to a textual corpus that included but inevitably exceeded the bounds of the literary source (which upon its original publication may have originated but might also have continued and elaborated this cultural discourse). Chapter Two argues that the “vampire discourse”—rather than two explicitly credited sources, the widely published novel by Bram Stoker and a popular American theatrical adaptation—served as the source for the Universal film adaptation. The vampire discourse included those two versions of the well-known story of Count Dracula, but it also consisted of many other works from diverse fields, including folklore, literature, popular theatre, sociology, art and history, that addressed vampirism in one way or another throughout the preceding centuries. *Dracula* was a commercial success, which encouraged Universal to replicate and continuously refine the model of adaptation in subsequent releases within its larger goal of developing a profitable commercial film genre.

With *Frankenstein* (1931), the immediate follow-up to *Dracula*, Universal identified and then managed a much larger, more ubiquitous cultural discourse and implemented a broader corporate strategy by developing more efficient formula filmmaking practices and further distinguishing itself with the horror genre. The storylines, themes, characters, and authors associated with *Frankenstein* by the early 1930s represented a wildly diverse yet powerful “frankenstein discourse” that, along with Universal’s experience with *Dracula* and its evolving relationship with the Studio Relations Office (SRO), later renamed the Production Code Association, effectively constituted an expansive source

text that the company used to produce its 1931 film adaptation.⁴⁸ *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, two economically produced and profitable film adaptations, convinced the company to continue in the genre. Simultaneously, those films offered models for the set, costume, lighting and sound design, as well as narrative arc, character development, and cast and crew choices that would be adopted in subsequent horror releases. Thus, by its inception and elaboration of the genre, Universal had created a cultural discourse of its own, which influenced story development, casting, budgetary, and publicity decisions and placed considerable pressure on later entries in this cycle.⁴⁹ (Other factors guiding Universal's selection of source material were the appropriateness of theme, character, and narrative, through which the company could guide these sources and the already-flourishing discourses around them into a narrative formula, the horror genre.)

The use of such sources allowed Universal to distinguish itself within and outside the film industry, while achieving profitability at a time—i.e., the early Depression—when even the most established studios realized significant financial losses. Simultaneously,

⁴⁸ I assign a lower-case “f” to this term to emphasize the discursive shift from proper to common usage that occurred between the publication of the Mary Shelley novel in 1818 and the release of the Universal Pictures film adaptation in 1931. For further discussion, see the section below entitled “FRANKENSTEIN DISCOURSE.”

⁴⁹ As mentioned above, all of these sources bore enough similarities in plot and setting to allow Universal to incorporate them into its horror formula. Many of the novels and short stories Universal chose to adapt centered on Faustian scientists or intellectuals whose quest for knowledge and companionship lead them to conduct illegal experiments that challenged social norms and values. These protagonists' inevitable demise validated traditional morality as espoused by the Production Code enforced by the Hays Office censorship guidelines and explicitly criticized intellectual individualism. However, the source texts themselves focused on these themes or storylines to varying degrees; thus, the imperatives created by Universal's emerging style, signified not only by the stars and aesthetics of these films but also by the sources upon which they were based, led the studio to elaborate on these themes and characters in its films even if the source texts did not. Like other Universal horror films, *Murders in the Rue Morgue* featured an unstable scientist, played by burgeoning Universal “star” Bela Lugosi, whose controversial experiments in evolution, conducted in secret, prey on a small town and its residents. Eventually, the scientist is caught and punished and his experiment terminated before widespread chaos can erupt.

the company's selection of cultural discourses, which had accumulated a variety of meanings and applications and whose constituent literary works existed in the public domain, enabled a startling level of flexibility in the film adaptation process. This fact was especially important in the late-1920s and early-1930s, a period of dramatic technological and industrial change within the American film industry.

UNIVERSAL PICTURES, INC.

Universal founder Carl Laemmle's business ventures between 1906 and 1909 coincided with the formation of the nickelodeon era and the shift from mom-and-pop exhibitors and independent producers to regional chains and large-scale production associations. Laemmle soon began producing films, forming the Independent Motion Picture Company (IMPC) in 1909, in order to bypass the monopolistic efforts of the Motion Picture Patents Company. IMPC films, along with those of other independent producers, were shown at Laemmle's theatres, many of which were expanding to seat many more patrons. Already Laemmle had achieved a fledgling form of vertical integration, which allowed his company to prosper and expand. In 1913, Universal Pictures, Inc. was created when Laemmle partnered with Robert H. Cochrane, and the company united its production facilities at a new studio in north Hollywood in March of 1915.⁵⁰ The first feature-length film produced under the Universal moniker was *Traffic in Souls* (1913), a tremendous success that earned half a million dollars at the box office.

⁵⁰ See Schatz, *Genius of the System*, Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, and Clive Hirschhorn, *The Universal Story* (New York: Crown, 1983) for further discussion. Universal's cross-country relocation reflected two interdependent trends developing in the early teens and becoming more prevalent thereafter: the simultaneous nationalization of the movie business and the gradual consolidation of the film industry into the hands of a few powerful vertically integrated corporations. According to Neal Gabler in *An*

Rather than using this capital to convert to a full schedule of feature-length releases, Laemmle (an opponent of the star system in general and large contracts for acting talent in particular) chose to produce a limited number of features per year. Universal produced films that could be packaged and sold to exhibitors as programs usually consisting of a low budgeted feature and several one- and two-reel shorts, along with a few more ambitious productions each year.⁵¹ Those pre-packaged programs of entertainment could be placed at Universal-owned theatres, or sold easily to independent exhibitors. The decision to specialize in programmers proved to be an important executive decision that would influence the company and its strategy in the years ahead. Not only did this production focus indoctrinate studio employees with competence in a specific category of filmmaking, it also ensured that the company's public visibility would be confined to the second-tier and rural exhibition markets where Universal's cinemas and those owned by independent exhibitors were most concentrated. That is, Universal was competitive outside of the heavily populated urban areas that often featured the largest and most

Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood (New York: Doubleday, 1989), Universal was one of the last of the major film producers to relocate from New York to California (74). According to Douglas Gomery in *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), "In the period immediately after World War I, movie exhibition replaced big-time vaudeville as the mass entertainment form preferred by Americans" (36). In just over a decade, movies had become respectable and highly profitable. First-run movie theatres produced the most significant, sustained portion of that profit. Regional theatre chains expanded their cinemas or built lavish new ones, raised ticket prices, and devised ways to appeal to middle-class patrons. Gradually in the late teens and then more rapidly in the twenties and thirties, filmmaking corporations acquired those chains. Laemmle was one of the first movie businessmen in the nickelodeon era to understand the financial and logistical advantages gained from the control of production, distribution, and exhibition. In 1910s and early 1920s, before what Thomas Schatz calls "the age of vertical integration," Universal produced its own films, distributed them to domestic and international markets, and exhibited its product in many Universal-owned theatres.

⁵¹ In 1913 and after, Universal produced a significant number of one- and two-reel shorts, while its features were released under three separate production imprints—Red Feather (low budget programmers), Bluebird (mid-level budgets), and Jewel (big budget, prestige) (Hirschhorn, *The Universal Story*, 13).

profitable theaters, which would become even more valuable to filmmaking corporations and their viability in the ensuing years.

In 1920, Laemmle appointed Irving Thalberg, his 21-year-old former private secretary, as general manager in charge of production at Universal's Hollywood production facility. Thalberg hoped to raise the studio's visibility by producing a greater share of big-budget pictures and the studio's production schedule was gradually dotted with such vehicles, including the big-budget adaptation of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923), starring Lon Chaney. Thalberg was an adept production manager and during this brief period Universal was distinguishing itself with these lavish productions, most of which secured a profit for the company. However, Thalberg was still frustrated by the restraints of Laemmle's low-budget programming packages mandate.

Universal did not expand its theatre holdings or update its theatres in the 1920s, when other companies were acquiring those regional chains that controlled the most lucrative theatres, often enormous, ostentatious movie palaces in select urban areas. In fact, during this period, the company sold off many of the exhibition outlets it did own, threatening its ability to secure favorable exhibition deals at first-run movie house for its few A-level features. Instead, Universal opted to produce "full-service programming" for rural areas, or "outback" exhibitors.⁵² Laemmle also turned to the international markets, creating

⁵² According to Schatz, "Universal had all but written off the first-run market by 1920" (*Genius of the System*, 21). The company failed to capitalize on the growing commercial profitability available through theatre ownership, which could provide regular infusions of cash, and guaranteed exhibition outlets and publicity channels. Needing money to maintain debt payments and its regular production schedule, Universal began selling off its theatres in the 1920s. However, while those small-town exhibitors are often perceived as "outback" collectors of the least desirable motion picture product, they held numerous advantages over large chain outlets in metropolitan areas, as Gregory A. Waller outlines in his recent essay,

relationships with foreign exhibitors whose audiences were hungry for Universal's shorts and low-budget westerns.⁵³

Within a decade, Universal had shrunk from major to major-minor status, and so it was no surprise that in 1923 Irving Thalberg was lured away by Louis B. Mayer Productions (which merged to form MGM a year later).⁵⁴ Lon Chaney starred in another massive hit, *The Phantom of the Opera*, the next year, but he soon bolted to MGM as well. In the mid-1920s, Universal was left with few assets, an unclear production schedule, and no marquee stars to lure audiences to its films, which were seldom available in first-run markets anyway. Constant internal flux at Universal failed to solidify a permanent production policy, and the company rapidly lost money in the late 1920s due to poor management practices that threatened relationships with exhibitors and a lack of efficient, reliable production units that could turn out features on a regular basis.

"Imagining and Promoting the Small-Town Theater" (*Cinema Journal* 44, no. 3 [Spring 2005]: 3-19). For example, small-town theater owners had access to and an intimate understanding of the tastes of their clientele, as well as the ability to shift their exhibition schedules quickly. As Waller notes, many of those theaters "vigilantly heeded public opinion." On the other hand, outlets for the large chains were at the mercies of their corporate owners' booking strategies, and their larger capacities, while more lucrative at the box office, often made direct and regular contact with their customers difficult. Finally, Waller observes that many small-town theaters represented a community center, and, as a result of the personalized service they could offer, fostered a significant relationship with their patrons and the community at large. Rather than ignoring rural and independent theaters, the trade press valorized some of their practices and encouraged larger chains to integrate them at their outlets: "Through 1930-31, the [*Motion Picture Herald*] ran a number of news items, editorials, and feature stories that advised the managers of chain theaters to undertake the kind of civic outreach that had apparently proven so successful for the small independent owner-operator," Waller reports. Publix adopted such a strategy when it provided theater managers with lengthy descriptions of their respective communities in order to implement policies and local activities that could "win the 'respect of his community for his theatre,'" in a manner similar to independent managers (10-16). Such was the extremely personalized, but more volatile in terms of booking schedules, environment in which Universal programmers regularly played in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In these rural areas, loyalty was concentrated in the theater owner rather than in the products exhibited in the cinema. While Universal seemed to have a solid grasp on the tastes of this audience and solid relationships with local distributors, it was still at the mercy of audience response, which could be quickly gauged by the theater owner.

⁵³ Hirschhorn, *The Universal Story*, 13-14

The emergence of sound films, a boon for many Hollywood filmmaking corporations, only exacerbated the problems at Universal.

EMERGENCE OF SOUND FILMMAKING AND EXHIBITION⁵⁵

The late 1920's was a period of profit, innovation, and consolidation in the Hollywood studio system. Five filmmaking corporations—Paramount, Loew's-MGM, Fox, Warner Bros. and Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO)—acquired key regional theatre chains, thereby vertically integrating to control the means of producing, distributing, and exhibiting their product. This strategy reduced risk, quelled competition for the consumer's dollar, and insured greater revenues. The fact that these important exhibition outlets produced approximately 85 percent of all money taken in at domestic theatres only increased the power those five major companies exerted over the entire industry, and put major-minor (of which Universal had become one) and minor studios at a greater disadvantage, as they had minimal access to the most lucrative theatres—or, they were at the mercy of the owners of those theatres when negotiating contracts to exhibit their films—and an ever decreasing chance to produce films of comparable budgets and quality to those released regularly by the majors.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Hirschhorn, *The Universal Story*, 13-14.

⁵⁵ There is considerable debate about the events leading to, and the rationale behind many of the decisions involved in the conversion to sound. Douglas Gomery offers a brief but compelling analysis of the many published histories describing this period. Opposing the notion that the transition to sound was a chaotic story of heroes and villains, lucky breaks and long-shot gambles, Gomery presents it as one of careful, pragmatic decisions by companies intent on securing long-term profit and corporate viability. Gomery advocates an "invention, innovation, and diffusion" model, typical of the development and wide adoption of many technological changes in industrial environments, to understanding and retelling the events of this period (*The Coming of Sound*, xxii-xv, 1-6). John Izod adopts the same method in Chapter 7, "The Coming of Sound," of *Hollywood and the Box Office, 1895-1986* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

⁵⁶ Gomery, "Economics of the Horror Film," 55-56.

Synchronized sound films, or talking pictures, represented an opportunity for the film industry to further enhance its product for consumers, who had consistently expressed an interest in talking pictures throughout the 1910s and 1920s. While various companies had toyed with the technology over the past two decades, the major studios were hesitant to be the first to switch from silent to synchronized sound filmmaking and amplified exhibition for fear of alienating audiences they had worked carefully to attract with silent film programming.⁵⁷ Just as daunting were the substantial modifications in technical and creative expertise that would accompany talking pictures and, finally, the large amount of capital required to convert soundstages and theaters to talking picture production and exhibition.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ See Izod, 74-75, for further discussion.

⁵⁸ According to David Bordwell, "With the arrival of sound, the cost per film increased sharply; microphones dictated camera placement; sound technology altered camera design; the blimp made cameras larger and heavier, displaced the viewfinder ..., and made follow-focus next to impossible." Bordwell, "Camera Movement: the coming of sound and the classical Hollywood style," 1977, Reprinted in *The Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul Kerr (London: Routledge, 1986), 149. Bordwell also notes that sound-equipped camera apparatuses were up to 300 pounds heavier than cameras of the silent period. This added bulk and weight required new tripods, an additional direct cost of conversion to sound production (151). Also see Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926-1931* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), 114-115; and Izod, 75, 80-81.

In January 1929, *The New York Times* devoted a lengthy feature story to a description of the vast expertise required to ensure an appropriate synchronized production environment on the soundstage. David Lasser, "The New Art of the Talking Picture," *New York Times*, 13 Jan 1929b, Reprinted in *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. Gene Brown (New York: Times Books, 1983). Lasser also discusses the painstaking process of converting soundstages to accommodate synchronized production, which involved new all-concrete construction or the reinforcement of walls with a variety of noise-dampening materials. Subsequent mathematical studies discerned the acoustic properties of the room, which in turn influenced the placement of microphones and actors.

Adapting to these new technical mandates would be difficult and might alter film aesthetics, style, and narratives (possibly for the worse). In addition, talking pictures would need more dialogue, which would mandate more time and expense in the scriptwriting and the story development process. Donald Crafton cites several contemporary executives, creative talent, and industry observers who believed that the dialogue requirements of sound film would radically alter film for the worse by reducing it to a poor reproduction of live theatre (*The Talkies*, 166-168). For a contemporary analysis of the new challenges faced by screenwriters, "Making Cinema Dialogue," 7 July 1929, *New York Times*, Reprinted in *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. Gene Brown (New York: Times Books, 1983).

Despite these restrictions, the major filmmaking corporations were in a strong position for what seemed like an inevitable transition to talking picture production and exhibition. All had significant levels of capital, credit resources, and theatre holdings to produce and exhibit sound films. On the other hand, major-minor (like Universal) and minor studios owned few or no theatres and very little capital with which to invest in sound technology. Moreover, if the non-majors were to produce sound films, they would have no guarantee that those films would be distributed to sound-equipped theatres, most of which would be in first-run markets, especially in the early part of the sound era when converting to amplified exhibition was most expensive.

Warner Bros. (at the time a minor studio with major aspirations) laid the groundwork to distinguish itself by releasing talking pictures. Intending to build relationships with exhibitors that could not afford the live orchestras needed for many silent films, Warner Bros. formed an agreement with Western Electric, a subsidiary of American Telegraph

Acting technique would need to change as well. Now-audible dialogue would need to be clearly enunciated by actors. Line readings and voice inflection would indicate emotion in sound films to a greater degree, where facial expressions and body movement once did in silent films. See Johannes Riis, "Naturalist and Classical Styles in Early Sound Film Acting" (*Cinema Journal* 43, no. 3 [Spring 2004]: 3-17), for an analysis of prevalent acting techniques, most of which were transposed from the theatre, in the early sound era. See footnote 124 for a further description of Riis' argument in this article. "Casting Audible Pictures," *New York Times*, 9 June 1929, Reprinted in *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. Gene Brown (New York: Times Books, 1983), describes the increasingly rigorous casting process for talking pictures, which required considerably more time and attention to detail than the casting of the silents.

Finally, switching to sound production and exhibition demanded large initial investments. For example, average initial investment to install sound in each theatre was between \$8,000 and \$15,000 in 1927, while production facilities would need to be completely sound-proofed to ensure quality. According to Janet Wasko in *Movies and Money: Financing the American Film Industry* (Norwood, NJ: APLEX Publishing, 1982), these costs decreased to between \$5,000 and \$12,000 per theater in 1928, and \$5,000 to \$7,000 in 1929 (49). Izod estimates that installation of Western Electric's Vitaphone equipment cost between \$15,000 and \$25,000, depending on the seating capacity, acoustics, and size of the theater. In addition, use of Western Electric equipment also included royalty fees based on number of screenings and theater seating capacity (76).

and Telephone Company (AT&T), in the spring of 1926 for the purpose of releasing films with synchronized music but without much audible speech.⁵⁹ To reduce risk and quell competition amongst Western Electric and Radio Corporation of America (RCA), which aimed to charge significant royalties to provide synchronization equipment and technical support, five filmmaking corporations—Paramount, MGM, RKO, Fox, and Warner Bros.—formed a committee to determine the best and most cost-effective means by which they could adopt synchronized production and exhibition.⁶⁰ The popularity of *The Jazz Singer* (1927), which included synchronized music and some dialogue, encouraged Warner Bros. that sound film was not merely a novelty; it could appeal in all markets. The next year, the dazzling success of Warner Bros.’ *The Singing Fool* (1928) convinced other studios of the profits available in all-talking features.⁶¹ Studio executives publicly promised that sound films would complement silent films as a novelty, but by 1930 “talkies” had become the dominant form of production and

⁵⁹ Warner Bros. immediate success with sound film allowed it to acquire several theatre chains in 1929, which increased its assets from \$5 million to \$230 million, vertically integrate, and ascend to major status. Izod, 75-76.

⁶⁰ According to Crafton, by forming this committee,

These companies made a calculated decision to exchange monopoly power ... for defined competition. ... Because of this productive competition... [film sound] helped unify the industry and standardize the product. As a result, the talkies changed from a special package of goods and services to one common trait shared by all movies. (*The Talkies*, 164)

Gomery agrees that the wide institution of sound production and exhibition further solidified the majors’ dominance over the domestic and international film markets (“Economics of the Horror Film,” 51).

⁶¹ Gomery, in *The Coming of Sound*, is careful to point out that *The Singing Fool*—rather than its more famous predecessor, *The Jazz Singer*—was the early sound film that finally convinced the major filmmaking corporations of the commercial promise and feasibility of talking pictures. Fox, another minor at the time, followed Warner into sound film with talking newsreels, which utilized the company’s Movietone sound-on-film technology (also developed by AT&T). RCA’s synchronization lost out to Vitaphone; the company responded by forming Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO), a vertically integrated filmmaking enterprise of its own that used the RCA Photophone synchronization system.

exhibition.⁶² Soon the transformation, which had seemed doubtful just a year later, was complete. “By the end of 1930 not one of the Hollywood studios was producing a silent feature film of any kind.”⁶³

UNIVERSAL PICTURES, SPAWNING HORROR IN THE SOUND ERA

In the mid- to late-1920s, Universal was an important supplier of cinematic entertainment to rural markets, one of the last vestiges of silent film exhibition. Therefore, it should be no wonder that the company was one of the last among major and major-minor filmmaking corporations to convert to an all-talking picture production schedule. As Universal’s theatre holdings dwindled, the company’s programmers could

⁶² Between 1928 and 1930, studios employed several strategies to “hedge” the commercial and public relations risk involved with transitioning completely to sound film. Among these were sound remakes of silent film hits, dual versions (i.e., silent and talking) of current films, and “part-talkies” (see Crafton, 169-179, for a description of the varying levels of success of these strategies). Critics also expressed skepticism about the commercial viability of talkies and doubted the studios’ financial ability to execute a complete conversion to sound filmmaking and exhibition (see for example Albert Warner, “Sound vs. Silence,” 10 Feb 1929, *New York Times*, Reprinted in *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. Gene Brown [New York: Times Books, 1983]).

Fox was the first studio to announce an all-talking picture production schedule, and it invested \$15,000,000 in research and development, conversion and installation by March 1929 and hired 200 Broadway actors to cast in its films. “Fox in Talkies Only; Signs 200 Show Folk,” *New York Times*, 25 March 1929, Reprinted in *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. Gene Brown (New York: Times Books, 1983). For another contemporary description of the experiences of Broadway actors’ migration to Hollywood and their experiences there, see Duncan Aikman, “Broadway Finds a Home in Hollywood,” *New York Times*, Sept 1929, Reprinted in *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. Gene Brown (New York: Times Books, 1983). Later in 1929, more than two-thirds of all domestic theaters were equipped for sound, with the remaining holdouts scheduled to convert by the end of the year. Waller, 4. Waller quotes statistics offered by *Exhibitors-Trade World*, which seemed particularly enthused about the “tidy” progression from the silent to the sound era and, as a result, willing overlooked the complexity, difficulty, divisiveness of this transformation.

⁶³ Izod, 79-80. However, not all theatres had been converted to sound exhibition and dual versions were still in exhibition. In fact, a silent version of *Dracula* was released along with its talkie counterpart. By January 1931, *The New York Times* announced that, based on audiences’ wide exposure to talkies and the constant improvements in production and exhibition standards, “The novelty of talking pictures has worn off—people are no longer interested just because they talk” (H.G. Knox, “Audiences and Sound,” *New York Times*, 4 Jan 1931, Reprinted in *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. Gene Brown [New York: Times Books, 1983]). The following week, the newspaper published a long feature that declared sound film acting “a new art,” worthy of analysis alongside theatrical performances (Otis Skinner, “Acting

be easily sold to independent exhibitors, usually in non-first run venues that lacked the cash required to install sound exhibition equipment. While this was a practical operation for the company during this period, the imminent full transition to sound meant that the long-term viability of such a strategy would limit the filmmaking corporation's profitability and, as a result, permanently relegate Universal to the ranks of the major-minors or, even worse, perhaps force them to descend to minor status, where its presence in first-run exhibition markets would disappear. A further diminishment of Universal's level of vertical integration would also require an alteration of its corporate strategy, which in turn might create, at best, uncertainty within the studio and corporate offices and, at worst, internal reorganization, and put the future of the filmmaking corporation in doubt.

Always suspicious of the star system and strongly preferring the stability of the programmer policy, Carl Laemmle may have been comfortable with such a series of events. However, in 1928, Laemmle ceded control of production at Universal to his twenty-one year old son Carl "Junior" Laemmle, who, like Irving Thalberg before him, preferred big budget, prestige pictures that would fit in better at the increasingly lavish movie palaces in first-run markets. With a new executive in power, Universal's corporate strategy shifted quickly to accommodate Junior's tastes. The production schedule was modified accordingly. A few of Junior Laemmle's early "Jewel" productions were successful, including two adaptations, of the popular musical *Broadway*

for the New Sound Film," *New York Times*, 11 Jan 1931, Reprinted in The New York Times *Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. Gene Brown [New York: Times Books, 1983]).

and the war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the latter a \$1,400,000 production that turned a significant profit, won the 1929-1930 Academy Award for Best Picture, and began to make a name for Universal beyond their usual programmer fare.

However, the company's industrial positioning and its level of vertical integration, the underpinning for the successful implementation of any corporate strategy, could not sustain the broad policy adopted under Junior's leadership. According to Schatz,

"Pictures like *Broadway* and *All Quiet* ... were acts of cinematic and institutional bad faith, hardly the basis for a consistent studio operation or a reliable market strategy."⁶⁴

Universal held neither the cash reserves nor the right theatres to continue producing and exhibiting such films.⁶⁵ Universal could not afford to produce such films with enough

regularity to reinforce the reputation it desired. Its competitors were signing top acting talent and using a regular production and releasing schedule to develop them into stars;

Universal was intermittently releasing a commercially or critically successful film to first-run theatres, while simultaneously shipping mid- and low-budget programs to less

lucrative theatres outside the first-run markets.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Junior Laemmle

understood that the company needed to develop an identity and gain a foothold in the major markets, but for that to happen Universal required a steady stream of cash.

Without many assets, creditors were not clamoring to supply capital, and marquee acting talent was not eager to sign on with Universal, nearly invisible in the top markets. So,

⁶⁴ Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 87.

⁶⁵ Under Junior Laemmle, Universal acquired several hundred theatres, the majority of which were outside of major urban areas and fit the programming policy the company had been practicing throughout the 1920s.

instead of continuing to risk Universal's solvency with big-budget productions, Junior cut the schedule of features in half, monitored budgets (none of which would exceed \$1 million), and sought to develop an image for Universal in formula pictures.⁶⁷

Despite all of the company's problems, 1930 and 1931 were watershed years for Universal. The company actually used its various industrial obstacles to produce a genre of pictures that could create an identifiable style that consumers could attach to Universal. Steady emphasis on genre filmmaking enabled Universal to achieve a high level of production efficiency; in turn, increasing expertise in those genres allowed the company to produce and release a stream of films that could nearly guarantee return on investment, infuse cash, and realize financial stability. The effects of the Depression would begin to hit the entire industry in 1931, when declining domestic box office receipts were exacerbated by interest payments from the heavy credit undertaken when converting to sound in the previous years.⁶⁸ Combined profits of the top-eight filmmaking corporations (of which Universal was one) fell nearly 90 percent from 1930

⁶⁶ As Hirschhorn notes, Carl Laemmle countered his limitations in the domestic market by forming relationships with foreign exhibitors and distributing to international markets.

⁶⁷ Schatz and Gomery disagree on the importance and value of Junior Laemmle's leadership at Universal during this period. In *Genius*, Schatz contends that Junior wisely tightened Universal's production schedule and budgetary standards, allowing the company to weather the financial perils of the depression and establish a focus on genre filmmaking that would persist through the next two decades. Gomery argues that Junior guided the company haphazardly and without foresight: "The inexperienced 21-year-old 'Junior' Laemmle turned Universal from a marginally profitable operation into a gigantic corporate loser, willing to try anything" ("Economics of the Horror Film," 55). These competing points of view emerge from differing perspectives on the goals of Hollywood studios. Schatz equates success to the successful development and execution of studio style, which allows filmmaking corporations to distinguish themselves and creates the opportunity for long-term cultural visibility and commercial sustainability. Gomery allows for the importance of studio style, but asserts explicitly that the sole goal of executives at filmmaking corporations is "to maximize the long run profits of their companies" (*The Coming of Sound*, xi-xii).

levels.⁶⁹ The same year that its competitors absorbed these commercial setbacks, Universal reported a profit of \$400,000.⁷⁰ That mild achievement indicates the immediate success Universal experienced with its efforts to develop expertise and competitive advantage in formulae filmmaking and releasing. While it continued with a few reliable genre categories, including gangster and women's pictures, a relatively new genre, horror, accounted for a significant degree of Universal's success and its optimism as it entered the lean years of the Depression.

In the early sound era, horror was an undeveloped genre. As Douglas Gomery observes, in the silent era "no Hollywood company could establish the horror film as a consistently popular genre."⁷¹ Universal certainly had experience in the macabre and gothic, especially during Lon Chaney's tenure, but *Hunchback* and *Phantom* appeared in the silent era and might be attributed to the appeal of Chaney, as Universal believed when it publicized those films on the basis of Chaney and their melodramatic elements rather than on their horrific or gruesome features. Other silent films that might now be classified under horror, such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and *Nosferatu* (1922), were

⁶⁸ See Chapter 3, "The Introduction of Sound and Financial Control (1927-1939)," of Wasko, *Movies and Money*, for a description of the heavy borrowing by studios to fund sound conversion, which increased the control levied by financial institutions over the film industry.

⁶⁹ Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 87.

⁷⁰ In 1930, when sound films were the dominant form of feature film and filmmaking corporations had regularized their synchronization production methods, Paramount led all studios with a profit of \$25 million, followed by Loew's, Warner Bros., Fox, and RKO (which was completing its first year of producing films). In 1930, Universal reported assets of \$17.2 million, which steadily declined to \$10.6 million in 1936 as the company sold off those few theatres it acquired in the mid-1920s. While the rest of the film industry was enjoying a windfall from the increasing efficiency of synchronized production, the improving narrative complexity and production values of sound film, and the eagerness of audiences to consume talking pictures, Universal lost \$2.2 million in 1930. Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 147-148.

⁷¹ Gomery, "Economics of the Horror Film," 55.

publicized as foreign “art” films. Numerous silent films contained elements commonly associated with the horror genre, but contemporary producers and reviewers did not classify them as such because, simply, the genre of horror did not exist in popular critical or advertising parlance, or in commercial filmmaking practices during this period. (Roy Kinnard entitles his filmography, *Horror in Silent Films*, for these very reasons.⁷²)

Frankenstein, discussed below, represents the explicit formation of a distinct horror genre, when Universal and other studios exploited, and reviewers and industry censors recognized characteristic elements in this developing genre. However, *Dracula* (1931) is the first entry in Universal’s horror cycle. That film, and Universal’s experience with it, *Dracula* introduced conceits and practices that which all of Universal’s horror films would either imitate or from which they would gradually depart.⁷³ The first and most important of those parameters was the use of the literary or theatrical source—i.e., the

⁷² According to Roy Kinnard in *Horror in Silent Films: A Filmography, 1896-1929* (Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland & Co., 1995), “Before *Frankenstein*, in the silent era, there were no horror movies as the public thinks of them today, although there were certainly many films containing terrifying scenes and horrific plot elements” (1). Schatz argues that Universal “had been cultivating the [horror] genre for years” prior to the release of *Dracula* and the quick succession of horror films that would follow. That period of generic “cultivation” described by Schatz consisted of Universal’s current financial difficulties, lack of recognizable acting talent, and strong relationships with European directors, who drew audiences in foreign markets and gave attached a recognizable aesthetic style (German expressionism) and frequent thematic concerns (gothic horror) to Universal releases in the United States. Prior to *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, many of Universal’s releases demonstrated the company’s “[fascination] with the horrific” (*Genius of the System*, 87-89). I agree with Schatz in his assertion that the development of the early sound era horror genre depended on multiple aspects of Universal’s corporate history.

⁷³ *Dracula* thus represented a portion of what Schatz describes as the “experimental stage” common to all burgeoning film genres. Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, 38. In Schatz’s typology of generic classification, horror is a genre of “Order,” in which a primary individual is the “focus of dramatic conflicts within a setting of contested space.” The common resolution in these narratives (or, the “distinct problem-solving strategy”) is that the “hero” fails to be integrated fully into the contested space and “instead maintains his individuality” (34-35). These features are clearly typical of horror films’ monstrous anti-hero protagonists, outsiders who threaten not only the stability and safety of modern society, but also propriety and rationality. Several factors that were integrated into, or were important to, the Universal horror film cycle included low key lighting, which saved time and money on set design and lighting; short running times,

horror film as adaptation. While Universal had to abandon producing lavish productions like *Broadway* and *All Quiet*, an important aspect of those two films (along with others produced in the early 1920s, such as *Hunchback*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and others) continued when Universal decreased the volume and scale of its feature releases; a significant portion of the company's feature formula pictures would be adaptations of popular literary and theatrical properties. This approach contradicted the formula strategy somewhat. After all, formulae are achieved by the repetition of aesthetic and narrative standards established in previous films, while pre-existing literary properties are acquired and adapted because they possess certain unique qualities and built-in audiences that make them worth acquisition fees and story development costs.

Why fit a literary source into a formula? As my analysis of Universal's early horror features will suggest, the company rationalized its choice and treatment of literary sources in three ways: (1) the majority of the literary sources it selected for adaptation into the horror genre were in the public domain, and thus did not require acquisition fees and were immune from copyright infringement; (2) the allegedly unique aspects of the literary source were exploited not only in story development, but also in publicity and in negotiating censorship guidelines; (3) those literary and theatrical properties Universal chose to adapt featured extremely well-known storylines, characters and authors, whose iconic status, rather than limiting the company's ability to fit them within the formula requirements, allowed for a significant degree of flexibility (which their public domain

which fit into Universal's double feature programming strategy; and European actors, directors and story settings, which played well to foreign audiences and added a hint of exoticism for domestic audiences.

status did not restrict) in story development, publicity, and future iterations in subsequent films. Each of these three interdependent strategies toward adaptation in the horror genre became more prevalent and efficiently executed throughout the 1930s.

VAMPIRE DISCOURSE

A tale of a mysterious, bloodthirsty, 500-year-old Transylvanian Count was one such story ripe for adaptation, especially malleable due to its massive international popularity and steady presence in popular culture over previous centuries. The vampire myth emerged from Central European legends that told of afflicted, bloodthirsty humans living in distant Eastern and Northern Europe lands. Occasionally, these stories were attached to real people, living as vampires and in compact with Satan. The narrative and the specific features of vampires coalesced upon the publication and dissemination of works arguing for the possibility of vampirism—including Herbert Mayo’s *On Truths Contained in Popular Superstition* (1732)—and a series of novels—*The Vampyre: a Tale* (1819), *Varney the Vampire* (1847), and *Carmilla* (1872). *The Vampyre* and *Carmilla* gained moderate readerships in England and may have influenced the most realistic and successful entry in the developing vampire discourse, *Dracula* (1897).⁷⁴

By enabling the living dead vampire figure, now named Count Dracula (reportedly after the notorious Prince Vlad ‘The Impaler’ Dracula of Transylvania), to pass

⁷⁴ In the “Introduction” to a 1983 edition of *Dracula* (London: Oxford World’s Classics, 1983) A.N. Wilson describes several scenes, settings, and characters in *The Vampyre* and *Carmilla* in order to raise the possibility that Stoker was directly influenced by these sources when researching and composing *Dracula*. Wilson also claims that Stoker’s characterization of the title character bears striking similarities to a 1485 Lubeck print portrait of Prince Vlad V of Wallachia (viii-xiii). A brief background of *The Vampyre* and its author are included, and its complete text is reprinted, in “Appendix C” of Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1818 (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), 233-55.

undetected within modern London society, by attributing sophisticated characteristics to the title character, and by unfolding the narrative in first-person diary entry form, author Bram Stoker raised the level of realism (and by extension the emotional effectiveness) in the vampire discourse to an all-time high.⁷⁵ The Stoker novel sold heavily in England, and in the United States after its release there by Doubleday in 1899.⁷⁶ A subsequent Doubleday edition of the novel edition was reprinted 17 times between 1902 and 1928, after which the company released the novel under various imprints—including W.R. Caldwell, Grosset & Dunlap, Doubleday-Doran and Garden City—between 1928 and 1930. (In 1901 and 1903, Doubleday released a limited edition version of the novel under its prestigious Wessel imprint, signifying the actual or perceived valence of the novel in high/middlebrow literary culture.) In 1928, the Grosset & Dunlap imprint released a version featuring a dust jacket with an advertisement for the American theatrical adaptation. This edition was reprinted three times until 1931, when the imprint released a photoplay version featuring stills from the Universal film adaptation of *Dracula*.⁷⁷ Based

⁷⁵ Reviewers immediately noted the affective power of the novel. According to London's *Daily Mail*, *Dracula* was "weird, ... powerful, ... horrible, ... and gloomy." A reviewer from *The Pall-Mall Gazette* wrote, "It is horrid and creepy to the last degree. It also excellent, and one of the best things in the supernatural line" (Quoted in Phillip J. Riley and George Turner, "Production Background," in *Dracula: The Original 1931 Shooting Script* [Absecon, NJ: MagicImage Filmbooks, 1990], 20, 25).

⁷⁶ A.N. Wilson cites several reasons for the popularity of the Stoker novel and for the continued prevalence and plausibility of the *Dracula* myth: "Much could doubtless be made of the fact that this widespread horror of the living dead ... began at a phase when, for the first time in Christian history, there was widespread doubt about the real likelihood of a Resurrection of the Body." Wilson observes that *Dracula* was released at a time when the crematorium become widely used to dispose of dead bodies, and cites G.K. Chesterton's assertion that the novel could read as an allegory, in which, "Dracula represents the predator ruling class sucking the life-blood out of the masses" (xvii-xix).

⁷⁷ *Dracula* was released (in both complete and abridged versions) and reprinted 13 times in England during this same span. Transylvanian Society of *Dracula*, U.S. and Italian Chapters, "Section I. English-Language Publications of *Dracula*," in *All Things Dracula: A Bibliography of Editions, Reprints, Adaptations, and Translations of Dracula*, Compiled by J. Gordon Melton, undated, <<http://www.cesnur.org/2003/dracula/I.htm>> (12 Nov 2002). Also see Robert Eighteen-Bisang and J.

on its various editions and frequently released reprintings, the Stoker novel held a steady presence in American literary and popular culture during the first three decades of the 20th century.

After centuries of circulation in the domains of folklore, sociology, and sensationalist literary fiction, vampires entered the theatre and then the silent cinema soon after the 1897 initial publication of *Dracula*. Bram Stoker produced a theatrical adaptation weeks after publication of his novel, although little is known about its success. Several silent film features and shorts were released in the first three decades of the twentieth century (including an alleged Russian adaptation released around 1920; *Drakula* [1922], produced and released in Hungary but currently unavailable; and *Nosferatu* [1922], directed by F.W. Murnau and now considered a classic example of German Expressionism). Hamilton Deane wrote and produced another theatrical adaptation of *Dracula*, which was an immediate success when it opened in England in 1924. The “modernized retelling” toured the country for three years before American producer Horace Liveright acquired the rights to the play, hired John Balderston to streamline the plot and polish dialogue for American audiences, and premiered *Dracula* on Broadway in 1927. As in England, the play was a hit, running for 261 performances before going on a national tour in spring 1928.⁷⁸

Gordon Melton, *Dracula: A Century of Editions, Adaptations and Translations. Part One: English Language Editions* (Transylvanian Society of Dracula, 1998), and Norbert Spehner, *Dracula: Opus 300* (Ashem Fictions, 1996).

⁷⁸ Michael Brunas, John Brunas and Tom Weaver, *Universal Horrors: The Studio's Classic Films, 1931-1946* (Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland & Co., 1990), 9. Also see Riley and Turner, 26-27.

All of these iterations of vampires produced a vampire discourse, which now featured an internationally recognizable icon, Count Dracula, whose characteristics and biography, as related by Stoker, were just plausible enough to allow for the frightful possibility that he and other living dead just might exist and pass undetected in modern society. Such a notion was vehemently supported by Reverend Montague Summers in *The Vampire in Europe* (1929), which chronicled the continuous presence of vampires in England and the rest of Europe, told of their preferred victims, and explained how they remained anonymous within society.

DRACULA: STORY DEVELOPMENT AND PRE-PRODUCTION

Universal first considered adapting *Dracula* in 1915 and then more seriously in 1927, when Carl Laemmle ordered studio readers to review, summarize, and assess the film possibilities of the Stoker novel and the British play. Those reviews, submitted in June 1927, were less than positive. The readers predicted a hypothetical film adaptation would be “revolting,” “an insult to ... its audience,” “unpleasant,” “horrible,” and “[repulsive] and [nauseating].” In addition, several readers believed that a silent film version of *Dracula*, if it closely followed its sources, could never pass censorship boards without being altered radically.⁷⁹ While several of those reviews also cited the promise of *Dracula*, for its gruesome imagery, mysterious characters, and sensationalistic plot elements, Carl Laemmle decided against developing and releasing such a grisly film to his rural exhibitors.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ These reader reports are reprinted in Riley and Turner, 30.

⁸⁰ On young producer David Selznick’s suggestion, Paramount also considered adapting *Dracula*.

Two years later, Junior Laemmle saw things differently. The American theatrical adaptation of *Dracula* had completed a nine-month run on Broadway and an 18-month nationwide tour. The play's success proved that audiences could not only stomach the morbid and disturbing features of the story, they were drawn to them. The broad implementation of synchronized filmmaking and exhibition made an adaptation of the play or the novel plausible. Content standards had also loosened considerably as censorship agencies simultaneously lost power and struggled to develop consistent guidelines for talking pictures. Junior was sure *Dracula* could be a hit in the cinema and distinguish Universal, and so, despite the objections of his father's advisors, the young production chief penciled *Dracula* into the 1930 production schedule as a big budget release.

In June 1930, prior to securing the rights to the Stoker novel or either of the recent theatrical versions, Laemmle assigned Fritz Stephani to summarize and tease out cinematic angles of the novel. Stephani's 32-page treatment opens by establishing the domestic bliss between Jonathan Harker and his fiancée Mina Seward just before the former is summoned to Hungary. Stephani comments that including this scene, rather than opening with the approach to Count Dracula's estate, would establish a location to be used later in the story, introduce a romantic subplot into the film, and provide a realistic point of contrast to the mysterious and "improbable" characters, setting, and events that would follow. The opening scene also establishes a light, even humorous tone, which is continued at intervals in various characters and scenarios throughout the treatment; Stephani thought comic relief essential: "This will afford some relief to the

intense and dramatic atmosphere of the story,” he explains in expository comments. The Stephani treatment also suggests the important effect that sound might play in a film adaptation of *Dracula*. The “howling of wolves” and “voices, coming from nowhere” induce “terror” in characters, while the absence of sound—described at one point as “a dead quietness”—produces the “heavy atmosphere” that predominates in the film.⁸¹

Unlike the 1927 reviews offered by the Universal readers, the 1930 treatment identified and exploited a litany of generic elements available in (or that could embellished from) the source material, including romance, mystery, comedy, melodrama, the thriller, and adventure. Stephani’s emphasis on the presence and absence of sound at various moments in the narrative, in combination with their visual accompaniment, suggests the affective potential of these technical elements to provoke terror, or horror.

The literary rights to *Dracula* should have been under copyright protection when Universal decided to produce the first talking picture presentation of the popular story; in fact, it was in the public domain. Stoker had failed to secure international copyright when he did not deposit two copies of *Dracula* at the United States copyright office. However, this was not discovered until 1933, three years after Universal paid, on 22 August 1930, \$40,000 for the rights to the novel and to the theatrical adaptation credited to Deane and Balderston.⁸² Days prior, Junior had assigned Louis Bromfield to write a

⁸¹ The entire June 1930 treatment by Fritz Stephani is reprinted in Riley and Turner, 35-40.

⁸² While Brunas et al contend that Universal paid \$40,000 for “the rights to the book and the play” (9), Schatz reports that Universal acquired only the play because of a copyright debate that arose in Germany when producers of *Nosferatu* claimed their film was based on a “popular myth” rather than on the Stoker novel. The producers of *Nosferatu* lost their court case, which compelled Universal to avoid the possibility of a lawsuit by paying acquisition fees for the American theatrical adaptation, protected under its own copyright (*Genius of the System*, 89-90). Riley and Turner state that the acquisition of *Dracula* included

treatment in screenplay form. The Bromfield script, based primarily on the Stoker novel, opens in “the wildest part of the Transylvanian mountains,” establishes a dark, unsettling tone immediately and features little dialogue. Screenwriter Dudley Murphy was then appointed to work with Bromfield on a re-write that might incorporate more elements of the popular theatrical version and enable Universal to keep the production within budget estimates (and fit the running time into a double feature releasing format, then common at the theatres at which most Universal films played).⁸³ Junior reviewed the completed screenplay and suggested extensive cuts that might conserve production costs and enhance the pace of the story. According to Riley and Turner, in their “Production Background” of the film, Junior’s suggestions offer evidence of “the financial pressures of the New York office.” Another screenplay was ordered and begun in September 1930; this final draft, by Tod Browning and Garrett Fort, followed the theatrical version of *Dracula* even more closely.⁸⁴ Later critics have identified *Dracula*’s similarity to its theatrical source, rather than to the Stoker novel, as a fault of the film.⁸⁵ However,

rights to another theatrical adaptation by Charles Morrel (42). Whatever the correct details of the source acquisition, Universal freely used Stoker’s name, cited the film’s relationship to both the novel and play, and cross-promoted the Stoker novel when promoting its film adaptation.

⁸³ According to Gomery, double features were a relatively common attraction at 1920s neighborhood theatres and became more common in 1930 and thereafter (*Shared Pleasures*, 77).

⁸⁴ Riley and Turner, 55-56. Riley and Turner reprint the August 1930 Bromfield script, 42-54

⁸⁵ For example, Roy Huss remarks,

Tod Browning’s *Dracula* is a film of missed opportunities, a piece of work that is shackled by the producer’s decision to capitalize upon the success of Balderston and Deane’s stage adaptation of Stoker’s classic novel rather than to exploit the greater cinematic suggestiveness of the novel itself. ... [Browning] seemed inclined to accept the exigencies of the stage in shaping this film. ... He seems to regard the frame of his camera’s viewfinder merely as a proscenium arch to be filled in with performers and background decor, hardly ever as a creative instrument. ... When the camera moves, it is merely to pursue, like a spotlight, the movements of the actors, not to ‘create’ the special cinematic continuum of space and time in which ‘reality’ could be heightened.

evidence indicates that this decision was pragmatic and gradually achieved: a result of, (1) the prevailing economic considerations at Universal (adapting a playscript into a screenplay would require less time, labor, and money); (2) the contemporary demands of sound filmmaking practice, which required heavy, generally immobile cameras (producing a perspective similar to the proscenium effect experienced by a theatergoer) and a larger volume of dialogue and stage directions (much of which could be directly transposed from plays); (3) the amorphous nature of the vampire discourse, of which the Stoker novel and Balderston play were merely two entries; (4) the recent popularity of the theatrical version throughout America and England; and, (5) and the eventual composition of the cast.

With various scripts in development, casting actors and gathering a production crew started immediately. The details of Count Dracula's exploits varied with each iteration of the legend; however, the character was a highly recognizable icon on an international scale, so casting the title role was crucial to the quality, realism, and box office potential of a film adaptation. After an extensive search, Bela Lugosi, who starred in the American

("Vampire's Progress: *Dracula* from Novel to Film via Broadway," in *Focus on The Horror Film*, ed. Huss and T.J. Ross [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972], 50-51)

Huss assigns authorship of *Dracula* to at least three agents: director Browning, playwrights Deane and Balderston the credited screenwriter Garret Fort, and the "producers" of the film (whether that be producers Browning, Junior Laemmle and E.M. Asher, or Universal in general). By the logic employed in Huss' comments, Bram Stoker shares some authorial responsibility for the film as well. This is a confusing series of assignments and accusations, which frequently characterizes auteur-inspired criticism, lacking historical context. *Dracula's* close similarity to the theatrical adaptation is partially due to Universal's pragmatic decision to acquire the rights to the American play and to employ playwright Balderston in developing the script. In addition, the film's 'staginess' can be attributed to the period in which it was produced, rather than to any specific authors. In the early sound era, the volume of dialogue required for talking picture scripts and the technical difficulty and expense of camera movement compelled studios to acquire and adapt theatrical scripts. In "Camera Movement," David Bordwell explains the technical limitations on camera operation and cinematography in the early 1930s and describes the re-emergence of camera

stage version of *Dracula*, was hired to reprise his role in Universal's adaptation. Carl Laemmle had originally wanted Lon Chaney to star in the film, but the actor's unexpected death from throat cancer forced Universal to take a chance on Lugosi, who had very limited experience in film and no star appeal in the cinema. Lugosi also had a heavy Hungarian accent, which posed a possible dilemma for the intelligibility of his dialogue. On the other hand, he had just completed a successful theatrical run, in which he was widely praised for his portrayal of the Count. Lugosi's accent and sharp features might lend an air of menace, exoticism, and authenticity to the character. Moreover, he was intimately familiar with the role and the theatrical script, much of which would be used in the film version. Lugosi could work quickly, efficiently, and cheaply (he would be a relative bargain at \$500 per week).⁸⁶ Running out of time before Universal hoped to begin shooting the film, Laemmle and his producers decided to fill out the cast with actors already familiar with the story; Edward Van Sloan, Dwight Frye and Herbert Bunston, all featured in the American theatrical version of *Dracula*, were hired to play Professor Van Helsing, Renfield, and Dr. Jack Seward, respectively.

Tod Browning, known for his collaborations with Chaney in a series of macabre MGM films in the mid- to late-1920s, was hired to direct *Dracula*. Browning had lobbied to secure the rights to *Dracula* in 1927, but Irving Thalberg, then head-of-

movement in the mid-1930s. Therefore, *Dracula* could indeed be called cinematic by the prevailing standards and practices of the period.

⁸⁶ For an extended discussion of the casting of the title character for *Dracula*, see John T. Soister, *Of Gods and Monsters: A Critical Guide to Universal Studios' Science Fiction, Horror, and Mystery Films, 1929-1939* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), 81-89. According to Soister (and Riley and Turner), Universal considered several actors, including Conrad Veigt and Ian Keith, and the aforementioned Chaney, before

production at MGM, did not perceive the story's potential as a silent film and believed talking pictures would never emerge as a feasible exhibition format, so he refused. Because of his interest in *Dracula*, his experience with macabre themes, and his prior relationship with Universal, Browning was an appealing choice to maintain the budget and quality of the A-level project. Moreover, Browning had directed Lugosi in MGM's *The Thirteenth Chair* (1929). Karl Freund, a recent Universal signee from Germany who would later direct several features for the company, was hired as cinematographer. From his work on many German abstract expressionist films of the 1910s and 1920s, including *The Golem* (1920), *The Last Laugh* (1924) and *Metropolis* (1927), Freund was experienced in composing compelling, unsettling shots despite budget restrictions and time constraints. Charles D. Hall was appointed to design and oversee construction of sets, also important facets of the film's ability to convey tone and to seem authentic. Hall, who worked in several previous Universal features, was well acquainted with the company's stock of props and sets, some of which could be re-used and modified from existing sets. The re-use of stock sets, props, and wardrobe was and is common in filmmaking practice, and the recycling of existing sets was of particular concern in Universal's adaptation of *Dracula*: Stephani's initial treatment indicates that the scenes in the Hungarian village that Renfield stops in on his way to Transylvania could use Universal's pre-existing "Swiss Village Set"; and, in his notes on the Bromfield-Murphy

casting Lugosi, who actively lobbied for the role by appealing to the trade press and encouraging a letter writing campaign.

script, Junior requests clarification regarding scenes that would require set construction or modification of existing sets in stock.

DRACULA: PRODUCTION⁸⁷

With primary crew assembled and casting complete, production on *Dracula* began on September 29, 1930, just over a month after Universal acquired the rights to the story sources and only days after Lugosi and most of the other principal actors were cast. Shooting was scheduled for 36 days and. Universal announced in trade papers that *Dracula* would be an “almost \$400,000” production. Ultimately, a more modest budget of \$355,050 was set for the film, an above average level according to the company’s production schedule from 1930 to 1932 (which featured 34 feature productions with an average budget of \$237,000 and shooting schedule of 26 days).⁸⁸ Shooting extended to 42 days, concluding on November 15, 1930. Despite extending beyond the estimated shooting schedule, *Dracula* still fell nearly \$14,000 under budget. (Post-production completed on December 9, and *Dracula* finally finished production after two additional days of shooting: for “added scenes” on December 13 and retakes in “*Dracula*’s

⁸⁷ For production histories of *Dracula*, see Riley and Turner, “Production Background” (19-72), Schatz, *Genius of the System* (87-91), Soister, *Of Gods and Monsters* (81-89), and Brunas et al, *Universal Horrors* (7-13). Internal records during this period at Universal are scarce; as a result, the production histories provided by Riley and Turner, Schatz, Soister, and Brunas et al are necessarily limited in detail and scope. My description of the production is brief, and these authors should be consulted for further elaboration on the production of *Dracula*.

⁸⁸ According to these figures, *Dracula* was an important entry in Universal’s slate of feature releases. Public budget announcement quoted in Riley and Turner, 42. Budget figures available in “Budget: 109-1 Tod Browning: ‘DRACULA,’” Universal Pictures Collection, University of Southern California, Special Collections Library (hereafter referred to as Universal Collection). According to this document, pre-production costs for *Dracula* totaled just over \$71,000, which represented about 20 percent of the total budget for the film. I would like to thank Ned Comstock for his generosity in sharing the archive and in locating documents related to the Universal films I will be discussing throughout this chapter. Production schedule and average budgets for 1930-1932 are in Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 86.

chamber” and “Seward’s office” on January 2.⁸⁹ According to Riley and Turner, *Dracula* eventually exceeded its production budget by nearly \$90,000.⁹⁰)

At that time, a cut of *Dracula* was ready for review by the Studio Relations Office (SRO), filmmaking corporations’ self-imposed censorship board (later called the Production Code Association). Established in 1922 as the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America under the leadership of Postmaster General Will Hays, the MPPDA functioned as a public relations intermediary between Hollywood filmmaking corporations and various public, religious, and governmental institutions. The movie moguls that created the MPPDA hoped that Hays and his functionaries could protect their films against censorship complaints and the bad press that went along with it, which in turn might secure the market value of their companies.⁹¹ Hays immediately instituted a Committee on Public Relations that would monitor “public demands and moral standards” and in June 1924 introduced a “Formula” that all member studios would use when selecting story materials and producing them for the screen.⁹² Even with the pacification offered by the MPPDA, local censors became even stricter in their demands

⁸⁹ “Budget: 109-1 Tod Browning: ‘DRACULA,’” Universal Collection.

⁹⁰ According to Riley and Turner, this figure included all costs except “exploitation and talent” (62).

⁹¹ According to Richard Maltby, the primary role of the MPPDA was to appease federal legislators in order to quell the constant threat of antitrust legislation against the increasingly monopolistic practices of the largest filmmaking corporations. Meanwhile, the MPPDA fostered “friendly” relationships with the various “fraternal, educational, and religious organizations” that had been critical of Hollywood (“To Prevent the Prevalent Type of Book,” 83).

⁹² The Formula focused on the selection of source materials and held MPPDA member studios to “exercise every possible care that only books and plays of the right type are used for screen presentation.” Quoted in Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code* (New York: Anchor, 1990), 5. With these guidelines and the support of a permanent reviewing office, the MPPDA represented a clearinghouse for the films under development by Hollywood studios and liaison between the film industry and the censors and other observers that decried the influence of movies.

for cuts to objectionable content. (At the same time, studios were struggling with the heavy costs required to incorporate these demands into their films.) To help filmmaking corporations anticipate problems with censors, in 1927 the MPPDA distilled the most frequent objections of censors into a list of “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” that producers could use to guide the content of their films. Largely a public relations ploy, the new guidelines were generally ignored by Hollywood studios, which bristled at the increasing interference from the New York-based Hays office.⁹³

In April 1930, amid threats of federal censorship, the “do’s and don’ts” were elaborated and further synthesized into *A Code to Maintain Social and Community Values in the Production of Silent, Synchronized and Talking Motion Pictures*, a document that listed specific content guidelines and, as a way of rationalizing those guidelines, defined the role of motion picture entertainment in contemporary society.⁹⁴ As its title suggests, this newly devised Production Code represented a consolidation of the standards by which the MPPDA would review film content. Simultaneously, adoption of the Code shifted the SRO from a guarantor of Hollywood’s public image to an arbiter of both story development and production for all films released by studios belonging to the association that funded the office. Faced with a perfect storm of possible government regulation, sharp declines in attendance, and (for both these reasons) the loss of Wall Street backing, the member studios approved the Code in February 1930. Hollywood’s new moral piety was made public in March 1930.

⁹³ In 1929, only twenty percent of all Hollywood films were sent through the MPPDA for review. Leff and Simmons, 7-8.

It was in this context that Universal forwarded a script of *Dracula* to the SRO in September 1930. An examination of the interactions between Universal and the SRO reveal several important steps in the story development, post-production, and publicity process, as well as the means by which Universal and the SRO helped to formulate and adopt several foundational features of the horror genre.⁹⁵ For the SRO, the horror films of the early 1930s challenged the tenets of the recently drafted Production Code and forced the SRO not only to redefine its role in relation to scripts and film texts containing questionable subject matter, but also to articulate a set of clear descriptive markers for burgeoning genres, in this case “horror.” (These developments germinate in the review proceedings for *Dracula* and flourish in the SRO’s review of subsequent Universal films.) While Universal produced *Dracula* and other films that would form the basis of the horror genre, the SRO played a crucial role in identifying some of the most critical elements of the genre, including the affective force of audible dialogue and sound effects and those films’ continuous appeals to realism (especially in their diegeses and marketing campaigns). The SRO’s evolving standards for acceptable content, its definition of a “family picture” suitable film for general audience and its understanding of the effects of films on that audience, coincided with the development of the horror genre. In addition, the SRO would influence the manner in which Universal presented literary sources and their authors in film adaptations.

⁹⁴ Complete text of the Code may be found at the Arts Reformation Web site, <<http://www.artsreformation.com/a001/hays-code.html>>.

⁹⁵ In my discussion of the correspondence between Universal and the SRO regarding *Dracula*, I necessarily backtrack in the chronology of events I have presented thus far. For example, while I have discussed

While the success and proliferation in the early 1930s of “sex pictures” created a public relations dilemma for the SRO, those problems were compounded by the simultaneous emergence of the as-yet unnamed horror genre, with grotesque imagery, supernatural themes, and (an as-yet-unnoticed phenomenon) jarring, provocative sound design.⁹⁶ The SRO’s increasingly rigorous review process and stringent guidelines regarding content were the indirect result of those Universal horror films, which prompted several government and religious observers, as well as many at-large citizens, to complain of the deleterious and dangerous effects of the horror genre and to demand a more strict policy regarding film content. The review process for *Dracula* proves both that producers were taking their new moral guidelines lightly and that the SRO was impotent to enforce the Code. Due to the reception of *Dracula* and other contemporary films featuring objectionable content and themes (mostly on moral and religious grounds), the SRO became more powerful and its policies more stringent, and in response Universal and other studios formulated strategies for circumventing and responding to objections by the SRO and other United States and international censorship boards.

Rather than immediately identifying and then acting quickly to remove the objectionable qualities of horror films, the SRO *gradually* recognized their similarities in

acquisition and casting, in the discussion of the SRO that follows I will once again cite decisions made prior to casting, such as story development. I apologize for any confusion.

⁹⁶ According to SRO memos, reports, and correspondence, among these films were Universal’s *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, as well as MGM’s *Freaks* (1932) and Paramount’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931). According to historical account of the Production Code provided by Leff and Simmons, the formulation of the Code in 1930 and its elaboration and institution as a mandate in 1934 was in large part the result of the increase in sexual content and reference in a number of films during this period, particularly in the wildly popular Mae West vehicles *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), *I’m No Angel* (1933), and *Belle of the Nineties* (1934). In the early thirties, producers buffered themselves against criticism with heavy doses of euphemism, innuendo, and casts of “old-line Hollywood names” (17-32).

content and themes. The SRO responded in this way for a simple reason: despite previous attempts to improve the public image of Hollywood, employees and executives at the organization did not anticipate that institutional observers or consumers would be offended, provoked, or disturbed by such themes, images, and sounds. In fact, the process that led to the suppression of elements of these films required the SRO, first, to identify the visual, auditory, and narrative features that were objectionable; then, to group a set of films under this rubric; and finally, to name that newly identified category and to levy its authority to influence the content and presentation of those films it saw as falling within that category. Through this screening process and a series of confrontations and compromises with Universal and other studios, the SRO had a large part in formulating the horror genre in the 1930s and beyond. Likewise, the horror genre had a significant effect on the SRO's ability to position itself as a binding arbiter in the Hollywood studio system.

Months prior to acquiring the rights to *Dracula*, Universal initiated the SRO review process in June of 1930 by sending a letter to Studio Relations executive Colonel Jason Joy announcing its intentions to produce the film and offering copies of the American theatrical script and the 1897 novel to SRO reviewers.⁹⁷ According to associate producer E.M. Asher, Universal hoped to elicit “censorship angles” on both texts, since they planned to adapt freely from both sources. Most notable about the script review process for *Dracula* is the lack of SRO opposition or censorship demands to any specific content

⁹⁷ “Letter: E.M. Asher to Jason Joy,” 26 June 1930, Production Code Administration File, Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library (hereafter referred to as PCA File), File: “DRACULA (UNIVERSAL, 1931).”

or themes. This indicates both the SRO's impotence as a regulatory institution during this time and its inability to identify objectionable elements in contemporary film scripts. After receiving copies of the play and novel, as well as drafts of *Dracula's* screenplay over the next three months, Joy reported to Laemmle, Jr. that he found nothing objectionable in the developing screenplay.⁹⁸ A lengthy, "final script synopsis" written in October 1930 by SRO employee B.N. describes *Dracula* as a "tale of horror and mystery," intermittently relieved by a romantic side-plot.⁹⁹ Whereas B.N. does indeed identify horrific elements of *Dracula* in the six-page script synopsis, these features provide exoticism, sensationalism and mystery, adding to the entertainment appeal of the famous story. By all accounts present in these files, various employees of the SRO shared B.N.'s opinions and found little to criticize in the numerous script drafts of *Dracula* exchanged between Universal and the SRO in the summer and fall of 1930. (Joy's only advice for revision emerged from commercial sensibilities: he suggested that derogatory references to Dutchmen and the "Napoleans and Mussolinis" of Europe might rankle the more stringent international censorship boards and jeopardize foreign box office, which was important to Universal.¹⁰⁰)

The SRO did not oblige Universal to make specific cuts to its script for *Dracula*, but it did begin to articulate the impending film's qualities and possible generic category; these included mystery, romance, thriller, and "horror," a term attached to *Dracula* not by

⁹⁸ "Letter: Jason Joy to Carl Laemmle, Jr.," 10 Sept 1930, PCA File, File: "DRACULA (UNIVERSAL, 1931)." See Brunas et al for further discussion of story development and script drafts in September 1930 (9-10).

⁹⁹ "Synopsis of Script (final)," 1 Oct 1930, PCA File, File: "DRACULA (UNIVERSAL, 1931)."

Universal but by the SRO. While B.N. had not clearly designated horror as a generic category, the reviewer had begun to articulate the elements of the genre—sensational imagery, exotic settings, for example. However, the SRO had not yet determined that these elements were offensive and needed to be suppressed, tempered, or eliminated. Just as Universal would realize the opportunity available through the genre during the production of *Dracula* and following its release, the SRO would develop the ability to distinguish the possible negative influence of horror in the latter stages of its review process for that film; it would recognize the generic parameters for the genre and produce mechanisms to contain horror only after the release of *Dracula*.

Universal moved quickly on production of *Dracula* and had a cut of the film ready for SRO reviewers by January 1931. Still, the SRO found only seemingly inconsequential details to criticize. A “Code report and story synopsis” of the film by reviewer James Fischer concludes, “The picture satisfies the requirements of the Code and contains nothing to which the censors could reasonably object.” Regarding the depraved, bloodthirsty eponymous character, Fischer predicts, “Dracula is not really a human being so he cannot conceivably cause any trouble.” Fischer ends his report by categorizing *Dracula* as a “family picture.”¹⁰¹ Any objections Fischer might be able to formulate seem to be defused by the film’s fictional subject matter, an impression encouraged by the improbable nature of the story and its foreign locale. The SRO focused on the fantastic qualities of the story and title character, but Universal hoped to attract audiences

¹⁰⁰ “Letter: Jason Joy to Carl Laemmle, Jr.,” 13 Sept 1930, PCA File, File: “DRACULA (UNIVERSAL, 1931).”

¹⁰¹ “Code Report and Story Synopsis,” 14 Jan 1931, PCA File, File: “DRACULA (UNIVERSAL, 1931).”

based on familiarity with the vampire discourse of fiction and non-fiction, plays and films, and their belief in the existence and real danger of vampires.¹⁰²

While SRO employees express few reservations about the *Dracula* script and feature film, SRO junior executive Lamar Trotti does lodge a mild complaint against the film's trailer.¹⁰³ Trotti finds, in his words, "nothing reasonably censorable" in the trailer, but he adds that as a cinema patron he would avoid what promised to be such a "gruesome" picture, citing as evidence one line by a primary female character: "The Dracula opened a vein in his arm and made me drink his blood."¹⁰⁴ Here is the first and only objection to *Dracula*. While this mild grievance is just that, it would form the basis of additional objections lodged by the SRO against subsequent Universal films and the horror genre in general. First, the "censorable" materials in the trailer, a line of dialogue that vividly describes a gruesome act, involves a relatively recent phenomenon that the SRO struggled to identify and address during this period—the level of realism achieved in sound film and the effects this technical innovation might have on the viewer, whether those effects are produced by dialogue, ambient sound, or specific combinations of words and images. Once again, in his comment, Trotti cannot explain why the line of dialogue is problematic, but he knows it would dissuade him from attending the film. As Fritz Stephani recognized when composing his early treatment of *Dracula*, the sound-image relationship would be an important affective component of the sound era horror film.

¹⁰² Riley and Turner, 19.

¹⁰³ While the original 1931 trailer is unavailable today, it is "suggested" in the *Dracula* pressbook. The vague summary provided there claims the trailer will describe the characteristics and background of Count Dracula, mention the international popularity of the story and its various theatrical adaptation, and promise unprecedented "thrills" for the spectator.

Second, Trotti's observations demonstrate a cognitive gap between his desire to patronize *Dracula* and his recognition of the same impulse in a general audience. That gap would gradually close after the release of *Dracula*, when in its review of *Frankenstein* and later Universal horror films the SRO would recognize its tastes and preferences as identical to those of the general public, and it would have the power to mandate that films be adapted to SRO preferences. However, while the SRO identified possible objectionable features in the *Dracula* script, trailer, and feature film, those elements did not seem particularly offensive to the individual reviewers, who still seemed to consider themselves advocates of the studios rather than more objective guarantors of the public interest indicated by their adherence to the edicts of the Code. For these reasons, the SRO review process for *Dracula* was in many ways a formality; however, it nonetheless formed the basis for future interactions between the two entities, which would become increasingly combative regarding several important elements of the sound era horror genre and Universal's adaptation strategy.

DRACULA: THE PRESSBOOK

With Universal's Dracula and Frankenstein in 1931 a distinctive national mythography and commodity are born simultaneously. – Frank McConnell, "Rough Beasts Slouching"¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ "Trailer Synopsis and Report," 28 Jan 1931, PCA File, File: "DRACULA (UNIVERSAL, 1931)."

¹⁰⁵ Frank McConnell, "Rough Beasts Slouching" ([1970] Reprinted in *Focus on The Horror Film*, ed. Roy Huss and T.J. Ross [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972], 26. As I hope to make clear in this chapter, McConnell's provocative claim is both right and wrong. Universal's *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* are commodities, but so too are other iterations of those texts throughout their respective histories within the vampire discourse and "frankenstein discourse." Instead of birthing the phenomenon identified by McConnell, they merely guide and continue it.

Dracula (1931) is just one entry in the extensive, malleable, long running vampire discourse; Universal's publicity for the film exemplifies precisely how the company hoped to position its film and itself within and in relation to that canon. For *Dracula*, the source texts were numerous and, to a varying degree, included all of the entries in the vampire discourse; Universal could refer to any of them in publicizing its film adaptation. The pressbook Universal distributed to exhibitors prior to the release of *Dracula*, indicates the strong name recognition of *Dracula* and vampirism, articulates the generic categorization Universal hoped to attach to its film, and reveals the strategies through which the company hoped to attach levels of realism to the film, vampirism, and the conditions of exhibition. The pressbook also shows how Universal aggressively highlighted the sensational and frightening aspects of the film, while it simultaneously sought to inject the impression of non-fiction into, if not the film itself, then the existence of vampires and in turn the conditions of exhibition. The company had limited access to first-run theaters, where it hoped to secure engagements for *Dracula*; however, the aura it hoped to produce would be created and conveyed at the site of consumption, the movie house. Without direct control over those cinemas, the pressbook for the film, which was distributed to theater owners in an attempt to secure an engagement for and to advise on publicizing the film, was vital to communicating Universal's intentions for exhibiting the film.

Page four of the fourteen-page pressbook features an explicit set of instructions for the exhibitor hoping to attract audiences. The insert, titled "WHAT TO PLAY UP," consists of four points and concludes with a personal message (asking for ideas and

feedback from exhibitors) from Joe Weil, Universal's New York "Director of Exploitation." According to Weil, exhibitors should promote the "TITLE," "CAST," "DIRECTOR," and "THEME" associated with the film. Two of these exploitation tactics, the TITLE and the THEME, reveal the manner through which Universal exploited Dracula's relationship to the Stoker novel, the various theatrical adaptations and the vampire discourse, as well as the rhetorical appeals the company used to highlight the generic appeal and elements of realism available in the vampire discourse.

In story development, *Dracula* generally followed the script, sets, and stage directions of the theatrical adaptation, but publicity more often mentioned the film's connection to the popular novel, rather than the theatrical sources, in promotional posters. The poster reproduced on the front of the pressbook mentions the Stoker novel—"from the famous novel and play by Bram Stoker"—in small font across the bottom line of the sheet. This slight placement is in stark contrast to other larger-font text featured prominently at the top, "CARL LAEMMLE presents The VAMPIRE THRILLER!", and near the bottom, "The story of the strangest passion the world has ever known." These lines, especially "The VAMPIRE THRILLER" and "known," suggest a higher level of awareness with the vampirism and the vampire discourse, than with the name Stoker or other details of the novel or play (with the exception of the title character of course). This relationship is consistent with other posters and lobby cards reprinted in the pressbook—most mention Bram Stoker, but none do so prominently. On the other hand, the Stoker novel receives mention much more frequently than the play upon which *Dracula* was directly based.

The pressbook includes a two third-page section, on page two, that encourages exhibitors to aggressively cross-promote the novel in various tie-up campaigns. These descriptions of the book and its appeal do not cite the literary quality of *Dracula*, nor do they attempt to instill middlebrow or highbrow appeal into the film adaptation through its literary lineage, as many filmmaking corporations attempt to do in promoting their adaptations. Instead, they signify the desire to trade on the popular appeal of the novel. For instance, the popularity of the novel is immediately announced in the section's bold heading—"The book is one of the world's greatest sellers – Tie it up to the picture! Reach that ready-made audience."¹⁰⁶ This approach signifies the cultural authority attached to the novel at the time and the generic strategies employed by Universal for its film adaptation. In explaining the appeal of either the literary source or the related film adaptation, that account inevitably collapses the meanings and cultural values associated with both texts. For example, the pressbook encourages exhibitors to copy and distribute bookmarks that customers can use when reading *Dracula* or other "mystery stories." On the bookmark, carefully chosen adjectives used to describe *Dracula*, such as "thrilling," "weird," "breathtaking" and "wild," push the consumer toward a specific interpretation and generic classification of the Stoker novel, which may or may not be represented in the novel or in previous iterations of the vampire discourse. The important point is that these adjectives collapse the interpretative distinctions and differences between the novel and film adaptation.

¹⁰⁶ Based on the intentions of all filmmaking corporations to use the pressbook as a means of persuading exhibitors of the commercial viability of a specific film, such an announcement should be expected, as

So too do several ideas Universal hoped exhibitors would use to promote the book and film simultaneously. Among these are numerous publicity events that Universal hoped exhibitors might adopt: creating a “giant book” for lobby display by enlarging the dust jacket or a still larger version that can be mounted to a truck and driven around town on the back of the truck; tearing out the pages from the book that depict scenes featured in production stills released for the film and then posting both together in the theater lobby; “reading [*Dracula*] over the air”; and, weeks before the film’s release, loaning out several copies of the novel to patrons (as a library would) before offering them as prizes when the film opens. More interesting is the manner by which these strategies describe the themes and appeal of the novel and how they (intentionally and unintentionally, literally and symbolically) conflate the novel and film adaptation. After constructing a large version of the book, installing it on a truck and touring it around town, an exhibitor could insert posters for the movie into the book in the place of the enlarged pages or dress the theatre’s designated “ballyhoo man” as Count Dracula, hide him inside the book, and have him emerge suddenly to frighten onlookers. In both of these suggestions, adaptation is figuratively dramatized. The book is positioned as a site through which the film adaptation directly springs forth. (As we know, the adaptation process was much more complex and difficult, and the book held a less direct relationship to the 1931 film adaptation of the same name.) This promotion converts the novel into a prop, existing only to confer prestige and introductory matter that can enable the film adaptation to live.

should the unverifiable claim, “over ½ million copies sold,” which is featured above a picture of the book on the same page.

As it is driven around town, the blown-up Stoker novel in fact disguises the experience and meaning of *Dracula*, which, these promotions promise, only the film adaptation can convey.

That promise is continued in the suggested radio recitation of *Dracula*, which according to the pressbook should feature “eerie sound effects” that might include “a wind effect, flapping of wings, [and] strangled screams” while the reader recites only the most “thrilling, ... action packed excerpts.” Again, the experience of consuming the Stoker novel merges with the Universal film adaptation. Sound enacts the collapse of meaning and effect between the two texts. The novel is selectively presented (and thus represented) in the radio reading. The pressbook suggests that only the most exciting, frightening scenes be recited, which the background sound effects will undoubtedly heighten. Both the scene selection and the aural accompaniment heavily edit the narrative of the Stoker novel in order to convey the appeals—mystery, romance, the macabre, a mix of realism and the supernatural—of the film adaptation. As in Fritz Stephani’s treatment and in the early Bromfield script, sound (both in spoken narration and dialogue and in sound effects) is the vehicle through which that meaning, effect, and generic classification can be communicated.

Lamar Trotti’s comments about the *Dracula* trailer conflict with the earlier observation by the SRO reviewer B.N., who stated that the film would be suitable for a general audience because it lacks a basis in realism. In fact, Trotti’s impression of the trailer indicates one of the appeals that Universal used to publicize the film, the possible truth of the vampire myth. According to Riley and Turner, “What made *Dracula* different

was that the audience was expected to accept the villain as a genuine vampire and not another crook in disguise.”¹⁰⁷ The SRO did immediately recognize such a possibility, but several promotional strategies featured in the pressbook support the contention that the truth of the *Dracula* story, and vampirism in general, formed part of the film’s appeal. The basis in realism begins with the film’s tagline, featured on nearly every poster for *Dracula*—“The strangest passion the world has ever known”—which suggests the audience’s acquaintance with the *Dracula* narrative and vampire myth and the possible truth (suggested by “knowledge”) of both. The *Dracula* pressbook suggests numerous exploitation tactics, many of which reiterated the goal of the film’s trailer—creating realism by implicating spectators into the *Dracula* narrative and myth. For example, ad copy (suggested for use as a “newspaper teaser ad”) attempts to instill anticipation and fear through an appeal to realism:

BEWARE!

Be on guard for One who roams the night!
Lock and Bolt the doors and windows!
Investigate all strange noises!
Be on guard against the woman in white!
Wolfbane will make you immune form danger!
Get set for “*Dracula*,” the vampire mystery thriller!¹⁰⁸

The ad copy announces the impending release of a specific film while it argues that vampires are already a real danger to the prospective audience member. Page five of the pressbook includes several publicity stunts that elaborate on the abstraction of myth and realism that had gained the vampire discourse notoriety throughout its long history.

¹⁰⁷ Riley and Turner, 19.

¹⁰⁸ *Dracula* pressbook, PB4. Reprinted in *Dracula: The Original 1931 Shooting Script* (Absecon, NJ: MagicImage Filmbooks, 1990), PB1-PB14.

Exhibitors could oversee a newspaper essay contest asking the question, “Do vampires really exist?” Even more ambitious is a campaign that sends letters addressing this notion to local physicians, who by attending the film or entertaining the possibility might build interest in the film and lend credence to the existence of vampires. Even the suggestion that the theater’s “ballyhoo man” dress in vampire costume and “walk around the streets” or emerge from an enlarged replica of the novel personifies the creatures and by so doing lends credence to the titillating possibility that vampires may actually exist and hope to prey on humankind.

Evan as the cross-promotional tactics collapse the meaning and function of the Stoker novel into the film adaptation, the pressbook implies that this film is an adaptation of a cultural myth as much as the novel by Bram Stoker or the play by John Balderston. More specifically, Universal’s adaptation is only one entry in the long-running Dracula myth, through which an aura of excitement, fear, and anxiety extend and the Universal film contributes. The second most frequent tagline featured in posters—“The VAMPIRE THRILLER”—introduces this idea, for the use of the article “the” admits the existence of other entries in the vampire discourse while it argues that *Dracula*, which may include the film adaptation and all the texts produced under that title, is the preeminent entry in the canon. (This implicit argument is presented in a manner similar to the ad copy, cited above, which suggests Count Dracula—i.e., the “One”—is the definitive vampire character.) *Dracula* may be the authoritative “vampire thriller,” but it is not the only one. Coincident with the popularity of the vampire discourse and the possible truth of vampires is the highly malleable nature of the vampire discourse. This narrative

flexibility allows *Dracula* to follow a variety of narratives and, unlike the vast majority of adaptations, to avoid disclosing its ending prior to the release of the film. In Stoker's novel, Count Dracula is killed just before he reaches the safety of Castle Dracula, which is cleansed when its three female vampire inhabitants are destroyed and its entrances sealed with consecrated objects.¹⁰⁹ However, in other iterations of the vampire discourse, the undead creatures lord over wild foreign locales or live surreptitiously in modern societies. Universal used this familiarity with the vampire character and the flexibility of their stories to promote its film adaptation. According to the pressbook,

Where the play ends publicity begins!

The ending of 'Dracula' is difficult to guess and provides a surprise twist to the picture. Which offers you an opportunity to plant the panel strip shown here in your local newspaper and submit their ideas of a proper ending to the action shown in the photos [sic].¹¹⁰

The panel strip to be reprinted in newspapers is entitled, "Write your own ending for 'Dracula' and win a prize!" Here, the prospective audience assumes temporary authorship of *Dracula*; once again, Stoker, Balderston, and Deane recede to the background and Universal adopts the mantle of author and owner of the "real" ending of *Dracula*. Participation in the contest by the reader inevitably acquaints him or her with *Dracula* and implies knowledge of the vampire discourse; simultaneously, it attaches one to Universal's *Dracula*. The open-ended nature of the vampire myth and its countless previous iterations, Universal's ownership of *Dracula* and its legal ability to depict the narrative and characters of *Dracula* in any fashion it desires might also play off of and

¹⁰⁹ In its film, Universal chose to kill Count Dracula irrefutably. See below for further discussion of this matter.

¹¹⁰ *Dracula* pressbook, PB5.

lend credence to the realism available in the vampire discourse and thus heighten interest in vampirism and *Dracula*. In effect, the only consistent element of the vampire discourse is the presence of the vampire, in this case Count Dracula, the character that Universal hoped to develop into a figurehead for the discourse and a captivating icon that could attract cinema audiences.

Most promotional posters and lobby cards identified *Dracula* as a thriller (i.e., “The VAMPIRE THRILLER”) or a sort of twisted romance (“The Strangest Passion ...”). The former assignation is reiterated in the “Two-Color Rotogravure” inserts that exhibitors could place in local newspapers, as well as several tag lines, including “Weird! Wild! Breathtaking!” and “Gripping! Exciting! Shivery! Eerie thriller of One who roamed the night!”, that theatres could use to promote the release.¹¹¹ The latter is suggested by the “What is a Dracula Kiss?” essay contest and several photo inserts and posters featuring Count Dracula leaning over various women.¹¹² In other publicity, mystery is the predominant appeal of *Dracula*, both in novel and film version. The popularity and extreme flexibility of the vampire discourse allowed for the element of mystery—viewers knew the characteristics and motives of vampires, but they did not how and where vampirism might afflict society, as well as how the threat of vampirism could be eliminated. Moreover, the existence of vampires was another element of the mystery contained in the vampire discourse and connected to *Dracula* in publicity; see for example the essay contest soliciting patrons to argue for or against the existence of

¹¹¹ *Dracula* pressbook, PB3, PB5.

¹¹² *Dracula* pressbook, PB5, PB6-PB8.

vampires and the aforementioned essay contest asking readers to submit “proper endings.” Several of the mock reviews and publicity stories featured in the pressbook categorize *Dracula* as a mystery as well.

The pressbook demonstrates that Universal was equally uncertain about the generic distinctions with which it could describe the appeal of the film, but the company did believe “horror” was an accurate description for longer sequences of *Dracula* and could be an avenue through which exhibitors could market the film. The ascription is finally attached to *Dracula* in the pressbook’s “story synopsis and exploitation angles,” which begins: “For its entertainment, this picture depends upon thrills and ‘horror’ situations.” Rather than using horror as a noun describing a group of films with similar features, here the term indicates a broader effect of *Dracula*.¹¹³ But the term has even greater significance in its use here than in previous iterations at the SRO or in reviews of the Stoker novel; it not only refers to specific effects, it also describes entire “situations” within the film and represents a primary promotional “angle.” The quotation marks around horror indicate the relative instability of the term as a primary linguistic ascription and perhaps its lack of familiarity among exhibitors. Still, Universal believed horror was an important enough feature of the film to introduce it to exhibitors and encourage them to use it as a primary publicity angle, which could elevate *Dracula* from “roadshow”

¹¹³ The idea that emotional affect is the distinguishing characteristic of the horror genre persists in scholarly studies. In “Introduction: Horror Film and the Apparatus of the Cinema” (in *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear*, ed. Hantke [Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2004]), Steffan Hantke observes, “Horror is one of the rare genres that are defined not primarily by period or formal idiosyncrasies, but by the effect they produce in the audience. ... Horror carries the response it tries to evoke proudly in its name, suggesting that this response is the single, direct, and perhaps even exclusive characteristic by which it wishes to define itself” (viii). Noël Carroll agrees that horror films are designed to produce an affect he

circuit to the “ace spots” in first-run markets. Universal had another supernatural thriller, *Frankenstein*, in the works. Success for *Dracula* in the first-run market might also secure a similar place for its successor by building relationships with key exhibitors, while it could distinguish Universal and its evolving “horror” formula for consumers.

In the pressbook, Universal recognizes and argues for the commercial appeal of narrative features, characters, and special effects that go further than simply “thrilling.” The “‘horror’ situations” and “gruesome scenes” of *Dracula* will “shock,” make the “spine tingle,” “chill,” and “terrify” to an unprecedented degree. While the SRO called *Dracula* a “family picture,” Universal in its own publicity does not—according to the story synopsis, the film’s “nightmarish” effects may be too much for children and *Dracula* should not be promoted to this audience.¹¹⁴ In this way, Universal hints at a special feature of the horror film, its unresolvability. According to Schatz, all generic narratives attempt to resolve conflict and “tame” cultural contradictions.¹¹⁵ So too would horror films, as they introduced and then eradicated “undead” villains from their midst and presented and then eliminated menacing and morally questionable applications of scientific experimentation. However, the special allure and effect of the horror film, as Universal begins to define and publicize it in the *Dracula* pressbook, is that the central intruders could persist outside of the cinema. The killer on-screen may have been killed

dubs “art-horror” (*The Philosophy of Horror or, Paradoxes of the Heart* [New York & London: Routledge, 1990], 8).

¹¹⁴ While Universal did not encourage promoting the film to children, director and horror historian Garry Don Rhodes claims that Count Dracula consistently ranked as one of the most identifiable fictional characters among children of the period (“The Road to Dracula” [supplementary visual essay by David J. Skal], in *Dracula: The Legacy Collection*, dir. Tod Browning, prod. Universal Pictures, 1931, 75 min. Universal Studios Home Video, DVD).

irrefutably, but these horror films suggest that there are many more villains out there—i.e., more undetectable, bloodthirsty vampires, as in *Dracula*; more deranged scientists and their grotesque, regenerated humanoids, as in *Frankenstein*; more psychotic geniuses pining for retribution against society, as in the Poe adaptations—in society who pose a more realistic threat. At the same time, the element of supernatural laced through these films allows for their characters to attain a more affective status in the psyche. If the door is locked, the villain can still enter your home or even your dreams; if you kill him, he can self-replicate or infect others. In essence, there was no protection from these anti-heroes.

DRACULA RELEASED

Universal selected February 14, 1931 as the opening date for *Dracula*. Based on the gruesome, frightening aspects of the film, the Valentine's Day release date was a clear irony, and it simultaneously recalled the bizarre sexual allure of Count Dracula, already subtly suggested in posters that featured the Count hovering above a spider web with several young women ensnared. By all accounts, the film was an immediate success. Reviewers called the film an “ultra-sensational, ... [with a] cunningly developed story” and “the best of the many mystery films,” and *Dracula* was Universal's top grossing film of 1931.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, 30-31.

¹¹⁶ Sid, “Review: *Dracula*,” *Variety*, 18 Feb 1931, 14; Mordaunt Hall, “The Screen: Bram Stoker's Human Vampire,” *New York Times*, 13 Feb 1931, 21. Hirschhorn claims that *Dracula* was Universal's “biggest money maker” of the year” (72). Exact box office figures are unavailable.

Several elements of *Dracula* became standards for the horror genre, which later films would either mimic or self-consciously resist.¹¹⁷ In my brief examination of *Dracula*, I explore two of the ways in which the film produced its effects and initiated conventions of the horror genre that would be re-produced in later films: the application of sound—in the abrupt interjections and long absences of sound effects and in the presentation of dialogue—and the continuous appeal to realism. The specific use and application of sound, introduced in *Dracula* and then applied in an increasingly sophisticated manner in subsequent Universal horror films, is an under-recognized constituent element not only in the institution of the horror genre, but also in the long-term approach to adaptation at the studio, which also included the use of widely recognized cultural discourse source texts, and the corporate strategy implemented to achieve the broader goals, credibility in first-run markets despite lack of theater holdings and financial stability, outlined by Junior Laemmle.

In his comments on *Dracula* in the short documentary, “The Road to *Dracula*,” David J. Skal contends that the frequent intervals without sound in the film indicate director Tod Browning’s discomfort with sound filmmaking and ignorance of the expressive

¹¹⁷ Thomas Schatz compares a film genre, replete with various “rules of expression” that are manifested in its films, to a language system (*Hollywood Genres*, 21). While Schatz’s semiotic model certainly would fit some of the narrative conventions associated with the horror genre (for example, the intrusion of a lone outsider who must be eradicated from the community), it does not meet the reasons why “horror” was ultimately distinguished from the other genres with which *Dracula* is lumped in its pressbook and why Universal recommended that children not attend screenings of the film—its effect on the audience. Both of the *Dracula* reviews cited above describe the reactions of the audience to the film. According to the *Variety* reviewer, “The atmosphere makes anything possible,” which keeps the spectators “in a state of expectancy, anticipating the next stimulating shiver.” Mordaunt Hall of *The New York Times* reports, “[*Dracula*] is a production that evidently had the desired effect upon many in the audience yesterday afternoon.” (This perspective might explain the SRO’s difficulty in adequately categorizing *Dracula* and describing it as a “family picture.”)

possibilities available through the recent innovation.¹¹⁸ Part of the reason for this absence is budgetary—Universal had not assembled a full-scale music department for scoring films nor did it want to invest resources in acquiring the rights to original music for *Dracula*.¹¹⁹ (Only the opening and end credits include musical accompaniment.)¹²⁰ While the film does feature frequent extended segments without dialogue, sound effects, or music, those absences build rather than limit the emotional effectiveness of the film while they reveal Universal’s resourcefulness in the face of budgetary and technical limitations. For example, the bay of wolves frequently is heard off-screen, disrupting on-screen conversations, startling characters, and announcing the imminent presence of Count Dracula. An early, significant instance of the off-screen sound effect occurs during Renfield’s stop at the small village prior to his commencement to Bourgeau Pass to meet the Count’s carriage and continue to Transylvania, and then again upon his first encounter with the Count. Other instances include the frequent howling when characters discuss Count Dracula, and the bat noises that disrupt a conversation between Harker and Mina. In each of these examples, off-screen, ambient noise serves as narrative shorthand, foreshadowing the presence of the Count and shifting the tone of the scene.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Brunas et al agree, as they cite “the absence of a musical score, [which] is keenly felt during its many painfully protracted stretches of complete silence” as one of *Dracula*’s numerous “flaws” (19).

¹¹⁹ Universal was not alone. In the silent era, filmmaking corporations frequently advised exhibitors about the music selections theater orchestras could play along with silent films. Those studios that did not specialize in musicals were slow to hire a staff of musicians during the transition to sound filmmaking and synchronized scoring.

¹²⁰ These segments include selections by Schubert, Tchaikovsky, and Wagner.

¹²¹ The *Variety* review of *Dracula* cites this technical feature as a primary cause of *Dracula*’s effectiveness as a “sublimated ghost story ... [with a] real emotional horror kick.” “Some of the horror tricks of sound and sight are full powered,” observes the writer, who cites multiple examples in the film that produced such a reaction, including the flapping of bat wings and “a madman who shrieks in demoniacal rage for spiders to eat.”

While the strategy propels the narrative and heightens the effects of specific scenes, it also represents a response to budget and technical limitations. Unexpected, off-screen sounds disconnect the noises from their sources and build anxiety in the scene. They also negate the need for additional shots, and by implication, supplementary camera movement and sets. Instead, the camera can linger on the scene's original speakers to indicate the effect of the noises and communicate the emotional reaction of the character. This approach becomes clear when the din of wolves is overheard as the Count introduces himself to Renfield: the Count comments on his affection for the noises while Renfield recoils in fright. Later, when the ship upon which Dracula sailed from Transylvania to England is found in tatters and replete with dead bodies, the use of off-screen sound effectively replaces an entire scene. The camera holds on a shot of a rope tied to a dock mooring and a shadow of a body draped over the ship's steering column as off-screen speakers discuss the ship's condition (Figure 2.1, below).



Figure 2.1: A conversation explaining the gruesome events that occurred on the ship carrying Count Dracula to England is heard above this shadow, depicting a sailor slumped over the ship's steering column.¹²²

This scene demonstrates another advantage of the off-screen sound strategy—Universal could avoid picturing particularly gruesome scenes, which would limit objections to the scene's themes and save money by avoiding the need for elaborate makeup, action, and costume.¹²³ Nowhere is this effect more evident than in the final scene, when Van Helsing finally kills the Count. The hammering of a wooden stake, a particularly violent act, through the Count's heart is performed off-screen, behind a shot of Harker and Mina.

The off-screen sounds present in *Dracula* communicate information, interject tonal shifts, and propel its narrative, but the film also features extended segments without sound of any kind. These long silences increase the anxiety of the film and heighten the effect of those moments when jarring, foreign noises intrude upon the space inhabited by

¹²² *Dracula*, dir. Tod Browning, 75 min. Universal Pictures, 1931, DVD.

¹²³ Huss argues that the “shadow-on-the-wall episode” enhances the element of “suggestibility” that he believes is typical of the horror genre: “By suggesting rather than portraying the victimized corpse, the director leaves the imagination of the audience free to create a more personal sense of grotesquerie” (53). I

the characters. Such an effect is evident when Renfield first meets the Count, who serves as his driver to Castle Dracula. Renfield introduces himself, but the Count does not reply. The ride through Transylvania continues amid an eerie silence and intermittent ambient sound until Renfield looks out of the cabin and sees no driver, but only a bat leading the coach's horses. Again, the lack of dialogue and clearly distinguishable sound effects build the elements of mystery and anxiety, while they contribute to the inexplicable aura associated with the Count and his estate. As with some of the off-screen noises, the absence of sound conserves budget resources by limiting the need for background music or additional dialogue. These artistic choices, compelled by economic necessity, produced tonal effects and narrative conceits that would become synonymous with the horror genre as it was identified by observers and elaborated by Universal.

Unsure of the technical capacity of their synchronized recording equipment and acutely aware of the varying quality of amplified sound exhibition, Junior Laemmle and others at Universal feared Bela Lugosi's Hungarian accent might be unintelligible to audiences. However, the actor had resolved this problem in the hundreds of times he had recited Count Dracula's dialogue on stage. He not only had mastered enunciation, he had perfected delivery in his unique characterization of the Count. In the film, Lugosi varies the tempo, intonation and cadence of his lines to maximize affect (both within the narrative and upon the audience) and indicate the Count's fluid transition between his native environment and the civilized world. When indicating his name and his personal

agree with Huss' basic argument regarding the effect of the shot. However, the scene should not be viewed as a purely artistic construction, but as a creative, pragmatic response to technical and financial restrictions.

preferences, the Count speaks more slowly and irregularly. At other times, he communicates in a more regular tone and rhythm, especially when commenting on events around him and attempting to conceal his identity to those around him.¹²⁴ The first spoken dialogue by the Count occurs as he descends the staircase in his estate and announces to Renfield, “I am, Dracula ... I bid you, welcome.” In these two pronouncements (broken up only by a brief response by Renfield), Lugosi pauses before the last word, producing a measured, irregular, and thus distinctive speech pattern. In the Count’s next comment, above the din of howling wolves, “Listen to them—children of the night. What music they make,” Lugosi pauses only between phrases and speaks more quickly and fluidly. These opening lines establish a varying pattern of speech rhythm and intonation, which becomes more apparent later. For example, in the following scene, the Count informs Renfield, “I never drink ... wine.” Lugosi inserts a long pause between “drink” and “wine,” escalating the dramatic effect of his words and calling attention to the differences between him and typical society.

Thus, Lugosi matches the presentation of the Count’s dialogue with the context, content, and intent of the character’s communication. Such a performative strategy clearly heightens the unique aspects of and the anxiety associated with the Count, who easily adapts his speech to his audience and, by so doing, becomes nearly undetectable in

¹²⁴ Johannes Riis’ recent analysis of naturalist and classical acting theory and practice in the early sound era reveals that intonation and tempo were taught as crucial means of expressive emotion, most notably by late-nineteenth century naturalist acting theorist William Bloch. According to Riis, “Distinct intentions stall the tempo of delivery by requiring pauses, which in turn encourages constant shifting among affects” (15). Riis observes the naturalist style, adopted by numerous screen actors who had entered motion pictures from the theatre, closely resembles stage acting in its use of line delivery, rather than the exaggerated movement or facial expressions prevalent in the “classical” mode, to convey emotion and information to the audience.

modern London. Perhaps the most evident example occurs when the Count first encounters Seward, Harker, Lucy, and Mina at the theatre. The Count has ordered his latest victim, a young woman dressed in a maid's uniform, to interrupt Seward and thus give the Count an opportunity to inquire about the location of his minion Renfield. (While she gets the attention of Dr. Seward, the Count slips off his cape and reveals a dapper tuxedo. The brevity and minimal costume change signifies the facility and ease with which he can shift between menace and graciousness.) The Count asks Seward: "Pardon me. ... Might I inquire, if you are the Dr. Seward whose sanitarium is at Whitby?" Here, the Count speaks quickly, without evident pauses between particular words or phrases. But later, his attitude changes, and so does his speech pattern. In response to Lucy's recitation of a poem regarding death, the Count replies, "To die; to be really dead—that must be glorious. There are far worse things, awaiting man." In response to the abrupt shift in tone and content of his dialogue, Harker, Mina and Lucy recoil and nervously attempt to laugh off the Count's macabre declaration.

Without coordinated production and exhibition, this feature of Lugosi's portrayal would be lost. By naturalizing Count Dracula but not discounting his indiscriminate cruelty, Lugosi increases the anxiety associated with the vampire character, especially for those who entertain the possibility of his existence. Thus, *Dracula* insists on the reality of vampires, which was a primary appeal of the film according to its proposed publicity campaign. Several other elements of the film adaptation corroborate this assertion. The

Lugosi's portrayal of the Count seems to fit into the naturalist style, in which, "The actor [searches] for a separate intention to motivate the delivery of each line" (8).

early village scene establishes the debate over the belief in vampires as superstition or an actual threat to safety, domestic tranquility, and social order. Prior to Renfield's arrival at the village, a woman prays in her home; when Renfield does reach the village and he discusses his trip with an older resident, the latter attempts to dissuade Renfield from traveling to Transylvania at night. During this conversation, a large cross, situated in the background atop a small hill, is clearly visible and serves to introduce the use of religious observance and religious iconography as defensive measures against vampires. The villager describes the alleged characteristics of the Count—"Dracula and his wives ... take the form of wolves and bats ... [and] feed on the blood of the living." While inhabitants of the remote village have altered their habits and formulated many of their beliefs in response to the threat of vampires, Renfield's response, "Why that's all superstition," and his decision to immediately continue on his journey indicate that he will not alter his beliefs. This scene clearly opposes the belief systems of the rural/rustic/[explicitly] religious, who believe in and defend themselves against vampires, against the urban/modern/[implicitly] secular, who scoff at the existence of vampires. The next shot—a zoom in on a coffin as a hand slowly emerges while wolves howl in the background—reveals that the film narrative will side with the beliefs and practices of the former group.

The contrast between superstition/religion and modernity/science continues throughout the narrative, as multiple characters question the existence and threat of vampires while others assert their reality. (Count Dracula argues for the latter when he comments, "I hope you haven't taken my stories too seriously.") As Van Helsing—a

Professor, an expert on superstition, and as such a clear link between these perspectives—observes, “Superstition of yesterday can become the scientific reality of today.” *Dracula* makes it clear that one must believe in this myth in order to remain safe from vampires. According to the professor, “The strength of the vampire is that people will not believe in him.” Thus, those who discount the validity of this superstition pay dearly. Renfield immediately pays for his narrow-mindedness and becomes the film’s first victim of Count Dracula. Lucy Westin also becomes a victim, as she mistakenly expresses attraction to the Count rather than repulsion, and quickly falls victim. Only upon adopting the superstition and using religious iconography as defense objects and weaponry can the threat of *Dracula* be eliminated.¹²⁵ In this way, *Dracula* both stages and resolves the real-world debate regarding vampirism. By so doing, the film and its publicity raise the appeal of the vampire discourse, heighten interest in its film adaptation, and increase anxiety associated with vampires. The company would continue to employ this strategy in later horror films—that is, by arguing for the reality of the supernatural and highly unlikely elements in its films, the company sparked interest in the themes, characters, and general subject addressed in the film and elevated the primary effect of the genre: horror.

While the film adaptation diverged from the Stoker novel to a considerable degree in numerous areas, including the elimination of much of the action at Castle Dracula, the modified greatly condensed characterization of Harker, and the stark difference from the

¹²⁵ Despite the repeated accuracy of Van Helsing’s predictions, he must continually insist on the reality and threat of vampires: “I am convinced that this Dracula is no legend, but an undead creature whose life has been unnaturally prolonged.”

multiple perspective, diary-entry presentation featured in the novel, the film adaptation included one important plot detail that strictly followed the literary source—Count Dracula is finally killed by Professor Van Helsing. After finding Dracula asleep in his coffin, Van Helsing opens the coffin and kneels over the slumbering Count before a cut to a shot of Harker and Mina. Hammering and grunting noises enter the sound track from off-screen. Van Helsing then declares—“Dracula is dead forever.” Concluding *Dracula* with this event severely limited Universal’s ability to maximize the commercial profit available through the title character. Only after the release of *Dracula* did the company realize that such a highly amorphous, flexible narrative and cultural myth would allow for the preservation of the iconic, sensationalistic villain in order for it to re-emerge in subsequent storylines and film adaptations. The vampire discourse had unlimited longevity and broad appeal, and the Count was the most popular of all vampire characters (thanks in part to the Universal film). With Count Dracula clearly exterminated, the possibility of future use of the character was all but nullified.

FROM DRACULA TO FRANKENSTEIN

Still, Universal enjoyed tremendous benefits from *Dracula*, both in its return on investment, in the visibility gained in the first run market, and, most notably, in initiating (the “experimental stage of) a new formula upon which it would depend for years. Anticipating the success of *Dracula*, Junior Laemmle and his producers at Universal searched for an immediate follow-up. In late 1931, they identified another literary classic and cultural phenomenon, *Frankenstein*, as the possible second entry in their burgeoning genre. Like the Stoker novel, the novel version of *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley seemed

at first glance an unlikely candidate for a film adaptation; *Frankenstein* was a sprawling story presented from multiple narrative perspectives—in this case, via epistolary form—and set in diverse locales. As did *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* depended for its effect on a supernatural series of events that centered on the living dead: the young, ambitious Doctor Victor Frankenstein defies the laws of physics and the natural world by stitching together and then re-animating a human life, composed of parts of several dead bodies. This reanimated, unnamed “Creature” revives, escapes the custody of Frankenstein and roams the Swiss mountains and countryside, where he ponders his existence and inadvertently terrorizes the country’s villagers. Scorned from society, the Creature demands that Frankenstein assemble a companion. When Frankenstein refuses the request, the Creature seeks revenge upon his creator and the story concludes after Victor Frankenstein, on the verge of death aboard a ship en route to England, has finally confessed his violation against the natural world and recounted his interaction with the Creature and the promise of violence levied against him. Clearly, *Frankenstein* bore similarities to the primary characters and narrative of *Dracula*, but the former also differed from the latter, most notably in the fact that the reader was exposed to the thoughts and motivations of the undead Creature—who longed for inclusion in, rather than desired to prey upon, society—and that the lonesome Creature (after being found in the ship’s cabin hovering over the dead body of Victor Frankenstein) is left alive, clinging to an “ice raft,” at the story’s conclusion.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Before the Creature leaps out of the ship’s cabin, he recounts his recent experiences to the Captain, expressing both rage against his creator and regret for the violence and terror he has brought upon

Other, more compelling aspects related to the novel convinced Universal that *Frankenstein* was the ideal literary property for its burgeoning formula. It was in the public domain, an extremely attractive attribute for Universal, which as a result also had unlimited flexibility in its use, reproduction, and dissemination of the plot, characters and the author's name and image, and the company would use that freedom to great advantage. While Universal's financial condition persuaded it to adapt public domain novels and plays, it focused on a particular group of such sources that featured similar themes, storylines and, most importantly, an iconic status and international renown that had accumulated around their stories, characters, and respective authors over the previous decades. The narrative and primary characters invented by Shelley had in the space of just over a century achieved a massive international popularity as the novel was reprinted in multiple languages and dispersed into diverse media outlets and discursive channels.

In adapting *Frankenstein*, Universal capitalized not only on the popularity of the 1818 novel, but also on the influence of the numerous theatrical adaptations produced across the world, the omnipresence of the primary characters, and the mythic status of the story's primary themes. By the late 1920s, its characters, ideas, and terminology had entered the fields of business, law, literary criticism, sociology, and popular journalism. In fact, the iterations of *Frankenstein* had reached such a dizzying level that it constituted a discourse

humankind. After this long soliloquy, the Captain, who recounts the scene in a letter, admits an ambivalent sympathy for the “monster” before him:

My first impulses, which had suggested to me the duty of obeying the dying request of [Frankenstein], in destroying his enemy, were now suspended by a mixture of curiosity and compassion. I approached this tremendous being; I dared not again raise my eyes to his face, there was something so scaring and unearthly in his ugliness. (Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1831 [New York: Penguin Books, 1992], 211)

of its own—a “frankenstein discourse”—that superceded the novel and provided an attractive, highly flexible “text” from which to adapt. Universal required that flexibility to adapt *Frankenstein* to the simultaneous demands of the contemporary “frankenstein discourse,” the increasing authority of the SRO, its own financial imperatives, and the burgeoning horror formula, the latter of which influenced story development, but also production and publicity.¹²⁷

With the production and release of *Frankenstein* in November 1931, Universal solidified a strategy of adaptation that would allow the struggling studio to realize a number of goals, including the repetition and further refinement of a set of thematic concerns, aesthetic elements, and censorship standards that contemporary critics and audiences could readily associate with the studio and the emergent horror genre; efficiency in production and marketing; and the establishment of a reputation, which Universal could capitalize upon in *Frankenstein* and exploit in subsequent releases. In its role in the realization of these goals, *Frankenstein* helped Universal reach both short- and long-term success, an achievement only possible within the context of its relationship to *Dracula* and the state of frankenstein discourse.

FRANKENSTEIN DISCOURSE

What is interesting about Frankenstein's adaptation to motion pictures is that none of the films have remained true to the text. Instead, motion picture adaptations of Frankenstein have created the myth of the mad scientist and his creature. This myth was not Mary Shelley's intention for

¹²⁷ As I'll discuss below, the company could use the notoriety of the novel in publicity—for example, to bestow a sheen of cultural respectability upon its film and to defend itself against industry censors who protested the film's gruesome images and themes—but it did not need to follow closely the plot or characterizations in this text in its cinematic rendering.

her novel and may have inadvertently hurt critical response to the novel. –
Sumeeta Patnaik, “Bibliographic Studies on the Work of Mary Shelley”¹²⁸

This section describes what “Frankenstein” represented in American culture prior to and coincident with the release of the film adaptation by Universal. I have gathered a cross section of documents relevant to Mary Shelley's novel, the various theatrical adaptations, and the lexical and symbolic use-value of the *Frankenstein* “myth” in the years leading up to 1931. Each of these categories contributes to what Michel Foucault calls a “general economy of discourses,”¹²⁹ which were available and proliferating in the cultural milieu when Universal Pictures’ film adaptation was conceived, produced, and released to American and foreign audiences. The varied meanings of “Frankenstein” during this time—a discursive corpus that clearly exceeded Mary Shelley's 1818 novel— influenced the approach to film adaptation utilized by Universal. Thus, the 1931 film is no direct transformation of novel to film; in fact, adaptations never are. Rather, film adaptations are merely one entry in a continuing succession of cultural transformations undergone by a text and various elements associated with it after its publication and dissemination. The first sound era film adaptation of *Frankenstein* is a vivid example of this process. The cultural status of *Frankenstein* (1818), its author, narrative features, and characters had significant effects not only on specific decisions related to the selection, story adaptation, production, and marketing of Universal’s film, but also on the strategy of adaptation employed by Universal in subsequent releases.

¹²⁸ In *Mary Shelley and Frankenstein: Essays*, Compiled by Kim Britton, undated, <<http://www.kimwoodbridge.com/maryshel/patnaik.shtml>> (7 July 2005).

¹²⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, 1976 (New York: Vintage, 1990), 11.

Paul Jensen's retrospective on *Frankenstein* for the Fall 1970 issue of *Film Comment* begins with a brief consideration of the disparity in contemporary critical reviews for that film—which was included among the *New York Times*' ten best films of 1931—and subsequent entries in Universal's *Frankenstein* series. According to Jensen, this discrepancy implies that “the rest of the route was downhill” and that *Frankenstein*'s warm reception in 1931 and 1932 was due to the “story's distinguished background [and] ... the connotation of Literature evoked by the name of Shelley.”¹³⁰ In other words, Jenkins understands the response to *Frankenstein* as a direct function of the respect granted to its source material rather than of the inherent appeal of the film.¹³¹ In “Production and Reproduction: The Case of *Frankenstein*,” Paul O'Flinn accuses contemporary reviewers of misreading *Frankenstein*. Whereas Jenkins understands the influence of Mary Shelley and her book as helping to generate *positive* evaluations, O'Flinn identifies reviews that believe the 1931 film to be an *inadequate* recreation of the original literary text.¹³² Jenkins and O'Flinn dispute *Frankenstein*'s reception and the reasons behind it, but both scholars agree that historico-cultural conditions exert significant influence on the manner in which the *Frankenstein* text is interpreted and

¹³⁰ Jensen, 42.

¹³¹ As I'll demonstrate later, Mary Shelley's name was of less use than her husband's in suggesting the film's cultural value and in protecting Universal from complaints against the film's objectionable content.

¹³² Paul Jensen, “Film Favorites: Paul Jensen on *Frankenstein*,” *Film Comment* 6, no. 3 (Fall 1970): 42-6; Paul O'Flinn, “Production and Reproduction: The Case of *Frankenstein*,” in *Frankenstein/Mary Shelley*, ed. Fred Botting (New York: St. Martin's, 1995): 221-47. While Jensen and O'Flinn should be credited for culling original reviews of the film in an effort to gain a more elaborate understanding of the film, the dependence on a narrow range of reviews casts doubt on his ability to assess adequately *Frankenstein*'s reception, which consisted of a wide range of qualitative evaluations. I am also skeptical of O'Flinn's primary example of criticism in this article, which comes from the *New Statesman*, a literary and arts magazine whose editors and readership might be more inclined to cast doubt on any Hollywood adaptation's adequacy to its source.

reconstructed.¹³³ Such conditions, which include but are not reducible to the Shelley novel, also influence why and how *Frankenstein* was selected for adaptation, produced, publicized, and received by audiences and critics.¹³⁴ *Frankenstein's* theatrical history, the contemporary significance of Mary Shelley as author of the novel, as well as the circulation of the myth and imagery relating to the story, its characters, and its themes in the years leading up to the film's release comprises the frankenstein discourse in which Universal adapted its film and illustrates the influence of contemporary images and ideologies on the text of Universal's adaptation.

The basic plot and primary characters of *Frankenstein* purportedly came to Mary Shelley in a nightmare on June 15, 1816, following a spirited discussion (with her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley and others) in which a challenge was issued to compose a ghost story. The following morning, Shelley immediately recorded her dream of scientist who defies the laws of nature by reanimating a creature composed entirely of the parts of other dead bodies. The manuscript, complete with a preface by her husband, was finished on May 14, 1817. Two publishers rejected the anonymous manuscript before

¹³³ However, framing the prevailing social conditions of Depression years in the United States (which for O'Flinn leads causally to an "ambiguous" endorsement of mob violence by the film) as the sole contextual influence on a film can produce a misinformed and simplistic reading of the Universal film. Without doubt, economic fears constrained Hollywood studios during this time, challenging them to formulate a product that would appeal to an economically distressed, and dwindling, audience. Perhaps Universal's adaptation of *Frankenstein* compensated by accentuating spectacle, horror and gruesomeness while simultaneously glossing Victor (Henry in the film) Frankenstein's culpability for, what Shelley deemed in her 1831 introduction for the novel, his immoral violations of the laws of God and Nature. However, such a strategy on the part of studios should not be attributed exclusively to a period of economic hardship: Hollywood film studios have always been heavily invested in the exploitation of spectacle as a means to differentiate their products from other films and competing commercial media. A review of movie publicity during nearly any point in film history will confirm this claim.

¹³⁴ O'Flinn agrees in part, asserting, "The Universal movie was calculated quite precisely to touch the audiences of 1931" (42). However, his consideration of the period offers only a limited description of the context in which *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Frankenstein* (1931) were released.

Lackington, Allen & Company finally accepted *Frankenstein* on August 22, 1817. Mary Shelley had little influence on the text thereafter, as Percy Shelley assumed complete control of the editing and proofreading process. *Frankenstein* was published anonymously on March 11, 1818.¹³⁵ By all accounts, the novel was an immediate commercial and critical success and, for its dark tone and sensational sequence of events, made it especially attractive to theatrical producers.¹³⁶

Three separate articles and books survey the history of *Frankenstein's* theatrical adaptations: Elizabeth Nitchie's 1942 "Stage History of *Frankenstein*"; Albert J. Lavalley's 1979 "The Stage and Film Children of *Frankenstein: A Survey*"; and Steven Earl Forry's 1990 book, *Hideous Progenies: Dramatizations of Frankenstein from Mary Shelley to the Present*. Each scholar agrees that *Frankenstein* enjoyed almost immediate success as a stage adaptation. In 1823, only five years after the original release of Shelley's novel, Richard Brinsley Peake's *Presumption; or the Fate of Frankenstein* was presented on the London stage. The opening performance's Playbill calls attention to the moral element of the story, which demonstrated, "the fatal consequence of that presumption which attempts to penetrate, beyond prescribed depths, into the mysteries of nature."¹³⁷ The initial run of *Presumption* lasted for thirty-seven performances before spreading to other theatres in London, the English countryside, Scotland, and, in 1825,

¹³⁵ Shelley revised the tale and added an introduction for a second edition of the novel, released in 1831 with her name now attached. Because of the author's more explicit influence, most scholars take this edition to be the definitive version of *Frankenstein*.

¹³⁶ Macdonald, D.L. and Kathleen Scherf, "Introduction," in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, 1818 (Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press), 11-43.

New York, where according to the *New York Evening Post*, “[It was] received with the most unbounded applause.”¹³⁸

Mary Shelley attended one of the initial London performances and expressed her satisfaction with the adaptation. However, according to Nitchie, the author opposed certain story modifications. Most notably, the novel’s framing story-within-a-story structure was eliminated (which included the excision of the character of Walton) along with the extended narrative focus on the interactions and interior monologue of the Creature. Without the latter element, Shelley believed audience sympathy for him would be limited.¹³⁹ If the publicity that accompanied revivals of *Presumption* is any indication, Shelley’s fears were warranted. Frankenstein’s Creature becomes the chief attraction to the story and the character who, while nameless and now inarticulate, bears responsibility for much of the spectacle highlighted by publicity: “Among the many striking effects of this Piece, the following will be displayed: Mysterious and terrific appearance of the Demon. ... DESTRUCTION of a COTTAGE by FIRE. And the FALL of an AVALANCHE.”¹⁴⁰ Instead of a literary vehicle for exploring moral accountability, *Frankenstein* becomes an opportunity for the “display” of physical destruction, as the words in all caps make clear. In turn, culpability shifts from the ambitious scientist

¹³⁷ Quoted in Elizabeth Nitchie, “The Stage History of *Frankenstein*,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (Oct 1942): 384-398, Reprinted in *Mary Shelley: Author of Frankenstein*, ed. Nitchie (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 1953), 221.

¹³⁸ Quoted in Steven Earl Forry, *Hideous Progenies: Dramatizations of Frankenstein from Mary Shelley to the Present* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 11.

¹³⁹ The subsequent cultural meaning(s) attached to the Creature/Monster for the next 100-plus years (discussed below) indicate that Shelley’s prediction was correct.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Nitchie, 225.

Frankenstein to his “ghastly” creation, now considered a “Monster,” which in the many revivals of *Presumption* was destroyed in exciting but increasingly unlikely ways.

While *Presumption* continued to play across Europe and the United States for many years, other theatrical adaptations of *Frankenstein* were born around the same time. Some of these, including an 1823 version produced in Switzerland, took care to soften horrific and morally questionable aspects of the story, instead choosing to make cautionary elements even more explicit to audiences.¹⁴¹ Whether such didacticism had its intended effect is unclear and beside the point, for *Frankenstein* had already begun to provide diverse and often contradictory meanings for nineteenth-century audiences, who endorsed these interpretations with “immediate popularity.”¹⁴² While they may have simplified the complexity of *Frankenstein’s* original structure and thematic ambiguity, these adaptations simultaneously made the story and its characters available to a broad international audience while opening them to a variety of meanings, interpretations, and cultural applications. At once, the expanding series of *Frankenstein* treatments came to be understood as a spectacular thriller, a tragic morality play, and, as subsequent nineteenth-century adaptations emphasized, a burlesque melodrama and a comical farce. Albert Lavalley credits *Presumption’s* gross simplification of the original story to the trend toward comedic parodies of *Frankenstein*. For example, Fritz, Victor Frankenstein’s assistant, was born in *Presumption*, and elaborated in two popular farces:

¹⁴¹ Nitchie, 226

¹⁴² Albert J. Lavalley, “The Stage and Film Children of *Frankenstein*: A Survey,” in *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, ed. George Levine and U.C. Knopfmacher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 246. According to Forry, “From 1823 to 1826, at least fifteen dramas employed characters and themes from Shelley’s novel” (34).

Frankenstitch (1824) and *Frank-n-steam*.¹⁴³ Once again, the relative quality of these and other parodies is less important than the fact that by 1824 *Frankenstein* had already gained enough presence in theatrical and literary circles to merit a parodic response.

While the production of new theatrical adaptations of *Frankenstein* waned between 1826 and 1915 (only three new versions, two British and one French, were brought to the stage in this time span), *Frankenstein* gained renewed life on the American stage in the two decades preceding Universal's 1931 film adaptation. The first American-born adaptation, *The Last Laugh* by Paul Dickey and Charles Goddard, was performed in New York on July 29, 1915. The play discarded the possibility of human reanimation, changed the names of all characters, and replaced the attempt to reanimate through alchemy with electricity. "The last laugh" referred to a humorous resolution tacked onto the end of the play, which thus continued the ongoing transformation of Shelley's original story into comedy. According to Forry, "The most important aspect of *The Last Laugh* is its abandonment of every popular conception of the myth that had developed through the nineteenth century." Reviews of the play were positive, but attendance was lackluster, and the production lasted only 52 performances.¹⁴⁴

Twelve years later, Peggy Webling's *Frankenstein: An Adventure in the Macabre* premiered in London on November 25, 1927, as a "companion piece" to Hamilton Deane's stage adaptation of *Dracula*. The two plays toured successfully together in England for the next two years before premiering in New York's Little Theatre on

¹⁴³ Lavalley, 250. See also Forry, 25.

¹⁴⁴ Forry, 85, 87.

February 10, 1930. Webling's version of *Frankenstein* re-incorporated many of the elements discarded in *The Last Laugh*. However, *Frankenstein: An Adventure in the Macabre* represents a reversion to the 1823 *Presumption* rather than to the Shelley novel. Webling restores the character of Fritz, Frankenstein's assistant, excludes the novel's formal narrative structure, and again presents the Creature as a mute, vengeful "Monster." While this theatrical adaptation, the last to be performed prior to the release of Universal's 1931 film, re-invokes the Frankenstein name and mythology in the United States (and more specifically to New York critics and theatergoers), it raises a particular version of that mythology more in tune with *Frankenstein's* stage history than with its literary history.

Importantly, the parodic theatrical adaptations placed the story in a modern setting, a modification that persisted in the majority of later adaptations and allowed for the projection of story elements and characters into numerous contemporary arenas. Re-framing *Frankenstein* as a contemporary story allowed various writers to transfer the themes, images, and characters of *Frankenstein* and all its adaptations into their own discursive fields. Therefore, what Forry calls the proliferation of the "[*Frankenstein*] myth among the general populace" is not surprising. While Forry focuses on "Victorian renderings of Shelley's novel" between 1832 and 1900, I would like to call attention to the presence of these various invocations of all-things *Frankenstein*—what along with all the other invocations of the story cumulatively constitutes a frankenstein discourse—in the first three decades of the twentieth century, a period in which "frankenstein" carried

diverse and often contradictory meanings for those who chose to invoke its characters, imagery, and themes.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the term “frankenstein” is often mistakenly applied to the nameless monster.¹⁴⁵ Forry identifies the presence of this confusion in theatrical reviews as early as 1832, but the tendency became more widespread as frankenstein discourse spread throughout Europe and the United States. Tellingly, each of the entries in the OED’s etymology of usage—the first sampled from 1838—instantiates a misuse of the term. Such confusion is certainly true for many of the articles that used *Frankenstein* as lexical markers in their titles.¹⁴⁶ The fact that a keyword search yielded such a breadth of references suggests that frankenstein discourse was pervasive and liberally applied in these decades, especially in the less formal circumstances available in newspapers, periodicals, and other media.

I located two relevant references in British arts & culture periodicals published prior to 1900. The first, a brief article entitled “Frankenstein’s Chemistry” in the July 29, 1871, issue of *Punch*, reviews a book called *Fragments of Science for Unscientific People*. Here, Shelley’s novel is evoked as a famous instance of “unscientific science”—the term “frankenstein” alludes to the novel itself.¹⁴⁷ *The Open Court* published a longer

¹⁴⁵ The entry for “frankenstein” reads,

The name of the title-character of Mrs. Shelley’s romance *Frankenstein* (1818), who constructed a human monster and endowed it with life. Commonly misused allusively as a typical name for a monster who is a terror to his originator and ends by destroying him. (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “frankenstein,” undated, <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry_main/00089474> [3 Dec 2002]).

¹⁴⁶ Because of limitations on my search for items addressing and contributing to frankenstein discourse, the examples discussed here obviously do not represent all of the invocations of “Frankenstein” during the period but only a representative (and I hope suggestive) sample.

¹⁴⁷ “Frankenstein’s Chemistry,” *Punch, or The London Charivari* 61 (29 Jul 1871): 41.

piece entitled “The Modern Frankenstein” in its July 23, 1889, issue. In this article, “frankenstein” refers both to criminals and to the scientists who have tried to exculpate them from guilt by claiming that a genetically inherited “criminal cranium” makes one more susceptible to deviance.¹⁴⁸ While these two articles occur in publications primarily devoted to the arts, politics and culture, both authors apply “frankenstein” to a certain type of misguided, immoral, unscrupulous scientific method. Thus, despite the trends in theatrical adaptations to highlight the destruction caused by Frankenstein’s Monster, both of these articles invoke *Frankenstein* for a theme prominent in Shelley’s novel.

A 1905 article in *The Literary Digest*, “Gibson as Frankenstein,” applied “Mrs. Shelley’s Frankenstein” to Henry Dana Gibson’s decision to abandon his famous Gibson girl. The short item implies that Gibson’s creation, upon entry into the public domain, has taken on a life of its own and is out of his control.¹⁴⁹ While the explicit comparison matches the fictional relationship between Victor Frankenstein and his Monster, the reference also works when considering the cultural influence of the latter, who also “refused to die” in the frequent theatrical revivals and textual evocations of the famous character.

Forry argues that the initial cultural allusions to *Frankenstein* occurred in nineteenth-century political cartoons.¹⁵⁰ Two illustrations in *Punch* continued that tradition in the

¹⁴⁸ George M. Gould, “The Modern Frankenstein,” *The Open Court* 3, no. 22 (25 Jul 1889): 1745. Coincidentally, Gould’s equivocation of “Frankenstein science” with a strain of criminal psychology devoted to the study of genetic and physical structure of the brain closely parallels the subsequent modification in the *Frankenstein* adaptations (which included the 1931 film) that accounted for the Monster’s destructiveness through the use of an “abnormal brain.”

¹⁴⁹ “Gibson as Frankenstein,” *The Literary Digest* 31, no. 21 (18 Nov 1905): 737-38.

¹⁵⁰ Forry, 43.

twentieth century. The first, an October 11, 1922, cartoon entitled “The Fleet Street Frankenstein and His Monster,” depicts a menacing “insured subscriber”—caption: “It’s your money I want”—hulking over a seated, diminutive “newspaper proprietor”—caption: “I’m beginning to be sorry I created you.” While the characters and captions recall the creation metaphor, this scenario begins to shift the discourse beyond explicit literary and scientific references and toward the arena of politics and business.¹⁵¹ The second *Punch* illustration appeared on March 12, 1930, and again uses the Frankenstein/Monster relationship for the purpose of political commentary. “A Frankenstein of the East” refers to Gandhi, whose Monster is a turbaned, dark complexioned Genie. As in “The Fleet Street Frankenstein,” the creator sits passively beneath his much larger creation.

Gandhi: “Remember—no violence; just disobedience.”

Genie: “And what if I disobey *you*?”¹⁵²

Clearly, this cartoon wishes to cast doubt on Gandhi’s ability to retain control of his menacing, exoticized followers. While the comparisons to Frankenstein and his Monster are accurate, this reference also draws on the theatrical adaptations’ tendency to present the Monster as a dangerous, uncontrollable Other.

In a seemingly unlikely development, frankenstein discourse spread to the language of college athletics in the United States. Two essays used *Frankenstein* to criticize the increasing commercialization of college football. Walter Camp’s essay, “The

¹⁵¹ “The Fleet Street Frankenstein and His Monster,” *Punch, or The London Charivari* 163 (11 Oct 1922): 339.

¹⁵² “A Frankenstein of the East,” *Punch, or The London Charivari* 178 (12 Mar 1830): 287. Original emphasis.

Frankenstein of College Athletics,” in the November 1923 issue of *World’s Work* argues that the money produced by college football programs unfairly benefits a small fraction of university students.

The extreme foes and extreme friends of athletics have been driving each other into false positions from which, so far as any constructive action is concerned, the result is an abortive stalemate. And, what is far worse, neither of these rabid parties is willing to aid in any way in a search for moderation, and for some at least power for good that lies in this Frankenstein.¹⁵³

For Camp, “frankenstein” represents the Monster: the byproduct of unchecked, dangerous ambition. However, unlike the majority of applications of the *Frankenstein* myth, this monster is no monolith; rather, its potential “power for good” enables the possibility for change, for redemption. Thus, Camp’s exploitation of *Frankenstein* broadens both the meaning (bad or good) and range (athletic institutions) of “frankenstein discourse.”

C.W. Savage, Oberlin College’s Director of Athletics, posits a similar argument in “The Football Frankenstein,” appearing in the *North American Review* in December 1929.

There is a sense of bewilderment, a feeling of hesitancy, of helplessness in the minds of those who question, that inhibits action and permits this Frankenstein to continue building up the monster of commercialism.¹⁵⁴

Frankenstein’s identity periodically shifts between individual proponents of commercialized college athletics and a more broadly conceived institutional perspective; in either case, Savage accurately assigns the term to the scientist/creator figure.

However, because this Frankenstein remains vague and not easily deducible to a single

¹⁵³ Walter Camp, “The Frankenstein of College Athletics,” *World’s Work* 47, no. 1 (Nov 1923): 103.

person or entity, the sense of “helplessness” shifts to the questioning public. Savage’s contribution to frankenstein discourse reasserts the metaphoric connection to football; more importantly, it constructs a scenario similar to that depicted in Universal’s film adaptation, in which both the role of victim and the responsibility for the eradication of the monster’s menace is thrust upon the surrounding townsfolk.

“The Fleet Street Frankenstein” political cartoon that appeared in 1923 moved frankenstein discourse toward application in the business sector; that connection was reinforced from 1927 to 1931 with the publication of two articles and one book. “Frankenstein Literature and Business Managers” by Cary F. Jacob (*The Sewanee Review*, October 1927) laments the commercialization of newspapers, periodicals, and literary magazines. According to the author, these publications are increasingly at the mercy of advertisers who object to any content that contradicts or implies disfavor upon their products. As Savage does in “The Football Frankenstein,” Jacob argues that this disturbing trend—in essence, a Monster literature artificially constructed by the destructive motivations of advertisers and business managers—can be circumvented only through voluntary, collective action.¹⁵⁵

“Frankenstein, Inc.” by Mitchell Dawson appeared in *The American Mercury* in March 1930 and argues that legal firms are in danger of being taken over by “immortal and soulless” corporations: “When the lawyers fashioned their corporate creatures and taught them to walk alone, they soon realized that they had let loose forces which they

¹⁵⁴ Savage, C.W., “The Football Frankenstein,” *North American Review* 228, no. 6 (Dec 1929): 105.

¹⁵⁵ Cary F. Jacob, “Frankenstein Literature and Business Managers,” *The Sewanee Review* 35, no. 4 (Oct 1927): 472.

might find hard to contain.”¹⁵⁶ As the article’s title implies, Frankenstein represents the Monster figure (i.e., corporations), created by a group of well meaning creators (i.e., lawyers). Once again, blame rests not on any individual but on institutions that, unchecked by government intervention, threaten to proliferate out of control. I.M. Wormser’s 1931 book, *Frankenstein, Incorporated*, also applies *Frankenstein* themes and terminology to legal and corporate domains. Wormser, like Dawson, mistakes Frankenstein for the monster, which, like corporations, should be “controlled . . . in the interest of Public Service.”¹⁵⁷ Not only the legal profession, but also the entire populace, is at the mercy of this unchecked force. Both Wormser and Dawson contextualize their arguments within the economic anxiety present in the Depression era as they modify the applicability of frankenstein discourse to contemporary concerns.

The linguistic and symbolic uses of *Frankenstein* detailed in the examples above expose both the currency of *Frankenstein* for a broad range of critics and audiences and the original story’s vulnerability to elaboration, modification, and even reversal within these varied invocations. The frankenstein discourse available in the first third of the twentieth century spanned a vast range of discursive communities, who attributed diverse meanings and levels of significance to the story and its associated elements. Still, many of the details of Mary Shelley’s novel persisted: the scientist and his creation remained, but their relevance, motivations, and even names shifted based on the intentions of the specific interlocutor. On one hand, the Monster represented an uncontrollable behemoth

¹⁵⁶ Mitchell Dawson, “Frankenstein, Inc.,” *The American Mercury* 19, no. 75 (Mar 1930): 274-75.

¹⁵⁷ I. M. Wormser, *Frankenstein, Incorporated* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1931), vii.

that, if unchecked, could destroy its maker and surroundings to those hoping to warn an audience of the treachery of corporations. On the other hand, it symbolized the dangerous, because intellectually obtuse, Other to social and political commentators. (Note that both of these presentations require that the Monster lack rationality and compassion, both important aspects of his personality in the original novel. In order to create this drastic transformation, the now irrational, cruel Creature is often turned mute or nearly mute, an alteration that would persist in the Universal film adaptation.)

Whatever its specific definition, *Frankenstein's* recognizability and lineage offered the critics and commentators cited above a “symbolic profit” that attached “social value and symbolic efficacy” to their arguments.¹⁵⁸ This value is most evident not in the tendency of frankenstein discourse to stray from the specific details of Mary Shelley’s novel, but in the very transmutability that generated such broad applicability to that discourse. According to Bourdieu, “The different meanings of a word are defined in the relation between the invariant core and the specific logic of the different markets, themselves objectively situated with respect to the market in which the common meaning is defined.”¹⁵⁹ *Frankenstein* underwent modification in the context of “different markets” and exerted an influence on those markets through that very invocation. For example, Wormser’s comparison of modern corporations to *Frankenstein* grafts a revised meaning to both modern business enterprises and to the Shelley novel and the corpus of texts that had accumulated around the literary work in the preceding years.

¹⁵⁸ Bourdieu, *Language & Symbolic Power*, 67.

¹⁵⁹ Bourdieu, *Language & Symbolic Power*, 39.

Due to the variety of media and discursive channels through which *Frankenstein* continuously circulated throughout most of the nineteenth and the first three decades of the twentieth centuries, Shelley's notoriety rose quickly and then rarely waned in the period between 1818 and Universal's 1931 film adaptation. Rather than relying strictly on the perceived quality and popularity of her novel, her status as an author of serious fiction often depended on the quality and intent of the plays in production at the moment. The vast majority of the playbills and advertisements reproduced in Forry's survey of stage adaptations refer as the source either to Shelley, the novel, or both. This implies that Shelley's name as author consistently held rhetorical appeal with producers and audiences.

In academic discourse, Shelley was occasionally invoked throughout the 1920's. For example, a book review in the February-April 1926 issue of *The Modern Quarterly* compares the novel *Doctor Transit* to *Frankenstein*. According to reviewer Eileen Hood, the former compares favorably to the latter as a first novel of science fiction. While Hood derogates Shelley's work as amateurish, the underlying assumption of the review is that *Frankenstein* is a seminal text, a benchmark against which other works of science fiction can be measured.¹⁶⁰ Two years later in 1928, Viking Press published the first critical biography of Shelley. Written by Richard Church, the text attempted to interpret Shelley's fictional work through recourse to her life. According to a 1929 review, Church focuses his research primarily on the author's relationships with her husband,

¹⁶⁰ Eileen Hood, "The New *Frankenstein*," *The Modern Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (Feb – Apr 1926): 166-67.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, and mother, Mary Wollstonecraft.¹⁶¹ This biography, released by an American publishing house, demonstrates evidence of Mary Shelley's rising currency in world letters and literary criticism. When considered in conjunction with a brief entry by C.W. Prescott in the May 1930 issue of *American Literature* speculating on the author's artistic influences for *Frankenstein*, an image of Shelley as an author worthy of rigorous biographical and critical inquiry begins to emerge. By 1931, her most famous work of literature is clearly visible in a number of different discursive communities in the United States: popular culture, theatre, business literature, politics and academia.

As Mary Shelley's name, *Frankenstein*, and the multiple stage productions that announced their relationships to the novel circulated more widely in nineteenth- and twentieth-century England and the United States, "frankenstein" split into a variety of lexical and cultural meanings for a multiplying number of communities—of which business, law, sports, and literature were just a few. Universal Pictures' adaptation and the publicity that accompanied it extended frankenstein discourse into the sound era cinema, and by so doing it briefly fixed the meanings of frankenstein discourse by, for example, eschewing the novel's structure and applying a distinctive visualization to the Monster. However, any widely available text that seeks to define a mode or style of discourse never stifles, but rather radiates interest in and generates the presence of that discourse.¹⁶² Like the Monster itself, frankenstein discourse was a powerful construction

¹⁶¹ W.E.Sedgwick, "Review of *Mary Shelley*," *The Hound & Horn* 2, no. 3 (Apr – Jun 1929): 319-20.

¹⁶² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 31. An 11 October 1931 announcement and article in the *New York Times*, entitled "Frankenstein Finished," regarding the film and its pending release observes, "The word Frankenstein is familiar to almost every one, [but] it is surprising how many persons are confused as to its exact meaning." The anonymous writer proceeds to explain the familiar story's historical background and

that could be neither contained nor fully reformed but only “managed, inserted into systems of utility.”¹⁶³ Whether consciously or not, Universal adopted and applied this perspective to its film adaptation strategy in the early 1930s.

ACQUIRING, DEVELOPING, AND PRODUCING *FRANKENSTEIN* (1931)¹⁶⁴

Universal acquired the theatrical rights to *Frankenstein: An Adventure in the Macabre* for \$20,000 in January 1931, several weeks prior to the release of *Dracula*.¹⁶⁵ Unlike the Stoker novel, *Frankenstein* was in the public domain and thus freely adaptable for commercial purposes under current copyright laws. Why then would Universal, fresh off the success of *Dracula* but still lacking significant liquid resources, pay for the rights to a version of the story, rather than adapting the novel by Shelley for free? The answer to this question is three-fold, and emerges from the prevalence and mutability of the frankenstein discourse and in the economic conditions at Universal during this period. First, Universal was simultaneously giving itself flexibility in the content and presentation of its film adaptation while it was protecting itself against copyright infringement. Because the story and its characters circulated freely in contemporary culture, Universal’s adaptation of *Frankenstein* inevitably would resemble a number of

the actual names and traits of its characters, before offering more details on Universal’s film adaptation (Reprinted in The New York Times *Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. Gene Brown [New York: Times Books, 1983]). Such an article offers evidence of both the pervasiveness of frankenstein discourse and the significant malleability of the characters and scenarios in an adaptation, which the article claims are only vaguely known. Whether this article was conceived by the newspaper’s writers or by the Universal publicity department matters less than the public acknowledgement of the prevalence and perception of frankenstein discourse during this period.

¹⁶³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 24.

¹⁶⁴ Several scholars have recounted the pre-production and production of *Frankenstein*. See David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York: Norton, 1993); Soister, *Of Gods and Monsters*, 112-117; Brunas et al, *Universal Horrors*, 20-30; Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 91-95.

versions currently in circulation, some of which were protected by copyright and some of which were not. The Webling play was one such example, and by acquiring the rights to this theatrical adaptation, Universal could protect itself from future legal recourse. (Universal had learned this lesson in witnessing the years of copyright-infringement litigation between the Stoker family and the producers of *Nosferatu*.)¹⁶⁶

Second, adapting a play was more efficient than adapting a novel, especially after the emergence of talking pictures. Theatrical sources offered dialogue and a built-in contemporary audience, as well as models of stage directions, set designs, and story development. The mass migration of actors and writers from Broadway to Hollywood had been well documented, and many of the actors featured in film adaptations had recently performed in the theatrical version, Bela Lugosi among them.¹⁶⁷ Literary sources required considerable condensation and omission to suit economic imperatives and story length constraints. Working from the Webling play, as well as using the services of Balderston, allowed Universal to save time and money in these areas of pre-production and production, enabling the company to spend less money and time on story development than if it had assigned its contract writers to start from scratch with the novel. The shortened duration of the story development process offered an even more

¹⁶⁵ John Balderston bought the rights to Peggy Webling's play in 1930, but his revision never reached the stage. Instead, he sold his version to Universal and assisted with story development on the film adaptation.

¹⁶⁶ Soister asserts that acquiring the rights to this particular theatrical version, which was not currently playing in American theatres, ensured "total product exclusivity," meaning that Universal would not have to contend with a "'rival' production" of *Frankenstein* (114).

¹⁶⁷ The *New York Times* published numerous articles on studios' aggressive signing of Broadway talent, as well as a lengthy feature story on the personal challenges and opportunities of this transition for actors and writers. See "Fox in Talkies Only; Signs 200 Show Folk," and Duncan Aikman, "Broadway Finds a Home in Hollywood."

important advantage: Universal could move quickly into production of *Frankenstein* and capitalize on the recent popularity of *Dracula*.

Third, Universal was perfecting a formula that it could express not only through the final cut of its releases, but also in the pre-production and production stages of those releases. In its recent experience with *Dracula*, the company and its employees developed a model of adaptation that produced what it believed would be an entertaining and profitable motion picture. Like *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* developed its story line, script, and marketing plan from a popular story and iconic characters, a well-known novel, and a pre-existing theatrical production. Universal was thus standardizing a mode of film adaptation instituted with *Dracula*. At the same time, the filmmaking corporation improved upon some elements of the adaptation process in *Frankenstein*—for example, utilizing a novel in the public domain rather than one under copyright protection, which reduced acquisition fees by fifty percent. The company would reproduce and further refine this strategy in the pre-production, production, and publicity it implemented for subsequent films. Evidence of the increasing efficiency in *Frankenstein* can be seen in the production budget for the film, \$262,007, about 25% less than that of *Dracula*.

As Universal hoped, *Dracula* was a commercial success. But the film granted Universal more than a much-needed infusion of capital; it delivered multiple forms of symbolic profit as well, including visibility and credibility in first-run markets, notoriety for several actors under contract (including Lugosi, Frye, and Van Sloane), and the introduction of a new formula, which Universal could rely upon in the long term. Junior Laemmle quickly moved forward with *Frankenstein*, another supernatural thriller

adaptation. Robert Florey, tentatively assigned as the film's director to fulfill the one-picture contract he had recently signed with Universal, was asked to write a story synopsis based on the novel and the studio-owned theatrical adaptation. Reaction to his treatment was positive, and Florey and Garrett Fort immediately began a full screenplay, which included many scenes that made it into the final shooting script, completed and attributed in credits to Garrett Fort and Francis Edwards Faragoh. The *Frankenstein* screenplay introduced a few elements not present in the Shelley novel, including a romantic side-plot that featured a rival, Victor Moritz, for Henry Frankenstein's relationship with his romantic interest, Elizabeth. (Not coincidentally, *Dracula* also enhanced the romance between two of its main characters.) The inclusion of a similar narrative strand in *Frankenstein*, which was important enough to necessitate the invention of a new character, could relieve the dramatic tension produced by the film's themes, images, and sounds while it could introduce another connection between the two films and the Universal horror formula.¹⁶⁸

James Whale, fresh off the success of *Journey's End* (1930) and the Universal-produced *Waterloo Bridge* (1931), was offered his pick of any Universal film in development. The British director, known for melodramatic war pictures, chose *Frankenstein* and replaced Florey as director. This decision was a blow to Florey, who had invested considerable energy into the project. However, the introduction of Whale

¹⁶⁸ Schatz notes this tendency within the development of all Hollywood genres. "Genre filmmakers are in a rather curious bind: they must continually vary and reinvent the generic formula. At the same time, they must exploit those qualities that made the genre popular in the first place" (*Hollywood Genres*, 36).

influenced numerous key decisions in pre-production, including the casting of the film.¹⁶⁹ Colin Clive, who had worked with Whale on the stage production of *Journey's End*, was cast as the ambitious scientist Frankenstein. As with the casting of Count Dracula, Universal went through a lengthy process in finding an appropriate actor to play the Monster, a role that had become the chief attraction of *Frankenstein* and “frankenstein discourse.” Lugosi was an initial choice, but he reportedly had problems with the part, including the lack of dialogue and the heavy makeup he would be forced to wear; he finally refused.

Ultimately, the little-known character actor Boris Karloff landed the role. Karloff came to the attention of Whale in a chance encounter at the studio commissary. The director was struck by the character actor's angular features and expressive eyes and immediately asked Karloff for a screen test. In full makeup and costume, Karloff performed sensationally by all accounts and he was quickly hired at a fraction of Lugosi's salary. The primary cast was completed with many players from *Dracula*; Dwight Frye would portray Frankenstein's grossly disfigured lab assistant Fritz and Edward Van Sloan would be the young doctor's mentor, Dr. Waldman. As the similar narrative features of *Dracula* in the script for *Frankenstein* had functioned, these casting choices further ensured continuity between *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*.

An examination of the interaction between Universal and the SRO on *Frankenstein* sheds light on several facets of the development of the film and more importantly the

¹⁶⁹ See James Curtis, *James Whale: A New World of Gods and Monsters* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1998), for an argument regarding Whale's influence on the artistic presentation of *Frankenstein*.

increasing cultural visibility and the further concretization of several features within the horror genre, as well as the developing review approaches and the escalating authority of the SRO during this period. While the SRO signed off on *Dracula* with nary a protest, its ability to identify censorable content and its authority to mandate content had expanded considerably between February 1931 and August of that same year, when Universal submitted a script draft of *Frankenstein*. During this period, Hollywood pictures were becoming increasingly sensationalized, a trend led by the emergent gangster genre and numerous “sex pictures.” The Code seemed to be having little influence on Hollywood producers, who were intent on drawing audiences by upping the ante on violence and sex with each release, even despite the cuts demanded by local censors to ensure their exhibition. The SRO, mired in a public relations nightmare, sought a way to assert itself and protect the future of the film industry.¹⁷⁰ It did this by modifying its demeanor toward studios looking for uncritical approval of their films.

An August 18, 1931, letter from Joy to Junior Laemmle provides evidence of the SRO’s shifting perceptions. Joy expresses optimism that *Frankenstein* can pass censorship boards, but it also offers a stern warning:

...the only incidents in the script about which to really be concerned are those *gruesome* ones that will certainly bring an audience reaction of horror. We think you ought to keep thoroughly in mind during the production of this picture that the telling of a story with a theme as

¹⁷⁰ *Little Caesar* (1931) and *Public Enemy* (1931), released just before and after *Dracula*, were met by strong resistance from censors and heated objections from religious groups for their excessive violence and seeming validation of their criminal protagonists. Even with required cuts and the addition of introductory announcements condemning the criminal underworld they depicted, both films were tremendous commercial successes. Other studios quickly jumped on the gangster bandwagon, and according to Leff and Simmons, more than two-dozen gangster features were in production in late 1931. “Once the advocate of *Little Caesar*, Joy no longer pleaded with the censors for Hollywood clemency” (15-16).

gruesome as this will not permit the use of superlative incidents of the same character.¹⁷¹

Here, Joy twice uses an adjective, “gruesome,” that would become increasingly prominent in discussions of Universal’s early 1930 films. And the apprehension on Joy’s part is not necessarily related to the mere presence of “gruesomeness” in the script and film, but in the effects those scenes and themes could instill into a prospective audience. In the SRO review of *Dracula*, such themes and content were at the service of a fantastic story and character, and thus they served entertainment purposes. While *Frankenstein* also would depend on a supernatural plot and title character, its themes and images are somehow more realistic and thus may produce an undesirable response—“horror.” Paradoxically, *Dracula* represented an escape from realism, while *Frankenstein* threatened to produce undesirable effects by similar means.¹⁷²

Shooting on *Frankenstein* began on August 24, 1931 and ended on October 3, five days after its scheduled completion. Reaction to initial cuts of the film indicates that Universal did address some of Joy’s concerns in production. A November 1931 letter from SRO executive Fred Beetson to Junior Laemmle reported that a Code review of *Frankenstein* foresaw few censorship difficulties for the film, which was to be released in less than three weeks.¹⁷³ However, numerous state censorship boards objected to *Frankenstein*—for example, Kansas censors demanded the elimination of several

¹⁷¹ “Letter: Jason Joy to Carl Laemmle, Jr.,” 18 Aug 1931, PCA File, File: “FRANKENSTEIN (UNIVERSAL, 1931).” Emphasis mine.

¹⁷² In my analysis of *Frankenstein* below, I’ll demonstrate how the film employs similar methods and topics as *Dracula* does to instill horror. However, *Frankenstein* actually lessens the appeals to reality used by its predecessor (both in the film proper and publicity).

dialogue sequences, at least one dozen shots, and entire scenes.¹⁷⁴ Asher wrote to Joy defending the film's entertainment value and dramatic integrity in its present cut, and hoped that the SRO would argue against the demand for cuts.¹⁷⁵

However, the strong sentiment against the film's content and the considerable effort required to negotiate acceptable content influenced the SRO to re-examine its perspective on such films. SRO reviewers began to formulate a strategy to limit proliferation of films like *Frankenstein* rather than defend them. These discussions also reveal that the SRO was beginning to reassess its endorsement of *Dracula* months earlier. In a January 1932 memo from Will Hays, Joy describes a group of films that threaten the public perception of Hollywood producers and the legitimacy of film as an entertainment medium:

If something ... could be done about the so-called horror pictures we'd be very much happier than we are. The fact that the supply of such stories is necessarily limited will lead eventually to straining for more and more horror until the wave topples over and breaks. Universal now has two more such stories in mind for production ..., and all the others are more intrigued by the fact that *Frankenstein* is ... taking in big money at theatres. Talking out here won't have much effect, with the cycle as successful as it. If the scattered ... instances that come to our attention reflect the general attitude, resentment is surely being built up. How could it be otherwise if children go to these pictures and have the jitters, followed by nightmares? I, for one, would hate to have my children see FRANKENSTEIN, JEKYL, or the others and you probably feel the same way. Not only is there a future economic consideration, but maybe there is a real moral responsibility involved to which I wonder if we as individuals ought to lend our support.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ "Letter: Fred Beetson to Carl Laemmle, Jr.," 2 Nov 1931, PCA File, File: "FRANKENSTEIN (UNIVERSAL, 1931)."

¹⁷⁴ According to Brunas et al, the Kansas-approved cut of the film came in at nearly half of the 70-minute running time, "rendering the film nearly incomprehensible." The local response against this version was so strong and vocal that censors finally relented and allowed the full version to be exhibited in the state (27).

¹⁷⁵ "Letter: E.M. Asher to Jason Joy," 10 Jan 1932, PCA File, File: "FRANKENSTEIN (UNIVERSAL, 1931)."

¹⁷⁶ "Memo: Jason Joy to Will Hays," 11 Jan 1932, PCA File, File: "FRANKENSTEIN (UNIVERSAL, 1931)."

As in his warning to Junior Laemmle about *Frankenstein's* gruesome elements, in this memo Joy suggests that such themes and images can leave indelible impressions on spectators, especially children (a demographic he did not explicitly address in his review of *Dracula*). Joy also has moved from isolated examples to a group of films described under a generic moniker: "so-called horror pictures." This attribution seems to give Joy the power to identify *Frankenstein* and other films as a legitimate threat to spectators and to the reputations of Hollywood and the SRO. The impending upwelling of "resentment" from censors and consumers positions the SRO to assume the authority of defining and uphold the "moral" role of Hollywood. I should note that this is a striking similarity to Joy's conception of the threat of horror films in general: that they might produce effects in spectators which could spread beyond the defined, safe space of the cinema. Just months after his review of *Dracula*, Joy adopts a dramatically different stance with respect to the effects that content might produce on the audience. He insists that his reservations about those effects are synonymous with those of the audience at large. Joy's quick transition from his desire to protect his children from horror films to his musings on the need to restrict the entire genre indicate the modified posture he and the SRO begin to assume by late 1931: the SRO's tastes are everyone's tastes. With such a perspective in place, no wonder that the organization became more rigorous about, and in a short time more able to guide, the content in films released by Hollywood filmmaking corporations. Films categorized under the horror moniker motivated this transformation,

which had lasting effects not only on this genre but also on all films released by Hollywood studios in the following decades.

Joy's prediction that studios would exhaust the supply of stories for this burgeoning genre seems to refer to the fact that most of the "so-called horror pictures" up to that point were film adaptations. Soon, these studios would simply run out of pre-existing stories—which might be good or bad depending on the genre's ability to self-proliferate. But these initial sound era horror films were not adapted from anonymous novels, short stories, and plays; rather, *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* relied for their name recognition and, as evidence from the SRO file reveals, their cultural legitimacy on the international popularity and respectability of pre-existing texts and famous authors. Universal and the SRO would use this fact in its favor when confronted by censorship bodies about the suitability of *Frankenstein* for general audiences. For example, when *Frankenstein* faced stiff resistance from Quebec censors, Universal and the SRO collaborated on a solution that appeased censors but also maintained the coherence and integrity of the narrative. Instead of removing large sections of the film, they considered inserting a prologue that featured a dialogue about the reasons for composing the book between *Frankenstein's* author, Mary Shelley, her husband Percy Shelley, and their friend Lord Byron.¹⁷⁷ Another option eventually agreed to by Quebec censors and the Canadian Universal Film Company was simply featuring a sustained shot of the book jacket behind scrolling text that assured viewers ...

¹⁷⁷ "Letter: Asher to Joy," 12 Apr 1932, PCA File, File: "FRANKENSTEIN (UNIVERSAL, 1931)."

The story of FRANKENSTEIN is pure fiction. It was written by the wife of the famous English poet Percy B. Shelley on a challenge from him and Lord Byron as to who would write the most fantastic tale. Like a “Trip to Mars” by Jules Verne and other imaginative books it delves into the physically impossible. For almost a hundred years this story has furnished entertainment for countless people and though no moral is intended, it might tend to show what would happen to man if he delved into something beyond his ken.¹⁷⁸

The SRO’s response to the censorship problems resembles its reviewers’ initial interpretation of *Dracula*—that the story can be less shocking and morally objectionable if it is understood to lack any basis in reality. While it had become more rigorous in its review process and more adamant about its objections, the SRO still felt that a film’s categorization under “fantasy” counterfeited the affect it could engender in audiences

However, the tactic utilized by Universal also gestures toward a new strategy that positions the literary author, in this case Mary Shelley, as ultimately responsible for the content of the film. In effect, the SRO and Universal were constructing yet another way “to evade authorial responsibility for the moral standards of their output,” in a manner similar to the cautionary, polemical announcements appended to many gangster films.¹⁷⁹ In publicity for *Dracula*, Universal had suggested promotions that conflated the content of the Stoker novel and the Universal film, but here the company heightens the importance of the literary figure (and, tellingly, indicates the elevated notoriety and appeal of Percy Shelley above his wife). This strategy could simultaneously deflect criticism onto a deceased figure and perhaps heighten the cultural value of the film by its association with not just one but three literary icons, the Shelleys and Byron. By

¹⁷⁸ “Memo: Luduc to Fithian,” 9 Feb 1932, PCA File, File: “FRANKENSTEIN (UNIVERSAL, 1931).”

assigning responsibility for possibly objectionable content (under the guise of unassuming “fantasy”) onto these three figures, the cultural legitimacy of Universal’s product is ostensibly elevated from the sensationalistic exploitation of a calculating, commercially minded filmmaking corporation to the “pure” whimsy of respected writers.

“THE MONSTER IS LOOSE!”: MARKETING *FRANKENSTEIN*¹⁸⁰

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the various texts that contributed to frankenstein discourse shifted focus away from Victor Frankenstein in favor of his spectacular, grisly creation, and one would expect the impending film adaptation to follow suit. However, the frequently cited tagline for *Frankenstein*, “THE MAN WHO MADE A MONSTER,” suggests otherwise, indicating that the film adaptation would closely follow the scientist’s story.¹⁸¹ (The spoken introduction to the film, discussed below, repeats this gesture.) But the description of the Creature as a Monster hints that the film’s narrative might indeed follow the prevailing path of “frankenstein discourse,” as does the majority of the rhetorical appeals featured elsewhere in the ads. Take for example an announcement that appeared in the November 25, 1931, edition of the *Atlanta Constitution*.¹⁸² While the tagline is positioned in bold font directly beneath the title, the text and images above and below focus exclusively on the Monster, effectively

¹⁷⁹ Maltby, “To Prevent the Prevalent Type of Book,” 92.

¹⁸⁰ I have been unable to locate an original pressbook distributed by Universal for the release of *Frankenstein*. Unlike for *Dracula*, no pressbook for *Frankenstein* has been reprinted and published. Therefore, I will briefly describe and analyze several newspaper advertisements for the film, the majority of which followed the guidelines for or directly reprinted ads and slogans featured in pressbooks.

¹⁸¹ In many of the newspaper advertisements that announced the opening of *Frankenstein*, the ad for the film is featured prominently, usually garnering more space than those for other films. This signifies that *Frankenstein* was a highly anticipated release and that exhibitors believed it had significant box office potential.

¹⁸² “Advertisement A: *Frankenstein*,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 25 Nov 1931, 21.

obfuscating the presence of the title character and his role in the story (Figure 2.2, below).



Figure 2.2: An ad featured in the *Atlanta Constitution* (25 Nov 1931).

Copy at the top reads: “THIS TALE OF/ A MONSTER WHO LOOKED LIKE A MAN/ ... CONCEIVED/ in/ MADNESS/ .../ BUILT/ with/ LOVE!” Just below, in smaller font, the rhetoric further cedes narrative control of *Frankenstein* to the Monster when pronouns replace his proper name: “—no woman’s/ kiss could/ touch his lips—/no pity could touch/ his heart!” Two images of the Monster frame this copy, an imposing headshot occupies the upper left and a picture of his body splayed across a gurney inhabits the

bottom right, and visually reinforce his dominance over the ad. Based on the text, visual images, and orientation of the ad, the possibility of confusing creator and creation (in function or name), or more likely collapsing the roles of the two into a single character, becomes possible and perhaps even likely. While the publicity for *Frankenstein* encourages this mistaken identity, it has not invented this confusion; rather, it merely adopts a trend established previously in frankenstein discourse.

The diminishing distinction between Frankenstein and the Monster portends the generic categories that Universal would deploy to explain the film and its appeal. *Frankenstein* clearly was designed to capitalize on the success of, and to continue the generic parameters introduced in, *Dracula*. Moreover, the discussion of theatrical versions of *Frankenstein* above demonstrates that shock value, horror, and spectacle had been prominent elements of stage publicity and, in relation, frankenstein discourse since Peake's 1823 *Presumption*. Thus, it is no surprise that advertisements promise a different viewing experience than the "pure fiction" cited in the introduction produced for Quebec censors. That introductory message implies that *Frankenstein* served no function and had no effect beyond the "entertainment" it could provide within the cinema. Rather than fantastic, benign entertainment, the ads for *Frankenstein* describe a film with themes, images, and effects that would linger in the spectator's mind well past the movie-going experience.

No phrase signifies this intention more than the declaration, "THE MONSTER IS LOOSE," featured in a November 29, 1931, ad. Here, the exclamatory statement implicitly affixes a specific emotional facet, terror, to the film: the Monster threatens the

well being of the audience beyond the pale of the cinema, even prior to entry into the movie house.¹⁸³ Such generic signals are more numerous and explicit in other ads. In a gesture that would be reiterated in the film, another November 29 announcement in the *Atlanta Constitution* carries a “friendly warning” that *Frankenstein* may agitate those who have “a weak heart and cannot stand excitement or gruesomeness.” According to the ad, those potential audience members who do “like an unusual thrill ... will find it in *Frankenstein*.”¹⁸⁴ (This admission of the film’s gruesome images and scintillating story line contradicts Universal’s strategy for rebuffing censors.) The most explicit instance of this approach occurs in a December 2, 1931, ad in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Figure 2.3, below).¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ The desired effect of this proclamation is structurally similar to the constant threat of vampirism raised in publicity for *Dracula*.

¹⁸⁴ “Advertisement B: *Frankenstein*,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 29 Nov 1931, 16. Despite the increasing propensity to cite the “gruesome” images and horrific effects of *Frankenstein*, attempts by Universal to classify the film under the thriller category persist. One ad calls *Frankenstein* an unprecedented thriller (“NO THRILLER EVER MADE CAN TOUCH IT!”), while another alleges, “[*Frankenstein* is] one thousand times more fascinating than *Dracula*.” The latter claim again calls attention to *Frankenstein*’s relationship to *Dracula* and Universal’s wish to forge an identity through the horror genre by linking the two films for the prospective audience. From this perspective, the description of *Frankenstein* as a thriller attach to the generic qualities assigned to *Dracula*. “Advertisement B: *Frankenstein*” and “Advertisement A: *Frankenstein*”.

¹⁸⁵ “Advertisement C: *Frankenstein*,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 2 Dec 1931, 12.

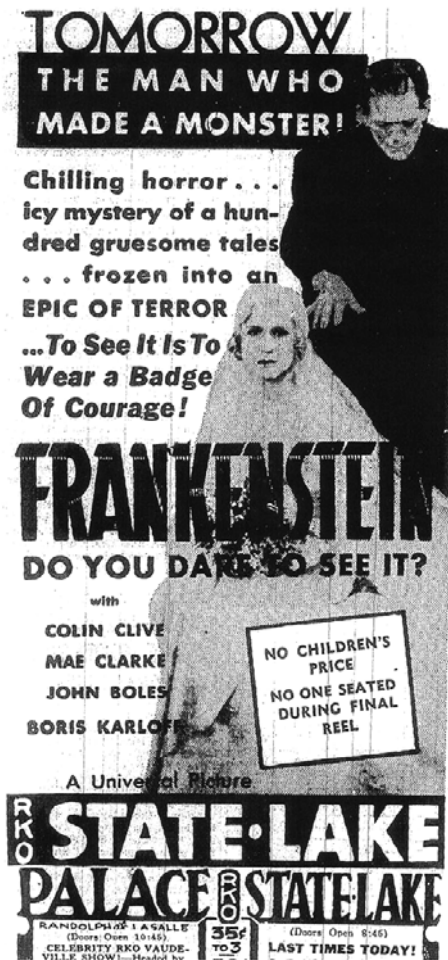


Figure 2.3: An ad featured in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (2 Dec 1931).

Here, the familiar tagline is followed by a description of the film that is tinged with generic keywords: “Chilling horror .../ icy mystery of a hun-/dred gruesome tales/ ... frozen into an/ EPIC OF TERROR/ ... To See It Is To/ Wear a Badge/ of Courage!” As it had in the *Dracula* pressbook, Universal uses publicity to organize *Frankenstein* into several generic categories. The long and diverse background of the source material—here indicated by “epic” and “hundred gruesome tales”—allows for such a variegated designation. While the ad dislodges Frankenstein from its association with the Shelley

novel and disperses the film's meaning and appeal across a litany of categories, including mystery, thriller, adventure and prestige release among others, the word "frozen" somehow fixes that movement of the "tale" and frankenstein discourse to suit its own needs; and those purposes are to elicit "terror."

These ads gesture toward the ambivalent, sadomasochistic appeal of *Frankenstein* that also begins the film. Even before the opening credits, *Frankenstein* opens to reveal a tuxedoed orator, emerging from dark theatre curtains. The medium shot slowly creeps to a close up as he speaks, addressing an implied crowd before him.

How do you do? Mr. Carl Laemmle feels that it would be a little unkind to present this picture without just a word of friendly warning. We are about to unfold the story of Frankenstein, a man of science, who sought to create a man after his own image without reckoning upon God. It is one of the strangest tales ever told. ... I think it will thrill you. It may shock you. It might even horrify you. So if any of you feel that you do not care to subject your nerves to such a strain, now is your chance to, uh—well, we've warned you.¹⁸⁶

This brief forewarning attributes authorship of the film and its ambivalent emotional effects, but not the "tale," to studio figurehead Laemmle. This gesture serves as yet another means to form a connection between the audience and the filmmaking corporation. Here, Universal's "personal" responsibility for the fledgling genre is absolute.

Advertising had already explicitly stated the lineage from *Dracula* to *Frankenstein*, so too does this brief oratory, which conflates the background and appeals of the two films. While *Dracula* is dubbed, "the strangest passion the world has ever known" in

¹⁸⁶ *Frankenstein*, dir. James Whale, 71 min. Universal Pictures, 1931, DVD.

publicity, *Frankenstein* is described, “one of the strangest tales the world has ever known.” Based on these descriptions, *Frankenstein* is “one” of many such “tales,” a group in which *Dracula* would no doubt be included. The introduction does not mention Mary Shelley, original “teller” of the legend. In effect, Universal wrests authorship of this *version of Frankenstein*, removes the overt presence and authority of Mary Shelley (as happens to a lesser degree in the opening credits, where the author of the novel is referred to as “Mrs. Percy Bysshe Shelly”), and links the “tale” implicitly to Frankenstein discourse, *Dracula*, and the horror genre. The *Dracula* pressbook promises thrills, horror, shock, and mystery, just as this introduction does for *Frankenstein*. Tellingly, the generic litany ends by ascribing “horror” to this film, and by implication to its film adaptation predecessor. “Horror” is the term that would become more firmly attached to such films in publicity, in discussions at Universal and the SRO, in critical reviews, and within the films themselves.

CODIFYING THE HORROR GENRE WITH *FRANKENSTEIN*

Dracula instituted many of the parameters that subsequent horror films would follow and gradually refine. Among these were the strategic use of sound (both through the presence and absence of sound effects and sparse but effective dialogue), plots that pit a dangerous outsider against modern society, and the repeated insistence that its events and characters could in fact exist and affect the lives of the films’ audiences. *Frankenstein* includes all of these elements as well; however, in *Frankenstein*, those generic characteristics are executed in a more efficient manner than in *Dracula*. In my discussion of the film, I’ll develop this claim by first exploring the various ways in which

Frankenstein establishes continuity with *Dracula* and expresses its dependence on its predecessor as source material. Then, I'll examine the increasing technical expertise and narrative fluidity demonstrated by *Frankenstein*, which indicates Universal's further refinement of the horror genre formula.

Advertisements for *Frankenstein* and the film's spoken introduction imply its relationship to the successful and distinctive *Dracula*. Since Universal did not own theatres, audiences may not complete this association by simply noticing the company moniker attached to both films. Several similarities between the films repeatedly invoke the relationship. Both lack background music, save for their respective opening credit sequences. Both feature similar plots, which focus on supernatural characters that wreak havoc on European society. Yet, whether because of budget restrictions or other reasons, numerous films during this period lacked music; and any science fiction release, fantasy, or thriller might have included unbelievable incidents and far-fetched characters.¹⁸⁷

Frankenstein goes further, duplicating many of the themes, actors, characterizations, and sets of *Dracula* and creating continuous link between the two films. A few examples illustrate this phenomenon. Immediately following the opening credit titles, the story opens to a tight shot of the bodies of several unidentified individuals. Speaking in Latin and holding crucifixes, they are obviously engaged in a religious ritual, which in the next shot is more clearly a funeral. The camera pans over the faces of the funeral attendees,

¹⁸⁷ *Frankenstein* can be perceived as a blend of horror and science fiction, as can the later *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1932), *The Invisible Man* (1933), *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and several other horror films that no doubt influenced the dystopic depictions of the future that predominated in the genre in the 1950s and thereafter. Other contemporary science fiction films include *The Lost World* (1925), *Metropolis* (1927), and *Just Imagine* (1930).

revealing several of the extras used in *Dracula*, which begins with a similar scene featuring some of the same actors in prayer. The parallels between the two films grow closer when in *Frankenstein's* subsequent shot, two men secretly observe the funeral; one of those men is Frankenstein's assistant Fritz who resembles and acts like Renfield of *Dracula* (the other man is Henry Frankenstein). In fact, Dwight Frye portrays both characters, executing another link between the films. In another casting correspondence, Edward Van Sloan (Professor Van Helsing in *Dracula*) plays Dr. Waldman, Frankenstein's former medical school professor and, as Van Helsing represented, a voice of scholarly reason.

Frankenstein and Fritz soon exhume the coffin after the ceremony has concluded and the gravesite has been deserted. As they dig, their dialogue might lead an audience to wonder if *Frankenstein* could be a continuation of *Dracula*: perhaps Henry Frankenstein and Fritz are trying to revive Count Dracula himself. Henry Frankenstein exclaims, "The Moon is rising. We have no time to lose. ... He's just resting. Waiting for a new life to come." Of course, *Frankenstein* is not a sequel to *Dracula*, and Frankenstein and his assistant are not exhuming the dead Count. However, the fact that *Frankenstein* begins with this scene—rather than, say, a chronicle of the young's scientist youth and education or a framing device approximate to the novel's story-within-a-story structure—and indicates the film's lineage and its reliance on *Dracula* for story development, character portrayals, and themes.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Several other elements in *Frankenstein* continue the themes and repeat the characterizations in *Dracula*. *Frankenstein* focuses on the origins and exploits of the living dead through the dramatization of a violent,

The respective marketing campaigns for *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* acknowledge the “strangeness” of the supernatural events and characters they depict; however, both simultaneously insist on the possibility of the events and ideas they dramatize in order to raise interest in their respective subjects and increase the emotional affect of their diegeses. *Frankenstein* does not have the long sociological strand of the vampire discourse to gesture toward and excite audiences, as *Dracula* does. Therefore, it relies even more heavily on the film adaptation’s plot and characters to invest the *Frankenstein* myth with authenticity. In *Dracula*, the Count’s background and characteristics are briefly described at several moments throughout the narrative. *Frankenstein* devotes the majority of its first half (roughly 35 minutes) to the events leading to the assembly and reanimation of the Monster. The extreme care with which the film adaptation chronicles these proceedings exceeds even the Shelley novel, which instead concentrates on events that follow the “birth” of the Creature.

As Van Helsing does in *Dracula*, the respected Dr. Waldman delivers the judgment about the likelihood of the supernatural subjects actually occurring. Waldman originally doubts his former pupil’s project. When Frankenstein exclaims, “I have discovered the great ray that first brought life into the world,” Waldman is suspicious, believing the scientist’s misguided ambitions have driven him mad. This segment and portions of its

part-human “Monster” that preys upon modern society. Frankenstein’s Monster resembles the Count, but so too does Henry Frankenstein in some ways. Like the Count, Henry Frankenstein requires a “supply of other bodies” to sustain himself. Recently dead corpses are the rudiments of his work, which gives his life meaning; fresh bodies are Count Dracula’s literal life-blood and he travels to London to find an infinite supply. When perceived from this perspective, *Frankenstein* represents an adaptation of *Dracula*, the Shelley novel, the Webbing play, and frankenstein discourse.

dialogue resemble the moment near the end of the Shelley novel, in which the ship captain comes face to face with the grotesque Creature that Victor Frankenstein has described. The captain is initially skeptical of Frankenstein's story, but his eyewitness account offers indelible proof of the Creature's existence and, more importantly, of the possible truth of his spectacular origin. Dr. Waldman of the Universal film adaptation serves a similar function as the ship captain of the novel. However, while Waldman does in fact see the inanimate Creature lying motionless on Frankenstein's lab gurney, he (alongside Moritz and Elizabeth) also witnesses its metamorphosis from death to life. The novel dramatizes Frankenstein's experiment while he is alone in his lab; witnesses may be able to corroborate the Creature and his features but not the unlikely manner by which he came to be. The film adaptation extends the argument of the novel by depicting the scene of creation with witnesses, one of which has been presented as a medical authority.

Waldman not only represents a credible witness for the reality of "bio-electric reanimation," he also enacts the figurative transformation from Creature to Monster. After Frankenstein triumphantly exclaims, "It's alive!" and describes where he collected the various parts that comprise his invention, Waldman replies that the brain, stolen from the Medical College, was that of "a criminal mind. ... You have created a Monster and it will destroy you." This declaration effectively completes the origin story of the Monster, who thereafter becomes the central attraction of the film, as he was in most theatrical productions.

In “frankenstein discourse,” the transformation in Frankenstein’s creation from benign, rational, speaking Creature to destructive, irrational, silent Monster occurred when theatre producers sought to concentrate on the sensationalism of the story and insert exciting visual effects. As a result, the frightening, uncontrollable Monster quickly emerged as de facto figurehead of frankenstein discourse. The Monster even became confused with Frankenstein himself. In the film adaptation, a similar process occurs: Frankenstein’s creation quickly (and without apparent cause) transforms from Creature to Monster, acts as such, and becomes the central figure in the narrative, symbolically wresting control of the story from his creator.¹⁸⁹

As is the tendency in the development of any formula production strategy, later entries often are more efficient than their predecessors.¹⁹⁰ *Frankenstein* is no exception. Produced for considerably less than *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* paradoxically appears more technically efficient than the previous entry in the Universal horror genre. It features a marked expansion in camera movement and mobility. Evidence of this can be seen at several moments, including a crane shot that moves through the village celebration of the Frankenstein wedding; a medium shot of the Monster, angled upward from his feet and

¹⁸⁹ The Monster’s usurpation of the narrative from his creator is finalized when Henry Frankenstein leaves his remote lab after the Monster becomes enraged and kills Fritz. While Frankenstein is resting at the House of Frankenstein with his fiancée Elizabeth, Waldman takes over the care and study of the Monster, which soon awakes, strangles the doctor, and escapes into the Bavarian countryside. These developments fit into the “rites of order,” described by Schatz in *Hollywood Genres*, which structure the narratives of numerous popular genres, including horror I contend (34-35). Just as Henry Frankenstein is reintegrated into society, signified by his marriage at the House of Frankenstein, the Monster becomes the central character of the story and, as a result, is thrust into the role of “violent” outsider who, because he threatens the domestic tranquility just re-established at the House of Frankenstein, the community rallies to eliminate.

¹⁹⁰ For an analysis of standardization and differentiation practices during this period, see *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 96-112.

designed to create a sense of the character's intimidating presence; and the series of shots indicating the respective reactions of Waldman, Elizabeth, and Moritz to Frankenstein's claims about his experiment in human reanimation. The last of these three examples indicates the ability of the *Frankenstein* production crew to set up and execute multiple shots despite the smaller budget and shooting schedule of the film in comparison to *Dracula*, which may have used a single shot to convey the characters' reactions. (See for example the shot in which Count Dracula, standing in the theatre box, shocks Lucy, Mina, and Harker by observing, "To die, to be really dead: that must be glorious.")

Frankenstein also demonstrates the increasing expertise and efficiency with which Universal integrated sound technology into the horror genre and its releases in general. While *Dracula* features sound effects that invoke tonal shifts, from the everyday to "horror," and to inform the audience, but not other characters, of Count Dracula's presence, *Frankenstein* includes sound effects that often signify and motivate scene changes and thus play an integral role in both the narrative and its ability to induce horror.¹⁹¹ The first off-screen noise that instigates an important plot development occurs when Fritz, attempting to steal a jar containing the "normal" brain he and Frankenstein plan to use for their experimental creature, drops the jar after a noise outside of the classroom frightens him. He takes, unwittingly, the "abnormal" brain instead and flees,

¹⁹¹ The presence of ambient sound is also more consistent in *Frankenstein*, indicating the dexterity with which Universal utilized sound technology. However, because I cannot reproduce the conditions of exhibition, which varied by theatre and print exhibited, I can only comment positively on the more consistent presence of ambient sound, not its quality, which may an impression produced by my specific context of reception.

thus ensuring the disposition of the Monster and the course of the story (Figure 2.4, below).



Figure 1.4: An off-screen noise frightens Fritz (Dwight Frye), causing him to drop the ‘normal brain’ intended for Henry Frankenstein's experiment.

Later in Frankenstein's laboratory, the ambient sound of a thunderstorm establishes an eerie mood while it signals the necessary production design (lightning) for Frankenstein to bio-electrically reanimate the corpse.

This pattern of mood shift and story development by way of off-screen sound persists throughout the film, eventually expanding to an even more sophisticated function, in which sound effects communicate important information and prompt scene changes. During the same scene, an off-screen knock, which signals the presence of Waldman, Elizabeth and Moritz, disrupts Frankenstein's experiment and ensures that others will witness and verify the impending re-animation process. Another example: just prior to the marriage ceremony at the House of Frankenstein, a groan tells Frankenstein that the Monster is in the house and then a woman's scream that he is in Elizabeth's room; later, a

noisy struggle informs the search party that Frankenstein has found the Monster. These noises thus deliver information to characters and the audience and, by so doing, they prompt stage directions and set and scene changes.¹⁹²

While *Dracula* includes extended segments without dialogue, music or sound effects, *Frankenstein* features far fewer. However, despite the impetus and ability to fill the soundtrack, relative quiet does predominate in a few instances. In part because of their infrequent presence, these segments of *Frankenstein* elicit a much greater influence on the desired response the film attempts to conjure. When Waldman prepares to dissect the sedated Monster, mise en scene conveys the action and conjures anxiety: a medium shot shows the Monster's arm slowly, silently creeping behind the doctor, moving up to his neck, and finally grasping Waldman to strangle him (Figures 2.5 through 2.8, below).

¹⁹² Despite this function, in *Frankenstein*, as in *Dracula*, off-screen sound also conserves budget resources by limiting the need for additional shots and set construction.



Figure 2.5-2.8: In one of Frankenstein's most anxiety-inducing shots, the Monster (Boris Karloff) silently grabs and kills Dr. Waldman (Edward Van Sloan).

The Monster repeats this tactic in two later scenes—in each, he looms behind and then cautiously approaches Elizabeth and later Frankenstein. The lack of dialogue and background music in these shots increases the anxiety of the depicted events, forebodes violence, and elevates the menace associated with the Monster (Figures 2.9 and 2.10, below).¹⁹³

¹⁹³ In this and other scenes, the Monster approaches his victims in a manner analogous to Count Dracula. Both blend into their surroundings—the Monster via his surprising stealth and Dracula through his ability to assume the deportment of a cosmopolitan—enough to be virtually undetectable until predation is imminent and unavoidable.



Figure 2.9-2.10: Repeating the stealth tactic employed in previous scenes, the Monster quietly approaches Elizabeth (Mae Clarke), whose off-screen scream alerts the wedding party of danger and her whereabouts.

In addition, here the viewer is privy to information via a point of view that characters in the scene do not have. This method exceeds the techniques used in *Dracula* and represents a revolutionary step in the horror genre's means of exciting its audiences and inducing its primary effect.¹⁹⁴ Such a technique of narrative communication was common in silent film, but *Frankenstein* appends this element indelibly to the language through which sound era horror films would excite audiences thereafter.

In another shift from the Shelley novel, theatrical versions of the story make the Monster unable to speak. So too does the Universal adaptation. But just as the affectation in Lugosi's line delivery creates a unique, eerie characterization for Count Dracula, the varying intonation and volume in Karloff's grunts, groans, and screams lends a countenance to the Monster that dialogue and regularized enunciation may not. During a scuffle with Fritz, Frankenstein and Waldman, the Monster emits a barely audible moan

¹⁹⁴ This visual language, which simultaneously elicits fear while it communicates vital information, is ubiquitous in contemporary horror films to a point that it hardly merits exposition. Nevertheless, one may examine important scenes in such recent films as *Scream* (1996) to witness the use of this technique after its introduction in *Frankenstein*.

as he struggles to evade the torch held by Fritz. As the Monster attempts to escape from the clutches of the other two men, the moan elevates to a deep groan and he pushes them away. Finally, he is struck on the back and falls to the floor, where he emits a series of sharp, loud growls. The three men successfully restrain the Monster with a rope and Frankenstein exclaims, "Get him to the cellar. It's a Monster." In this scene, the Monster not only inaugurates his frequent attempts at oral communication, he is also dubbed "Monster" by his creator, a designation that is the result of both his physical strength and his subhuman speech. Reinforcing this transformation from docile, silent creature to uncontrollable, audible Monster, the next shot shows the character, manacled in the aforementioned dungeon, struggling to break free and screaming erratically.

The inability to communicate with others also makes the Monster less predictable, infused with both menace and pathos. For example, when Fritz taunts the chained Monster, the latter's countenance rapidly transitions from cowering fear to homicidal rage. Later, after the Monster has escaped into the countryside, he happens upon a young girl. This is his first encounter with a human outside of Frankenstein's lab. Based on the previous characterization of the Monster in the film and in Frankenstein discourse, one might anticipate him to flee or destroy her. Instead, he approaches her without a sound and, in response to her compassion, unexpectedly participates in a game with her. However, his inability to comprehend speech or to communicate verbally causes him to misunderstand the game, and the Monster, believing his actions to be part of the game, throws the girl into a lake, where she drowns.

In conjunction with *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* associated the company with a successful formula and created a demand for horror that, among all filmmaking corporations, Universal could satisfy most quickly, efficiently, and profitably. A key decision after production and initial previews of *Frankenstein* by Junior Laemmle helped to ensure these advantages. A previewed cut of the film included an ending that clearly indicated the death of both Frankenstein and the Monster. Junior Laemmle felt that such a conclusion ended the film on a depressing, dissatisfying note and, more importantly, that it eliminate future use of the characters in Universal films. The company committed this mistake with Count Dracula, and it did not want to do the same with the unique characters of *Frankenstein*. Whale initially resisted Junior Laemmle's appeals, but he finally compromised by agreeing to shorten the windmill sequence to suggest but not confirm the Monster's death and then to attach a brief epilogue showing Henry Frankenstein in recovery at the House of Frankenstein.¹⁹⁵ This revised ending differs slightly from that depicted in the Shelley novel and from the fiery disaster sequences that closed many of the theatrical adaptations; however, it was quite true to frankenstein discourse, where the characters lived forever in order to be invoked in future times and locations. From a broader perspective, the film's revised ending ensured that the Monster and its creator might benefit the company for years to come, not only in terms of future deployment of the characters in subsequent *Frankenstein* films, but also in the assurance that the actors—such as Frye, Karloff and Van Sloan, all under contract at Universal—

¹⁹⁵ Schatz recounts these events in *Genius of the System*, 94-95.

would have future value in the *Frankenstein* series and those other Universal horror films requiring similar characters.

Apparently, the new ending satisfied contemporary audiences as well, for *Frankenstein* was a remarkable commercial success—especially in comparison to its modest budget, which eventually reached \$300,000. *Frankenstein* was released to United States theatres November 21, 1931, and opened gradually across the United States during the next two weeks. By all accounts, it was a sensation in the large urban areas, as well as neighborhood and rural markets that it reached in the following weeks, and the film eventually earned \$12,000,000 in domestic box office receipts.¹⁹⁶

This immense return on investment realized through *Frankenstein* far exceeded that of *Dracula*. Even more satisfying, *Frankenstein* was leaner and more efficient than its predecessor. It was cheaper to make and drew a larger audience. It was more fluid in its technical elements, such as sound and cinematography, and more effective in its narrative exposition. Moreover, Universal's decision to allow the Monster and Henry Frankenstein to live to star in other films would prove a boon to the future viability of the horror genre and the commercial potential of its most familiar characters. While the literary version of *Frankenstein* and the frankenstein discourse were in the public domain, Henry Frankenstein and his monstrous creation, played expertly by Karloff and visualized

¹⁹⁶ This widely accepted estimate is shared by numerous sources, including *The Internet Movie Database* (URL: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0021884/business>) and another site dedicated to box office figures (URL: <http://www.leesmovieinfo.net/wbotitle.php?t=677>). The \$12,000,000 figure does not account for foreign markets, where Universal had long held an advantage over its competitors. The consistent use of foreign settings in Universal horror films produced a dual effect: American audiences might appreciate the safe distance from the unsettling events transpiring on screen while foreign audiences would welcome the European locales, characters, and occasional dialogue, whether authentic or not.

indelibly by Universal's production team, were under the exclusive ownership of Universal, which could profit from them now and in future iterations. *Frankenstein* also attached the Universal name to a profitable formula with cache in first-run markets. While the film was a boon to the filmmaking corporation, all of these measures of success were only possible through the innovations of *Dracula*; *Frankenstein* depended on *Dracula* as a model of adaptation (which included such elements as story development and marketing) and a generic forebear.

A quick scan of contemporary reviews for *Frankenstein* confirms the claim that the film solidified the characteristics of the horror genre and Universal's relationship to it.¹⁹⁷ The consensus of reviews discussing horror in *Frankenstein* signifies, first, that Universal's publicity campaign had some degree of success in alerting audiences to the elements of spectacle in the text, leading all but one review to analyze the ability of the film to deliver on its promise to frighten and horrify; and second, that horror was an expectation of frankenstein discourse and by association *Frankenstein*. Among a sample of eleven reviews from newspapers, periodicals, and trade publications, all mention the emerging horror genre, while ten of eleven use the objectives of the category—i.e., to “shock,” “terrify,” or “horrify”—to judge the appeal and effectiveness of the film. A moderate portion of the reviews, four of eleven, identify Universal's attempt to establish

¹⁹⁷ Nelson B. Bell, “Rialto: *Frankenstein*,” *Washington Post*, 21 Nov 1931, 14; “*Frankenstein*,” *The Film Daily*, 6 Dec 1931, 10; “*Frankenstein*,” *Variety*, 8 Dec 1931, 14; “*Frankenstein*,” *Outlook and Independent* 159, no. 15 (9 Dec 1931): 471; “*Frankenstein*,” *Time*, 14 Dec 1931, 25; “*Frankenstein*,” *Photoplay*, Jan 1932, 47; Mordaunt Hall, “*Frankenstein*,” *New York Times*, 5 Dec 1931, 21; Leo Meehan, “*Frankenstein*,” *Motion Picture Herald*, 14 Nov 1931, 40-1; Mae Tinee, “Horror, Thrills Compose Plot of *Frankenstein*,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 4 Dec 1931, 23; Rob Wagner, “*Frankenstein* (Universal, 1932),” *Rob Wagner's*

the genre through *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*; *Time* magazine's reviewer grouped the films under the moniker, "horrific weirds."

Universal effaced Mary Shelley's status as the originator of *Frankenstein* when promoting and introducing the film, choosing instead to identify the source material as a famed "tale." This tactic may have influenced the modest portion of reviews, only two of eleven, which mention Shelley or the literary version of *Frankenstein*. Those reviewers that invoke the novel do so in a way that calls attention exclusively to horror-related aspects of the text and other characteristics widely associated with "frankenstein discourse." For example, Leo Meehan's review in *Motion Picture Herald* calls the film, "[an] adequate version of a famous story and a famous play. The camera has afforded almost frankenstein opportunities of emphasizing all the deadly horror of this unique piece of literature." Meehan is clearly attempting a play on words, but his adjectival invocation of the common noun meaning of "frankenstein" also illustrates the term's presence in the contemporary vernacular. In addition, his brief comparison between source text(s) and film issues forth from his understanding of frankenstein discourse and his discomfort with the film's explicitly selective manner of adaptation.¹⁹⁸

Script 7, no. 158 (20 Feb 1932): 10; Whitney Williams, "Grewsome Entertainment: *Frankenstein*," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 Nov 1931, sec. "Preview": 3.

¹⁹⁸ Meehan acknowledges familiarity with the theatrical version of *Frankenstein*, as does Mordaunt Hall in his review of the film for the *New York Times*. Not coincidentally, both publications are located in New York, the city in which Peggy Webling's play had completed a successful two-month run the previous year. As a result, Meehan and Hall likely were familiar with the stage adaptation of *Frankenstein*, more likely to interpret *Frankenstein* in relation to the plot and themes of its theatrical predecessor, and in turn less likely to fault the film for diverging from the 1818 novel. The critical responses often depended on a combination of the reviewer's mode of address, audience, and geographical location alongside his or her familiarity with a particular strand and location of this expanding corpus of terminology, iconography, and texts.

CONCLUSION

Rather than diverting or derogating *Frankenstein* or the Shelley novel, this and other reviews contribute to and extend frankenstein discourse like any other theatrical, cinematic or literary text and lexical application discussed above. As might be said of Universal with its adaptation, these reviewers attempted to momentarily fix for their own purposes the “proper” meanings and functions of *Frankenstein*. Perhaps most importantly, the varied interpretations of *Frankenstein* expanded the meanings of the film text produced by Universal (too scary or not scary enough; adult oriented or “infantile”), the novel written by Mary Shelley (cast as “world-famous fiction,” “morbid psychological romance,” and “fairy tale”), and the frankenstein discourse which subsumed both of these texts and other lexical meanings and cultural associations. Thus, frankenstein and its related texts can represent *both* “artistic achievement” and “grewsome [sic] entertainment,” as can *Dracula* (which represented a model of story development, marketing, commercial positioning during the adaptation process for *Frankenstein*) and the vampire discourse that served as the first Universal horror film’s source text.

In this way, Universal’s film adaptations straddled two box office classes at once—the lucrative first-run market releases—signified by one of the ad’s claims that *Frankenstein*, despite its relatively modest budget, was “a Universal super-prestige release”—and the low budget, B-level, action-oriented formula films and programmers more commonly exhibited outside of the major urban areas and in foreign locales. Later Universal horror adaptations, explored in the following chapter, offer more vivid

examples of such a bifurcated releasing and marketing approach. All of these film releases—from *Dracula*, to *Frankenstein*, to the subsequent entries in the horror cycle, many of which were film adaptations—reflected a corporate strategy that was formulated in the early 1930s, when Junior Laemmle and other executives at Universal decided to use a certain class of source materials, especially attractive to Universal’s present condition and its future goals. These materials helped the corporation embark on a formula production policy and innovate a new genre through which the company could gain public visibility and derive a competitive advantage against firms with greater assets and stronger industrial positioning.

CHAPTER 3

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Sound, Horror, and the Adaptation of Cultural Discourses at Universal Pictures;

Part 2: The Poe Adaptations, 1932-1935

By its inception and elaboration of the horror genre in *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, Universal had created a cultural discourse of its own, which influenced story development, casting, budgetary, and publicity decisions and placed considerable pressure on later entries in this cycle.¹⁹⁹ Among these were several film adaptations based upon the literary works of Edgar Allan Poe, which proved ideal fodder for Universal's approach to film adaptation and the implementation of its corporate strategy and will be the focus of this chapter. An increasingly diverse pool of sources influenced these film adaptations, including the literary works upon which each film was supposedly based, the successes and failures of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, the more strict demands of the SRO, the economic efficiency and narrative standardization in the Universal-produced horror genre, and the long-debated and constantly fluctuating cultural status,

¹⁹⁹ As mentioned above, all of these sources bore enough similarities in plot and setting to allow Universal to incorporate them into its horror formula. Many of the novels and short stories Universal chose to adapt centered on Faustian scientists or intellectuals whose quest for knowledge and companionship lead them to conduct illegal experiments that challenged social norms and values. These protagonists' inevitable demise validated traditional morality as espoused by the Production Code enforced by the Hays Office censorship guidelines and explicitly criticized intellectual individualism. However, the source texts themselves focused on these themes or storylines to varying degrees; thus, the imperatives created by Universal's emerging style, signified not only by the stars and aesthetics of these films but also by the sources upon which they were based, led the studio to elaborate on these themes and characters in its films even if the source texts did not. Like other Universal horror films, *Murders in the Rue Morgue* featured an unstable scientist, played by burgeoning Universal "star" Bela Lugosi, whose controversial experiments in

popularity, and iconicity of Poe himself, which comprises a corpus of texts I refer to as the “Poe discourse.” The rising popularity of Poe’s works and the pervasive presence of his cultural image helped to persuade Universal that “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” would be a strong candidate for adaptation. The Poe discourse influenced the narrative and marketing of *Murders* to a significant degree, but it came to dominate two subsequent Universal horror films, *The Black Cat* (1934) and *The Raven* (1935). In these releases, much of the content contained in the literary texts authored by Poe recedes. The prevailing and long-debated biographical legend of the author—which effectively constituted a more prolific and influential source than the respective short story and poem for which the films took their names—assumes increasing control of the plot, themes, and characterizations.²⁰⁰

THE AUTHOR-FUNCTION AND FILM ADAPTATION AT UNIVERSAL

In 1931 and 1932, Universal generally neglected to exploit the profit available in identifying Mary Shelley as the writer responsible for the literary version of *Frankenstein*, but it did deploy the supposedly anti-commercial sentiments often attached to the literary field in its attempt to fend off censors and elevate the cultural respectability of the title, its origins, and content. Thus, the Shelley name (both Mary and Percy) served a small but significant “author-function” for Universal in the company’s film

evolution, conducted in secret, prey on a small town and its residents. Eventually, the scientist is caught and punished and his experiment terminated before widespread chaos can erupt.

²⁰⁰ According to Boris Tomashevsky in his 1923 essay “Literature and Biography” (Reprinted in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978]), the biographical legend emerges when the biography of an author cannot be separated from his or her literary production or the interpretation of the subject’s literary works.

adaptation. Foucault introduces this concept in his essay, “What is an Author?”, where he examines the post-structuralist notion, first posited by Roland Barthes, that the author holds no authority over a text’s inherently unstable meaning.²⁰¹ Foucault acknowledges that the traditional notion of the author is indeed “dead,” but he asserts that this is no reason to discard the category of the author or the study of authorship, for “authors” still function symbolically and historically outside of the text, whether by claiming authority over the work or by their names and images being subject to the political, commercial, or cultural purposes of others. According to Foucault, the author-function is the result of a series of “complex operations,” which are entirely contingent on the discursive and historical context in which the supposed “author” is deployed.

Universal’s use of Mary Shelley within *Frankenstein* helps to illustrate this dynamic. The frankenstein discourse gradually detached Mary Shelley’s name from the story and its characters. As a result, her name and image held a steadily declining level of authority over the story as it dispersed over multiple discursive fields in the 100-plus years between the publication of the novel and the Universal film adaptation. Due to this progression, the value of Shelley’s name and image to Universal in its effort to promote *Frankenstein* was limited, even more so it seems than that of her husband, Percy Shelley, who at the time represented a more reliable guarantor of *Frankenstein’s* originality and quality.²⁰²

In Tomashevsky’s words, “[Such critics] cannot be made to comprehend an artistic work as anything but a fact of the author’s biography” (47)

²⁰¹ Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?,” 124-127.

²⁰² The deployment of Shelley’s name and image would have differed drastically if Universal or another filmmaking corporation had adapted *Frankenstein* in a different period or hoped to situate the film in a different genre. One need only look at *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*, the 1994 adaptation of *Frankenstein*, for an example in which Shelley’s name serves a primary function. This explicit evocation of the author

In fact, because Universal hoped to attach itself indelibly to the internationally renowned frankenstein discourse, the company had a greater interest in laying claim to authorship of the definitive version of this famed story: for the company's effort to gain respectability in lucrative exhibition markets, to publicly acknowledge its role as the singular progenitor of the horror genre, and to gain legal authority over depictions of such valuable characters as Henry Frankenstein and his Monster. Shelley thus recedes into the background, her specter only to be raised when the need arises.

While Universal made modest but significant use of the literary authors of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* when publicizing its film adaptations, the company's reliance on the "author-function" gradually but unmistakably increased with a series of adaptations of public-domain literary works by Edgar Allan Poe: *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932), *The Black Cat* (1934), and *The Raven* (1935). Whereas *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* exploited the author for cross-promotion and to appease censors, *Murders* and the subsequent Poe adaptations used the author's name, image, and his figurative embodiment to perform these and several additional functions. This process would depend upon Universal's invocation of the clichéd notion of the romantic author that previous horror adaptations had subtly dispensed with in previous adaptations.

Awareness of *Frankenstein* and frankenstein discourse without doubt exceeded that of Poe's individual works, even "The Raven," his most famous and widely circulated poem during this period. However, Poe was a well known and, more importantly,

signifies Shelley's contemporary cultural status and the motives of the film adaptation's consortium of production companies, distributor TriStar Pictures, director-producer Kenneth Branagh, and others with influence over such a designation and its rhetorical use.

controversial figure, the subject of a cultural discourse that held a debate about his artistic merit, sanity, and biographical relationship to his work at its core. Whereas specific characters and narratives, and not the authors Stoker and Shelley, were the fulcrums by which the vampire discourse and frankenstein discourse appealed to audiences and through which they proliferated, Edgar Allan Poe's literary celebrity, even more than the literary works attributed to him, was at the center of another cultural discourse. Universal would exploit the various forms of profit—literary, cultural, and commercial—available through the Poe discourse to guide its adaptations of his work, as it had done with the pre-existing discourses around *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*.

POE DISCOURSE

Mr. Poe, you are avenged. – Dr. Richard Vollin (Bela Lugosi), *The Raven* (1935)²⁰³

That declaration, enunciated during the climax of Universal's adaptation of *The Raven* in 1935, seems puzzling within the context of that film. Speaker Richard Vollin, a renowned physician played by Bela Lugosi, harbors an obsession not only for the recurring themes and subjects present in Edgar Allan Poe's work, but also for the author. Vollin compares himself to Poe throughout the film, casting himself as a brilliant, lovelorn loner who resorts to sadistic measures to exact revenge on a society he regards as beneath him. Vollin likens himself to the narrator of "The Raven," and believes Edgar Allan Poe to be the real-life model for the sullen speaker of the poem. Taking the association one step further, Vollin not only likens himself to his hero, he comes to Poe's

²⁰³ *The Raven*. Dir. Lew Landers, 61 min. Universal Pictures, 1935, DVD.

posthumous defense by carrying out the author's supposed wishes; his actions are those he believes Poe would take in the same situation; his revenge is Poe's revenge. While such an assumption would be disputed by present-day literary scholars, Vollin's inference kept with the perception of Poe and his relationship to his work that reigned during this period.

In the three films based on Poe's poetry and short stories Universal produced in the early- and mid-1930s, *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Black Cat*, *The Raven*, Vollin's mystifying statement, "Mr. Poe, you are avenged," is a key to deciphering Universal's approach to film adaptation during this period, which spans the classical period of generic transformation of the early sound era horror genre at Universal.²⁰⁴ In fact, these three adaptations—all of which diverge markedly from the plots, settings, and characterizations of the literary sources upon which they claim to be based—can only be analyzed appropriately from this perspective, which accounts for the convergence of the corporate strategy employed by Universal, censorship guidelines, and the proxy source from which these films increasingly emerged: i.e., the evolving popular and literary reception of Poe during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which contributed to and proliferated the Poe discourse.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ According to Schatz, films of the classical stage are "formally transparent" in their reinforcement of the genre's conventions through narrative and aesthetic features. At this stage, genre films vary the previous standards by becoming more complex in theme and visual style (*Hollywood Genres*, 38-41).

²⁰⁵ For similar justification that led me to assign a lower-case "f" of frankenstein discourse, I intentionally use the upper-case "P" in the Poe discourse. Frankenstein transformed from proper to common usage, but Poe's reputation became more singular, even as it became more widely known and dispersed into various discursive arenas, in the years between his death and Universal's 1930s adaptations.

Vampire discourse and frankenstein discourse had at their respective centers an iconic undead Monster, characterized by indiscriminate cruelty and the ability to live forever; so too did the Poe discourse as it was presented in Universal's adaptations. But that undead Monster was no supernatural being of disputed origin. Rather, it was Poe himself. Universal recognized and capitalized on this coincidental similarity. The Poe adaptations, especially *The Raven*, demonstrate Universal's familiarity with the Poe discourse, its dexterity in utilizing the profit available in cultural discourses, and the company's desire to shape this discourse in a manner that could simultaneously increase the value of Poe's image and works and blend specific features of the Poe discourse more fluidly with the contemporary objectives of Universal. Thus, the Poe discourse was also reconstituted according to the company's interests, including the constant impetus to fend off censorship demands by appealing to the cultural esteem and anti-commercial image attached to the literary author, as well as the company's desire to conform to the formulaic narrative and aesthetic strictures introduced and codified in earlier horror films.

The Poe discourse constitutes a phenomenon that exceeds the literary works attributed to Edgar Allan Poe. Instead, it extends from the biography of Poe, which was first communicated in brief by the author's literary executor, Rufus Griswold, a long-time friend and colleague who held a deep-seated contempt for Poe (apparently based on the last of a series of disputes between the two) that found public expression in his widely circulated obituary of the late author.²⁰⁶ Published first in the *New York Daily Tribune* on

²⁰⁶ Rufus Wilmot Griswold, "Death of Edgar A. Poe," *New-York Daily Tribune*, 9 Oct 1849, 2. The obituary was published under the byline of Ludwig and henceforth the long debate spawned by the publication was widely known as the Ludwig controversy. For a brief description of the relationship

October 9, 1849, and then reprinted in select newspapers across the United States, Griswold's sober recollection of the late writer and editor observed that Poe deservedly "had few or no friends," held a "recklessness for [the] consequences" of his actions and, because of his distracted, isolated nature, often "walked the streets, in madness or melancholy, with lips moving in indistinct curses, or with eyes upturned in passionate prayers." Griswold also claimed that Poe had effectively deserted the Army when it proved not to his liking and that he frequently beseeched his colleagues and employers for money. Finally, Griswold used Poe's biography to interpret the author's literary works: "Nearly all that he wrote in the last two or three years ... was in some sense biographical; in draperies of his imagination, those who had taken the trouble to trace his steps, could perceive, but slightly concealed, the figure of himself." This widely circulated assessment of Poe's character profoundly influenced the popular opinion and literary reception of Poe throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, spawning both consent and vehement disagreement that kept the author in the public eye for decades and actually raised the commercial viability of his works.

Prior to the Griswold obituary, Poe was little known outside of professional literary circles, where he was recognized as an astute, but harsh literary critic and the editor of various magazines and journals.²⁰⁷ Poe was also a staunch supporter of international

between Poe and Griswold, see Killis Campbell, "The Poe-Griswold Controversy," *PMLA* 34, no. 3 (1919): 437-442.

²⁰⁷ Poe held editorial positions at *The Southern Literary Messenger*, *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, *Alexander's Weekly Messenger*, *Graham's Magazine*, both *The Evening* and *Weekly Mirror*, and *The Broadway Journal*. He dreamed of founding and editing his own literary magazine (first prospectively called *Penn Magazine* and later *The Stylus*) for which he sought financial support up until his death. In his final days, Poe traveled from New York to several cities on a lecture tour designed to raise money for the

copyright reform, a topic that he frequently raised in editorials. According to the strident editor, the current laws made the pursuit of literature as a profession unrealistic; as a result, the field was deprived of the best talent, and those that did choose the literary life toiled in destitution and frustration.²⁰⁸ Indeed, Poe had first-hand experience with such travails, as he frequently found himself penniless, and to support himself and his young family occasionally borrowed from friends and employers. Unpaid debt caused numerous fallouts between Poe and his friends and employers, and seemed to serve as another source for the posthumous willingness to denigrate the writer's character. (His destitution was a symptom of the state of the literary marketplace for writers, a problem that Poe addressed in a series of articles in January 1845.²⁰⁹) Poe certainly tried, but he was not able to support himself and his family by augmenting his income from prolific magazine writing with his poetry and fiction, for which there was a minimal demand by contemporary publishers and readers.

magazine. Reportedly, he was able to collect \$1,500 in subscriptions on a side trip to Richmond a few days before his death in Baltimore (James Albert Harrison, *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, vol. I* [New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1902], 332). The money was not with Poe when he was found in a near comatose state on October 3, 1849, which supports the theory that Poe may have been the victim of a robbery. Poe died four days later, on October 7, 1849, in a Baltimore hospital. For a well-researched survey of the various theories regarding the cause of Poe's death, see "Poe's Death," *E.A. Poe Society of Baltimore*, 13 Nov 1999, <<http://www.eapoe.org/geninfo/poedeath.htm>> (13 Sep 2005).

In his frequent reviews and essays in these publications, Poe developed a reputation for incisive criticism, regardless of his relationship to the author whose work was under review. For example, his indictment of the "literati of New York" in a six-part series in *Godey's Lady's Book* created a major stir among the 40 authors assessed in the articles and incited "A Reply to Mr. Poe" by Thomas Dunn English. In his response, English accuses Poe of alcoholism that inhibited his professional commitments, forgery, borrowing money under "false pretences," failing to honor monetary debts, and other "ungentlemanly conduct". Poe, "The Literati of New York City - Nos. I-VI," *Godey's Lady's Book*, May – Oct 1846; English, "Mr. English's Reply to Mr. Poe," *Evening Mirror*, 23 June 1846.

²⁰⁸ For examples of such essays, see Poe, "Pay of American Authors [Part I]," *The Evening Mirror*, 24 Jan 1845, 2; Poe, "Pay of Authors in America [Part II]," *The Evening Mirror*, 25 Jan 1845, 2; Poe, "Pay of American Authors [Part III]," *The Evening Mirror*, 27 Jan 1845, 2; Poe, "Pay of American Authors:

The 1927 publication of *Tamerlane and Other Poems* marked Poe's entry into the literary marketplace as a poet. The book, attributed to "A Bostonian" on the title page, received few reviews or notices of publication, and sold so poorly that years later many questioned Poe's claims of the book's existence.²¹⁰ A similar reception accompanied the 1931 publication of *Poems*.²¹¹ In the ensuing years, poems by Poe were occasionally printed in literary magazines, but he remained obscure and was seldom mentioned in lists of top American poets published in the 1830s.²¹²

During this period, Edgar Allan Poe was also known for his fiction, which included a single novel, numerous short stories, and three short story collections. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, described by Poe as "a very silly book" and intended as an attempt to appeal to a broad audience, was originally released in two installments in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1837 and later published in book form in early 1838.²¹³ The only foray into the novel form by Poe, *Pym* sold poorly and neither provided an infusion of money nor distinguished the author with the mainstream readership he sought. By that time, many short stories had been published in numerous magazines. Poe's stories first

Synopsis of the International Copy-right Question [Part IV]," *The Evening Mirror*, 31 Jan 1845, 2; Poe, "Some Secrets of the Magazine Prison-House," *Broadway Journal*, 15 Feb 1845.

²⁰⁹ See footnote 208.

²¹⁰ Poe, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (Boston: Calvin S. Thomas, 1827). Thomas Olive Mabbott estimates that about 200 copies of the volume were printed ("A Few Notes on Poe," *Modern Language Notes* 35, no. 6 [June 1920]: 372-74). An expanded volume of poems, *Al Araaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems*, published by Hatch & Dunning in a 1829 edition of around 500 copies, received a few ambivalent reviews and release announcements, and several of its poems were reprinted.

²¹¹ Poe, *Poems* (New York: Elam Bliss, 1831).

²¹² According to Killis Campbell, Poe's name does not appear in numerous anthologies of American poetry and lists of notable poets published in books and magazines between 1831 and 1840. However, Griswold does include several poems by Poe in *The Poets and Poetry of America* (1842) ("Contemporary Opinion of Poe," *PMLA* 36, no. 2 [June 1921]: 39-40).

²¹³ Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1838).

appeared in the *Saturday Courier* throughout 1832, and over the next few years, his short fiction could usually be found in the magazine of his present editorship.²¹⁴ Many of these early short stories were published anonymously or under pseudonyms, and few were reprinted. Three collections of Poe's tales, the two-volume *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840), the pamphlet-length *The Prose Romances* (1843) and the more widely circulated *Tales* (1845), were published during his lifetime.²¹⁵ *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* sold only 750 copies in its first three years of publication, but the collection received positive reviews and began to distinguish Poe within the literary field.²¹⁶ This recognition of his stories and artistic merit validated the author's labor, but his growing reputation resided almost exclusively within the literary field, thus limiting interest from noteworthy publishing houses and, despite the more frequent appearance of tales from his collections in magazines, restricting him from earning a significant income from his fiction.

That limited notoriety began to change in the mid-1840s. "The Gold Bug" (1843) earned a \$100 literary prize from the *Dollar Newspaper* and was widely reprinted.²¹⁷ Two years later, "The Raven" (1845) appeared in a late-January 1845 edition of the *Evening*

²¹⁴ See the "Poe's Tales" page of the E.A. Poe Society of Baltimore Web site for a complete, alphabetized list of short story publications (undated, <<http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/index.htm>> [3 Oct 2005]).

²¹⁵ Poe, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque, vols. I and II* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1840); Poe, *The Prose Romances of Edgar A. Poe* (Philadelphia: William H. Graham, 1843); Poe, *Tales* (New York and London: Wiley & Putnam, 1845).

²¹⁶ Many of those favorable reviews were collected and reprinted at the back of Volume II of *Tales*. In his *New York Mirror* review, L.F. Tasistro argues that, based on *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, Poe "deserves a high place among imaginative writers ... [and expresses] excellent taste [and] ... great intellectual capacity." Tasistro, "Review: *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*," *New York Mirror*, 28 Dec 1839, 215. Poe also corresponded during this time with Washington Irving, who enthusiastically praised Poe's fiction and literary potential.

Mirror. During the next month, the poem was reprinted in four additional literary magazines and at least newspapers across throughout New England. By the end of year, “The Raven” was well known across much of the eastern United States and in England. Reviewers anointed “The Raven” as a high achievement in short history of American poetry and cited the poem as evidence of the fruition of Poe’s literary potential.²¹⁸ This newfound success influenced more prominent publishers like Wiley & Putnam to reconsider the commercial potential of Poe, as is evidenced with another collection of Poe’s short fiction, *Tales*, released by the same house later that year.²¹⁹ Advertisements for *Tales* make clear that the publisher, which released the collection under its “Library of American Books” series, hoped to brand Poe as unique, both in his literary skill and preferred subject matter. A July 19, 1845, notice of the book’s release states, “This excellent collection will include the most characteristic of the peculiar series of *Tales*

²¹⁷ Poe claimed that the short story reached a circulation of more than 300,000, an estimate that Campbell questions in “Contemporary Opinions of Poe” (50-51).

²¹⁸ While Killis Campbell observes that the near consensus of critical opinion on the poem seems to have subsided a few months later upon its re-release by the Wiley & Putnam in *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845), “The Raven” helped Poe earn an unprecedented level of literary recognition and public notoriety. Poe, *The Raven and Other Poems* (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1845).

²¹⁹ *Tales* reprinted a significant number of the ratiocinative stories, including “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1842-43), and “The Purloined Letter” (1844), and several of the macabre tales, among them “The Black Cat” (1843) and “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). Apparently, Poe took issue with this selection by the Wiley & Putnam editors. In an 1846 letter, the author explains,

This is not *representing* my mind in its various phases -- it is not giving me fair play. In writing these Tales one by one, at long intervals, I have kept the book-unity always in mind -- that is, each has been composed with reference to its effect as part of a *whole*. In this view, one of my chief aims has been the widest diversity of subject, thought, & especially *tone* & manner of handling.

Poe, “Letter to Philip Pendleton Cooke,” Aug 1846, Quoted in “*Tales*,” E.A. Poe Society of Baltimore, 24 Aug 2001, <<http://www.eapoe.org/works/editions/tales.htm>> (2 Oct 2005). Poe went so far as to request that the publisher release a second volume of stories that might better reflect the range and quality of the author’s oeuvre. Wiley & Putnam was not interested, as is evidenced by their marketing campaign for the book.

written by Mr. Poe.”²²⁰ Despite the fact that many of his recent short stories fell into one of the two categories represented in *Tales*, Poe resisted being assigned to a specific generic classification. Regardless, Poe had little reason to worry about his reputation, for no evidence exists to suggest that the collection sold many copies. (*Tales* was not reissued until 1849, when the publisher attempted to clear its remaining stock of the book.) Even after the success of “The Raven” and the author’s ascension to the larger publishing houses, Edgar Allan Poe was little known outside the literary profession, where his reputation still rested on his sharp criticism, a few new stories, and the more frequent reprints of his existing stories and poems before his death in 1849.

The characterization of Poe in Wiley & Putnam’s advertisements for *Tales* would find new credence after his death, when the author’s personal life became fodder for debate. Griswold’s cool defamation of Poe’s character, coupled with his passing mention of the author’s literary potential, produced a peculiar phenomenon that in some ways ran counter to his probable intent in penning the obituary. Instead of banishing Poe to literary obscurity, the obituary sparked an intense debate about Poe’s character and a reappraisal of the literary works. Poe was mired in poverty and relative obscurity during his lifetime, but Griswold had inadvertently resuscitated his career by describing a troubled, at times brilliant literary figure.

The Poe debate, which snowballed into a reflexive, self-perpetuating discourse, began just days after publication of the obituary. Less than two weeks later, N.P. Willis wrote a

²²⁰ “Advertisement: *Tales of Edgar A. Poe*,” *Broadway Journal*, 19 July 1845, 31, Quoted in “*Tales*,” E.A. Poe Society of Baltimore, 24 Aug 2001, <<http://www.eapoe.org/works/editions/tales.htm>> (2 Oct 2005).

sharp critique of Griswold's obituary and a measured defense of Poe, which attributed his unsavory behavior to alcoholism.²²¹ A more ambivalent response by Henry B. Hirst, which described the obituary as both "unjust" and "brilliant," appeared in the Philadelphia *Saturday Courier* on the same day, and the argument had begun.²²² A short piece by John Reuben Thompson, published in November 1849, sheds light on the growing notoriety of the late author, which had amassed in the span of a few weeks:

So much has been said by the newspaper press of the country concerning this gifted child of genius, since his recent death, that our readers are already in possession of the leading incidents of his short, brilliant, erratic and unhappy career. It is quite unnecessary that we should recount them in this place.²²³

Here, Thompson implies that Poe's reputation has already overshadowed his literary merit and that the interest in the author centers upon the debated details of his life and death rather than upon his literary oeuvre, a central aspect of the Poe discourse.

Thompson proceeds to describe his relationship with Poe at the *Southern Literary Messenger* as professional and courteous. Still, like Willis and Hirst, Thompson implicitly admits that another "erratic and unhappy" side of Poe existed and ultimately contributed to his demise. Despite these writers' insistence on Poe's various personal and literary merits, they cannot deny the dark side of Poe described by Griswold. While each faction of the Poe debate offered differing accounts of his professionalism and the

²²¹ N.P. Willis, "Title Unavailable," *Home Journal*, 20 Oct 1849.

²²² Henry B. Hirst, "Title Unavailable," *Saturday Courier*, 20 Oct 1849, Quoted in Campbell, "The Poe-Griswold Controversy," 443.

²²³ John Reuben Thompson, "The Late Edgar Allan Poe," *Southern Literary Messenger*, Nov 1849, 694-697.

causes of his unusual demeanor, defenders and detractors alike agreed that the author's behavior was erratic and that he held extraordinary artistic potential.

By describing Poe as frequently distracted, vaguely immoral, filled with indefatigable sorrow, and a "brilliant but erratic star" of the American literary field, Griswold had fashioned an intriguing character. This image easily merged with the romantic image of the author introduced and actively fostered in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by such poets as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Percy Shelley (little wonder then that his name took precedence over his wife's in Universal's publicity for *Frankenstein*). Literary critic Andrew Bennett describes the "Romantic theory of authorship" as an effort to characterize the literary author, particularly the poet, as "autonomous, original and expressive, ... [and] unique."²²⁴ According to Bennett,

The Romantic author is ultimately seen as different from humanity. He is seen as both an exemplary human and somehow above or beyond the human. ... He is, after all, ahead of his time, avant garde. The idea of the Romantic author ... is conceived as a subject inspired by forces outside himself, forces that allow him to produce work of originality and genius.
²²⁵

This description of the newfound public image attached to and actively cultivated by the Romantics beginning in the late eighteenth century also explains the reputation grafted onto the image of Edgar Allan Poe more than a half century later. While Poe sought steady income and a measure of cultural distinction from the publication of his

²²⁴ Andrew Bennett, *The Author* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), 56-57.

²²⁵ Bennett, 57-60. Bennett also observes that this conception of the authorship contains a crucial and compelling contradiction: "In the ideal author, in the genius, there is a mysterious disjunction of cause and effect. There is no reason why the genius is able to create the works that he creates" (60). This component of the Romantic author is especially relevant to the Poe discourse, as it applies both to interpretations of

fiction and poetry, those commentators who defended and disparaged the author after his death actively reclassified Poe into the categorical demarcations of Romantic authorship: Griswold inadvertently turned Poe into a figure of fascination, an outsider with an inscrutable character, as well as a natural genius that displayed flashes of brilliance; others seized on these qualities to reconstruct the image of Poe for their own purposes. The inexplicable genius and erratic behavior of Poe were now signs of his “difference” and the under-appreciation of his work was a clear indication that Poe was “ahead of his time.” Therefore, he could not and should not be judged by the generally accepted standards of conduct and values.²²⁶

Evidence of the spread of Poe’s work to mass audiences in a manner that encouraged this association can be seen in the inclusion of “Annabel Lee” (1849), “The Bells” (1849), or “The Raven” (and occasionally some combination of the three) alongside notices of the author’s untimely death in newspapers across the United States. While the poems offered proof of the deceased’s brilliance and his preoccupation with death and suffering—i.e., the dark side repeatedly identified in descriptions of Poe—the juxtaposition of the author’s life and literary works quickly became a staple of any discussion of the author or his literary works. In these notices and in nearly all subsequent discussions of the author, the biographical legend and literary discourse, representations of the public and private identities of Poe, entwine to a point that the two

Poe’s works and to explanations of his character. Discussions of Poe reveal an obsession with not only describing his puzzling behavior but also locating its source.

²²⁶ An anonymous “Ode to Poe,” appearing in the *New York Tribune* on November 13, 1849, is very early evidence of this reasoning. In verse form, the “ode” challenges Griswold’s personal attacks against Poe,

discourses merge and become indistinguishable. The effect of such a textual arrangement produced a familiar and oft-repeated framework from which to address the author: Poe's works vividly reveal his predilections, habits, and psyche, which itself is essential in producing the subject matter and themes that his work repeatedly depicts. As a result, the symbiotic relationship between the biography and literary oeuvre raises the value of each category, resulting in lively debate about Poe in diverse discursive fields, the formation of a cultural (not necessarily literary) icon, and steadily growing interest in Poe and his works. This interest expands the market even further, and discussions of Poe proliferate, which in turn both modifies the author's image and further codifies his iconic status, and so on.

With Poe's name and reputation now widely known in popular culture, Griswold himself was one of the first to capitalize on a perceived appetite for the author. As literary executor, Griswold edited the earliest posthumous collection of Poe's tales and poems, *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, published in two volumes that were released simultaneously in January 1850. The publication of *Works* increased the intensity of the Poe debate and helped to disseminate it to discourses beyond the literary field.²²⁷ The following month, an attack on Griswold's motives was published in the *Portland Advertiser*, and an article defending Poe's personal merit, via an analysis of his literary

thereby committing the debate about the author into literary form and reclassifying the author as a misunderstood idealist; i.e., a displaced Romanticist.

²²⁷ George Graham, editor of *Graham's Magazine* and for a time Poe's employer, offered yet another first-person defense of Poe in March 1850 when he vehemently denied the validity of Griswold's obituary. Graham, "Title Unavailable," *Graham's Magazine*, Mar 1850.

oeuvre, appeared in the *American Whig Review*, which is notable for two other reasons.²²⁸

First, it is an early example of a contribution to the debate about Poe from a writer not acquainted with the author. Previously, first-person knowledge of Poe served as a key appeal to credibility in debates about his character. Peck detaches that requirement by way of a second and more important contribution to the Poe discourse: he valorizes the author's character exclusively by reference to his literary oeuvre, a strategy previously employed by those wishing to malign Poe.²²⁹ The fact that this entry in the Poe debate appears outside of the literary field in which Poe worked and was best known during his life indicates that this facet of the Poe discourse had seeped into a broader cultural discourse.

Griswold offered a more detailed assessment of Poe in a "Sketch of the Author" that introduced the unofficial third volume of *Works*.²³⁰ Published in September 1850, the 30-page introduction offers a more detailed analysis of Poe's literary works, which he again praises, and new revelations about Poe's life, including an explicit assertion that he had deserted the Army, had been expelled from the University of Virginia for immoral behavior, was alleged to be violent towards his second wife, had blatantly plagiarized the work of others on multiple occasions, and lacked any semblance of compassion for

²²⁸ John Neal, "Title Unavailable," *Portland Advertiser*, Mar 1850; G.W. Peck, "Title Unavailable," *American Whig Review*, Mar 1850.

²²⁹ Griswold had conflated the author's personality with his poetry and fiction, which encouraged others to adopt a similar heuristic in their evaluations of Poe's life, poems, short stories, novels, and literary criticism. (Griswold hints at this perspective in the obituary: "Every genuine author in a greater or less degree leaves in his works, whatever their design, traces of his personal character.") Regardless of their motives, others followed suit. Eric W. Carlson notes this trend as well: "Seldom distinguishing subject matter from theme or artistic intent, the nineteenth-century reader and critic tended to confuse Poe's biography with his books" ("Preface," *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Criticism Since 1829*, ed. Carlson [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966], viii)

others.²³¹ Griswold had an intimate relationship with Poe, whom he disparaged, and the author's work, which he lauded, and therefore seemed a fair and reliable source. Moreover, *Works* was the definitive edition of Poe's fiction, poetry, and criticism for the next quarter century. As a result, his widely disseminated portrait of Poe held considerable influence. For example, literary critic Killis Campbell cites eleven separate contemporary reviews of *Literati* that either adopt or elaborate upon Griswold's characterization of Poe. Few could discredit the description of Poe's character, but several writers, including an anonymous contributor in the *Saturday Evening Post* and reviews of *Literati* by E.A. Duycinck of *Literary World* and A.K.H. Boyd of *Fraser's Magazine*, questioned Griswold's intentions and by implication his credibility in focusing on Poe's "shortcomings."²³² Whether in defense of Poe or in agreement with Griswold, all of these reviews betray the influence of the Poe discourse, in which a discussion of the value of a literary text veers into a dispute about the personal and professional motives of the author and editor.

As Griswold does in his obituary and "Sketch," Willis, Thompson, Graham, and others cite their respective relationships to Poe as evidence. Their use of first-hand knowledge to provide trustworthy, unimpeachable evidence about the author is indicative of a larger trend in literary biography, which valued personal contact with the subject above all else in determining a subject's true character. The effect of this approach is to bind, physically and symbolically, Edgar Allan Poe's biography with his work, as the

²³⁰ Poe, *The Literati* (New York: C.S. Redfield, 1850).

²³¹ Griswold, "Sketch of the Author," in Edgar Allan Poe, *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe, volume 3* (New York, W.J. Widdleton, 1864), i-xxx

early notices of the author's death had done. C. Chauncey Burr offers the most interesting entry amongst the defenses of the author. Implicitly admitting the "dark" periods suffered by Poe, Burr attributes the author's behavior to the inevitable "fatal excesses of genius" that occasionally intruded upon the general warmth and kindness of the author. Later, Burr attempts to reverse the course of Poe criticism by vehemently insisting that any interpretation of the Poe canon must preclude a consideration of his character:

It is perhaps true that, into the works of mediocre authors, who have only skill to write out some chapters from their experience in love and other matters, we may look for their own moral pictures; but not thus into the works of the great artist, of any author of real genius.²³³

In this way, Burr further attached Poe to the Romantic depiction of the author, and he expressed a crucial symptom of the Poe discourse, in which an analysis of Poe's life inevitably, by default or design, seeps into a discussion of his literature.²³⁴ Burr's article also signifies the acceptance of Poe's "dark side" into both camps of the Poe debate, thereby solidifying the eccentric, troubled, brilliant characterization of Poe that compelled interest in the author in subsequent decades.

The short article "Poe, Poets, Etc." by Catherine Ledyard, published in a March 1853 edition of the *Supplement to the Evening Post*, describes explicitly the process by which

²³² Campbell, "The Poe-Griswold Controversy," 447-450.

²³³ Burr, "The Character of Edgar A. Poe," in *Nineteenth Century* 5, no. 1 (Feb 1852): 25-26.

²³⁴ Even "Poe and Hawthorne" by Eugene Benson (*The Galaxy* 6, no. 6 [Dec 1868]: 742-748), an ostensibly critical examination of Poe's works suffers from the pull of the Poe discourse. According to Benson, "Poe was dominated by moral conscience; Hawthorne was dominated by moral conscience" (742). While this distinction allows Benson to flesh out such obsessions in each author's literary works, it also enables an acknowledgement and quick dismissal of the personal shortcomings of Poe, whose intellect overwhelmed his ability to entertain moral or ethical questions in his work and his life.

Poe's background could lead one to read his works and interpret them with respect to the author's infamous background.

The portrait prefixed to the first volume delights my womanish fancy exceedingly. ... The face of Poe is certainly not what one would expect; he looks a thorough gentleman, mild, luxurious, benignant. ... How difficult ... to realize that this man lived a slave, and died a victim, to a degrading appetite – how mournful to find that his kindest biographer can but extenuate, not approve, his conduct. ... Two things strike the reader of these volumes: – first, the horror which envelopes, as it were, many of the poems and stories in the collection. ... The second remarkable feature is the analytical character of the author's mind. This last element is fully displayed in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," a narrative, by the way, which thrilled me with terror, though I read it in broad daylight, and in the room with several people; the former is present in "Ligeia," "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," "The Black Cat," and many other tales.²³⁵

In this detailed example of a reader's introduction to Poe's literature, knowledge of the controversy over Poe leads Ledyard to select *Works* from a library, ruminate over the author's biography while studying the portrait of Poe, and then read several tales in an attempt to elucidate his unfortunate "character" and literary brilliance.²³⁶ In fact, the "thrilling" effect described by Ledyard seems attributable to both of these traits.²³⁷

The curiosity in Poe created a demand for more biographical accounts of the author. The sheer number of such essays published in the 1860s and 1870s suggests the self-perpetuating tendency of the Poe discourse—each smear against Poe produced space for a response that could offer a competing view of Poe and an attack the credibility of the

²³⁵ Ledyard, "Poe, Poets, Etc.," *Supplement to the Evening Post*, 21 Mar 1853, 1.

²³⁶ William F. Gill devotes even closer attention to this portrait in his biographical article, "Some New Facts about Edgar A. Poe," *Laurel Leaves* (1876): 359-388.

²³⁷ In *A Bibliography of First Printings of the Writings of Edgar Allan Poe* (Hattiesburg, MS: The Book Farm, 1940), Charles F. Heartman and James R. Canny note the frequent appearance of Poe's poetry in gift books and literary annuals during and after the author's life (206-208). The presence of Poe in these volumes offers evidence of another strand of the Poe discourse, characterized by the lack of reference to the

critic—and the depth of demand perceived by book publishers and magazine editors. The renewed market for discussions of Poe that emerged after the relative dearth of such publications in the latter half of the 1850s and the first half of the 1860s suggests both the muffling effect of Griswold’s “Memoir” of Poe and the influence of the movement, beginning in the 1860s and finally succeeding in 1875, to erect a monument to Poe. Occasionally, these were published in literary magazines like *Beadle’s Monthly*, *Graham’s Magazine*, and *Harper’s New Monthly*. More often, biographical essays were appended to collections of Poe’s poetry or short fiction as introductory “memoirs.”²³⁸ The textual arrangement of these collections and full-scale biographies again encourages a collapse in the distinction between biography and literature, fiction and reality, the public and private Poe.

While the Poe discourse proliferated and sales of his work gradually increased, Poe, once an admonished, obscure figure known for his sharp criticism, gained a measure of cultural respectability. An early sign of his ascension to this status can be seen in the discussions around dedication of a monument to Poe in Baltimore.²³⁹ (While this honor would seem to suggest a newfound interest in the author’s literary works, discussions of

biography and the use of selections from the oeuvre that do not reflect the author’s obsession with the macabre.

²³⁸ See for example, Poe, *Poems by Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: W.J. Middleton, 1866); Poe, *The Life and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. E.L. Didier (New York: W. J. Widdleton, 1877); William Fearing Gill, *The Life of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: W. J. Widdleton, 1878); Edmund Clarence Stedman, *Edgar Allan Poe* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1881); Poe, *Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (Boston: DeWolfe, Fiske, and Co., 1884); George Edward Woodberry, *Edgar Allan Poe* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1885); Poe, *Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Stedman (Chicago: Stone & Kimball, 1895); Poe, *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1902).

²³⁹ The first published evidence of which can be seen in a December 1865 letter announcing, “There is a movement in progress in Baltimore to erect a monument to the gifted but unfortunate author of ‘The

the monument often focused on its appropriateness for a man of such questionable moral rectitude, as the short piece cited above does when it describes Poe as “unfortunate” and the anonymous writer’s testament, During his life Poe’s remarkable genius won for him many friends.” Others picked up on the debate through a similar approach.²⁴⁰) The announcement of the erection and dedication of the Westminster monument in 1875 was widely reported and, for contemporary and later critics, served as *ex post facto* proof of Poe’s moral integrity and newfound cultural respectability. So too did the large audience at the event, where honorary letters from the likes of Longfellow, Whittier, Bryant, and Tennyson were read.²⁴¹ In the following decades, the Poe memorial represented a tangible emblem through which critics could return to a discussion of the contentious biography and thus re-engage the debates of previous years.²⁴²

In Reconstruction-era America, Poe was just becoming a recognized literary figure, but, as some of the proponents of the memorial pointed out, the author had already achieved literary fame and commercial success in foreign markets. In France, Poe’s tales were translated and in circulation in the mid-1840s, and French journalist E.-D. Forgues

Raven.” Anonymous, “A Monument to Edgar A. Poe,” *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser*, 19 Dec 1865, 4.

²⁴⁰ For example, see Joseph Evans Snodgrass, “The Facts of Poe’s Death and Burial,” *Beadle’s Monthly*, May 1867, 283-287.

²⁴¹ For a report on the monument’s erection and dedication, see “The Monument to Edgar Allan Poe,” *New York Herald*, 28 Oct 1875, which preceded John J. Moran, “Official Memoranda of the Death of Edgar A. Poe,” *New York Herald*, 28 Oct 1875, 4. Moran, a physician apparently acquainted with Poe, recounts the subject’s final hours in yet another attempt to clarify the events surrounding his death and resuscitate the image of Poe. While the decision to keep the tribute to Poe within the grounds of the cemetery was determined after much debate, the monument’s presence serves as a rather ironic reminder of Poe’s contemporary and future attachment to the macabre.

²⁴² Examples include William P. Meany, “Edgar Allan Poe’s Grave,” *The Celtic Monthly*, Sep 1879, 139-141; Clara Dargan Maclean, “Some Memorials of Edgar Allan Poe,” *Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly* 31, no. 4 (Apr 1891): 457-464; and Anonymous, “Poe’s Burial and Grave,” *New York Times*, 26 Feb 1893, 10.

wrote the first foreign language review of Poe in 1846. Two years later, poet Charles Baudelaire translated “Mesmeric Revelation” and championed Poe throughout the following decades for his attention to the literary effects that could be produced through rigorously planned and precisely controlled methods of composition.²⁴³ In addition, the detective stories gained an immense following in that country and added another facet to the author’s literary fame, which, according to one critic, was partially based on “his image as an isolated and brilliant victim of his artistic temperament as opposed to the commercial journalism of contemporary America.”²⁴⁴ While Poe was celebrated in France, his works gained notoriety elsewhere, including Russia in the 1840s and throughout Europe later that century. Lois David Vines also notes Poe’s influence on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers of Latin America and Asia.

Many of the early defenses of Poe came from England, where several collections of Poe’s work had appeared in several editions in the latter half of the nineteenth century. (Among these were *The Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe of America* [1856], the four-volume *Works of Edgar Allan Poe* [1874-1875], and *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life, Letters, and Opinions* [1880].) The disparity between Poe’s international and domestic reputations contributed mightily to the Poe discourse. Those discussions of Poe that cited his neglect in his home country added yet another facet to the image of Poe as a brilliant, misunderstood outsider. Even with its emphasis on the literary Poe, English critics could

²⁴³ Lois David Vines, “Poe in France,” in *Poe Abroad: Influence, Reputation, Affinities*, ed. Vines (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 9-18. Also see *The Influence of Edgar Allen Poe in France* by Celestin Pierre Cambiare (New York: G.E. Stechert & Co., 1927) for an extensive study of the author’s influence in France.

²⁴⁴ D. Ramakrishna, *Explorations in Poe* (Delhi, India: Academic Foundation, 1992), 101.

not ignore the prevailing assumption about the author's dark personality. As with American readers, this image was undergirded by the visual representations of Poe often featured in literary collections and biographies. While a photograph was the most popular and widely circulated image of the author, illustrated portraits of the author clearly adopted this perspective of Poe to accentuate such qualities. (See for example Andrew Lang's description of a portrait that was included in an edition of "The Raven" and "The Pit and the Pendulum": "The portrait of Poe singularly resembles what Napoleon might have looked like if deprived for many days of his victuals."²⁴⁵) Despite these calls from abroad to acknowledge the author's literary merits and, for the most part, ignore his personal shortcomings, the Poe discourse continued to gather momentum in the United States through its scrutiny of Poe's private life.

In 1860, another acquaintance of Poe's, Sarah Helen Whitman, wrote the first book devoted exclusively to the arguments about the Poe biography.²⁴⁶ *Edgar Poe and his Critics* uses Whitman's close relationship to Poe, his family, and his friends to ensure the author's moral integrity, while it attempts to parse the motives behind the derogatory presentations of the author. The book reveals a significant trend within the Poe discourse: the emergence of a reflexive strain that focused exclusively on debates about Poe and contained little if any discussion of the author or his work. The early critiques of Griswold represent the first examples of this trend, which proliferated in the second half of the nineteenth century. Examples include the 1866 article "Poe and his Biographer,

²⁴⁵ Andrew Lang, "Edgar Allan Poe," *The Independent*, 23 Nov 1899, 3132-3134.

²⁴⁶ Whitman, *Edgar Poe and His Critics* (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1860).

Griswold,” “Another View of Edgar A. Poe,” and the 1875 essay “Edgar A. Poe and his Biographer, Rufus W. Griswold,” among others.²⁴⁷

Later in the nineteenth century, interest in the nearly any detail about Poe’s life opened space for a new strain of Poe discourse. Articles such as Thomas W. Gibson’s “Poe at West Point” (1867) and William Fearing Gill’s “Some New Facts about Edgar A. Poe” (1876), which recount interactions with Poe at West Point nearly four decades earlier and the author’s love life, respectively, represents evidence of the author’s posthumous fame, the keen interest in the author’s biography over his literary works, the appetite for Poe gossip.²⁴⁸ This subtle modification in the content and function of discussion about Poe signifies an important shift in the author’s image and the Poe discourse: he had become a literary celebrity. According to Loren Glass in *Authors Inc.*, an illuminating study of this phenomenon, “an authorial star system” flourished in the early twentieth century, when publishers sought to market Modernist writers as brilliant, original artists *and* intriguing personalities to middle brow audiences. The idiosyncratic styles, highly varied subject matter, and explicit or implicit disdain for mainstream beliefs and practices that helped to distinguish modernist artists from mass culture were only one facet of this phenomenon. In his analyses of Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway and

²⁴⁷ George Washington Eveleth, “Poe and His Biographer, Griswold,” *New York Old Guard*, June 1866, 353-358; Margaret E. Wilmer, “Another View of Edgar A. Poe,” *Beadle’s Monthly*, Apr 1867, 385-386; William Fearing Gill, “Edgar A. Poe and His Biographer, Rufus W. Griswold,” *Laurel Leaves* (1875): 279-306.

²⁴⁸ Gibson, “Poe at West Point” (*Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, Nov 1867, 754-756) and Gill, “Some New Facts about Edgar A. Poe.” Also see Eugene L. Didier, “Our Monthly Gossip,” *Lippincott’s Magazine*, Oct 1878, 508-510; Susan Archer T. Weiss, “Edgar Allan Poe,” *New York Weekly Review*, 6 Oct 1866, 2.

others, Glass demonstrates that “the marketable ‘personalities’ of authors were frequently as important as the quality of their literary production.”²⁴⁹

The Poe discourse must be viewed as an important precursor to the widespread emergence of literary celebrity. Glass correlates the initiation of “celebrity authorship ... [with] the rise of mass culture and the first crisis of masculinity in the late nineteenth century,” but the trends cited as evidence of this phenomenon—including the intense scrutiny in the private affairs of the author, the reification of the social function of authorship, and the conflation of “literary value” and “public perception”—are also long-running facets of the Poe discourse. The “personality” of Poe had long since taken precedence over his poetry, fiction, or literary criticism, not because of any autobiography or surreptitious public relations campaign but because of the rapidly escalating discourse that had gathered around the author. By the end of the nineteenth century Edgar Allan Poe was enmeshed in a massive, self-perpetuating, impersonal machination that used his life story as fodder to fuel further scrutiny, speculation, intrigue, and adulation not so different from the “culture industry” that, according to Glass, twentieth-century literary modernists both detested and used to their advantage. While modernists straddled a divide between the cult of genius (attached to Romantic poets and “rediscovered” writers like Melville) and the cult of personality (available to

²⁴⁹ Loren Glass, *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880-1980* (New York & London: NYU Press, 2004), 2. While many writers expressed a disdain for adulation and public interest in their personal lives, Glass notes that the “self-aggrandizing” practices of some modernists differed radically from their proclamations of “self-effacement” (5). Glass continues,

The model of the author as a solitary creative genius whose work goes unrecognized by the mainstream collides with the model of the author as part of a corporate publisher’s

contemporary writers of various ilk and literary categorization), so too did the posthumous Poe.

In the twentieth century, the Poe discourse fanned out into a number of additional discursive fields and, due to a shift in the nature and status of literary criticism, the ascension of cinema as a mass entertainment medium, and the widespread acceptance of psychology and psychological criticism, achieved a level of ubiquity and appeal not available in prior decades. As a result, Edgar Allan Poe became an icon that represented a series of contradictions—both an American literary paragon and a pop culture celebrity, an author of popular sensationalist ghost stories and sophisticated short fiction and poetry, a benign storyteller and a vindictive, dangerous psychopath—that only served to increase the allure of Poe and the breadth of the Poe discourse.

Literary critics bestowed unprecedented scrutiny on the Poe oeuvre in the first three decades of the twentieth century, but even literary scholars could not avoid acknowledging that the private life of Poe was central to any discussion of the author or his work.²⁵⁰ For example, take Vernon L. Parrington's inclusion of Poe among the select writers worthy of recognition in *The Romantic Revolution in America 1800-1860*. Parrington's justification: while Poe is notable as "the first American writer to be concerned with beauty alone," he is a "problem for ... abnormal psychology to solve."²⁵¹ Such was the path of inquiry followed by a significant proportion of literary scholarship

marketing strategy. It is in the tensions between these two fields that the contradictions of modern American authorial celebrity emerge. (6-7)

²⁵⁰ *The Mind and Art of Poe's Poetry* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1899), by John Phelps Fruit, represents early evidence of the emergence of Poe as a site of sustained scholarly attention.

²⁵¹ Parrington, *The Romantic Revolution in America 1800-1860* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927), 57.

on Poe.²⁵² Other critical studies, such as *In the Poe Circle* (1899) by Joel Benton and *The Cult of Poe, and Other Papers* (1909) by Eugene Didier examine the Poe discourse, as does *Poe's Helen* (1916), by Caroline Ticknor, which devotes considerable attention to the effects of “rival biographers” on the author’s reputation.²⁵³ All of these inquiries not only acknowledge the Poe discourse, they imply that any study of Poe cannot ignore the “cult” around the author when assessing the literary merits or influence of Poe.

In *The Influence of Edgar Allan Poe in France* (1927), Celestin Cambiare attempts to prove not only Poe’s influence on French literature, but also the role of French critics and readers in “elevating [Poe] to immortality” on an international level, including the recent rise in critical attention in America and the increasing popularity of his short fiction.²⁵⁴ Cambiare’s claims about Poe’s reputation are a clear reflection of the numerous biographies that appeared in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

The Independent released a three-part biography of the author, entitled “New Glimpses of Poe,” in September 1900.²⁵⁵ While the title suggests a continuation of the recent

²⁵² Even the literary critics that did avoid the “cult of personality” attached to Poe have a difficult time distancing dissociating from this aspect of the author’s reputation. Take for instance Alduous Huxley’s brief discussion of Poe in *Vulgarity in Literature: Digressions From a Theme* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930). While Huxley restricts his comments on “vulgarity in Poe” to the “bad taste” evident in the author’s choice of literary form, such a designation inevitably exploits the dark impulses and melancholy more often attached to the author’s subject matter and biography.

²⁵³ Benton, *In the Poe Circle* (New York: M.F. Mansfield & A. Wessels, 1899); Didier, *The Poe Cult, and Other Poe Papers, with a New Memoir* (New York: Broadway Publishing Co., 1909); Ticknor, *Poe's Helen* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916). Also see Thomas Olive Mabbott, “A Few Notes on Poe,” for an example of academic literary criticism devoted to the disputed Poe biography. Even literary criticism focusing on the French enunciations in Poe’s works begins with reference to “the remarkable revival of interest” in Poe’s life (Edith Phillips, “The French of Edgar Allan Poe,” *American Speech* 2, no. 6 [Mar 1927]: 270-274). Killis Campbell attempts to offer a more objective assessment of this situation in “The Poe-Griswold Controversy” and “Contemporary Opinions of Poe.”

²⁵⁴ Cambiare, 5-7.

²⁵⁵ James Albert Harrison, “New Glimpses of Poe (I-III),” *The Independent* 52 (6-20 Sept 1900): 2158-2161, 2201-2202, 2259-2261.

popularity of gossip about Poe, the three-part format signifies a more sustained interrogation into his life, which simultaneously gestures back to the biographical essays and ahead to the book-length literary biographies, influenced by the academic scrutiny of literary scholars, that would appear in the following years, including Harrison's *The Life of Edgar Allan Poe*, Weiss' *The Home Life of Poe* (1907), and the two-volume *Edgar Allan Poe, the Man* (1926).

The most notable of these was Hervey Allen's two-volume *Israfel: The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe*, originally published in 1926, later reprinted, and then translated into several foreign languages before a condensed, single volume edition was released in 1934.²⁵⁶ Allen observes, "The legend of the man is enormous. ... He is one of the few of our poets who enjoy the perquisites of completely general fame," thus acknowledging the celebrity Poe has achieved in both literary circles and popular culture. Something more compelling attracts such a broad audience not only to the fiction, poetry and life of the author, but also to the Poe discourse. Allen continues, "But there is something more than that. ... Though we may find it impossible to love, and even difficult to admire, we cannot help being intensely interested."²⁵⁷ Here, Allen seems to be describing the Poe discourse, with its enveloping tendency and inexplicable magnetism. By implication, the biographer by Allen is merely another contributor to this discourse.

Most nineteenth-century collections of the works of Poe were devoted to the poetry, and early twentieth-century literary analyses of his work indicate that the author was

²⁵⁶ Allen, *Israfel* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1934).

²⁵⁷ Allen, xii.

primarily recognized as a gifted poet.²⁵⁸ However, the books by Cody (Editor of ‘The Best Tales of Poe’) and Cambiaire, as well as the release of *Tales of Edgar Allan Poe* in 1927, reflect the rise in popularity of the short stories, especially the macabre and ratiocinative tales.²⁵⁹ Editor James Southall Wilson describes the value of the short stories collected in *Tales* in a manner that allows a reader to easily conflate Poe’s oft-discussed dark impulses with the content of his short fiction:

The magic of Poe, his power to rouse our terror, to fill our mind with strange emotions, are the result of conscious art. He knew the mind of man best in that he knew how to bring it under his spell.²⁶⁰

Perhaps Wilson’s language reflects the influence of early cinematic depictions of Poe, which concentrated on the “strange emotions” featured in those short stories and the sensationalistic effects they could produce in an audience. And, with the notoriety of Poe’s name and the public domain status of his literary works, it is no surprise that early cinema producers, in the United States and abroad, freely mined the Poe oeuvre for story material. According to a filmography of “Poe-inspired” cinematic releases, seventeen silent film adaptations appeared between 1908 and 1919—eight in the United States, three in France, three in Germany, two in Italy, and one in Russia. Over the next ten years, no films explicitly adapted from or inspired by Poe were released in the United States (during that same span, four releases were produced in Europe.) In 1928,

²⁵⁸ Critic I.M. Walker corroborates this assertion in *Edgar Allan Poe: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 51.

²⁵⁹ Poe, *Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James Southall Wilson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1927). One might also cite *Selections From Poe* (ed. J. Montgomery Gambrill [Boston: Ginn & Co., 1907]) and *Poems and Tales by Edgar Allan Poe* (ed. Harry Gilbert Paul [Boston: D.C. Heath & Co., 1918]) as an example of the concurrent popularity of the poetry and short fiction before the latter took precedence in the 1920s and thereafter.

independent producers released two short-film adaptations, *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Tell-Tale Heart*, to domestic theatres.²⁶¹ While no figures are available to gauge the popularity of these adaptations, it is important to note that both of these 1928 releases focused on the macabre elements of Poe's short fiction, as did an Expressionist French adaptation of "The Tell-Tale Heart," *La Chute de la Maison Usher*, released in Europe and the United States the same year. Thus, in the 1920s cinema audiences were exposed to those works in the Poe oeuvre that only further highlighted the author's fascination with dark, morbid subject matter. *The Raven*, a 45-minute film released domestically in 1915, further demonstrates the currency of the Poe discourse during this period. While titled after the author's most famous poem, *The Raven* is in fact a biopic that chronicles the life of Poe from his youth to adulthood, and the film constitutes yet another argument over the author's personality and a widely circulated contribution to the cultural discourse associated with Poe.

The controversy over Poe's personality entered psychological discourse with the French publication of *Edgar A. Poe: A Psychopathic Study* (1923). According to author John W. Robertson, "Much that [Poe] wrote [can] aid in explaining certain ill-understood phases of his life."²⁶² Joseph Wood Krutch offers another perspective on the effects of Poe's sexuality upon his life and literature in *Edgar Allan Poe, A Study in Genius* (1926), as does Marie Bonaparte in *The Life and Works of Poe: A Psychological Interpretation*

²⁶⁰ Wilson, "Introduction," in Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Wilson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), v, xxi.

²⁶¹ Don G. Smith, *The Poe Cinema: A Critical Filmography of Theatrical Releases Based on the Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland & Co., 1999).

²⁶² Robertson, *Edgar A. Poe: A Psychopathic Study* (New York & London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1923).

(1933).²⁶³ The specific focus on Poe, as opposed to another author available for interrogation, seems to be no accident, but instead a byproduct of Poe's celebrity and the popularity of his short stories, many of which featured malicious thoughts and sadistic acts, during the period and the widespread assumption that the author represented, as Robertson claims, a "psychological problem." Robertson, Krutch, and Bonaparte bound the biography with the meaning of Poe's work in a new way—scientific rationalism—that would seem more difficult to dispute for its apparent objectivity and institutional authority. Such a development undoubtedly damaged the ability of Poe's defenders to offer a competing version of Poe's personality, for now the author's dark side was a sign of abnormality rather than eccentricity. In fact, accepting Poe's depravity offered a new avenue into the meaning of his work. (Universal would capitalize on this new aspect of the Poe discourse in its film adaptations.) Literary critics and biographers might cast doubt on some of the fabricated details of Poe's life, like the events leading to his death or his antagonistic interactions with his contemporaries, but they could not eliminate the assumption that Poe had deep-seated psychological problems, which inspired his psychologically complex and conflicted fictional characters.

Between the days after Poe's death and the eve of Universal's first sound era adaptation of works from the Poe canon, the author had become a literary celebrity who symbolized a number of distinct and sometimes contradictory meanings. Moreover, Poe's erratic conduct, his choice of subject matter, and his literary skill seemed to lack clear

²⁶³ Krutch, *Edgar Allan Poe, A Study in Genius* (New York: Knopf, 1926). Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Poe* (London: Imago, 1949).

causes. Not only did these ambiguities allow Poe to be more easily absorbed into the Romantic image of the author, they also enabled contributors to the Poe discourse, in their efforts to “solve” these mysteries, to create a variety of explanations—including mass culture, specific individuals like fellow writers, and even fate itself (which resulted in personal strife, the death of his wife and a tragic flaw, alcoholism)—to elucidate the author’s perceived melancholy and contrariness. While all of these allegations appeared to fit the mood and subject matter of his fiction and poetry, they reveal more about the motives of the each critic than they do about Poe. For example, Griswold’s contempt for Poe encouraged him to classify Poe as a mercurial literary talent who languished in obscurity due to his own faults. Graham, on the other hand, retorted with a more laudatory appraisal of Poe in part to justify the credibility of the magazine which bore his name and where Poe had served as editor. In each of the cases, Poe is deployed to satisfy purposes that extend beyond quibbles over the facts of his life or the bent of his disposition.

In its use of Poe, and its insertion of the Poe discourse into its horror genre, Universal Pictures was no different, for by the early 1930s the name and image of Poe had achieved iconic and broad applicability. Invocation of Poe signified not only an historical personage but also a set of themes—depravity, melancholy, psychological trauma, sadism—that took precedence over any single literary work. In fact, those literary works merely reinforced the aura conjured by the Poe moniker, as did the stark, oft-reproduced photographic image of Poe that adorned numerous title pages of his works, the myriad articles, biographical essays and books contesting the author’s moral rectitude or his

relationship to his fiction, and the various film adaptations based on the short stories and poems. As it had done with the associations and meanings attached to *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, Universal recognized that the value of the Poe oeuvre extended not from sales figures or from any specific characters or plots, but from a vague but palpable mood that had become attached to the author and his literary works and was circulating throughout popular culture by the 1930s.

UNIVERSAL'S INTEREST IN POE

By the early 1930s, Poe's poetry and fiction had achieved canonical status on an international scale. However, like the vampire discourse and frankenstein discourse, the Poe discourse was a more widely known and valuable resource than any specific literary work. The name and image of Poe held a broad appeal for a variety of audiences in popular culture and, due to the fact that its notoriety exceeded specific literary works, was highly malleable. As silent film producers had recognized in the previous decades, a film adaptation of nearly any of the works attributed to Poe, all in the public domain by the twentieth century, offered a large and culturally diverse built-in audience, significant flexibility in the formulation of a budget, and a choice of generic orientations that could emerge either from the literary works or from Poe's image. The latter fit nicely with the characters depicted in the Universal horror genre. The Poe discourse left no doubt that the author, like many of the characters in his fiction and poetry, possessed a "diseased intelligence," a phrase the narrator of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" uses to describe the amateur detective Dupin's cold, ratiocinative nature. Through the likes of Henry Frankenstein, Universal had experience with such intelligent, conflicted, callous

characters, so it is no surprise that the company mined the Poe discourse for its horror genre. However, the embodiment of this “diseased intelligence” would become a preoccupation both to the series of films based on Poe’s works and to the Universal horror genre.

MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE (1932)

The prospective *Murders* could follow the path blazed by *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* in several ways. First, the literary source was in the public domain and no theatrical adaptation was in production or in development. This status was a double-edged sword: a film adaptation would not require acquisition fees, but the company’s writers would need to work directly from the literary source to develop a storyline and script. Clearly, the length and relatively brief narrative arc of a short story provided more feasible adaptation material, but “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” was not a typical short story.²⁶⁴ It featured a lengthy, philosophically oriented introduction that described logical methodology and argued for the superiority of the obscure game draughts.²⁶⁵ Much of the action is set in Dupin’s cloistered study, where he discusses the mystery with an unnamed narrator and solves the case from his own office. Second, like *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, “Murders” features a foreign setting, which could provide a point of continuity with previous films, continue the formula’s appeal in foreign markets, and

²⁶⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1845), Reprinted in *Great Short Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 272-313.

²⁶⁵ Draughts, played between two opponents and featuring a checkered board and fixed number of pieces, is much like checkers. However, players may move their pieces in any direction and the object is to capture the opponent’s pieces or block them from the ability to move.

allow the company to re-use several sets from those productions.²⁶⁶ Perhaps more attractive, all of these goals could be achieved at half the cost of *Frankenstein* (and nearly one-third that of *Dracula*), evidence that Universal continued to locate and eliminate inefficiencies in the production of its horror formula.²⁶⁷

“Murders” otherwise bore few similarities to the literary sources or discourses surrounding *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. The short story did not feature supernatural themes or living dead characters; rather, it was a detective story centering on the brilliant amateur sleuth Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin, who by his powers of rational thought and deductive logic successfully solves an inscrutable case involving the murder of two women. The most unbelievable elements of the story involved the detective’s miraculous ability to solve the murder case and the orangutan’s unlikely murders in the fashion carefully described by Dupin. Universal was not known for mysteries or detective films, so relatively few of the characters described in the short story seemed to fit the personae of the company’s marquee actors as they had been established in previous films—i.e.,

²⁶⁶ Carl Laemmle had recently announced his company’s plans to produce talking pictures in France and Germany for release to foreign markets (“Universal to Make Films in France,” *New York Times*, 1 Sep 1931, Reprinted in *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. Gene Brown [New York: Times Books, 1983]). While *Murders* would be produced at Universal city, the setting of the story, the high popularity of Poe in France, and Universal’s pending foray into European markets made the story especially attractive for foreign release.

²⁶⁷ The budget for *Murders* was established at \$130,000; *Frankenstein* cost over \$260,000. Eventually, *Murders* would cost \$186,090. “Budget: Murders in the Rue Morgue,” undated, Universal Collection. Soister (131) and Brunas et al (32) assert that *Murders* was originally conceived as low-budget programmer, and only earned A-level support and “polish” after the box office success of *Frankenstein* raised demand for the horror genre. However, the presence of star Bela Lugosi, one of Universal’s most recognizable actors, director Robert Florey, originally assigned to the “super-prestige” release *Frankenstein*, and cinematographer Karl Freund indicates that *Murders* was always a high priority on Universal’s production schedule.

there was no crazed lackey for Dwight Frye and no evil, merciless freaks of nature for Karloff or Lugosi.

Clearly, something would have to give. Either Universal could resort to the appeal of the original story and characters, or the existing story and characters could be reformulated to fit with Universal's current assets—namely, its contract talent and its association with the rapidly emerging horror genre. It should be of little surprise that the latter won out, as “Murders in the Rue Morgue” morphed from a pensive, nonlinear detective story that kept physical contact with its grisly subject matter at arm's length into a grisly tale of bizarre characters and gruesome events—in other words, a horror film that, like *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, is replete with strange events, jarring sound effects, acts of cruelty, and the requisite romantic narrative strand.

Murders was in the works by spring 1931, seven months before the release of *Frankenstein*. Robert Florey, who had been unceremoniously pulled off of *Frankenstein*, was given the fledgling project to fulfill his one-picture Universal directing contract, and he quickly hammered out a story treatment by April 1931. Meanwhile, Junior Laemmle and Asher considered an appropriate crew and cast to build around Bela Lugosi, the early choice for a starring role. The inclusion of Karl Freund on cinematography, Jack Pierce, so crucial to the look of Karloff's Monster, on makeup, and Charles Hall on art direction ensured visual continuity with previous Universal horror films, despite the modest \$130,000 budget that was set for the film.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁸ According to Brunas et al, this original budget was slashed to a miniscule \$90,000 before Junior Laemmle, after witnessing the phenomenal success of *Frankenstein*, decided to re-shoot portions of the

So too did the evolving script, as developed by Florey, Tom Reed, and Dale van Every and then polished by John Huston, which modified characters and scenes from the story in order to fit the company's strengths and modest budget allowance. After Bela Lugosi backed out of *Frankenstein*, Universal clearly desired to develop the actor's image as it was expressed most vividly through his characterization of Count Dracula, continue his association with the horror genre, and, by so doing, exploit one of the company's most valuable assets. As the next film in the horror formula, *Murders* seemed a logical vehicle to fulfill these goals. However, the reserved, calculating, but ultimately honest detective character did not match Lugosi's talents for evoking menace and an inexplicable sexual allure. Rather than inventing a new character, Universal writers modified an existing one to fit the actor's appeal. As a result, the star of the short story, the detective Dupin, recedes to the background and the ape owner ascends to the story's fore. A sailor and, as the orangutan owner an involuntary accomplice to the homicides in the short story, the character was remodeled in the mold of the primary characters of previous Universal horror films. Suddenly, the ape owner became Dr. Mirakle, an amateur evolutionary geneticist and carnival barker who showcases the incredible intelligence of his orangutan Erik (played by a costumed Charles Gemora) to curious onlookers willing to pay to witness such a spectacle. Late each night, Mirakle performs genetic experiments (with the hopes of proving evolution) by kidnapping young women and injecting Erik's blood into their bodies. In Universal's script, Dr. Mirakle resembles

film and add others, elevating the film's cost to \$186,090 (31-32). In fact, re-shoots were also a result of objections by the SRO and other censors, as I discuss below.

a cross between the cruel, alluring and grotesque Count Dracula and the brilliant but reckless Henry Frankenstein. (Like those characters, Mirakle requires a steady stream of human bodies on which to subsist.) Lugosi's presence in the cast was no doubt the impetus for such a presentation and a primary reason that the story's appeal shifted from mystery to horror—to a philosophical exposition of ratiocination to a vivid chronicle of sadistic crimes committed by an overzealous scientist.

A new protagonist with drastically different intentions required an altered storyline and characterizations. Monsieur Auguste Dupin thus becomes Pierre Dupin (Leon Ames), a medical student now courting Camille L'Espanaye (Sidney Fox), daughter of the sole victim of Erik's rage (Betsy Ross Clarke). In the film adaptation, Dupin now represents an unassuming, naive everyman in the mold of *Dracula's* Jonathan Harker—e.g., he has a propensity for florid dialogue, recoils at Mirakle and his disturbing claims, and in an exciting climax chases Erik atop a roof before he shoots the ape, which falls into the Seine. (In the film adaptation, Dupin does investigate the missing women and senses Mirakle's hand in the crimes, but his previous actions and this climax transform him from passive amateur detective to action hero.²⁶⁹) Dr. Mirakle is also assigned a loyal, deranged sidekick similar to those played by Frye in *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Here, Janos, the Black One (Noble Johnson) is the deformed subordinate to Mirakle's schemes and, like Fritz, serves as henchman, lab assistant, and manservant.

²⁶⁹ Thus, Dupin resolves the narrative of the film adaptation as he does the short story, but he does not solve the "Murders" referred to in the film's title because no such mystery exists. The eponymous homicides occur during the climax of the film adaptation rather than prior to the narrative, as they do in the short story, and become mere plot devices rather than opportunities for Dupin to display his ratiocination. His

Instead of the inexplicable double massacre at the L’Espanaye apartment, the four abductions by Mirakle are *Murders’* primary criminal mysteries, which in fact are no longer mysteries to the audience, who watches two unfold. Rather than inspiring curiosity that induces the application of deductive logic, the plainly depicted human experiment and torture sequences featured in the film adaptation instead conjure anxiety, terror, and then disgust—the emotional effects associated with the horror genre. For instance, as Mirakle approaches a woman in distress, Lugosi walks toward and stares directly at the camera. As he does so, the character’s face grows larger, darker and more menacing, eventually filling the entire screen. The next shot is set behind Mirakle, and as he continues to walk toward the woman (and away from the stationary camera perspective), the viewer adopts his point of view. These two shots exemplify the differences in tone and perspective between “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and *Murders in the Rue Morgue*. The latter is set almost entirely in a cloistered study, where Dupin may exercise his logical brilliance from afar, and is narrated by an awestruck witness to the detective’s intuition and cold demeanor. The former depicts brutal crimes, sharp screams, multiple sets, and dozens of characters, and alternately focuses on the sadistic Mirakle and the love-struck Pierre.

No doubt, the narrative chronology and characterizations featured in Universal’s film adaptation diverged significantly from the original short story, but the film does deliver the primary events of the short story—albeit briefly and now functioning as the “action-

detective skills emerge through his exhaustive analysis of blood samples he obtains on routine trips to the Rue Morgue, where three unidentified female bodies have recently arrived.

packed” resolution—and includes most of the same characters, if under a modified presentation. The short story’s narrator becomes Dupin’s roommate Paul (Bert Roach), who recedes to minor status, while the Prefect of Police (Brandon Harris) appears as well. In addition, the extended debate regarding the criminal’s origins between neighborhood residents, which in the story proves to Dupin that the perpetrator is no human at all, is included as a comic sequence.²⁷⁰ This minor difference is indicative of the series of minor alterations to the events in its transformation from short story to film. For example, Mirakle orders Erik to climb into the L’Espanaye apartment rather than the ape committing the Rue Morgue murders on its own volition; when Erik does enter, he kills Mademoiselle L’Espanaye, the mother of Camille, rather than both women. Obviously, the latter decision serves the adventure and romantic aspects of the story.

But the film patterns itself after the Poe short story in a less direct but more important way. While the reconstituted Dr. Mirakle resembles characters from earlier Universal films and provides a strand of continuity between these releases, he also bears similarities to Poe and the “diseased intelligence” that was often attributed to him. The Poe discourse fashioned the author as brilliant, erratic and exceedingly cruel, both due to his incendiary and vindictive literary reviews and to his perceived similarity to the disturbed characters he invented in short stories. The frequent depiction of macabre scenarios and malicious thoughts indicated Poe’s taste for the grotesque and, it was supposed, his impulses to act them out. The maniacal, brilliant outsider Dr. Mirakle possesses these qualities often associated with Poe, encouraging the proposition that he is in fact a latent rendering of

²⁷⁰ Brunas et al (36) and Soister (131) disparage this sequence for its awkward attempt at comic relief.

the author. From this perspective, *Murders* utilizes both the narrative of the short story and a primary element of its appeal—i.e., the popular image of Edgar Allan Poe, which, as it had in *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, would prove beneficial during the obligatory SRO review process.

The long January 1932 memo Colonel Joy sent to Will Hays about the prevalence and objectionable aspects of the horror genre also predicts difficulty with future Universal releases, the next of which was *Murders*.²⁷¹ With that film, the SRO's definition of the horror genre would evolve to include a new objectionable feature—i.e., the contributions of sound to the effects engendered by horror films. As the agency's criticisms became increasingly specific, so too did its approach toward suggesting ways to reshape controversial films like *Murders*. Ultimately, the SRO's distaste toward horror films compelled it to assume some of the tangible authoritative measures Joy discusses in his letter to Hays when he notes, "If something ... could be done about the so-called horror pictures we'd be very much happier than we are. ... There is a real moral responsibility involved to which I wonder if we as individuals ought to lend our support." In this statement, Joy expresses a desire to transform the SRO from an agent of the interests of Hollywood filmmaking corporations (a hedge against commercial liability created by local censorship boards) to a protector of those corporations' prospective customers (to whom the SRO now felt a "moral" responsibility to shield from such harmful influences, a goal articulated in the Code). This proposition did not come to pass, as can be seen in

²⁷¹ "Memo: Jason Joy to Will Hays," 11 Jan 1932, PCA File, File: "FRANKENSTEIN (UNIVERSAL, 1931)."

the SRO's response to *Murders*. However, in its review of the film, the SRO expresses much stronger and more specific objections than it had to either *Dracula* or *Frankenstein* and the desire to assume a more powerful position in the Hollywood film industry.

Universal sent rough cuts of *Murders* to the SRO in January 1932, weeks after the release of *Frankenstein* (and just days before the lengthy discussion of the horror genre initiated later that month by Joy). That January, Joy wrote to Laemmle, Jr. that *Murders* might face stiff resistance from censors because of its depiction of a number of criminal acts by the depraved main character, Dr. Mirakle. The victimization of women was a new low for the horror genre, according to Joy. His suggestion for amelioration focused on sound rather than on specific shots in the film—"Our feeling is that the screaming of the woman of the street ... is over-stressed, ... We suggest that you consider making a new soundtrack for the film."²⁷² Here, after the persistent use of sound to evoke the desired effects of the horror genre, the SRO finally identifies the importance of the technology and attaches them to the emotional affect of a specific film. Sound thus represents a crucial lever by which the SRO was able to function as a more efficient intermediary between Hollywood filmmaking corporations and domestic and foreign censors. *Murders* is a film in which that shifting approach became more evident.

A "Synopsis and Code Review" released three days later and composed by reviewer J.V. Wilson largely agrees with Joy's views that the images and sounds of the "so-called horror plot" depict cruelty to young women in a particularly objectionable manner.

²⁷² "Letter: Jason Joy to Carl Laemmle, Jr.," 8 Jan 1932, PCA File, File: "MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE, (UNIVERSAL, 19**)."

However, as with his organization's attempt to make *Frankenstein* suitable for a general audience, Wilson believed that the "fantastic" aspects of the story, in conjunction with its well-known literary lineage, might buffer the film from criticism by censors and audiences.²⁷³ Again, the author signifies credibility and reduces the culpability of Universal and the SRO for distasteful sights, sounds, and themes. While on one hand the SRO began to recognize the importance of sound within the affective force of the horror genre, on the other it still felt that the literary background of the film adaptation, however far it strayed from the literary source, bestowed credibility, mitigated realism, and by extension precluded objections against themes and content. (Thus, in a pattern established by *Frankenstein*, *Murders* also introduces itself by announcing Edgar Allan Poe's authorship of the story in advertisements and the opening title sequence of the film.)

A story synopsis produced by Universal describes the numerous "shrieks" and "hair raising" incidents in the film as "high spots," indicating the import of sound in the film. A letter from Laemmle, Jr. to Joy in mid-January claims that Universal did address many of the concerns expressed by the SRO, including "toning down" the soundtrack of women screaming,²⁷⁴ a February Code review of a new cut of the film raises similar concerns:

Probably the strongest scene is the one in which Mirakle is experimenting on the woman of the streets. She is tied to a cross and continues to scream

²⁷³ "Synopsis and Code Review," 11 Jan 1932, PCA File, File: "MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE, (UNIVERSAL, 19**)."

²⁷⁴ "Highlights: Carl Laemmle, Jr. Presents 'Murders in the Rue Morgue,'" undated, PCA File, File: "MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE, (UNIVERSAL, 19**)."

and moan throughout the ordeal, at the conclusion of which who dies and her body is cut down and shot through a trap door into the river.²⁷⁵

The reviewer's assignation of the description of *Murders* as "adult entertainment" demonstrates how much the attitudes of the SRO changed toward these types of films, even with significant revisions to dialogue, sound, and individual scenes. *Dracula*, released just one year earlier, qualified as "family entertainment" and *Frankenstein* only received criticism after the SRO heard objections from censors. With *Murders*, of similar theme, plot, and cast as *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, alongside the awareness of a litany of other similar films planned and in development, the SRO began to exercise its limited authority and adopt a more aggressive stance with scripts and feature-length films. Essentially, the SRO was attempting to shift from the role of intermediary and messenger to arbiter and judge of the themes and content presented in Hollywood films. Its interaction with Universal on these films offers evidence of such a progression.

Principal shooting for *Murders* wrapped on November 13 1931, five days over the scheduled 18-day shoot but about \$10,000 below the estimated \$164,220 production budget. However, Universal's desire to improve the film's ending, establish more explicit continuity with *Frankenstein*, a current hit, and circumvent censorship problems required additional retakes and added scenes over ten days between December 10 and December 30, 1931, which eventually increased the film's cost to \$186,090. (Additional soundtrack recording and mixing, performed on January 27, pushed the budget to \$188,089.72.)²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ "Synopsis and Code Review," 9 Feb 1932, PCA File, File: "MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE, (UNIVERSAL, 19**)."

²⁷⁶ "Budget: 315-1 FLOREY, 'MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE,'" undated, Universal Collection.

Murders was finally set for a mid-February 1932 release, but the battle with censors was just beginning, for the SRO received immediate negative feedback about the film and the “content of horror films” in general.²⁷⁷ In a detailed letter, B.O. Skinner of the Ohio censorship board first identifies horror films as excessively realistic, and then catalogues the objectionable material in *Murders*. He writes, “I wish to advise you that in the future we are going to take more drastic action concerning such scenes of horror and realism to which we have found the public is reacting unfavorably.”²⁷⁸ While the SRO was beginning to notice the offensive aspects of the genre and to excise scenes and sounds creating that impression, the combination of horror and realism described by Skinner seemed particularly puzzling to the SRO, especially with respect to the Universal films. While *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *Murders* share an interest in scientific inquiry and rational explanations of their events, their diegeses clearly exceed scientific possibility and rational behavior by turning men into animals, re-constructing and re-animating human corpses, and, in *Murders*, attempting to produce a master race by simply mixing the blood of humans and apes. SRO reviewers initially believed that these fantastic plots, in combination with the fact that they were adapted from famous works of fiction by renowned authors, would defuse complaints like Skinner’s. Without any expectation of realism, the SRO assumed that deleterious effects on an audience were inconceivable.

²⁷⁷ *Murders* opened in New York on February 14 and in other markets a week later, February 21, 1932.

²⁷⁸ “Letter: B.O. Skinner to Jason Joy,” 20 Feb 1932, PCA File, File: “MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE, (UNIVERSAL, 19**).” Other state censorship boards agreed, excising approximately three minutes of *Murders* original 62-minute running time. Canadian censors once again asked for a prologue indicating the literary source and fictional nature of the story, similar to that used in the Canadian version of *Frankenstein*. Universal accommodated these demands with three separate modifications to *Murders*—

However, complaints like those posited by Skinner reveal a crucial oversight in the SRO's evaluation of horror genre and its effects—namely, those films' relentless insistence on the plausibility of the events they depict. While *Murders* does not include supernatural events or characters on the level of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, it does follow the terrain cut by its predecessors through the unbelievable sequence leading to the murders by Erik and Dr. Mirakle's outlandish genetic experiments. In the original short story, the supernatural is offered as one explanation of Dupin's "peculiar analytic ability," including the "extraordinary" instance in which he deduces the narrator's thoughts, which is forcefully dispelled when the former explains his logical method in detail.²⁷⁹ In *Murders*, Dupin is more practical and pedestrian. A love-struck medical student, he helps to solve the crime by testing blood samples from three unidentified female bodies in the Rue Morgue, each of whom has died through an injection of animal blood. Remembering Dr. Mirakle's claims about proving the genetic relationship between humans and apes, Dupin immediately infers that Camille might be in danger and races to her home just as the ape is terrorizing Camille and her mother. (Ironically, he and other onlookers offer eyewitness proof that the ape is capable of the homicide, something the short story's detective could not do. In the film, the famous sequence in which the Esplanayes' neighbors attempt to identify the native language of the sequence is played for comedy, which seems appropriate since the viewer is privy to the murder and abduction by Erik.)

on February 24, March 23, and June 25 of 1932—that increased the cost of the film by another \$4,000. "Budget: 315-1 FLOREY, 'MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE,'" undated, Universal Collection.

²⁷⁹ Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," 278-79.

As *Frankenstein* had done, *Murders* displays the efficiency with which Universal was able to execute core components of the horror genre—specifically, the suggestion rather than the clear depiction of gruesome scenes through camera work, the use of sound to excite audiences, and the appeal to realism noted by Skinner. All of these elements are evident in a single scene, which depicts the carnival barker-cum-scientist experimenting on a young woman, whom he has recently abducted and brought to his abandoned, cavernous lab. The scene opens to a shadow two-shot of the silhouette of Mirakle and the young woman, bound to diagonal posts (with a clear resemblance to a cross) and flailing to break free (Figure 3.1, below).



Figure 3.1: Dr. Mirakle (Lugosi) addresses his first victim (Francis).²⁸⁰

The image implicitly recalls *Dracula*, in which a shadow communicated a gruesome scene that suggested a dead body slung over a ship's steering column. As in *Dracula*, such a shot in *Murders* communicates information—amid the struggle, Mirakle informs

²⁸⁰ *Murders In The Rue Morgue*, dir. Robert Florey, 61 min. Universal Pictures, 1932, DVD.

the girl of his intentions—and simultaneously limits the visibility of grisly, and possibly censorable, content.

Murders complements this generic conceit with sound, which proved so instrumental in the affective force of its horror films. Various grunts and gasps are audible during the struggle between Mirakle and his captive, who emits a sharp, violent scream. (She also screams uncontrollably in the previous scene while witnessing a fight between two men; so too does Camille as she is abducted by Erik.) Mirakle demands that she be quiet, but the screams continue in erratic fashion. *Dracula* uses off-screen sound effects and the unique cadence of Count Dracula to create an atmosphere of discomfort and anxiety. *Frankenstein* features the guttural growls of Karloff to signify the Monster's difference and express his feelings, as well as the sound effects that communicate information and occasionally trigger scene changes. For the most part, *Murders* dispenses with such tactics; while Dupin does comment on the strange accent of Mirakle, ambient noise plays a relatively minor role. However, the bare, anguished female screams in *Murders* are a more central feature and produce a more powerful effect than in previous horror films. This component was potent enough to garner the attention of the SRO, which identified it as censorable content but could not suppress its influence on the genre, where the female scream represents an indispensable feature of nearly all subsequent horror films.

Finally, the early scene in Mirakle's lab demonstrates a more sophisticated and expressive use of cinematography than that exhibited in *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Amid the silhouetted struggle between the doctor and his unwilling subject, the camera pans from the shadow projection to the plainly visible human figures. In full view of the

camera, he extracts a blood sample from her arm. The camera zooms out to a medium shot that reveals the two characters, the skewed cross, the shadow, and the lab equipment in the foreground. The doctor walks to the lab bench. As he studies the mixed blood under his microscope, the camera zooms slowly into a medium shot of Mirakle, with the bound woman in the background. She continues to whimper and scream, and he demands silence as he mutters about her “rotten” blood, which will not mix properly with that of the ape. The camera zooms out as Mirakle, now enraged, yells in anguish and walks back toward the woman. Finally, the shot cuts to a close up of Mirakle and the girl, who unexpectedly falls limp and dies (Figures 3.2 through 3.6, below).



Figure 3.2-3.6: In a single shot, Mirakle castigates his victim, draws blood from her, inspects it under a microscope on his lab bench, and expresses outrage at the failed experiment. Meanwhile, the young woman murmurs in the background before finally falling limp.

Mirakle appears shocked and remorseful, but he quickly gathers himself and instructs Janos to dispose of the body, which in a subsequent shot is dumped into the Seine through a trap door in the lab floor. Through a single extended shot, the scene

communicates a plethora of information about Mirakle's demeanor and scientific acumen, his method for producing evidence of man's "kinship with the ape," and the setting in which he carries out his experiments and inadvertent homicides. Moreover, the camera movement featured in the shot indicates the increasing dexterity of the Universal horror production unit, which here has created, under its tightest budget to date, a dramatic, fluid shot that follows intricate stage directions, adheres to strict timing, and delineates important props in the fore- and background. Moreover, the shot injects a stark level of realism into and distinguishes the artistic aspirations and the generic lineage of *Murders*, all the while concealing its strict fiscal constraints.

In an earlier scene set in the carnival sideshow tent, Mirakle touts the brilliance of Erik and defiantly argues for the validity of his evolutionary theories. "I will prove [the carnival sideshow audience's] kinship with the ape," he exclaims. "Erik's blood shall be mixed with the blood of man." The onlookers are shocked, and Camille asks Dupin, "What does he mean?" Dupin's reply, "I wish I knew," implicitly challenges the plausibility of such an experiment. Later, the laboratory demonstrates Mirakle's intentions in detail. The stark depiction of the private lab, replete with beakers, microscopes, and other instruments, and the sequence of events that occurs there lend an element of credence not only to his scientific experience but also to his ability to carry out his grotesque, sadistic plan. As did the animation sequence in *Frankenstein* and the observations by Professor Van Helsing in *Dracula*, the subsequent scene in Mirakle's lab proves the villain's willingness and ability to execute his plan on the populace of Paris.

These technological and narrative features create continuity between *Murders* and previous Universal horror films, as do the presentation of several characters and plot elements. (As has been mentioned, Bela Lugosi assumes a similar disposition to Count Dracula and an analogous vocation to Henry Frankenstein; in his function within the plot, Dupin resembles Jonathan Harker; and Jonas, the Black bears more than a passing resemblance to Dwight Frye's portrayals of Renfield and Fritz.) According to the synopsis and list of *Murders*' "Conclusions" of the "Highlights" provided to exhibitors prior to its release, the film's box office potential rested on the continuity suggested by casting and generic appeal: *Murders* "capitalizes on the success of Bela Lugosi in 'Dracula'" and exceeds its predecessor in "thrills and breathless interest."²⁸¹ Several scenes in *Murders* further connote a relationship with *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Among these is an extended scene in which Dupin, Camille, Paul, and others sing joyously while riding through the streets of Paris, which resembles the House of Frankenstein marriage celebration sequence and utilizes a nearly identical set. Observers have also noted that Dr. Mirakle performs his experiments in the same watchtower that serves as Henry Frankenstein's laboratory and secluded domicile. Like Henry Frankenstein and his Monster, Mirakle and Erik fight (to the former's death) in a brutal struggle set in the top floor of the tower while frenzied townspeople gather outside.

While previous horror films, the star image of Lugosi, and contemporary censorship standards exerted considerable influence over *Murders*, so too does the Poe discourse,

²⁸¹ "Highlights: 'Murders in the Rue Morgue,'" undated, PCA File, File: "MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE, (UNIVERSAL, 19**)."

which encouraged the invention of characters such as the diabolical Mirakle, encouraged subtle modifications rather than strict adherence to the plot and tone of the short story, and, importantly, influenced the manner in which Poe was cited in publicity and film credits. The primary poster for the film features an illustration of a ghostly white face that resembles Lugosi; eyes wide open and staring intently to the observer's left, the face assumes a ghastly appearance with its red lips and flaming red streaks of hair (Figure 3.7, below).



Figure 3.7: An original poster publicizing the release of *Murders*.

Behind and to the upper left of the face is the profile of an ape with gritted teeth above a black background. Lugosi's credit, "*Bela LUGOSI/ (Dracula * Herndelf [sic])/ AS/ Dr. Mirakle,*" appears to the immediate left of the face and above the title, which reads, "*Edgar Allan Poe's/ MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE.*" (In the bottom third of the poster, Sidney Fox receives second billing, following by the additional acting and

producing credits, and “A UNIVERSAL PICTURE,” in larger font as the last line.) The face’s close proximity to Lugosi’s name, as well as its resemblance to Count Dracula, suggests that the illustration is of Lugosi, the star of the film and in the story the owner of the ape. However, the illustration also bears similarities to Poe, whose pale visage adorned the title pages of many of the published works prior to and during this period. With its haunting stare, wild hair and pallid coloration, the photographic representation contributed to the lonesome, brilliant, vindictive reputation circulated in the Poe discourse (Figure 3.8, below).

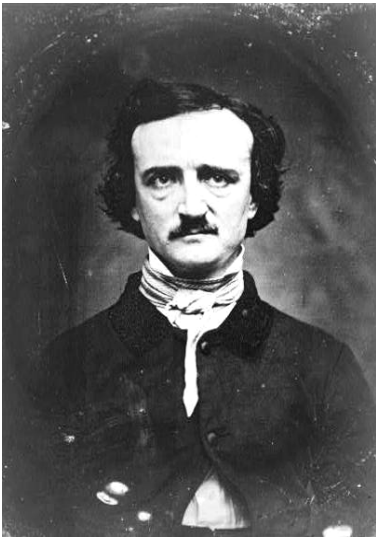


Figure 3.8: An oft-reproduced photograph of Poe.

The picture’s frequent position within his published works also encouraged the assumption that Poe was intimately connected to his subject matter (a suggestion more forcefully raised in *The Black Cat* and *The Raven*). The *Murders* poster, with its use of his name directly above the title and beside the illustrated face, encourages a similar assumption. As a result, Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” and the prevailing

meanings of the Poe discourse are absorbed into the aura Universal hopes to create with *Murders* and, more broadly, the horror genre.

But Universal did not deploy Poe's name and image merely to convert its meaning into the generic associations of the horror genre. The company also hoped that Poe could elevate the respectability of its own product, a low-budget formula film, and the genre in which it staked its future. In *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, Universal employed a similar tack in its ideas for cross-promoting the literary texts and possible theater exploitation and in the introductory segments to those films, which cited the literary origins of the film adaptations to raise the cultural value of the film and its producer and to fend off complaints against objectionable content. Heeding the SRO's advice, Universal uses a similar tool in *Murders* with the opening title card: "Carl Leammle/ presents/ 'Murders in the Rue Morgue'/ Based on the Immortal Classic by/ Edgar Allan Poe/" (Poe's name is also featured prominently, and usually above the title, in promotional materials, as in the poster above [Fig 3.7]).

Thus, Universal tapped the cultural value and sensationalism available in Poe through a seemingly contradictory strategy that hoped to exploit two components, sensationalism and literary prestige, available through the Poe discourse. For example, the story synopsis and list of publicity angles, which Universal distributed to exhibitors prior to releasing *Murders*, identifies Poe as "The world's outstanding author of mystery tales," while the short story is "One of the most famous of literature." Just a few lines prior, a list of "high-spots" cites the various "thrills" that the film's "sinister situations" and "blood-curdling shrieks" would induce, which marks the horror of the film rather than its

more pensive mystery aspects.²⁸² Universal conjured the image of Poe and the meanings of the detective story in order to guide them toward horror and away from other associations readily available in the Poe discourse.²⁸³ The company had performed a similar transformation in *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* when it described the details and authors of the literary works that were cited as sources.

Junior Laemmle announced to the *New York Times* and its readers in April 1932, “We’ve started a cycle of ... horror stories and we’re going to continue along that line.”²⁸⁴ The most immediate evidence of that strategy represented the transformation of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” from meditative mystery into sensational horror thriller. The results of this effort are corroborated in the critical response to the film, which registers consternation at the alteration of the short story’s central features while noting Universal’s overarching goal of inducing terror in the audience for the film. A *Times* reviewer called *Murders* a “collaboration between Edgar Allan Poe, Tom Reed and Dale Van Every. Poe, it would seem, contributed the title and the Messrs. Reed and Van Every thought up a story to go along with it.”²⁸⁵ The reviewer understands Poe as a superficial

²⁸² “Highlights: ‘Murders in the Rue Morgue,’” undated, PCA File, File: “MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE, (UNIVERSAL, 19**).”

²⁸³ The title credits produce a similar dynamic. The opening card reads, “CARL LAEMMLE Presents/ MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE/ based on the immortal classic by Edgar Allan Poe.” The explicit reference to Poe and reverential allusion to the short story denote that the film adaptation may follow the plot, themes, and genre of the “classic” literary source. However, the following titles, which feature five abstract illustrations behind the announcements of the cast and crew, suggest a generic shift from mystery to horror. Those illustrations, all in skewed point of view that recall German expressionism, depict images, such as a row of angled houses behind a cross, a connected series of circles and an ape crouched atop a wall that juts diagonally away from the viewer, that progress from possible scenes from the Poe short story, as in the initial row of houses that recalls the Rue Morgue setting and the homicidal ape, to more abstract scenes that suggest a darker theme and more gruesome story.

²⁸⁴ “A Chat with Laemmle, Jr.,” *New York Times*, 3 Apr 1932b, Reprinted in *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. Gene Brown (New York: Times Books, 1983).

²⁸⁵ A.D.S., “After Edgar Allan Poe; Review: *Murders in the Rue Morgue*,” *New York Times*, 14 Feb 1932.

functionary of Universal's larger generic goals. A *Variety* review of the film offers evidence that Universal's desire to create points of continuity between its horror films, and by so doing to become known as the progenitor of the genre, was working. The February 16, 1932, appraisal begins by citing *Murders* as the third entry in the genre for Universal and then noting similarities in plot, casting, and affect. However, these common features also provide an opportunity to compare the films, which allows the reviewer to disparage *Murders* more so for its timing in relation to *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* than any specific features of the film:

'Dracula' and 'Frankenstein' having softened 'em up, this third of U's baby-searing cycle won't have the benefit of shocking them stiff, and then making them talk about it. Had it come first there's no doubt it would have created a stronger impression.

While *Variety* is a trade publication and presumably holds an intimate knowledge of studio's releasing patterns and generic aspirations, this reviewer observes that the February 14 New York audience had become attuned to the conceits horror genre as well, indicated by their "cynical ... hooting" during the film's concluding scenes. Nevertheless, the critic predicts a warmer reception outside of New York.²⁸⁶

With its modest budget and the rising demand for horror, *Murders* was assured commercial success, inside and outside of the large theater markets. Just as important, *Murders* offered a vehicle by which it could continue the horror genre, build the value of Lugosi (who according to Universal's communication with exhibitors is the prime

²⁸⁶ "Review: 'Murders in the Rue Morgue,'" *Variety*, 16 Feb 1932.

attraction of the film)²⁸⁷, and test the appeal of Poe and the flexibility of the Poe discourse in the genre. The *Variety* review detects this last objective when it notes *Murders'* wild divergence from the original short story. Yet, the fact that "Poe wouldn't recognize his story" is not as important as the ability of the film to thrill audiences, a criterion that demonstrates the generic currency of horror far above the insistence of strict adherence to a literary precursor.

THE BLACK CAT (1934)

Perhaps the SRO may have taken the objections to the disturbing "realism" of horror films more seriously if it had believed in the long-term viability of the genre, which Joy discounts when he predicts, "The fact that the supply of such stories is necessarily limited will lead eventually to straining for more and more horror until the wave topples over and breaks."²⁸⁸ While Joy implicitly acknowledges the prevalence of adaptation within the genre when he mentions, "the supply of such stories," he fails to recognize three self-perpetuating components of the horror film as presented by Universal: (1), the possibility of writing original screenplays that conform to the narrative formulae introduced in prior horror film adaptations; (2), the introjection of plot resolutions that allow the villains of its films to live and wreak havoc in another film, thus spawning the possibility of franchises based on characters rather than the scenarios of the source materials; and, (3),

²⁸⁷ "Review: 'Murders in the Rue Morgue,'" *Variety*. According to the "conclusions" regarding *Murders'* appeal to contemporary audiences, the film "stacks up as one of the great box-office cleanups of the season" primarily because *Murders* "capitalizes on the success of Bela Lugosi in *Dracula*, ... [who has] terrific drawing power." Obviously, Universal may be overstating the film's appeal in order to place *Murders* in as many theatres as possible. However, these statements reflect the company's understanding of the film's appeals to audiences, which were its star and its similarity in effect, scenario, and cast to previous horror films.

the propensity to alter source materials radically to fit the tenets of the genre, which significantly expands the number of candidates eligible for adaptation. In *Murders*, Universal used the third strategy to convert the appeal of the original story from mystery to horror; in the process, it also recast the literary works by Poe as sensational thrillers, effectively modifying aspects of the Poe discourse and raising the value (at least from Universal's perspective) of other works by the author for future adaptations.

Thus, after continuing to profit from the genre with such successful features as *The Old Dark House* (1932), *The Mummy* (1933), and *The Invisible Man* (1933), and the entry of several other studios into the genre, Universal returned to Poe in 1934 with an adaptation of "The Black Cat" (1843).²⁸⁹ A first-person account of a man's descent into paranoia and psychosis, which leads to the inexplicable mutilation and murder of his cat, then the murder of his wife, and his imprisonment after her body and a nearly identical cat are found entombed in a basement wall, the short story's disturbed protagonist, macabre tone, and various acts of cruelty seemed more in line with the horror genre and with the representation of Poe and his work that Universal was trying to foster than did "The Murders in the Morgue." "The Black Cat" begins with the admission that the narrator's chronicle of recent events seems unbelievable and perhaps supernatural—"I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it." However, as in the Universal horror films, these statements are followed by assertions of the truth of his

²⁸⁸ "Synopsis and Code Review," 11 Jan 1932, PCA File, File: "MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE, (UNIVERSAL, 19**)."

²⁸⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat" (1843), Reprinted in *Great Short Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 390-401.

“homely narrative” and a comment about the effects those events had on him and might have on his readers:

Yet, mad am I not—and very surely do I not dream. But to-morrow I die, and today I would unburthen my soul. My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have terrified—have tortured—have destroyed me. ... To me, they have presented little but Horror.²⁹⁰

“The Black Cat” appealed to Universal for the story’s characters, gruesome events and desired effect, “Horror”; it even includes a sequence testifying to the truth of the events it was about to relay, as do *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. However, it also presented obstacles for a possible film adaptation. It features few characters, a thin plot, and no dialogue from which to transpose into a screenplay. (In fact, as an explicit confessional, it takes place entirely as the narrator’s interior monologue.) In addition, some of its events, which included the removal of a cat’s eye and the near decapitation of the narrator’s wife with an ax, were so grisly as to cause consternation about the ability to depict them in a way that could reproduce their intended effects and stay within increasingly narrow censorship standards.

Universal had ample time to sort out these obstacles, as a possible film adaptation of “The Black Cat” had been under consideration there since late 1932. At least three distinct treatments were rejected, and various cast and crew arrangements were formulated and then dissolved, over the following year. Finally, Junior Laemmle tabbed young Austrian Edgar Ulmer, who had worked up the ranks at Universal from the art

²⁹⁰ Poe, “The Black Cat,” 390.

department to a director of shorts and serials, to direct *Cat* for his first feature film.²⁹¹

Ulmer had roots in German Expressionism, as he claimed to have worked on the sets of *Golem* (1920) and *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), along with several films directed by F.W. Murnau and Fritz Lang. While his European resume was suspect (he was merely fifteen years old in 1920), Ulmer did assist Murnau on an American production, *Sunrise* (1927), and he hoped to graft his taste for modernist aesthetics, psychologically conflicted characters, and skewed visual perspectives onto the macabre elements already present in the short story and the multiple story treatments.²⁹²

After several treatments of the short story were composed and rejected in 1931 and 1932, Universal moved forward with a script, inserted *Cat* into the production schedule, and initiated the censorship review process by submitting a screenplay of the prospective film, by Edgar Ulmer and Peter Ruric, in mid-February of 1934. Later that month, Joe Breen replied to Universal producer Harry Zehner with a lengthy assessment of the prospective film. Breen expresses reservation at the “gruesome” images promised in “the scenes of skinning a man alive” and “the several sequences in which the script calls for a cat to be killed.” Moreover, depictions and implicit endorsements of animal cruelty will draw “considerable trouble” for Universal and the SRO.²⁹³ These comments indicate the significant influence of individual censorship boards and other institutional observers on

²⁹¹ See Soister (171, 175) and Brunas et al (78-82).

²⁹² Noah Isenberg, “Perennial Detour,” *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 4, 6, 7-8.

²⁹³ “Letter: Joe Breen to Harry Zehner,” 26 Feb 1934, PCA File, File: “THE BLACK CAT (Universal, 1934).” In the remainder of his response, Breen identifies a litany of scenes that could pose censorship problems. Among other requests, he asks that the film “avert suggestions of homosexuality,” eliminate several shots of corpses, and remove unsavory insinuations against Czechoslovakian and Germans. This

the SRO, a mediator that in turn relayed their mandates to filmmaking corporations.

Despite numerous press releases by the Hays Office over the past two years claiming that Hollywood filmmaking corporations would be producing “cleaner” films, the SRO still had little authority to enforce the Code and films of questionable moral standards continued to populate domestic theatres and provoke local censors and industry critics.²⁹⁴

Breen continuously lobbied for more authority, but as the review process for *Cat* demonstrates, he and his peers still lacked the clout to enforce the tenets of the Code.²⁹⁵

Apparently, the SRO’s advice had fallen on deaf ears at Universal, which knew by now what it could and could not get away with. More importantly for the continued execution of the filmmaking corporation’s strategy, the prospect of teaming horror icons Karloff and Lugosi to star in the film necessitated a tight shooting schedule to accommodate the busy actors and to capitalize on the current horror craze, which was increasingly being populated by the company’s competitors.²⁹⁶ No less than five other

last suggestion indicates the SRO’s simultaneous attention to both moral acceptability and commercial potential (i.e., the foreign box office viability of *Cat*) in its censorship reviews.

²⁹⁴ In his tenth annual report on the state of the MPDDA, delivered in Spring 1932 and immediately released to the press, Will Hays claimed, “The trend in pictures has been away from sordidness and toward romance and clean comedy” (quoted in “Hays Says Romance Ruled Films in 1931,” *New York Times*, 12 Apr 1932, Reprinted in *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. Gene Brown [New York: Times Books, 1983]).

²⁹⁵ Just two days after the caution to Universal regarding *Cat*, studio employee Lillian Russell responded to Breen, reporting that, per his suggestions, *Cat* writers had modified the script and that the film would begin production that day, February 28, 1934. “Letter: Lillian Russell to Joe Breen,” 28 Feb 1934, PCA File, File: “THE BLACK CAT (Universal, 1934).” Russell’s brief note was enclosed with a revised script, which was reviewed immediately by Auster (first name unknown). He notes that a “wedding scene” that opened the original script had indeed been removed as Russell mentioned, but otherwise, he sees “no appreciable change” in the screenplay (excepting the elimination of a disparaging reference to Czechoslovakians); even the “skinning alive scenes remain,” writes Auster. “Memo: Auster to Joe Breen,” 28 Feb 1934, PCA File, File: “THE BLACK CAT (Universal, 1934).”

²⁹⁶ According to Soister, Karloff “won the right” to act for other studios while still under contract at Universal. Therefore, he was extremely busy during this period. Lugosi, more firmly tied to the studio and in a desperate financial position, needed all the work he could get (170-71).

studios released films that could be classified into the horror genre in 1932 and 1933, and the genre showed no signs of slowing in the near future.²⁹⁷ *Cat* could again signify that Universal was the indisputable “house of horrors,” as publicity for its films often claimed. As an all-star feature, it also signifies the later classical stage in the evolution of the horror genre. According to Schatz, the late classical stage develops when the aesthetic conventions and narrative scenarios of late classical films are widely known; as a result, genre filmmakers search for ways to toy with those familiar features and their films self-consciously gesture toward the genre itself. The audience response to *Murders*, as it was related in the *Variety* review, signifies this progression to some degree: the viewers seemed fully aware of the narrative conventions of the genre, and when *Murders* did not fulfill or exceed their expectations, the intended effect of the film’s ending failed, triggering an entirely different response from the knowledgeable audience. With *Cat*, the presence of Lugosi and Karloff inevitably recalls the compelling characters they played in previous horror films; therefore, the clash between these “movie monsters” produces a phenomenon—existing on a level beyond the manifest plot, dialogue, and characterizations of the film—available to that portion of the audience with knowledge of the genre, its conventions, and its recent past.

Even with high-profile actors, the production budget for *Cat* was set at \$91,125—about one-quarter the cost of *Dracula*, one-third of *Frankenstein*, and one-half of *Murders*. Clearly, Universal production crews had gathered a level of expertise and the

²⁹⁷ Among the horror films released during this period were MGM’s *Freaks* (1932) and *Kongo* (1932), United Artists’ *White Zombie* (1932), Warner Bros.’ *Doctor X* (1932) and *Mystery of the Wax Museum*

company an arsenal of interchangeable costumes, props, and sets that allowed it to produce horror films ever more cheaply and quickly. The budget figures for *Cat* signal a further development in the genre, which *Murders* had obliquely indicated two years earlier—the division of its horror formula into prestige releases and programmers. For instance, *The Bride of Frankenstein*, also directed by Whale and starring Karloff and Clive, cost \$397,000 to produce, a moderate figure at most studios but an A-level amount at Universal. Junior Laemmle personally oversaw production, Balderston worked on the screenplay, Franz Waxman provided an original score (a rare luxury for any Universal film, especially horror), and a team of technicians devised the most elaborate effects the company had created in its horror films to that point. Compare that to *Cat*, supervised by producer E.M. Asher, written by second-tier Universal screenwriter Peter Ruric, directed by the enthusiastic but unproven Edgar Ulmer, scored primarily with stock and public domain music and a minute level of original composition by Universal conductor Heinz Roemheld, and manned by a single-member special effects crew. The production for *Bride* spanned over two months (including retakes), a significant investment of time and money, while *Cat* was scheduled for a modest 15-day shoot. *Bride* also had a running time of 75 minutes versus *Cat*'s 62. Based on their running times, shorter films could fit into either a programmer package or a double- or triple-feature format; Universal had built a presence in rural markets with the former and continued to sell packaged programs during this period, while the latter had gained popularity in all markets after 1933 when

(1933), Paramount's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), *The Ghoul* (1933) and *The Island of Lost Souls* (1933), and Majestic's *The Vampire Bat* (1933).

Congress instituted the National Recovery Act, which banned the “giveaways and games” that exhibitors offered to entice customers. Multiple feature formats represented a new value-added incentive to attract depression-era customers to the cinema.²⁹⁸ This subtle, yet significant divide within production for its horror formula serves as yet another sign of the progression of the genre into parallel releasing patterns.²⁹⁹ At the same time, *Cat’s* budget exemplifies the extraordinary dexterity with which Universal was able to pare costs while retaining features of A-level production, such as casting and set design.

With this bifurcated generic strategy in place, *Cat* began shooting in late February. Production extended one day beyond its 15-day shooting schedule, and with three and a half days of retakes, a cut of the film was completed on March 29 at a cost of \$95,745.³⁰⁰ While the SRO expressed skepticism at Universal’s willingness to conform to its suggestions with *Cat*, those concerns dissipated after Universal forwarded a rough cut of the film to the SRO in early April. On April 2, 1934, Breen wrote to Harry Zehner,

We had the pleasure this morning of witnessing a rough cut showing of your production, THE BLACK CAT, and I am hastening to tell you that it is our judgment that the picture conforms to the provision of the Production Code and contains little, if anything, that is reasonably censorable. We are particularly pleased with the manner in which your studio and director have handled this subject.³⁰¹

²⁹⁸ Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 77.

²⁹⁹ So too does *Bride*, released less than year after *Cat*. *Bride* toys with the usual formulaic restrictions of the genre, especially in the character motivations (and subsequent actions) and tone conveyed in the film. The darkly comic, somewhat absurd take on horror is a clear signal of the genre’s step forward into a late classical stage, in which the formal conceits of the genre assume more importance in the diegesis. *Cat* represents a less explicit sign of this stage of generic transformation.

³⁰⁰ Brunas et al, 83.

³⁰¹ “Letter: Joe Breen to Harry Zehner,” 2 Apr 1934, PCA File, File: “THE BLACK CAT (Universal, 1934).”

Whether a later version of the film differed radically from the one screened by the SRO or the SRO simply did not anticipate the reception of *Cat*, state and foreign censorship boards reacted much differently to the film.³⁰² In late May, the Maryland censorship board asked for the elimination of “all reference” to a climactic scene in which Werdegast skins Poelzig alive.³⁰³ Other censorship boards expressed a similar distaste for this scene, but the most adamant opposition to *Cat* came from the Ohio state censorship board, which demanded that all dialogue from this scene (an entire ten-minute reel’s worth) be removed or changed completely, as well as all other references to skinning. In addition, the board requested the removal of various sound effects, screams, groans, moans, and shrieks throughout the film. (Ohio also ordered Universal to remove “all shadow scenes” of the struggle and eventual skinning of Poelzig.³⁰⁴) Censors agreed that the sound effects sent specific shots featured in *Cat* over the top. Apparently, they had sniffed out an affective conceit of the horror genre.

“An Atmosphere of Death”: Horror and the Poe Discourse

As with *Murders*, the presence of actors with a pre-established persona (in which Universal had invested significant resources) and the tenets of the company’s horror formula as perfected in previous releases influenced the plot and characters of *Cat*, encouraging numerous modifications of the plot and characters presented in the literary source. While “The Black Cat” unfolds entirely from the perspective of the protagonist,

³⁰² *Cat* was rejected or banned in British Malaya, Austria, and Finland, while censors in Quebec and Great Britain asked for considerable modification before the film could be exhibited.

³⁰³ “Censorship Review: Maryland,” 27 May 1934, PCA File, File: “THE BLACK CAT (Universal, 1934).”

who becomes increasingly paranoid, obsessive, and less reliable as a narrator, *Cat* features no close approximation of this character. Instead, his traits and personality are parsed out to multiple characters at different stages of his descent into madness and violence. Thus, Lugosi's Vitus Werdegast, whose friendly demeanor and dapper attire conceal a deep-seated thirst for revenge against his enemy Hjalmar Poelzig (Boris Karloff), represents the conflicted psychological makeup of the narrator. (Werdegast's intense fear of cats serves as an explicit reference to "The Black Cat," but the short story's narrator never reveals a phobia of the animal, only an inexplicable disgust with the two cats living at and around his home.) Karloff's Poelzig—quiet, cold, malicious, and involved in bizarre rituals—is one half of that personality; he portrays the sadistic, but outwardly composed temperament that the narrator of "The Black Cat" adopts by the story's end. The gregarious writer Peter Alison (David Manners) is the other half of the narrator's psyche and embodies his early optimism, has a similar romantic relationship, and conveys his intense disgust and bewilderment with the depraved events he witnesses.

Selected themes and events of "The Black Cat" are retained, but not its primary or auxiliary characters. Instead, the popular conception of a Poe story—synonymous with lurid subjects, psychological depravity, and vengeful acts committed by isolated, disturbed characters—and the prevailing image of the author influences the characterizations of the film. For example, according to the Poe discourse, Poe was inextricable from many of the narrators or protagonists presented in his stories and poetry. Therefore, it is easy to read Poe's personality into a number of characters in *Cat*,

³⁰⁴ "Censorship Review: Ohio," 2 June 1934, PCA File, File: "THE BLACK CAT (Universal, 1934)."
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including Alison, the struggling and under-appreciated American mystery writer, Poelzig, whose placid demeanor conceals his malicious predilections, and Werdegast, who struggles between his sense of social responsibility and his desire to exact grotesque forms of revenge on his enemy. As all of these traits are evident in the popular and literary reputation of Poe, the Poe discourse takes primacy over the details of the short story, to an even greater extent than they do in *Murders*.

With *Cat*, Universal presents a version of Poe and his works that meshes easily with the Poe discourse and with the previous presentation of Poe in *Murders* (i.e., *Murders* and *Cat* become more similar to one another in plot, character, and genre than the short stories from which they are ostensibly adapted). The effect: to create a generic uniformity between those two films and the Universal horror genre while raising the visibility of Poe, solidifying his literary reputation and public persona among contemporary audiences, and making additional Poe stories more valuable and malleable for Universal. As a result, symbolic profit accrues to contributors to the Poe discourse and to Universal.

Cat adheres to the generic conceits of the horror genre, especially those established in previous Universal films featuring its two stars. Meanwhile, the Poe discourse—which here includes references to Poe’s professional status, assumptions about the author’s personality, his attachment to psychological concepts, and selected elements from “The Black Cat”—is communicated in an oblique, fragmentary manner throughout the narrative. *Cat* conjures the eerie, anxious mood and gruesome subject matter associated with Poe during the time period even as it strays from the short story that ostensibly

served as source material for the film adaptation. *Cat* features intermittent appearances by a black cat, which inexplicably re-appears after being killed in an early scene; the entombment of several women, including Werdegast's deceased wife, in the basement; and a mutilation scene. Previous Universal horror films also influence the storyline, characters, sets, and imagery featured in *Cat*. This dynamic is symbolized by the "atmosphere of death" that Werdegast believes hangs over the labyrinth, ascetic, modernist home that serves as Poelzig's secluded home and the film's primary setting. (Alison and his wife Joan also comment on the sensation.) On one hand, this assignation could describe the mood associated with Poe and his literary works and with various elements of "The Black Cat." On the other hand, it could refer to the unsettling, eerie atmosphere Universal hoped to create in its horror films and thereby distinguish itself for consumers. Each source lingers over the narrative of *Cat* and contributes to the film's affective success.

The relationship between elements of the Poe discourse and the conceits of the horror genre is evident at the outset of *Cat*. In the title card, Universal announces the film's relationship to the short story, "Suggested by the Immortal EDGAR ALLAN POE Classic." With such a description, the film highlights its relationship to Poe by placing his name in all caps and a large typescript, while it distances itself from a precise rendering of characters and plot details featured in the short story by the less visible designation "Suggested." Unlike previous title sequences in Universal's horror pictures, the title card does not appear first in the film. Rather, a card announcing its two stars, "KARLOFF and LUGOSI" in an enormous block script, precedes the title and credits.

Like the relationship between the all-stars of horror and the “immortal” author, genre staples, including well-known characterizations, themes and images in previous Universal horror films, dominate the narrative while the Poe discourse influences the mood of the film in a more subtle but just as effective manner.

Clearly, *Cat*'s opening title cards imply that Universal believed Karloff and Lugosi were the prime attractions of the film. (So too do publicity materials for the film [Figure 3.9, below].)



Figure 3.9: A promotional poster for *The Black Cat*, in which, fittingly, Karloff and Lugosi dominate the foreground while the eponymous feline lurks in the background.

Both actors were indelibly attached to the horror genre, which with *Cat* has entered a self-referential “late classical” stage of development. The film does not just attempt to establish continuity with earlier Universal horror films (although it does so with the use of familiar characters and plot devices)³⁰⁵; it introduces a reflexive narrative strand with

³⁰⁵ For example, *Cat* features a reclusive, eccentric, and malevolent antagonist that preys on a young couple. Scenes set in populated public spaces frame the narrative before the main characters descend into the dangerous world of the villains; in *Cat*, that setting is a train station and a train sleeping berth. As in *Murders*, the police and other public officials in *Cat* are ineffectual and dimwitted; they merely stall the efforts of the protagonists and provide a bit of comic relief.

repeated allusions to the previous roles and star images of the Karloff and Lugosi. Lugosi's train ride through the dark, remote mountains of Hungary recalls the carriage ride to Count Dracula's estate in Transylvania. The references become increasingly obvious as the narrative unfolds. Lugosi's Poelzig is introduced as he sits up slowly in his bed; the score heightens and the dim lighting reveal a silhouette that instantly conjures the familiar profile of Frankenstein's Monster. Moments later, Lugosi's Werdegast, whose intentions are still unclear, injects Joan Alison with a sedative; like the previous allusion to *Dracula* on the train, this scene gestures toward the harrowing torture scene in *Murders* and thus establishes ambiguity around the character, whom the Alisons have little reason to fear.

Through this strategy, *Cat* evokes nostalgia for the genre and, by so doing, attempts to establish historical credibility for the horror and its progenitor, Universal. A layer of pleasure in viewing *Cat* generates from the novelty of a battle royale between Lugosi and Karloff, the contemporary icons of horror (Figures 3.10 and 3.11, below).



Figure 3.10 and 3.11: At left, the slow rise from sleep that introduces the silhouetted Poelzig (Karloff) recalls the actor's most famous role, as Frankenstein's Monster. At right, two icons of the horror genre, Karloff and Lugosi, face off.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁶ *The Black Cat*, dir. Edgar Ulmer, 65 min. Universal Pictures, 1934, DVD.

In this narrative strand, several lines of dialogue between Werdegast and Poelzig serves an explicit, diegetic and an implicit, extra-diegetic function that bears little relation to *Cat's* plot but resonates when perceived in the context of the actors' prior roles. Take for example Werdegast's statement to Poelzig, "For fifteen years I've waited: not to kill you; to kill your soul." The line describes the rivalry between the two war veterans, while it recalls Count Dracula's and the Monster's status as living dead. In this vein, even more plain is a later observation by Poelzig, "Are we not the living dead? ... You are an avenging angel, thirsting for my blood." The comment makes little sense in the diegesis, but it appropriately describes the iconic star images attached to the actors, as well as the posthumous rise to celebrity by Edgar Allan Poe. A late scene in which Werdegast, with the help of his longtime assistant and secret operative Majordomo, finally overpowers Poelzig and exacts his revenge by skinning his adversary alive is a gruesome climax to the film. A shot featuring Poelzig tied to and stretched across two beams clearly gestures toward the torture scene in *Murders*, as does a shot of shadow through which the sadistic act is depicted. And when Werdegast, now Mirakle, tears his enemy's shirt, exposing the bare chest of Karloff, familiar to viewers of *Frankenstein*, the extra-diegetic narrative strand subsumes its diegetic counterpart (Figures 3.12 and 3.13, below).



Figure 3.12 and 3.13: Werdegast (Lugosi) finally exacts revenge against Poelzig. The gruesome act is communicated in the familiar Universal shadow shot (right).

Prior to *Cat*, the sound design of Universal horror films served as a crucial affective element. *Dracula* features numerous long silences that were occasionally disrupted by off-screen, ambient noises. *Frankenstein* uses such sounds to contribute to its unsettling tone and propel the narrative forward, while *Murders* inserts the sharp, deafening female scream into the soundtrack to a perhaps more disturbing effect. *Cat* combines some of these conventions while diverging from others. Like *Murders*, the film features several female screams, most of which signal, like *Frankenstein*, scene and set changes that structure the spatial dimensions of the labyrinth set and interject crucial information that alters the narrative. For example, while Werdegast tortures Poelzig, Joan emits an anguished cry, thus registering the gruesomeness of the flaying, which occurs off-screen and through another familiar Universal shot, the shadow projection (see Figs. 3.12 and 3.13, above). A fourth scream by Joan informs Alison of his wife's location. He runs into the room, sees Joan and Werdegast struggling to pry a key out of the hand of Werdegast's dead henchman, Majordomo, and, believing the two to be struggling, shoots the latter. Finally, a yell by Poelzig serves as yet another way to imply the physical

torture he receives without showing it in graphic detail. These scene attests to Universal's efficient but measured use of sound, which expertly utilizes sound design to evoke mood, communicate information, and move the story forward.³⁰⁷

Werdegast and Poelzig establish continuity between *Cat* and its predecessors, as do other characters and scenarios in the film. For example, Peter and Joan Alison are similar to the young couples in *Dracula* (i.e., Harker and Mina), *Murders* (Dupin and Camille), and to a lesser degree *Frankenstein* (Frankenstein and Elizabeth). While all of these characters appear frequently in the stories and occasionally are important to the plots, they function for the most part to offer romantic interludes in the narrative and to register the seriousness of the acts committed by the supernatural monsters and sadistic villains played alternately by Lugosi and Karloff. Ditto for the Alisons, newlyweds who establish a light tone in the opening sequence of the film, which is abruptly disrupted after meeting the sullen, prisoner of war Werdegast aboard a train to Hungary. When a taxi to their stopover hotel crashes in the night, the trio hikes to Poelzig's secluded, mountainside home and thus become unwilling witnesses to the enemies' long-awaited

³⁰⁷ Ambient sound, in the form of a muffled explosion, also signals the destruction of Poelzig's home by dynamite blast. Instead of depicting this scene, the noises appear off-screen in a shot of the Alisons running out of the house. Again, sound designs, as well as a brief flash of light, provides enough information to the viewer while it saves the expense and time of set construction, elaborate staging, and additional shots.

Financial restrictions and technological limitations were two reasons for the paucity of non-diegetic sound in previous Universal horror films. *Cat*, confined to a minuscule budget, lacks extended silences. In fact, non-diegetic sound dominates the soundtrack. Dramatic orchestral music, some composed by Heinz Roemheld along with selections from Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Schubert and others, appears in most of the sequences that lack dialogue and is especially evident whenever Poelzig enters a room. For example, when Poelzig rises slowly out of bed the score volume raises and shifts tempo to foreshadow the character's disposition. The same technique is used when Poelzig enters the bedroom where Werdegast and Alison attend to Joan, who has passed out after the taxi crash. The score, through its variations in volume and motif, helps to differentiate characters, where earlier films may have used dialogue for the same purpose. Moreover, the steady presence of the score provides continuity between scenes and maintains the mood, or

violent confrontation. The couple barely escapes the house before it explodes and, as in *Frankenstein*, *Cat* concludes with a brief scene that features the couple on a train, continuing on to Budapest as originally planned and apparently reassuming their normal lives.

The final scene of *Cat* concludes with the death of the adversaries Poelzig and Werdegast, the destruction of the home that served as mausoleum and meeting place for the former's satanic cult, and the restoration of order to the lives of the only living witnesses to the ghastly events and depraved individuals. According to the conventions of the horror genre and the preferences of the SRO, this is a stock generic ending. However, *Cat's* coda does not entirely eradicate the "atmosphere of death" that dominates the film's narrative and setting. According to the dialogue in this scene, Alison has recently published a novel, *The Triple Murder*, recording his recent harrowing experiences. Alison, an apparently sane individual and published writer, thus offers an appeal to plausibility of the type provided by Professor Van Helsing and Dr. Waldman in the supernatural scenarios of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, respectively. Alison reads a recent review of the book aloud:

The Triple Murder fulfills the promise shown by the 69th *Crime in the Purple Spa*. We feel however that Mr. Alison has in a sense overstepped his bounds in the matter of credibility. These things could never by the furthest stretch of the imagination actually happen. We wish that Mr. Alison could confine himself to the possible instead of letting his melodramatic imagination run away with him.

"the atmosphere of death," that pervades the narrative and its setting. *Cat's* score also dictates tone through its volume and tempo shifts.

Through its reference to unfulfilled potential, personal credibility, and the writer's relationship to the events depicted in his work, the dialogue raises the specter of Poe and three issues that fueled the Poe discourse. The review, published in an English-speaking and thus possibly American newspaper, also offers a parallel to the critical disregard and obscurity in the United States suffered by Poe during and shortly after his while, while his work enjoyed a wide audience abroad. These are the final lines of dialogue in *Cat*, which fades to credits with a close-up shot of Alison, silently perturbed at the ambivalent review. Similar to the effect of the titles that open the film, the scene presents a generic horror convention while offering an underlying subtext that "suggests" the Poe discourse.

Despite opening on May 3, 1934, to tepid reviews, *Cat* was Universal's top grossing feature of the year, which endorsed the popularity of Lugosi and Karloff, indicated the appetite for horror genre in all markets, validated Universal's bipartite horror production strategy, and guided the Poe discourse in a direction suitable for another horror film adaptation.³⁰⁸ Reviewers called the film a mere vehicle to exploit the popularity of Karloff and Lugosi and to delve into even more sickening subject matter.³⁰⁹ Critics were also quick to note the dissimilarity from the Poe short story: *Variety* observed, "Edgar Allan Poe's name is used for publicity purposes. All that is used is the title which belongs to a Poe short story."³¹⁰ A *New York Times* review, entitled "Not Related to Poe," was

³⁰⁸ Brunas et al, 79. Soister claims that *Cat* returned a profit of \$140,000 (175), a number corroborated by *The Internet Movie Database*, which reports a domestic gross of \$236,000 ("The Raven: Box Office," undated, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0024894/business>> [12 Oct 2005]).

³⁰⁹ *Variety* described the skinning alive sequence as "a horrible and nauseating bit of extreme sadism, its inclusion in a motion picture is dubious showmanship." Land., "Review: THE BLACK CAT," *Variety*, 22 May 1934, 15.

³¹⁰ Land., "Review: THE BLACK CAT."

even more indignant, beginning the piece with the sarcastic quip, “The acknowledgement which the producers of ‘The Black Cat’ graciously make to Edgar Allan Poe seems a trifle superfluous, since the new film is not remotely to be identified with Poe’s short story.”³¹¹ While the disparity between the film and its ostensible source irked some, audiences seemed to overlook this “fault” of *Cat* and perhaps delighted in the extra-diegetic narrative strand that occasionally altered the plot and encouraged confusing dialogue but also inserted an allusive layer to the film that allowed characters to transcend their overt roles in the story. Moreover, while Universal had little use for the characters and storyline invented by Poe, it successfully captured the mood long associated with Poe, thus signifying Universal’s appeal to the Poe aura, and its adherence to the Poe discourse.³¹²

THE RAVEN (1935)

If the characters played by Karloff and Lugosi, the two most famous Monsters in the Universal horror genre, bear similarities in *Cat* to the widely circulated public image of Poe, the correspondences are more explicit and provocative in *The Raven*, a film that actively engages in the debate about Poe’s personality. The presence of the Poe discourse and the “suggested” parallels between the celebrity image of Poe and several characters in *Cat* graft numerous traits onto the author’s reputation: he was perhaps

³¹¹ A.D.S., “Not Related to Poe: THE BLACK CAT,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1934, 18.

³¹² Recent commentators note that *Cat* reflects the “spirit” of “The Black Cat.” See for example Brunas et al (85), who cite a similar assertion by William K. Everson. This exceedingly vague designation is often used, along with terms like faithfulness, with respect to film adaptations’ relations to literary sources. As I maintain about the status of the Universal horror films, I believe that assertions regarding an adaptation’s correspondence with the spirit of a literary precursor signifies its position within a broader discourse, which exceeds the original literary work and its author, themes, and characters.

malicious, violent and disturbed; certainly his professional merits were unacknowledged and he was capable of exacting revenge for past transgressions. In fact, the correlation between the author and the characters portrayed by Karloff and Lugosi inevitably recalls Count Dracula and Frankenstein's Monster, and as a result positions Poe as yet another undead creature of the Universal horror genre. This inference becomes plain in *Raven*, in which the travails, transgressions, and lust for revenge of *Cat's* Werdegast and Poelzig are heightened, repeatedly recalled and finally executed by yet another psychotic physician, Richard Vollin (Bela Lugosi). The famous surgeon is an expert on the life and literature of Poe and possesses an extensive "Poe collection." But Vollin is more than a benign enthusiast and member of the "cult of Poe"; believing himself to be a kindred spirit of the author, he recites "The Raven" from memory, claims the bird as his "talismán," and has reconstructed several working torture devices described in Poe short stories. Vollin casts himself as a modern Poe: a victim of romantic misfortune, a slave to the uncontrollable will of his own genius, and misunderstood by a society he views as beneath his unique intellect. Like *Cat*, the film's narrative operates in multiple layers at once unfolding a familiar horror plot; a meta-generic series of allusions to previous roles portrayed by Karloff and Lugosi; a commentary on Poe's life, his relationship to his fiction and poetry, and thus a clear salvo in the debate about the author's character; and a cautionary tale dramatizing the effects of an obsessive devotion to the author's literary works.

Raven once again pairs Lugosi with Karloff, who plays criminal Edmund Bateman and, as in *Cat*, receives top billing despite a lesser part than Lugosi (Figure 3.14, below).



Figure 3.14: An original promotional poster for *The Raven* (1935) suggests Karloff's star appeal.

Bateman is another misunderstood outsider, ambivalently divided between his compassionate and destructive impulses, in the vein of both *Frankenstein's* Monster and *Cat's* Werdegast. Bateman desires to conceal his identity by changing his appearance, and he agrees to perform an undisclosed job involving "torture, murder" in exchange for reconstructive surgery. Instead, Vollin horribly disfigures Bateman. The Doctor promises to correct his appearance, but only after Bateman assists him in the sinister plan, an elaborate revenge fantasy that Vollin has yet to reveal in detail.

In still other ways, *Raven* can be viewed as an adaptation of *Cat*. The correspondences in characters between *Raven* and *Cat* are obvious; so too is the setting, as most of the action occurs in Vollin's labyrinth house, which such common features as an office, living and dining rooms and a bedroom, as well as a private medical laboratory and a bedroom that doubles as an elevator, which descends to a cellar that houses the

doctor's collection of torture devices. The elaborate set was one reason that *Raven* cost about 20 percent more than *Cat*, as was additional story development costs incurred from the use of at least eight writers. However, the paltry budget of \$115,000 was still far below the average levels of most of Universal's competitors.

As with earlier horror films, Universal assigned a first-time feature director, Lew Landers (who later worked under the name Louis Friedlander), to *Raven*. While this decision once again conserves budget resources that might be used in other areas, such as the elaborate set design featured in the film, it also indicates that the company's horror production unit, led by producer E.M. Asher, cinematographer Charles Stumar (with experience on dozens of American and German films), makeup designer Jack Pierce, and art director Albert D'Agostino, as well as experienced actors Karloff and Lugosi, had become self-sufficient and needed little management at this stage.

But while Universal hoped to score a repeat of its success with *Cat* by following closely many of the practices employed by that film, conditions had changed in the film industry in the brief period between the May 1934 release of *Cat* and the March 1935 production of *Raven*. Most notably, the SRO had been granted some of the authority it long sought. Facing widespread threats of drastic cuts or complete bans on their films, Hollywood reluctantly agreed to institute the Code as an ironclad mandate. In June 1934, Will Hays announced that the Studio Relations Office would thereafter be called the Production Code Administration (PCA). The new moniker hinted at the revised role the PCA would play with respect to Hollywood filmmaking corporations. From 1930 to mid-1934, the SRO merely acted as a mediator between censors and studios and occasionally

attempted to bolster the public image of Hollywood. Now, the PCA would serve as an administrator (which entailed both interpretation and enforcement) of the Code. All Hollywood releases required official PCA certification in order to secure exhibition at member theaters, most of which were in the largest, most lucrative markets. Those studios that attempted to release a film in violation of the Code would incur a \$25,000 fine and had little chance of commercial success in the few exhibition markets outside the domain of the PCA.³¹³ The PCA had clearly tacked to the right, toward the censors and industry watchdogs like the Catholic Legion of Decency.³¹⁴ Without doubt, the horror genre would be a target of the PCA. Despite the fact that Breen, the newly appointed Production Code Administrator, was known to be resourceful in proposing resolving conflicts with the Code without damaging the integrity of the release too drastically,³¹⁵ it was safe to assume that the gruesome images, depraved characters, increasingly taboo subject matter, and sharp, disturbing sounds that signified horror would be closely scrutinized in the new environment.

Based on its relative success with the horror formula and the declining value of real estate in the Depression, the company acquired a few small theatre chains, a move that signified its confidence in the future. Universal's losses were far less severe than its competitors' in 1932, and in 1933 the company actually turned a small but promising profit of \$200,000, especially significant during a period in which "the industry saw [its

³¹³ Leff and Simmons, 52-53.

³¹⁴ Leff and Simmons, 52-53.

³¹⁵ Joe Breen firmly believed that movies should set a clear moral example for spectators, and according to Leff and Simmons he was a favorite of the Legion (52-53).

late-1920s] profits turn into hefty debris.”³¹⁶ Rather than resting on his laurels, Junior Laemmle, now at 27 years old the production chief and studio boss, became more intent on breaking into the first-run market with several other generic specialties and a more consistent supply of prestige releases. Even with its sights set on the future, the horror genre was a consistent and much needed source of income for Universal. *Bride of Frankenstein* was a hit in the spring and summer of 1935, making additional future iterations of the series imminent. *Cat* had proven the efficiency of Universal’s horror production unit, the viability of the low budget horror vehicle, and the continued appeal of Karloff and Lugosi. With *Raven*, the studio could further exploit this lucrative strategy.

Raven’s stars and its producer indicate the film’s generic categorization, as do the sets, cinematography, and soundtrack that had become standard elements in the formula. The operating room, labyrinth home, and expansive cellar all have close or exact corollaries in previous Universal horror releases. So too do the frightening frequent off-screen noises and piercing female screams: as a storm descends on the Vollin home late at night, the ambient sounds of rain, thunder and lightning, as well as the crash of a tree limb through a bedroom window, set a familiar mood and recall the baying of wolves featured in *Dracula* and the violent storms in *Frankenstein* and *Cat*. Those sounds also propel the narrative of *Raven*, as Jean Thatcher’s scream in recognition of the breaking window (and the attempt by Bateman to enter her room through a trap door in the

³¹⁶ According to Andrew Bergman, in 1929 Warner Bros recorded a profit on over \$17,000,000, Loew’s almost \$12,000,000, and Fox and RKO around \$1,500,000, respectively (*We’re In The Money* [New York:

bedroom floor) also signals danger to her fiancé Jerry and prompts the couple to trade rooms. Moments later, Jerry hears a struggle and quickly opens the door to witness Bateman carrying Judge Thatcher to the hidden cellar. Jean's screams also offer confirmation of frightening images and situations within the film. She shrieks when seeing Bateman's hideously reconstructed face and again when her bedroom, which Vollin has converted to an elevator car, descends to the cellar and the walls of a torture room begin to close on her and Jerry.

The characters in *Raven*, especially Vollin, Bateman, Jean Thatcher, the object of Vollin's affection, and Jerry bear clear similarities to the villains, heroes, and young couples in many Universal horror releases. Those characters are placed in familiar scenarios as well. Two social outcasts battle each other, prey on unsuspecting visitors and eventually kill each other. In the course of the story, a young couple is endangered by the actual or virtual Monsters and serves as witnesses to the deranged individuals and unbelievable series of events. They miraculously survive, as is evidenced by a final scene in which they discuss the previous events and relish their fortune in escaping. *Raven* also features an ambitious, callous physician, a role here assumed by Vollin, who operates on an individual, here Bateman, to serve the former's wild and misguided ambitions (Figure 3.15, below).



Figure 3.15: Richard Vollen (Lugosi), after disfiguring Edmund Bateman (Karloff) in a misguided surgical procedure that further echoes the plotting and characterizations of *Frankenstein*.³¹⁷

The presence of Karloff and Lugosi in most of these scenes once again grafts a resonance onto their characters' actions and dialogue, which operates outside of the diegesis. Vollen resembles a peculiar combination of Henry Frankenstein and Dr. Mirakle, while Bateman, helpless and desperate to fit into society, suggests Frankenstein's Monster, as well as Mirakle's unwitting victims. After Bateman sees his face in a mirror and screams in anguish at his even more ghastly appearance, Vollen laughs maniacally and exclaims, "You are monstrously ugly!" With his new appearance, Bateman not only resembles Frankenstein's Monster, he also staggers around the room and emits grunts in a nearly identical manner as the latter. Vollen also recalls Lugosi's signature role, Count Dracula, both in the peculiar intonation and rhythm of his speech, which seems to put listeners on edge, and in his unusual views on death, once again imparted to a group of shocked listeners: "As a doctor and surgeon, I look upon [torture

³¹⁷ *The Raven*, dir. Lew Landers, 61 min. Universal Pictures, 1935, DVD.

and death] differently. ... A doctor is especially fascinated by death, pain, how much pain a man can endure.”

A Lineage of Horror: from Poe to Universal

In these late classical horror films, *Cat* and *Raven*, Universal not only introduces two additional entries into the developing genre; it also buttresses the value and cultural relevance of horror. Gesturing to the previous roles of Karloff and Lugosi inserts an additional narrative layer into these films *and* establishes a genealogy, and by implication a historical significance, for the genre. This phenomenon speaks to the short- and long-term profit available to Hollywood filmmaking corporations, especially those interested in highlighting their associations with particular generic categories. It is no surprise that Universal—producer and copyright holder of the numerous horror films referenced by *Cat* and *Raven*—is the primary beneficiary of this strategy. Indirectly, so too are the contributors to the cultural discourses upon which many of those films were based. An increased valuation of *Dracula* leads to a heightened estimation and interest in the vampire discourse, which affects the cultural and literary status of Bram Stoker.

Edgar Allan Poe is more than the long-dead author that “suggests” Universal’s iteration of *The Raven* and represents a potential publicity angle; he is a central subject of the narrative. His influence looms over the story to an unprecedented degree. For instance, the torture devices in the story—so numerous, meticulously constructed, and important to the resolution of the narrative—are one facet of *Raven* that lack an obvious precedent in prior Universal horror features (Figure 3.16, below).



Figure 3.16: Vollin shows off his working replica of a torture device originally described in the Poe tale "The Pit and the Pendulum."

In fact, the inclusion of these props is one of many ways in which *Raven* introduces Poe as a kind of founding father within the genealogy of horror, the genre that Universal resuscitated and currently dominated. With *Raven*, Universal successfully fortifies the cultural relevance and historical importance of horror by establishing itself as the inheritor of a genre Poe invented. To enact this historiographic move, *Raven* presents the author through a series of gestures with longstanding precedence in the Poe discourse: the film offers a biography of Poe, diagnoses the reasons for his famously melancholic and vindictive personality, and argues for the relationship of the author's life to his literary works. Meanwhile, *Raven* establishes a metaphorical version of the author who may carry out Poe's posthumous intentions. As had *Murders* and *Cat* (and any film adaptation for that matter), *Raven* depicts a Poe work in a manner that aligns with the objectives of its producer. At the same time, the film represents a contribution to the Poe discourse that may be disseminated to a broad international audience and by so doing may significantly influence the parameters and awareness of the existing cultural discourse. Finally and

perhaps most importantly, *Raven*'s explicit use of Poe absorbs the author and his image into the horror genre. If Victor Vollin is a proxy rendering of Edgar Allan Poe, then Vollin's sadistic acts become Poe's intentions. If Vollin, due to his cruel actions and his resonance with previous icons of horror, is yet another Universal Monster, then in the *Raven* so too is Poe.

The *Raven* begins with two brief introductory scenes: a woman, Jean Thatcher, crashes her car into a tree, and then a team of doctors, unsure of their abilities to revive the injured woman, concur that Victor Vollin, a renowned neurosurgeon, is the only hope. The following scene, featuring the brilliant, obsessive physician Victor Vollin is remarkable, as it introduces an unusual character and establishes the explicit and implicit dominance of Poe over the narrative. Cut from the hospital room to a shot depicting a projected shadow of a bird as a male voice, out of the frame, recites lines from "The Raven." A slow zoom out widens the frame to reveal Vollin, the speaker, who now he appears to be facing the shadow directly, apparently speaking to the image of the bird. (This will be a fitting symbol for Vollin's mental illness, for the doctor's obsession with Poe, and for the outsized projection of Poe into the story.) The shot zooms out further. In fact, Vollin is seated at his desk behind a stuffed Raven. He is not reciting the poem to the stuffed bird but to a man, the curator of a museum, who has expressed an interest in acquiring the doctor's extensive collection of Poe (Figures 3.17 through 3.20, below).



Figure 3.17-3.20: The familiar Universal shadow shot, followed by a two-shot featuring the projected bird silhouetted in the background (bottom right), introduces the aura of Poe and foreshadows the obsessive tendencies of Vollin.

After completing his recitation, Vollin announces that the bird, the “symbol of death,” is his “talisman.” Near the end of the scene, the doctor boasts that he has meticulously reconstructed the “seven ... torture, horror devices Poe describes in his tales.” The additional adjectival ascription, “horror,” is no throwaway word, for it inculcates the process by which the posthumous author will be indoctrinated as the inventor of the genre as well as a figurative participant in its elaborate revenge fantasies and sadistic acts.

If Vollin, who later will use those devices to exact an elaborate revenge plot, is a student of torture, an act that he obsessively refers to throughout the narrative, then Poe is

his teacher.³¹⁸ The short stories, especially “The Pit and the Pendulum,” offer a blueprint for torture devices, and, according to Vollin (and not coincidentally to a strand of the Poe discourse), Poe writes fiction and poetry that expose his desire to utilize those apparatuses on others in his own life. Vollin explains Bateman’s frightening appearance as the work of “Arab bandits, who have a genius for torture. It’s almost the equal of Edgar Allan Poe.” Here, Vollin blurs the distinction between fictional literary invention and the actual execution of those acts. Genius applies to both parties, and to Vollin himself, who, describing himself at one point as “a god with the taint of human emotions,” believes he shares the author’s interest, intellect, and disposition. Poe, long dead, is unable to exact his revenge on the individuals that betrayed him or impeded his wishes, but Vollin can and, by so doing, he can satisfy the author’s intentions.

The initial shots in Vollin’s introductory scene might also be interpreted as a re-enactment of the moment of the eponymous poem’s composition. After all, Poe was often perceived to be the first-person speaker of his poetry and fiction, and a previous film adaptation with the same title, *The Raven* (1915), was a biopic of the author. Perhaps the Universal film would follow a similar storyline. Of course, Vollin, rather than Poe, is the speaker, but the shots suggesting the scene of composition establish a connection between the character and Poe that would be extended in later scenes.

Afterwards, Jean, indebted to Vollin for saving her life, performs a “dance interpretation”

³¹⁸ In order to perform plastic surgery on Bateman’s face, Vollin demands that Bateman commit an act of “murder, torture” in return. After Vollin disfigures Bateman, he promises, “I’ll fix your mouth, Bateman. ... First, you must do this job for me Bateman. Your hand is used to torture.” So, while Vollin is obsessed with torture and torture devices he is hesitant to commit the acts themselves. Like Poe, he possesses the

of “The Raven” entitled “The Spirit of Poe,” in tribute to the doctor. Vollin and her father Judge Thatcher go backstage to congratulate her. Vollin, looking deeply into Jean’s eyes, murmurs a line from “The Raven”—“Whom the angels call Lenore”—and thus inserts himself and Jean into the narrative of the poem.

The Effects of Reading Poe, According to Universal Pictures

The Raven not only offers a brilliant, vindictive stand-in for the author (and for the series of Monsters featured in Universal’s horror films); it also depicts a devoted reader of the author’s fiction and poetry. In other words, *The Raven* presents a character, Richard Vollin, who operates as a literary critic and biographer of Poe. He explains the prevalent themes in, and attests to the value of reading, Poe’s work. By so doing, the film dramatizes the alarming effects that such close scrutiny can produce on a reader.

The early scene in which Chapman, the museum curator, expresses an interest in acquiring Vollin’s “Poe collection,” introduces the doctor as a devoted member of “The Cult of Poe” (a group described by Eugene Didier decades earlier), as does the brief mention of his collection of Poe-inspired torture devices. A later scene, in which Vollin offers an elaborate elucidation of the “meaning of ‘The Raven’ as his dinner guests listen closely, also establishes the doctor as a literary critic. His response is extensive and apparently bizarre to many of his guests; however, his perspective on Poe and the author’s relationship to his work falls in line with interpretations popular in Poe discourse.

knowledge of and intentions for these sadistic acts, and he creates the conditions for their commission, but he refrains from executing them himself.

Jean: What is your interpretation of ‘The Raven’?

Vollin: I will tell you. Poe was a great genius. Like all great geniuses, there was in him the insistent will to do something big ... in the world. And he had the brain to do it, but he fell in love. Her name was Lenore – something happened. Someone took her away from him. When a man of genius is denied of his great love, he goes mad. His brain, instead of being clear to do his work, is tortured, so he begins to think of torture—torture for those that have tortured him.

On one hand, Vollin’s critical commentary validates those contributions to the Poe discourse—prevalent in literary criticism, biographies, and psychological examinations of the author—that perceived a connection between the author’s troubled life, strange disposition, and disquieting literature. According to the doctor, the only authority on Poe in *Raven*, the literary works represent biographical laments (e.g., “The Raven”), wish fulfillments (“The Pit and the Pendulum” and “The Black Cat,” among others), or both.³¹⁹ Poe’s short fiction and poetry, apparently filled with death, romantic tragedy and torture, offer clues about his life and his intentions. (Poe may no longer carry out such measures, but Vollin might and he does later in the diegesis.) Vollin’s comments thus summarize the prevalent themes and subjects of the Poe oeuvre, which throughout the history of the Poe discourse was of secondary interest to the author’s contentious biography. It is no surprise that such a synopsis of the literary works aligns with the prevalent preoccupations of the horror genre and thus with the interests of Universal, a party with a clear interest in propagating the horror genre and instilling value into the copyright-free Poe oeuvre.

³¹⁹ Taking Vollin’s heuristic further, the “The Pit and the Pendulum” reveals the author’s desire to build torture devices and use them on those deserving punishment.

On the other hand, Vollin is a madman with little credibility. He may be obsessed with Poe, but why should that fact make him an authority on the author or his literary works? In fact, it may not. The doctor may be an expert in the medical field, but, privately, he is a psychopath. Like many other Universal villains, his true character is eventually revealed and he gets the punishment he deserves.³²⁰ (In *Raven*, Vollin is crushed by one of his own torture devices.) However, one cannot deny that *Raven* offers a gripping, cautionary tale on the effects of reading Poe. Offered no back story on Vollin, besides his decorated medical career, a clear syllogism becomes available after viewing the character's descent into madness: (1) reading can lead to the transformation of one's character to coincide with the subjects, themes, and values present in the literary works under scrutiny; (2) the literary works and the biography of Edgar Allan Poe primarily feature tormented, depraved characters, horrific scenarios, and acts of revenge; (3) reading Poe may yield psychotic alterations of one's character, which in turn leads to the adoption of the dispositions and the mimicry of the acts present in the literary works and the Poe discourse. While *Raven* raises awareness of Poe and his literary works, it does so in a manner that applies a malignant influence to such leisure activities and it introduces a character, Vollin, that might offer a cautionary tale to viewers. According to the logic introduced in *Raven* and by retroactive implication in *Cat*, *Murders*, and other horror adaptations, a cinematic rendering offers a frightening and entertaining experience, but it is a benign amusement when compared to the possible effects of reading the literary

³²⁰ Yet another parallel between Vollin and Poe: according to the rendering of Poe's biography offered in Rufus Griswold's biography and supported elsewhere, Poe's untimely and disgraceful death was a fitting end to a life characterized by offensive behavior, a pattern of deceit, debauchery, and misused genius.

source directly. Within the narrative, *Raven* uses this logic to posit a plausibility to the horrific events it depicts, much like the repeated arguments for the reality of vampires in *Dracula* and the reanimation sequence in *Frankenstein*. Taking the analogy further, the film positions Universal Pictures as a trusted caretaker of Poe, which acts as a kind of public servant (much like the mantle assumed by censorship agencies) that distills the dangerous aspects of the literary works into exciting, frightening, but ultimately safe form.

CONCLUSION

Dracula, *Frankenstein*, and the Poe adaptations introduce numerous aspects of the genre that persist decades later, while they also reveal the motives and goals of the filmmaking corporation that produced them. Universal's unique industrial positioning and its desire to build a reputation with consumers and exhibitors significantly influenced the selection of source material, how the stories and characters were adapted for the screen, who would comprise the cast and crew, how (and at what expense) they would be produced, the manner in which they were publicized, and when and where they were released. The heavily reliance on public-domain literary texts, which had either spawned or contributed to cultural discourses around their themes, characters and authors, was no coincidence—this strategy fit Universal's financial situation and its aspirations in first-run markets, especially in light of its dearth of theatre holdings.

Despite its recent successes, heavy debt still burdened Universal throughout the 1930s. While the programmers and formula pictures were supplying a steady flow of cash, prestige productions, which Junior Laemmle hoped would turn huge rewards and

position the company as a viable competitor to the majors, siphoned off that capital even more quickly. In late 1935, Carl Laemmle borrowed \$750,000 from Standard Capital and, by so doing, tendered control of the studio as collateral. After the budget for the company's latest big budget release, *Show Boat* (1936), ballooned, Standard Capital exercised its option and officially acquired Universal's production facilities, theatre outlets, and foreign interests for an additional \$4,100,000 in the Spring of 1936. Carl Laemmle retired and his son was unceremoniously released from his duties; in their stead, Robert H. Cochrane became president of Universal and Charles Rogers, a former RKO producer, was installed as head of production. Their first order of business was to contain the excessive budgets of Universal's current and future prestige projects. Junior Laemmle's penchant for prestige had forced the company to trim its production schedule over the past two years. Rogers decreased the average costs of all pictures while increasing the number of planned releases, 27, to 40 and even more in the following year.³²¹ Ironically, in the late 1930s Universal returned to the efficient B-level specialty upon which it subsisted in previous decades.

The horror genre, occasionally a public relations stigma and always difficult with censors, was another casualty of the new regime. (Another consideration was that a significant portion of Universal's horror production unit had bolted in the wake of the corporate changes.) Rogers preferred the musical, and young ingénue and Universal signee Deanna Durbin had become a star with *Three Smart Girls* (1936). The 15-year old star projected a new image for the New Universal, one that did not mesh with horror, and

³²¹ Hirschhorn, *The Universal Story*, 54-55. Also see Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 233-38.

the genre was placed on temporary hiatus. However, the company would return to the mainstay just a few years later. The characters Universal introduced earlier that decade were valuable properties and, perhaps more importantly for the still debt-ridden company, inexpensive to develop and produce while requiring minimal marketing budgets. Several early horror films, including *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, were planned for re-release (this repackaged double feature was a huge box office hit in the late 1930s), while new vehicles related to the *Frankenstein* series, including *Son of Frankenstein* (1939), were penciled in to the production schedule.³²²

A quick look at Universal's attempt in the late 1930s to reissue those seminal horror films from earlier that decade indicates the substantial control the PCA now held over the content of films, as well as the difference in standards adopted by the regulators in just a few years. When a copy of *Dracula* was sent for Code approval in 1938, the PCA wrote Universal that the film needed significant cutting; the majority of offensive material involved sound; specifically the "moans and groans" on the original sound track.³²³ Whereas in 1931 *Dracula* had passed easily through the SRO channels, which classified the film as a "family picture," just a few years later it faced a censorship body, now the PCA, with a drastically different understanding of acceptable content and significantly more power to enforce its opinions. The SRO had slowly achieved this position between its perfunctory review of *Dracula* in February of 1931, its tense discussions of the horror

³²² The horror genre re-emerged in force in the early 1940s and flourished for the next few years. All of Universal's horror releases during the period—including *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942), *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943), *House of Frankenstein* (1944), *House of Dracula* (1945), and *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948)—exploited the company's reputation as the originator of the genre.

genre later that year, its more meticulous interrogation of *Murders* from late 1931 to early 1932, and its warning of imminent censorship problems during the review of *The Black Cat* in 1934.

Now, a decade after the widespread institution of sound, the PCA perceived some uses of the technology as threatening and offensive. This was a lesson that, at least indirectly, Universal taught Hays and his cohorts years prior. Universal's early horror films also helped the SRO and PCA develop parameters for identifying the genre and strategies for presenting it to spectators in more palatable, less terrorizing form. (Whether this development led to a rapid dilution of the genre is open to debate.) Based on the reactions those films received from censorship boards in the United States and abroad, however, even slapping on the label of "pure fiction" and citing a literary forebear could not stop the gruesome images and the horrific screams featured in *Dracula* and its successors from seeming all too realistic to the PCA of the late 1930s, which made them un-releasable in their previous forms.

As the Poe adaptations demonstrate, Universal horror adaptations are also notable for their use of authors in assigning responsibility for questionable content and in publicizing the cultural value, generic features, and story elements of the impending Universal film adaptations of *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Black Cat," and "The Raven." Universal's approach to adaptation included the assignation of an increasing level of responsibility to those literary figures—initially in

³²³ "Letter: F.S. Harmon to J.D. Miller," 17 Mar 1938, PCA File, File: "DRACULA, (UNIVERSAL, 1931)."

marketing and censorship capacities and ultimately expanding to include the integration of the author's public image into the film narratives. The name and image of Edgar Allan Poe influenced publicity and story development decisions; the author was not only a sign of cultural prestige but also a paragon of the romantic artist, a brilliant social recluse with a deep-seated contempt for mass culture. These alleged characteristics made his image highly attractive to the company, which, within its larger corporate strategy, needed only to contour the Poe discourse to fit with the narrative conceits and predominant character features of its horror genre. Universal was not as much concerned with laying claim to authority over the original plots and characters of the cultural discourses it adapted, as it was with the way those authors could function to align with the company's commercial, industrial, and artistic goals.

Poe, the author that served the most vital author-function among all those available in Universal's horror adaptations, was unavailable to protest the violent reformulation of his work and personality into the 1930s cinema. He had long since passed, and his legacy was now in the hands of the individuals, institutions, and corporations that chose to raise his specter and debate his biography and the value of his work for their own purposes. In Hollywood, not all authors were so accommodating. The most famous example is that of Theodore Dreiser, who sued Paramount for its perceived derogation of *An American Tragedy* (1925) in its 1930 adaptation. The novel was not in the public domain, so Dreiser hoped to have some ability to defend the integrity of the novel, despite the fact that he had sold the rights to reproduce the story and characters to Paramount in the late 1920s. Dreiser lost his case, but his public attempt to seize control of *An American*

Tragedy was widely publicized (by himself and others), and his staunch defiance and explicit derogation of Hollywood filmmaking corporations' artistic values still seems to color assumptions about writers' relationships to Hollywood filmmaking corporations.³²⁴

But novels are commercial products too, and authors who cede control of their works for the purposes of adaptation into other entertainment media clearly benefit, not only through monetary compensation, but also through the wide dissemination of their names, images, and works into discursive fields previously unavailable to them through their own efforts or those of their publishers. No doubt the numerous film adaptations of the novels, short stories, and poems of Edgar Allan Poe brought countless readers to his work, kept his name, public image, and literary oeuvre in the public eye, and helped to position him in the American literary canon; Poe craved such prosperity and recognition during his lifetime. Moreover, new generic associations and cultural values were attached to him and his work through those re-formulations and re-projections introduced by Universal, but these developments are merely emblematic of the constantly shifting receptions and varying discursive conditions of all artistic works as they travel through

³²⁴ In this light, the exclamation by *Raven's* Richard Vollen, "Mr. Poe, you are avenged," could be interpreted in relation to the plight of all those authors grouped with the disgruntled Dreiser, whose images and literary works were acquired and allegedly distorted to fit with the aspirations of contemporary Hollywood filmmaking corporations. However, as Dreiser's case makes plain, the thirst for revenge against villainous studios is as much an effort to preserve literary posterity and to maintain authority over the work in question, as it is to protect its artistic integrity. Dashiell Hammett's attempt to compose radio plays around the character of Samuel Spade, originally featured in the 1930 novel *The Maltese Falcon* but now under the legal control of Warner Bros. Pictures, corroborates this claim. Warner Bros.' film adaptations had in fact increased the commercial value of this character, and Hammett's legal injunction to continue to create original scenarios featuring Spade was designed to capitalize on that recent surge in popularity, rather than to protect the artistic integrity of the character or the literary prestige of the author. For further discussion, see Chapter Four.

historical epochs that produce inevitable alterations on their subjectively posited value and meaning.

As much as the example of Dreiser is understood to symbolize the experiences of literary authors at the hands of the Hollywood culture industry, not all writers felt victimized by the process of film adaptation. Take for instance Donald M. Clarke, whose short essay “Turning Novels into Films,” is featured in the April 6, 1930, edition of the *New York Times*.³²⁵ Clarke’s novel *Louis Beretti* (1929) had recently been acquired and adapted by Fox, which in its film version, *Born Reckless* (1930), had altered and omitted several elements he deems crucial to the success of his novel. Clarke acknowledges that many authors “feel that the way they have produced an effect is the only way possible,” but he does not adopt a stance of accusation or sullen resignation while recounting the changes to character names and motivations and the significant elaboration of the latent violence and war motif present in his book. Instead, Clarke praises the resourcefulness and pragmatism of Fox, as it sought ways to rework the story based on the number of restraints inherent to the studio’s interests or the medium in which it works.³²⁶ Unlike Poe, Clarke had the luxuries of being compensated for the rights to his work, witnessing

³²⁵ Donald M. Clarke, “Turning Novels into Films,” *New York Times*, 6 Apr 1930, Reprinted in *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. Gene Brown (New York: Times Books, 1983). Two recent examples of literary authors expressing similar views of the film adaptations based on their novels include Louis Begley (“My Novel, The Movie”) and Michael Cunningham (“For ‘The Hours,’ An Elation Mixed With Doubt”), both of whom reflect on adaptations of *About Schmidt* and *The Hours*, respectively, in the *New York Times*.

³²⁶ The film studio, rather than the literary author, is the party that suffers from this process. Clarke comments,

Informants from the Fox New York offices have confided to me that they believe the boys have done a good job with “Born Reckless,” and that they think I’ll like it better

the transformation of his novel into film adaptation, and possessing the ability to respond publicly to that transformation. And, by his approval of the film adaptation, he still exercises a form of authority over the work, assuming the posture of a benevolent progenitor who graciously approves the reconstituted scenarios, characters, and themes that *he* created.

While Poe might have expressed dismay at the presentations of his literary work by Universal, the author surely would have commended the presentation of his life in *The Loves of Edgar Allan Poe* (1942), a biopic produced by Twentieth Century Fox. *Loves*, which concentrates on the author's literary career and his familial relations, represents Poe as a loyal, hardworking gentleman whose difficulties stemmed from his wife's extended illness, the jealousy of others, his vigorous fight for copyright reform, and his difficulties with unsympathetic, obtuse publishers. While the Universal adaptations posited Poe as a vindictive genius, *Loves* depicts the author as a victim of circumstance and of the literary marketplace.

Loves may be a more accurate account of the tribulations and aspirations of the author's life, but it is all but forgotten today, in part because of the quality of the film's acting, script, direction, and production values, but more so because it presented a version of Poe of which few were aware. In response to the callous indifference of publishers, *Loves'* Poe, rather than hatching devious plans that include elaborate torture devices or violent, rash retribution, merely drinks himself into a stupor and bemoans his fate. In

than I did "Louis Beretti." I probably will, because I didn't have to worry over any of the new problems that were created by introducing Louis into a new medium.

comparison to the dark genius character that became a celebrity and pop culture phenomenon, *Loves'* version of Poe was an impotent bore on screen. No wonder the pathetic outcasts, brilliant sadists and raving lunatics, presented in Universal's adaptations as oblique references to the author, captured the attention of audiences a few years earlier. Like Frankenstein's Monster, Vitus Werdegast and Edmund Bates were unpredictable; like Count Dracula, Dr. Mirakle, Hjalmar Poelzig and Richard Vollin were unapologetically deviant. And, whether the author would have appreciated these presentations or not, all of these renderings of Poe's poetry and short fiction, communicated to millions of potential readers, turned Poe into the elder statesman of horror, an ascription that persists to this day.

CHAPTER 4

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Efficiency and/in Film Adaptation at Warner Bros. Pictures

Maximum prosperity can exist only as the result of maximum productivity. –Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*³²⁷

[With] an entire cast and crew standing around and doing nothing and collecting salary, we have to get things moving! – Jack Warner³²⁸

In the early 1930s, Universal Pictures perceived film adaptation as an opportunity to utilize and develop story materials at minimal expense, graft its corporate identity onto internationally recognized discourses, gain a foothold in first-run exhibition outlets, and institute and develop a commercially profitable film genre. In short, the company's selection of source materials and its approach to film adaptation was directly related to its industrial positioning, a major-minor with no theater holdings, limited liquid assets, and few marquee stars. Like Universal, Warner Bros. Pictures was a filmmaking corporation in transition in the 1920s—officially incorporated in 1923 by brothers Harry, Albert, Sam, and Jack Warner—and aspiring to contend with the major studios Paramount,

³²⁷ Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1911), 12.

³²⁸ “Memo: Jack L. Warner to Walter MacEwan,” 12 Dec 1937, File: *Varsity Show* Production, Warner Brothers Archive, Quoted in Gustafson, *The Buying of Ideas*, 179.

Loew's-MGM, and Fox..³²⁹ During this period, Universal attempted to remain competitive by selling many of its exhibition outlets and concentrating much of its production schedule on packaged programmers for audiences outside of urban areas, while Warner Bros. tacked a different direction, growing at a rapid rate by acquiring key regional theater chains, merging with First National Pictures, purchasing Vitagraph Studios and Film Exchange, and forming a key partnership with Western Electric and investing heavily in talking picture production and exhibition. As a result, Warner Bros. ascended from a highly regarded major-minor to a robust major, vertically integrated studio.

These developments significantly influenced the manner in which film releases were used to execute the corporate strategy of each filmmaking corporation: major-minor Universal (and as we'll see in the next chapter, independent Selznick International Pictures) relied heavily on its films' ability to distinguish the company from competitors. Major Warner Bros. already had secure theater bookings in its own theatres, so, while it hoped to attract audiences with original, compelling stories and lucrative star vehicles, its

³²⁹ The brothers Warner entered the film business much earlier. In 1903, they exhibited films on a touring basis in Pennsylvania before opening their first nickelodeon in 1906. They ran a film exchange for the next two years, until the powerful MPPC successfully pushed their distribution operation out of business in 1909. The brothers briefly left the film industry, but re-entered early in the following decade when they began distributing and exhibiting foreign films (in cooperation with Carl Laemmle's Independent Motion Picture Company) and moved their headquarters to Southern California. After several attempts to enter film production during the decade, the brothers finally scored a hit with *My Four Years in Germany* (1918), an inexpensive feature-length picture that turned a significant return on investment. Having established a reputation with creditors and gained experience in production, the brothers formed Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc. in 1923. Harry became company president, Albert (or Abe) treasurer, Sam chief executive, and Jack vice president in charge of production. See Nick Roddick, *A New Deal in Entertainment: Warner Brothers in the 1930s* (London: BFI Publishing, 1983), 16-17; Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*, 46-47; Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 58-61; Cass Warner Sperling and Cork Millner, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: The Warner Brothers Story* (Rocklin, CA: Prima, 1994), 5-90.

vertically integrated status meant that Warner Bros. had no need to use films to foster relationships with distributors and exhibitors. With exhibition and distribution channels secure, the company instead formulated a strategy that sought to standardize its corporate operations and ensure operational efficiency, which in turn could assure quality products, streamline production practices, and increase profitability.

Warner Bros.' newly minted status as a major, as well as its long-term strategy, had a critical impact on the filmmaking corporation's approach to developing, producing, and releasing film adaptation in the 1930s and 1940s. More specifically, its approach to film adaptation reflected a corporate strategy centered on efficient operations, a policy with the full exploitation of available company resources as its goal.³³⁰ Whether those "resources" were property and technical equipment, contracted employees or story materials, Warner Bros. held fast to a system that would exhaust their use-value. By so doing, the filmmaking corporation supplied a steady stream of product for its exhibition outlets and maintained profitability on the one hand, while it created antagonistic relationships with its top stars—including Bette Davis, James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart—and dynamic executive producer Darryl Zanuck on the other. (This approach bears similarities to a company that seeks to keep inventory levels at a minimum in order to eliminate waste.) Warner Bros.' strict adherence to efficiency seeped into production

³³⁰ Here, I adopt the definition of corporate strategy formulated by Kenneth Andrews in *The Concept of Corporate Strategy, Revised Edition*: "Corporate strategy is the pattern of decisions in a company that determines and reveals its objectives, purposes or goals, produces the principal policies and plans for achieving those goals, and defines the range of business the company is to pursue" (18). A filmmaking corporation's corporate strategy represents a guide through which choices are perceived and decisions are executed.

practices and story development, which helped to establish a recognizable studio style reflected in its films' production values and thematic preoccupations.³³¹

The broad policy of efficiency influenced the selection of literary properties and the manner in which film adaptations were produced and promoted. I demonstrate in this chapter that Warner Bros.' corporate strategy is evident in its acquisition of *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) and its multiple adaptations of the literary source in the span of a decade—*The Maltese Falcon* (1931), *Satan Met A Lady* (1936), and *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). For Warner Bros., only one of its three adaptations of *The Maltese Falcon*, the last, could be called a commercial or critical success. Because of the company's model of resource management, though, the modest reception of *The Maltese Falcon* (1931) and *Satan Met A Lady* did not deter but further encouraged Warner Bros. to continue to perceive the value of the story, its generic associations, its characters, and the appeal of Hammett, and thus to remain open to "recycling" the story in the future. Dashiell Hammett's notoriety and the commercial potential of his fiction turned sharply upward after the release of MGM's successful adaptation of *The Thin Man* (1934) in 1935, which in turn established an unlikely connection between Hammett and screwball comedy. Hence the comedic twist on *The Maltese Falcon* in *Satan Met A Lady*, another critical and commercial bust for Warner Bros.

Yet the studio, true to its corporate strategy, undertook production on yet another version of *The Maltese Falcon* just a few years later, when Jack Warner and production

³³¹ According to Schatz, Warner Bros. studio style was conveyed through its films' spare sets, fast-paced action, and "ripped from the headlines" stories (*Genius of the System*, 136-139).

head Hal Wallis finally permitted studio screenwriter John Huston to direct his first feature-length film. Huston's years of subjection to Warner Bros.' corporate ethos clearly paid off, as the novice director shot rapidly and, along with others on the production team, helped to complete shooting early and bring the film in under budget.³³² Huston, producer Harry Blanke, and editor Thomas Richards introduced a brisk pace into the story that, along with its terse dialogue, harkened back to the gangster films through which Warner Bros. had distinguished itself the previous decade—in other words, the film reflected Warner Bros' doctrine of efficiency.

But the term efficiency was open to debate in the various commercial and cultural venues in which it was invoked and applied, and film adaptation represents an opportune location from which to observe the semantic disparity between the meaning and application of a concept—which emerged from industrial management and became increasingly popular throughout American culture in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s—with currency in literary and film industry discourses, respectively. Both fields believed the path to efficiency involved the elimination of waste and poor management practices, and, if practiced with rigor and exactitude, it promised abundant results. However, as one might expect, the ideal *application* of efficiency, as well as its perceived *effects*, differed radically: literary critics and writers maintained the term implied stylistic innovation, and in essence the artfully sculpted verse forms and minimalist diction represented a deft literary performance as much as an experiment in affect; proponents from the film

³³² “Daily Shooting Reports, MALTESE FALCON,” undated, Warner Bros. Collection, University of Southern California Special Collections (hereafter referred to as Warner Bros. Collection), File: 1487, THE

industry attributed a more pragmatic and practical meaning to efficiency, perceiving it as a series of steps toward standardized production and management techniques. In the context of film adaptation (and in Warner Bros. and *The Maltese Falcon* specifically), these distinct interpretations—innovation and standardization—expand in importance, offering evidence of the paradigmatic differences between literary and cinematic production.

SCIENTIFIC MANAGEMENT AND EFFICIENCY

Articulated in a series of papers by Frederick W. Taylor (published between 1895 and 1903), the theory of scientific management maintained that the solution to diminishing natural resources and competition in international markets could be found in the careful measurement and mathematical analysis of existing practices (by machines and humans) on the shop floor and the subsequent design of systems to maximize production capacity.

The best management is a true science, resting upon clearly defined laws, rules, and principles. ... The fundamental principles of scientific management are applicable to all kinds of human activities, from our simplest individual acts to the work of our great corporations. ... And, [this paper aims to] convince the reader that whenever these principles are correctly applied, results must follow which are truly astounding.³³³

Taylor believed his industrial application of scientific determinism was limitless in its application and results, and further support was offered in other areas, especially Harrington Emerson's classic text, *The Twelve Principles of Efficiency* (1911), which

MALTESE FALCON (1941) Picture # 369 HUSTON—SHOOTING SCHEDULES, Box: MALTESE FALCON.

³³³ Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, 7. Taylor's additional papers on scientific management include "Shop Management," "The Art of Cutting Metals," "A Piece Rate System," and "Notes on Belting." Scientific management achieved widespread notoriety only after a well-publicized court case,

established a history of efficiency by describing the wasteful practices that had led to the downfall of businesses to nation-states. The book also outlined a series of conceptual steps and practical applications by which readers could achieve not only increased operational efficiency, productivity and profitability, but also a “new morality,” where “ideas, ... not labor, not capital, not land [create] wealth.”³³⁴

Emerson had offered a humanistic extension of the principles of scientific management in layman’s terms, his book was a runaway bestseller over the ensuing decade, and efficiency became a buzzword in American popular culture.³³⁵ Books and articles advocating efficiency in such arenas as house keeping, religious observance and academic study appeared; and an “Institute of Efficiency,” led by Emerson, was formed and promised prospective students the opportunity to learn “the art of getting more results with less work [and] get the most out of your brain and your body.”³³⁶ By the late 1910s and early 1920s, large corporations and government agencies had absorbed the ethos of scientific management, and business leaders in various industries touted their

in which lawyers representing railroad workers used its methods and measurements to verify the inefficiencies of current rail operations.

³³⁴ Emerson, *The Twelve Principles of Efficiency* (New York: The Engineering Magazine Co., 1913), x, 27-35. By 1917, *The Twelve Principles of Efficiency* was already in its fifth edition. Also instrumental in validating scientific management was Henry L. Gantt, whose Gantt chart identified and tracked all the tasks involved in industrial production. The Gantt chart allowed companies to time each shop floor operation from beginning to end, entered data into the chart, and by so doing identify inefficiencies in current practices. See Gantt, *Work, Wages, and Profit* (New York: The Engineering Magazine, 1910).

³³⁵ Samuel Haber, *Efficiency and Uplift: Scientific Management in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1964), presents a succinct analysis of the influence of and various perspectives on the efficiency movement in academic, business, and popular cultures.

³³⁶ “Advertisement: Institute of Efficiency,” *Literary Digest*, 1917, Reprinted in Cecelia Tichi, *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 80. Tichi reprints several advertisements heralding efficiency and offers a valuable summary of the efficiency movement in popular culture and its influence on literary culture and form (75-96).

success stories.³³⁷ Soon, “waste” became a new area in which to identify lost or underutilized labor potential and resources and to increase productivity, culminating in the landmark study *Waste In Industry* (1921), the published results of extensive surveys of several American industries.³³⁸

EFFICIENCY IN THE LITERARY FIELD

Even in the midst of the efficiency craze, the precise meaning of the concept (and the related term waste) and the implications of such practices were debated: to many, it signified self-discipline and the maximization of one’s abilities and, to others, the

³³⁷ For example, *Scientific Management: A Collection of the More Significant Articles Describing the Taylor System of Management* (1922) features “An Object Lesson in Efficiency,” based on the successful application of Taylorian principles by the Tabor Manufacturing Company and authored by the company president; a February 1911 diatribe, originally published in the *Railway Age Gazette*, dissecting the logical discrepancies and “neglect of the human element” of “efficiency men”; and a long letter in response to that diatribe. Clarence Bertrand Thompson (ed.), *Scientific Management* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1922).

³³⁸ While waste has numerous meanings, hereafter I define the term as the “unrealized value” resulting from the misuse or inactivity of company controlled resources. This sense of waste is based on the expositions of the concept offered in David Rockefeller’s *Unused Resources and Economic Waste* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941) and W.H. Hutt’s *The Theory of Idle Resources* (London: J. Cape, 1939), both of which were contemporary to the period in which Warner Bros. acquired and released its adaptations of *The Maltese Falcon*.

Among its many essays on efficiency and labor relations, the collection *Scientific Management Since Taylor* (1924) includes a paper on “Industrial Standardization,” delivered by former-Secretary of Commerce and then-President Woodrow Wilson, that argues for “the value of standardization ... as a method of simplifying the process of manufacture and raising the ethics of production,” and “the elimination of waste ... [in effecting] the increased comfort and happiness of our people.” Hoover, “Industrial Standardization,” Reprinted in *Scientific Management Since Taylor*, ed. Edward Eyre Hunt (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1924), 189-196. Hoover also wrote the foreword to *Waste In Industry* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1921), based on extensive surveys of production practices in various American industries and sponsored by the Committee on Elimination of Waste in Industry of the Federated American Engineering Societies. Later that decade, with Hoover as their chief advocate, examinations of waste expanded their scope to investigate not only mismanaged but also unused resources, as well as to analyze distribution and consumption, and they seemed to promise a path out of the depression. In *Unused Resources and Economic Waste*, Rockefeller provides an overview of such published studies (19-40). A few years later, “productivity” replaced “waste” as a term that encapsulated the effort to maximize industrial capacity, available resources, and labor potential. With its broad area of application, productivity bridged scientific management and efficiency, as it promised the opportunity to mathematically verify industrial output while accounting for “human relations” (by offering, for example, strategies for managers to evaluate and motivate employees). See for example *Productivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), in which authors Peter O. Steiner and William Goldner define productivity not as the

bludgeoning of individualism and creativity and corporations' ruthless quests for profit at the expense of their employees.³³⁹ That skepticism found a voice in contemporary fiction, where a cautious and occasionally cynical presentation of the concept and the accompanying movement permeated the themes and subject matter of numerous naturalist and realist writers—including Frank Norris, Sinclair Lewis and Henry Adams—who assessed the effects of industrial progress, scientific management, and efficiency.³⁴⁰ But another group of contemporary writers carried efficiency a step further, not only championing its merits, but also absorbing the ideology of the movement into their perceptions about the style and function of literature. In her compelling study *Shifting Gears* (1987), Cecelia Tichi explains:

[Taylorism's] ethos of synchronized design, abundance, and functionalism, its kinetics, its utilitarian movement and method of spatial and temporal reformulation all came to have a significant impact on American Literature in the twentieth century. ... If some writers rebelled thematically against the idea of human mechanization, others recognized that the waste-efficiency contraries provided new opportunities for innovative formal design.³⁴¹

Literary modernists Ernest Hemingway, William Carlos Williams, and John Dos Passos practiced stylistic efficiency by paring down their prose and poetry to its minimalist, powerful core, but Ezra Pound was the clear leader of the movement, espousing the benefits of the literary ideal in his criticism and applying it in his editorial duties and

efficiency of production—i.e., “how much output is achieved for each unit of input”—and offer guidance on calculating wages based upon such measurements (5, 49-52).

³³⁹ An example of this ambivalence can be found in Everett W. Lord's *The Fundamentals of Business Ethics* (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1926), which provides moral and ethical guidance to the business professional and identifies “service” as the highest goal of business. By so doing, it represents one of many responses to the feared effects of scientific management and efficiency.

poetic compositions. Pound drew from the stylistic instruction of Hudson Maxim, who in *The Science of Poetry and the Philosophy of Language* (1910) outlined the benefits of adopting standards for the evaluation of literary fiction and poetry and argued that poetry could achieve a powerful effect on the reader by the elimination of unnecessary language, primarily florid adjectives and descriptive phrases.³⁴² In Maxim, Pound perceived a practical elucidation of the power of “verbal economy” and concision, which if executed correctly could convey precise clarity and, like an efficient industrial machine, yield maximum energy.³⁴³ It is worth noting the slight but nevertheless important difference between Maxim and Pound in their respective applications of efficiency. While the former outlined a method by which poets could standardize form, diction and, as a result, the mechanism by which meaning is conveyed, the latter perceived this same program as a means toward stylistic innovation, experimentation, and an abundance of meaning.

Another disciple of literary efficiency was mystery writer Dashiell Hammett, whose taut, spare style resembled Hemingway’s, whose thoughts on concision bore the influence of efficiency, and whose professional ambitions focused on the exclusive domain of literary modernism.³⁴⁴ Hammett’s affinity for linguistic precision was made

³⁴⁰ See Tichi, *Shifting Gears*, for an analysis of the thematic preoccupation with efficiency in the works of these authors (75-76, 87-90).

³⁴¹ Tichi, 90-91.

³⁴² *The Science of Poetry and the Philosophy of Language* (New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1910).

³⁴³ Maxim, 92-93.

³⁴⁴ For an analysis of Hammett’s relationship to literary modernism, see Mark McGurl, “Making ‘Literature’ of It: Hammett and High Culture” (*American Literary History* [Winter 1997]: 702-17). There, McGurl identifies Dashiell Hammett as a symptom of Modernism, an author who allows readers to see, “what Modernism looks like to mass culture and what mass culture looks like to Modernism, without canceling the relative autonomy of these two discourses” (706). Also see Greg Forter, *Murdering*

explicit in a 1924 literary review in *Western Advertising*, where he observed, “Simplicity and clarity . . . are the most elusive and difficult of literary achievements.”³⁴⁵ Hammett also skewered verbose writers in his literary reviews and in his fiction. *The Dain Curse* (1929), his second novel, features a mystery writer, Owen Fitzstephan, whose garbled prose ascends from the status of a literary flaw to a sign of psychotic behavior, as the very chaotic plotting that offers mass commercial appeal also ensures an insanity plea when the writer is finally apprehended.³⁴⁶ Fitzstephan announces, “Even literature shall help me. Didn’t most reviewers agree that *The Pale Egyptian* was the work of a sub-Mongolian? ... Evidence, son, to save my sweet neck.” Hammett—clearly on the side of those literary critics who had correctly diagnosed Fitzstephan in their reviews—deplored sloppy, imprecise writing, and he detested the readers who mindlessly consumed such works.

Detective novelist Raymond Chandler once observed, mistakenly, that Dashiell Hammett “had no artistic ambitions whatsoever. He was simply trying to make a living by writing something he had firsthand information about.”³⁴⁷ As a former detective working in the mystery genre, Hammett did indeed possess an unusual intimacy with his fictional material. Rather than representing a “meal ticket,” the author believed this fact, which for such writers as Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner was a source of pride and a marker of literary authenticity, represented an opportunity for literary prestige. Yet,

Masculinities: Fantasies of Gender and Violence in the American Crime Novel (New York: NYU Press, 2000).

³⁴⁵ Hammett, “Title Unavailable,” *Western Advertising*, 1924.

³⁴⁶ Hammett, *The Dain Curse* (New York: Knopf, 1929).

the author's intimate knowledge of the criminal underworld and private detective work also suppressed his ambitions, for the experiences he related in his violent, existential short stories were always-already inscribed within the mystery form, a genre considered (especially by Hammett himself) formulaic, second rate. In an August 1924 letter to the editors at *Black Mask*, one of the pulp magazines where his short stories regularly appeared in the 1920s, Hammett responded to this dilemma: "When I grind out a yarn because I think there is a market for it, then I flop. Whenever, from now on, I get hold of a story that fits my sleuth, I shall put him to work, but I'm through with trying to run him on a schedule."³⁴⁸ Thus, the first condition for the execution of Hammett's goal was to ignore the desires of the "market" that demanded and compensated him for his short fiction. (Here Hammett also resists the working class audience associated with *Black Mask*, as well as the regularized labor required within the periodical form.)

Recognizing that the pulp markets were not conducive to the formal and stylistic innovation he hoped to achieve, Hammett sought a publisher that could expose his work to an audience beyond that of *Black Mask*. In the spring of 1928, he sent the manuscript for what would become his first novel, *Red Harvest* (1929), to publisher Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. In that initial correspondence, Hammett announced his views on his genre.

Some day somebody's going to make 'literature' of [detective fiction]. ... I'm one of the few—if there are any more—people moderately literate who take the detective story seriously. I don't mean that I necessarily take my own or anybody else's seriously—but the detective story as a form.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," 1950, Reprinted in *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 1-21.

³⁴⁸ Quoted in Diane Johnson, *Dashiell Hammett: A Life* (New York: Random House, 1983), 53.

³⁴⁹ Quoted in Diane Johnson, 72.

Knopf, a middlebrow trade firm known for publishing respected European and American poets, essayists, and novelists in attractive, austere volumes, appeared to provide an ideal context to fulfill these wishes.³⁵⁰ Hammett had struggled with the rigorous time and space restrictions required by monthly periodicals like *Black Mask*, but he believed he could cultivate his literary aspirations in the longer novel form. Moreover, an association with Knopf would attract an audience more sensitive to such artistic experimentation.³⁵¹

LITERARY EFFICIENCY IN *THE MALTESE FALCON* (1930)

The Maltese Falcon, Hammett's third and most aesthetically self-conscious novel, is the work in which the author attempted to execute literary efficiency.³⁵² In contrast to the sober first-person point-of-view of *Red Harvest*, *The Dain Curse*, and previous short stories, *The Maltese Falcon* employs a detached third-person perspective that introduces the enigmatic private detective Samuel Spade. The novel confirms an affiliation with literary efficiency in the opening lines:

Samuel Spade's jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another, smaller v. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The v *motif* was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a

³⁵⁰ For a longer discussion of the history, goals, and selected publications of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., see the special edition of *The Library Chronicle of the University of Texas at Austin* devoted to the Knopf Archive at the University of Texas at Austin's Humanities Research Center (HRC). Also see Cathy Turner, "Opening Markets to Modernism: Alfred Knopf's Promotion of Thomas Mann in the 1920s," *The Library Chronicle of The University of Texas at Austin* 26, no.3 [1996]: 52-81). For a book-length critical examination of fine publishing in the United States see Megan Benton's *Beauty and the Book: Fine Editions and Cultural Distinction in America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000). Finally, Erin A. Smith's *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2000) offers a revelatory analysis and reception study of magazines specializing in detective fiction, including the aforementioned *Black Mask*.

³⁵¹ In *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000), Sean McCann also identifies the move to Knopf as important to the author's own identification with audiences as well as his literary peers (92-98).

³⁵² Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* (New York: Vintage, 1972).

hooked nose, and his pale brown hair grew down—from high flat temples—in a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blond satan.³⁵³

The precise, angular description of Samuel Spade renders the detective in an objective, vivid manner. The face is not so much described as prosaically drawn (much like directions that might be offered to a police sketch artist), *constructed* in a methodical, deliberate procedure similar to the manner in which the erection of a tent is described in Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River."³⁵⁴ The posture of objectivity implied by these directions collapses, though, in the paragraph's final sentence, as the image of Spade both coheres and dissimulates by way of the apposed "pleasant," "blond," and "satan." Indeed, the declaration hinges on the words "rather pleasantly": the insertion of this adverb and its modifier complicates the concision established in the opening lines with a force reminiscent of Pound's instructions to "use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something."³⁵⁵ The effect of such a process yields the impression that Spade is a prosaic, rather than human, creation—that he is a formal literary experiment rather than a realistic character. Take, for instance, the figurative terminology that subsumes the succession of facial features following the first sentence of the novel. Spade's chin does not just resemble a "v"; it *is* a "v"—as are his nose, mouth, eyebrows, and hairline, which become an arrangement of characters and morph the visual

³⁵³ Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*, 3.

³⁵⁴ Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River, Part I" (1925), Collected and Reprinted in *The Complete Short Stories Of Ernest Hemingway: The Finca Vigia Edition* (New York: Scribner Paperback, 1998), 161-70.

³⁵⁵ Pound, "A Retrospect" (1918), Reprinted in *Essays on American Modernism*, ed. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy (New York: G.K. Hall & Company, 1992), 32.

orientation indicated by the first sentence into a series of rigid constructions that, while technically precise and readily identifiable, converge and become increasingly abstract.³⁵⁶

The opening passage of *The Maltese Falcon* seems designed to provoke admiration and awe rather than comprehension, and, for Hammett, Sam Spade's introduction functions as a Modernist performance as much as the introduction of a new protagonist. The author continues his lesson in literary efficiency later, when Spade's seemingly mundane act of rolling a cigarette becomes a mechanistic ritual.

Spade's thick fingers made a cigarette with deliberate care, sifting a measured quantity of tan flakes into curved paper, spreading the flakes so that they lay equal at the ends with a slight depression in the middle, thumbs rolling the paper's inner edge down and up under the outer edge as forefingers pressed it over, thumbs and fingers sliding to the paper cylinder's end to hold it even while tongue licked the flap, left forefinger and thumb pinching their end while right forefinger and thumb smoothed the damp seam, right forefinger and thumb twisting their end and lifting the other to Spade's mouth.³⁵⁷

Descriptive terms are kept at a minimum as the prose catalogues each movement with precise care. Just as Tichi finds certain passages in the prose of Hemingway that might

³⁵⁶ The description of Spade also reflects the influence of the concurrent Cubist movement in painting and poetry, which experimented with two-dimensional planes, fragments, and images, juxtaposed sharp angles and smashed inscrutable shards of images to call attention to the illusion of realistic depth and space sought in the artistic styles that preceded it. The process of composition defamiliarized common objects and created the impression of three-dimensional depth within a cacophony of flat forms. In the opening passage of *The Maltese Falcon*, Samuel Spade's face dissimulates into an artfully arranged composition upon close inspection—the "v's" are familiar visual signifiers, yet they are also clearly two dimensional and lack texture and depth. Like a Cubist painting, this presentation of Spade creates spatial relationships through a series of conflated, flat surfaces evident nowhere more than in the "flat," seemingly indistinguishable temples on his forehead. For descriptions and histories of Cubism, see John Golding, *Cubism: A History and an Analysis, 1907-1914* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1988), and Christopher Green, *Cubism and Its Enemies: Modern Movements and Reaction in French Art, 1916-1928* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Gertrude Stein attempted to connect Cubism to literature in a 1926 essay, "Composition as Explanation." For a broader analysis of the relationship between Cubism and Modernist literature, see Thomas Vargish and Delo Mook, *Inventing Modernism: Relativity Theory, Cubism, Narrative* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999), and Stephen Scobie, *Earthquakes and Explorations: Language and Painting from Cubism to Concrete Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

serve as a sort of “guidebook,” so specific and deliberate that a reader, by following the actions of a character, might learn how to fish, or to build a tent, Hammett achieves a similar effect with the step-by-step description of Sam Spade’s actions.³⁵⁸

The conflation of the technical with the literary gestures toward an ideal of proficiency echoed not only in popular periodicals, conduct books, and technical manuals but also in literary magazines. Here, style matches theme—form matches function in a combination that yields, as Pound contended, overdetermined results. Spade’s dexterity and precise command of his movements matches that of Hammett, whose use of point of view and diction throughout the novel limits reader knowledge of plot details and character motivation, while it interjects an inscrutable, iconic quality into the protagonist: Spade is both “wild and unpredictable” and clearly in control of himself and the increasingly chaotic proceedings around him.³⁵⁹ All of these effects are achieved with a minimal level of perceived output from character (in the form of utterances and movements) and author alike (descriptive language and exposition). Such is the impression left by the efficiently run operation, which as the engineer Taylor, poet Pound, critic Maxim and others preached, minimized input while it maximized output.

While *The Maltese Falcon* sustains its taut style throughout, the strain of continuous efficiency becomes evident when Sam Spade’s cool exterior nears dissolution. The

³⁵⁷ Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*, 11-12.

³⁵⁸ Tichi, *Shifting Gears*, 223, 225.

³⁵⁹ As Spade informs femme fatale Brigid O’Shaughnessy, his “wild and unpredictable” image is a calculated construction; rather than a reflection of his vacillating temperament, it is simply “good for business” (215). Likewise, Hammett hoped his literary performance in *The Maltese Falcon* would be a good “business” move as well: as a detective novel in the popular mystery genre, his book should sell well,

constant juxtapositions of Spade's placidity against the emotional oscillations of other characters reveal the detective's strategy to a certain degree, as more players enter the story, but as Spade's frustration mounts, the descriptions center, again, on his physical features. See, for example, his facial contortions in the novel's final scene at the detective's apartment, when his reddening eyes and trembling hands contort the rigid v's of his face and upset his implacable dexterity (displayed earlier while rolling a cigarette).³⁶⁰ These instances reveal the strain of Spade's comportment—later restored in a final scene in the detective's office, his domain—and envision those moments when the meticulously controlled mechanism threatens to fail. Why expose the vulnerability of the detective protagonist? By illustrating the difficulty in maintaining efficiency, *The Maltese Falcon* throws efficiency into relief as a remarkable performance—a surfeit of gestures—with the potential of elevating its practitioner above the fray. Dashiell Hammett was not only interested in producing a smoothly running literary machine; he also craved the literary merit that would go along with it. Just as Sam Spade's calculated behavior marks his control over the action and his adversaries in the narrative, Hammett's strict execution of language separates him from his peers in the genre and promises much more.³⁶¹

and as an "art novel" under Knopf's Borzoi imprint, he should be able to accrue a level of level of literary prestige that might satisfy his professional ambitions.

³⁶⁰ Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*, 177, 211, 213.

³⁶¹ In its original publication and advertisement of the book, publisher Knopf called attention to the author's experience as a detective and the novel's authentic reproduction of the criminal underworld. In turn, nearly all critical reviews of *The Maltese Falcon* lauded its naturalism and cited its impact on the detective genre, at least in part, as a function of Hammett's background as a private detective rather than his literary gifts. See for example, Walter Brooks, "Behind the Blurbs," *Outlook and Independent*, 26 Feb 1930, 350; "New Mystery Stories," *New York Times Book Review*, 23 Feb 1930, 28. While such praise highlighted the novel's authenticity, it also still inscribed Hammett and *The Maltese Falcon* within the generic parameters of the mystery form and limited the author's ability to achieve distinction outside that field. Even worse, the book sold modestly at best for Knopf—9,000 copies in 1930 and 1,080 in 1931. However, Hammett's

The promise of increased and more functional output through the elimination of waste was central in the fields of literature and industrial organization, but the similarities end there. Literary modernists perceived efficiency as synonymous with stylistic innovation—in other words, a literary performance of the kind showcased in *The Maltese Falcon* that delivered meaning and, more importantly, signified difference, communicated singularity, and conferred distinction. On the other hand, industrial engineers and business theorists believed scientific management and efficiency represented a “progressive revolution” in organizational and individual behavior, which could contain and eliminate irregularities, achieve uniformity in operations and human activity, and increase profitability.³⁶²

EFFICIENCY IN THE FILM INDUSTRY

Even if writers and businessmen accessed similar terminology to express their divergent goals, literary experimentation and industrial management remained mutually exclusive, and discrepancies between the fields were real but largely insignificant. That is, except in those areas where these parties’ interests and professional activities intersected, such as the film industry. It should be no surprise that the film industry adopted the efficiency designation that predominated in business discourse and applied scientific management principles to achieve standardization and consistency. Perhaps less predictable is the fact that efficiency entered film industry discourse via labor

popularity in the pulps meant that Knopf could lease the rights to reprint the author’s novels to publishers wishing to release cheaper hardbound and paperbound editions, including a Grosset & Dunlap \$1.00 edition that sold over 15,000 copies in 1931. “Affidavit: Warner Bros. and Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. vs. CBS,” undated, Knopf Archive, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter referred to as UT-HRC Knopf Archive), box 714, folder 12.

organizations. As Janet Staiger points out, an early collective of camera operators emphasized the advantage in “[increasing] the practical efficiency of cameramen,” and other labor associations followed suit in advocating the standardization of production practices. Moreover, trade papers praised stylistic and narrative consistency in their reviews of films of the 1910s. In the film industry’s naissance, “Advertising, trade associations, professional and labor associations, trade papers, and critics promoted uniformity and quality.”³⁶³

Just a few years later, efficiency became a central tenet in the industrial organization of filmmaking corporations, which to assume tighter control over rising costs and the increasingly complex sets of tasks demanded in feature film production gravitated toward a producer-controlled management organization (and away from the director-controlled system that predominated during the formative years of the film industry).³⁶⁴ Under this new management model, a studio’s centralized production operation acted as a clearing house for all planned and current production, assigned employees to individual projects, and oversaw the work of studio directors during production. A 1916 *Saturday Evening Post* feature article announced proudly that, after much apprehension and delay, “System and Efficiency have found their way into the manufacture of motion pictures.” The anonymous author, a former billing clerk turned film director, recounts the process by

³⁶² Emerson, *The Twelve Principles of Efficiency*, 279-83.

³⁶³ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 105-108, 112.

³⁶⁴ Staiger argues that the central-producer system descended directly from scientific management, the need for which became especially vital with the standardization of “classical Hollywood film technique” and the emergence of the feature length film as the dominant product of film exhibition. According to Staiger, “Both of these factors required production planning,” as well as active oversight by managers during and after production (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 128-138).

which precise scheduling, careful costs detailing, and management supervision had seeped into the film industry, a business formerly plagued by unanticipated expenses and waste.³⁶⁵ The new System not only increases accountability and profitability, it also assures quality in production:

So complete was the record—so illuminating the marginal notes—that I was able at a glance to visualize each set and tell whether it was what I wanted or not. ... Such care and close attention was a revelation to me. ... The System gives the director time to be an artist!

Thus, the value of efficiency rests in its ability to organize and standardize operations, and, similar to the paradigm adopted in literary efficiency, to create an atmosphere (i.e., described as a new “temperament” on the set and in the studio) more conducive to artistic innovation. As the author explains, the new division of labor, and not the director’s aspirations for professional merit, is the primary cause for this desired effect— “[Directors] are beginning to see that we ... are responsible for the shooting of the picture itself; other people are responsible for the other things.”³⁶⁶

In the mid- to late-1920s, the American film industry further consolidated. To maximize their resources and increase profitability, several filmmaking corporations acquired large regional theater chains and purchased or merged with other producers and distributors. The increasing administrative and organizational complexity at the major filmmaking corporations demanded a new management structure, which led to the further sub-division of labor at Hollywood studios. For example, the task of developing, composing and editing film scripts, formerly performed by a single writer, was dispersed

³⁶⁵ “Putting the move in the movies,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 13 May 1916, 14-15, 96-98, 100-101.

into multiple specialists, one working on the story structure, another on intertitles, another on miscellaneous lines and story elements that required “doctoring” during and after production, and so forth. (This new organization not only circumscribed the power of each individual working on a film and had the potential of quelling stylistic and narrative innovation, but it also increased demand for labor in the film industry.)

Responsibilities separated at the producer level as well: a centralized producer now managed unit producers, each responsible for overseeing several films and communicating the wishes of upper management to production staff. Essentially general managers, the centralized executive producers of the late 1920s and early 1930s—to name a few, Irving Thalberg at MGM, Darryl Zanuck and later Hal Wallis at Warner Bros., Junior Laemmle at Universal—held an immense level of responsibility and power, in effect running daily operations at their respective studios and influencing studio style to a high degree.³⁶⁷

The largest filmmaking corporations, now with vast corporate umbrellas, enormous employee pools and intricate chains of communication, identified even more opportunities for eliminating waste and achieving efficiencies in their operations. Economies of scale and standardized production, distribution, and exhibition, in addition to the optimization of available property and labor resources, became essential methods

³⁶⁶ “Putting the move in the movies,” 98, 99.

³⁶⁷ According to Leo Rosten, such producers controlled so many daily decisions that they in effect dictated the “studio’s personality, the aggregate pattern of its choices and its tastes,” which in turn was reflected in the common narrative forms, thematic preoccupations, and production values of their studio’s releases (*Hollywood: The Movie Colony* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1941], 242-243). Also see Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1993), 73-76; Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 3-13.

for maintaining and further increasing profitability. To ensure the continuous use of personnel, property, assets, and exhibition outlets, most of the major studios established A and B production units, and then subdivided their A units further according to production and marketing budgets.³⁶⁸ In the span of two decades, Hollywood film studios had transformed from regional family operations into international, highly sophisticated, vertically integrated corporations that assiduously planned the production, distribution, and exhibition of each film and carefully accounted for all costs and revenues.

EFFICIENCY AT WARNER BROS.

Perhaps no major filmmaking corporation embodied the tenets of efficiency like Warner Bros., where the concept permeated nearly all areas of long-term planning and day-to-day business operations. Efficiency represented a corporate strategy that extended from production scheduling, to employee management, to set design, to story development; and it enabled the studio to maximize the productivity of present resources, whether those “materials” represented props, production equipment or employees. (As production chief Jack Warner explained, “[With] an entire cast and crew standing around and doing nothing and collecting salary, we have to get things moving!”³⁶⁹) Efficiency was not only evident in studio operations and a significant element of Warner Bros. corporate culture, it was also a primary ingredient in the creation and codification of a recognizable studio style for Warner Bros. In this sense, this corporate strategy rose to the

³⁶⁸ For a longer description of this arrangement and its rationale, see Balio, *Grand Design*, 98-107, and Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 6-7, 9.

³⁶⁹ “Memo: Jack L. Warner to Walter MacEwan,” 12 Dec 1937, File: *Varsity Show* Production, Warner Brothers Collection, Quoted in Gustafson, *The Buying of Ideas*, 179.

status of ideology, a “System” indoctrinated in nearly all levels and branches of the corporation and, as a result, informing nearly all of its decisions.

In a December 1937 *Fortune* profile of Warner Bros., company treasurer Abe Warner believed his company compared with another paragon of industrial efficiency, Ford Motor Company: “The Ford of the Movies is how Major Abe Warner likes to think of Warner Bros. ... [T]hey lead the low-price field and the profit to Warner is in the volume rather than in an occasional smash hit.” But economies of scale and specialized labor were operational staples at all majors, and many minors, in the studio era. What set Warner Bros. apart, besides the fact that it was known for its modest production budgets? *Fortune* elaborates,

By never buying unnecessary stories, rarely making retakes, and always knocking temperament on the head where they can, the Warners probably get more production money onto the screen than any other studio.

With this series of adverbs, “never,” “rarely” and “always,” the article identifies a series of decisions at Warner Bros that eliminate waste and, in their cumulative power, yield “maximum productivity,” as Frederick Winslow Taylor once described the goal of scientific management. For Taylor, such an approach could create “maximum prosperity”; for Warner Bros., the results are not only financial but also behavioral, serving to codify employee conduct—i.e., “knocking temperament on the head”—and to inform story selection and development—enabling the distinction between necessary and “unnecessary” stories. In this broader sense, efficiency represents a corporate strategy

(rather than a more limited and less comprehensive business strategy) that permeates decisions throughout the firm and influences its identity.³⁷⁰

According to *Fortune*, Warner Bros.' operations and management style were reflected in its products on "the screen," implying that efficiency was central to the formulation and execution of "inexpensive topical stories ... successfully snatched from the day's headlines." "Snatched" might seem a derogatory way of describing the studio's method of story selection, but here it is an admirable quality, as the term signifies the company's outsider reputation and denotes the unparalleled resourcefulness extending throughout the company, which yielded a distinct, sophisticated studio style:

Warner is the only big company without a newsreel, but it is more expert than most newsreels in capitalizing on the news. Many a Warner script is invented whole by the boys at the studio around some current scandal or timely and dramatic locale. Warner pictures are as close to real life as Hollywood ever gets.³⁷¹

Gritty realism—or, a proximity to "real life," as it described here—is a thematic and aesthetic quality often attached to Warner Bros. in discussions of its studio style, which is said to mesh with its corporate motives: modest budgets and brief, efficient shooting schedules.

The anecdotal description of a typical story development session is indicative of the informality and haphazardness attributed, here and elsewhere, to the company's decision-making process. In his illuminating study of the story department at Warner Bros. in the 1930s and 1940s, Robert Gustafson disputes this assumption, demonstrating the

³⁷⁰ See Andrews, 18-19, where the author distinguishes between business strategy and corporate strategy.

³⁷¹ "Warner Bros.," *Fortune*, December 1937, Reprinted in Behlmer (ed.), *Inside Warner Bros.*, 1935-1951 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 54-64.

sophisticated system by which the studio acquired and developed stories for the screen. “The internal operations of the Story Department followed a pattern that mirrored the workings of the entire studio organization. ... [The] basic operations of the department and its division of labor within it remained generally unchanged from 1930 to 1949.”³⁷² Like the entire studio, the department attempted “to get the greatest profit from what it produced ... by efficiently producing films at the lowest possible cost.”³⁷³ In its understanding of the value and function of its films, Warner Bros. differed markedly from a filmmaking corporation like MGM, which produced prestige vehicles that, by their very nature, are not produced at “the lowest possible cost” and attempted to exhibit this fact through elaborate sets, high production values, and A-level stars. All of MGM’s films were produced and released with the intention of turning a profit, but some were seen as mechanisms by which the company could maintain its long-term competitive advantage rather than as products that promised high ROI.³⁷⁴ Warner Bros. perceived the value of its films differently, and its studio operations followed suit.

Thus, story development at Warner Bros. was consistent with its overall corporate strategy, which the company had been carefully crafting for over a decade, beginning with the early feature-length and serial productions that would provide the capital to increase production and later incorporate in 1923. In the 1910s, the Warners attempted

³⁷² Gustafson, 172.

³⁷³ Gustafson., 43. Of course, big budget exceptions existed within this practice. Such films as *Anthony Adverse* (1936) and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) offered the kind of cultural prestige that kept Warner Bros. and its theaters competitive with the other majors, while they distinguished the company from other classes of filmmaking corporations, such as major-minors and minors. Nevertheless, even these more complex and costly prestige productions were produced as efficiently as possible.

on multiple occasions to enter film production on a permanent basis, but they did not experience real success until the release of *My Four Years in Germany* (1918), produced at a cost of \$50,000 and yielding \$1,500,000 at the box office. This windfall had several lasting effects: (1) it provided an infusion of capital, which enabled the Warners to purchase their first small Hollywood studio in 1920 and produce additional films; (2) it convinced the brothers to concentrate heavily on feature-length film production; and (3) it solidified their commitment to low budget, efficient production methods (which they used in the serials and comedies they produced between 1920 and 1923), the success of which allowed for the further expansion of its production facilities. Upon forming Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc. in 1923, the new company quickly sought a way to expand and compete with the majors, notably Paramount and Fox.³⁷⁵

Warners Bros.' successful releases and cost-conscious production and management strategy caught the attention of Wall Street investor Waddill Catchings, who helped to secure multi-million dollar loans that led to the purchase of Brooklyn-based Vitagraph Studios and Film Exchange and the acquisition and leasing of first-run exhibition outlets.³⁷⁶ As *Fortune* notes, the relationship with Catchings was encouraged by the brothers' reputation for translating fiscal restraint into commercial success—for example, *School Days* (1921) and *Why Girls Leave Home* (1921) had production budgets of

³⁷⁴ As Schatz observes, such films were often “loss leaders” for MGM; that is, they functioned primarily to further elaborate studio style and accrue symbolic profit rather than economic gain (personal communication, 24 Apr 2006).

³⁷⁵ Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*, 46-47.

³⁷⁶ Roddick, 17-19; Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 58-62.

\$50,000 and \$33,000, respectively, and box office grosses in excess of \$500,000 each.³⁷⁷

In effect, the fledgling company was realizing the immense benefits and minimized risks available through strict cost supervision and well-chosen story materials.

With the recent acquisitions, Warner Bros. Pictures could now manage the production, distribution, and exhibition of its films, and so the company ramped up production to 30 feature films per year. Still, to compete with the majors, further expansion was necessary, as was product differentiation. Beginning in 1926, Warner Bros. used its Vitagraph Studios and a recent partnership with Western Electric to produce short pictures that featured synchronized sound. Later that year, the company released *Don Juan* (1926), the first feature length film with sound effects and a synchronized score. Despite all the signs indicating audience interest in talkies, the film was only a marginal success, and the company, absorbing the heavy costs of converting its production stages and movie houses for “talking pictures,” found itself mired in debt.³⁷⁸ Nevertheless, sensing an opportunity to build its competitive advantage available through expertise in feature-length sound films, Warner Bros. continued to experiment with synchronized production and exhibition and, in a more risky financial move, significantly expanded its theater holdings, production capabilities, and shooting schedule.³⁷⁹ Between 1928 and 1930, Warner Bros. increased its net value from

³⁷⁷ “Warner Bros.,” 57.

³⁷⁸ See Roddick, *A New Deal in Entertainment*, for further discussion.

³⁷⁹ Warner Bros.’ ownership of Vitagraph, and its sound exhibition technology Vitaphone, provided two clear economic advantages: it allowed the company to equip all of its cinemas with sound more quickly and cheaply, and it provided Warner Bros. with fees for every Vitaphone-equipped theater, which numbered 6,000 by the end of the 1920s. The dominance of Vitaphone and Western Electric products during the

\$16,000,000 to \$230,000,000, a reflection of its acquisition of the Stanley Corporation of America and its 250 theaters and a majority share of First National Pictures in 1928.³⁸⁰

That year, the studio had fully converted to sound production and exhibition; so, while it absorbed the massive costs related to this transition, it was also well prepared to maximize the financial and strategic benefits available in the first years of the “talkie revolution.” It did so with the release of *The Jazz Singer* (1927), which included segments of synchronized dialogue, and *The Lights of New York* (1928), the first all-talking feature. The two films distinguished Warner Bros. from other majors, which had chosen to wait a full year before investing heavily in sound production and exhibition, and achieved massive box office success. (Despite its technological distinction, *The Lights of New York* was produced for a mere \$75,000, which in turn made its profits even more pronounced.) In the wake of these Warner Bros. successes, the public appetite for sound pictures was high, and the company, the clear leader in the technical and narrative aspects of the burgeoning field, positioned itself to capitalize by being the first studio to announce an all-talkie production schedule. Still, Warner Bros.’ synchronized films maintained a lower average production budget than the majority of its competitors and by 1930, amid unprecedented expansion by Warner Bros. in the previous years, the company paid off all of its outstanding debts and reported a profit of \$2,000,000.³⁸¹

Now a profitable, vertically integrated corporation with large-scale operations and a wide scope, Warner Bros. steadfastly adhered to its corporate strategy, which had enabled

transition to sound significantly enhanced revenues and limited costs for Warner Bros. during this period. Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*, 54.

³⁸⁰ Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*, 57; Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 66.

the company to limit risk by concentrating on low-cost feature film production, achieve both continuity and efficiency in production by concentrating on specific generic and narrative specialties, and adapt to its growth by maintaining a clear, consistent line of communication between company executives and its various branches. All of these tactics were amplified through vertical integration and the dramatically increased scale of operations, which to other companies may have created an unwieldiness that threatened profitability, at Warner Bros. in the 1930s.

Perhaps no individual was more important to Warner Bros.' administration of efficiency than Darryl Zanuck, the associate executive in charge of production between 1925 and 1933. Zanuck began his career with the company as a writer and was installed as head producer at the age of 23, after formulating the concept and plots of the popular Rin Tin Tin films, whose formulaic storylines and canine star allowed for miniscule production costs. The young executive not only oversaw production on the lot, he also formulated an incredible number of stories for Warner Bros. films. Allegedly, Zanuck was responsible for the scenarios and parts of the scripts for up to 20 films per year, wrote under four names, and possessed the ability to generate story ideas and compose script drafts in the span of 24 hours. The young producer's working methods—turning out story ideas and scripts quickly, and thus condensing the story development process—clearly matched the predilections of his employer—devoted to minimizing story costs by reducing the need for writers. (As Jack Warner commented, “[Zanuck] could write ten

³⁸¹ Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 66.

times faster than any ordinary man.”³⁸²) So too did the producer’s ability to adapt stories directly from current events, resulting in the “ripped from the headlines” plots for which the studio became known. Such subjects could give Warner Bros.’ releases a sense of topicality and significance while taking full advantage of Zanuck’s productivity and his ability to capitalize on the appeal of contemporary subjects and generic trends. Moreover, with the steady flow of production and the relatively simplistic administrative structure enabled by the production chief, Warner Bros. limited waste by setting detailed budgets and production schedules (also influenced by Zanuck) and by avoiding the possibility of idle studio employees or Warner Bros.-owned theaters.³⁸³

Zanuck helped to ensure a frantic pace of production at the studio, while Warner Bros. accumulated even more exhibition outlets and expanded its production schedule. As a result of all three processes, the studio created and solidified a recognizable style that reflected the company’s commitment to modest budgets and its partiality to topical stories. For example, *Little Caesar* (1931), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *I Am A Fugitive From A Chain Gang* (1932) and built the box office appeal and star identities of studio actors Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney and Paul Muni, respectively, and established the commercial viability of the gangster genre. By no accident, the consistency of subject matter, characterizations, lead actors, dialogue, and production values reflected studio production strategy (i.e., quickly formulated and inexpensively

³⁸² Quoted in Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 62.

³⁸³ For extended discussions of Zanuck’s legendary working methods and his influence at Warner Bros., see Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 61-66, 136-139; Roddick, 24-26.

produced) and the social relevance and aesthetic realism evident in other Warner Bros. films.

Warner Bros. and the rest of the film industry began to feel the effects of the depression in 1931. Lost revenue from declining attendance and heavy costs from sound conversion created significant losses for nearly all the major filmmaking corporations and fiscal restraint was placed at a premium. But this practice was nothing new to the company, where Jack Warner had gained a reputation for his constant attention to wasteful practices and unnecessary expenses. According to legend, he checked lights before leaving the studio each night, made sure that all props and costumes were returned to the appropriate departments, and kept workers in plain view so as to quell “loafing.” While informal and generally unaccountable in the ledgers, these methods had an important effect on decisions made throughout the organization: they indoctrinated a culture of efficiency at the studio, where all employees were under the view of the studio chief and expected to conform to his standards of behavior and operations. For example, until the mid-1930s, Warner Bros. producers generally did not receive screen credit for pictures they oversaw; among their various tasks in managing production, the most important according to Warner was to identify, report, and eliminate wasteful practices on the set.

In effect, Jack Warner deployed a system of oversight and disciplining (for example, actors’ paychecks were docked whenever they failed to return costumes in a timely fashion) intended to make “docile bodies” of Warner employees. As Michel Foucault formulates the term in *Discipline and Punish*, docile bodies have been “subjected, used,

transformed, and improved” through continuous observation and confinement. These individuals are psychologically “dominated” yet thoroughly “efficient” in carrying out the wishes of the agents in power.³⁸⁴ As these methods did for the prison wardens overseeing and disciplining seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prisoners, in business organizations, they have the advantage of simplifying complex chains of communication throughout large companies like Warner Bros and clarifying corporate strategy to ensure all employees understand, internalize, and dutifully execute a company’s objectives. And, just as the panoptical prison design enabled the application of these surveillance methods and was instrumental in establishing a system of desired behavior in prisoners, the internal structure of the firm is a vital component in ensuring uniformity within the company.³⁸⁵ At Warner Bros., the continuous presence of Jack Warner at the studio, his direct communication with top management (Albert and Harry Warner) and executive producers (Zanuck and later Hal Wallis), and the limitation of employee empowerment and reward led to the desired “temperament” among personnel and, in turn, to a company-wide devotion to efficiency.³⁸⁶

Indeed, the advantages to the firm in influencing the decision-making of employees are numerous, but so too are the risks, most notably in the form of labor relations. And, while Warner Bros. was famous for its shoestring budgets and “ripped from the

³⁸⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 136, 138.

³⁸⁵ Andrews, 2-5, 13-14.

³⁸⁶ As Schatz observes, “Production at Warners was even more centralized than at MGM. ... Nor were as many writers involved in rewrites. ... Warners directors, in particular, were attuned to a factory-based assembly-line production system.” In this system, directors and writers were valued for their productivity. Those individuals exhibiting this trait, like director Mervyn LeRoy, were granted a higher level of authority and creative control (*Genius of the System*, 139-140).

headlines” stories, it was infamous for its treatment of employees. The most visible example of this practice occurred in the very public contract disputes with many of the studio’s top stars, including James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Bette Davis, and Humphrey Bogart. The success of *The Public Enemy* (1931) convinced Cagney to lobby for more than the \$400 per week salary stipulated in his current contract. Jack Warner refused to renegotiate and, with an opportunity to maximize the box office value of his low-paid star, continued to assign the actor to a steady stream of upcoming productions. Cagney eventually held out, refusing to report to the set. While the dispute was finally resolved by a third party and Cagney’s wage was raised, the studio administration had sent a clear message to Cagney and other Warner Bros. employees: it would not budge on such demands in the future.

Nor would it be especially receptive to actors’ suggestions about their casting preferences in Warner Bros. productions. As Zanuck informed Edward G. Robinson, input would be accepted, but “the judgment and intelligence of our ‘system’” was the overarching principle by which decisions were made on the lot.³⁸⁷ Another studio may have judiciously limited the number of screen appearances by a popular actor like Robinson in order to avoid over-exposure and slowly build his or her star value, but not Warner Bros., where the “system,” carried out dutifully by Zanuck (who describes it in the same letter as “perfect” and “ideal”) dictated the maximum productivity of all studio resources, including featured acting talent. While contract actors grated against such

³⁸⁷ “Memo: Darryl F. Zanuck to Edward G. Robinson,” 26 Oct 1932, Reprinted in Behlmer, *Inside Warner Bros.*, 6-7.

policies, the benefits of continuous, efficient use were clear to studio operations and company ledgers.

Darryl Zanuck's abilities, principles, and management style seemed to mesh perfectly with Warner Bros.' corporate strategy and organizational structure, but, amidst mounting financial desperation, the quest for greater efficiency and less waste created friction between the head producer and his employer. The depression years threatened the solvency of the majority of Hollywood filmmaking corporations, but it was especially harsh on Warner Bros., whose buying spree in the preceding years and declining revenues caused funded debts to skyrocket from \$7.3 million in 1928 to \$60.2 million in 1930.³⁸⁸ In an attempt to address mounting losses, totaling \$14 million in 1932, Harry Warner outlined his intentions to establish a more "sane economy" at his company: "Actors, writers, directors, stage crews, office help, salesmen, theatre managers, ushers, in fact, everyone employed in the industry, from the highest priced executive to the lowest paid office boy, must cooperate, must do his share to keep expenses down." He would make good on his promise the following year, when along with other studios, Warner Bros. instituted an eight-week wage reduction for all of its employees. Warner Bros. went further, and an unannounced extension of the wage reduction disgruntled employees and convinced Zanuck that the studio could never offer a more visible presence in the company or the lucrative contracts being paid to production executives at other major studios. Zanuck should not have been surprised, for the wage cutbacks were consistent with the cost-cutting methods and management policy the studio had been

practicing for years. Nevertheless, he resigned in April 1933; days later he was announced as the executive in charge of production at the newly formed Twentieth Century Pictures. Ironically, a logical extension of Warner Bros.' longstanding policies had led directly to the resignation of its most dynamic executive and a key advocate for the company's corporate strategy.

WARNER BROS., FILM ADAPTATION, AND *THE MALTESE FALCON*

(1931)

The application of studio temperament and the execution of efficiency at Warner Bros.' extended into the larger operations of the story department. According to Robert Gustafson in *The Buying of Ideas*,

The business plan for the Story Department at Warner Brothers was part of an interdependent set of economic decisions and policies designed to reduce risk, to manage the uncertainty inherent in the box office, to control costs, and boost profits. ... Specific strategies were instituted in the Story Department to support the operations of the entire organization.

Those practices included using studio screenwriters to formulate stories that resembled box office successes for other studios, adhering to a strict budget in the acquisition of source materials, ensuring that only the least costly sources were left unproduced, and judiciously recycling story materials to maximize their utility.³⁸⁹ As Gustafson's analysis suggests, Warner Bros. was highly dependent on film adaptation not only to generate commercially viable story materials but also to achieve its economic goals by limiting waste and exhausting resources. (Indeed, Zanuck was an ideal executor for these goals.)

³⁸⁸ Gustafson, 108.

³⁸⁹ Gustafson, 163-164.

Even with Darryl Zanuck's skill in churning out formulaic but original stories en masse, the reliance on film adaptation was steady throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. *My Four Years in Germany* (1918), adapted from an autobiography and the studio's first legitimate feature-length hit, convinced Warner Bros. of the competitive advantage of maintaining modest production budgets and offered evidence that adaptation could facilitate that goal while increasing box office potential and differentiating the company through such original, high profile releases. In the ensuing years, the studio experienced a string of successes: *The Sea Beast* (1926) was a successful adaptation of *Moby Dick*, as was *Moby Dick* (1930); *Little Caesar* (1931) was culled from a W.T. Burnett novel of the same name, *I Am A Fugitive From A Chain Gang* was acquired prior to publication and became a commercial and critical success for the studio in 1932, and *42nd Street* (1933) and the *Gold Diggers* series (1923, 1929, 1933, 1935, 1936) were produced into popular musicals. Film adaptation was also a prevalent practice with respect to routine studio fare: roughly two-thirds of the films produced between 1930 and 1933 were based on plays, novels, short stories, and nonfiction works, and the majority of acquisitions cost below \$10,000.³⁹⁰

Among those low-cost acquisitions was *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), acquired for \$8,500 from publisher Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. After reading the novel upon a recommendation, Warner Bros. acquisitions editor Jacob Wilk immediately alerted the Hollywood office of the book's potential for the screen. The same day (April 21, 1930), the studio secured a ten-day option on the book, which was forwarded to Jack Warner. A

³⁹⁰ Gustafson, 79, 92.

ten-page synopsis of the novel was quickly written, and from that a three-page summary and review of its cinematic prospects was composed by studio reader George Halasz, who described the story as “fast, furious, thrilling, and extremely exciting.” Even more attractive was the ease and expeditiousness with which it could be produced at the studio:

It is written in excellent dialogue ... which can be easily lifted and incorporated bodily in the talkie. Most of the action takes place in hotel rooms, hotel lobbies, Spade’s apartment and office, which also makes it easier to adapt it for the purposes of the talkie without losing any of its excitement and flavor.³⁹¹

The reviewer warned of the violence and sexual innuendo in the novel and listed several ways in which a potential film version could remove the “cruelty” of the story’s conclusion. However, Halasz recommended the acquisition of *The Maltese Falcon* because, as a prospective adaptation, it would clearly conform to the studio standards and practices prioritized at Warner Bros. The action and subject matter of the story would resemble the plots and themes of other studio releases; production would require minimal set construction; and, because of the novel’s brisk pace and dialogue, story development could be completed in a brief and inexpensive manner.

In effect, Halasz valued the book for the very reason Hammett envisioned: efficiency. Of course, the studio reader’s sense of the term differed radically from the author’s. Whereas Halasz perceived efficiency as a means to fit *The Maltese Falcon* into the “system” in practice at the studio, Hammett believed literary efficiency represented a stylistic innovation that could distinguish the novel within the mystery genre and gain

³⁹¹ “Story Summary and Comment: THE MALTESE FALCON,” 23 Apr 1930, Warner Bros. Collection, File: THE MALTESE FALCON, Drafts, Clippings, Etc., Box: 12558, Dashiell Hammett, Legal (1/3).

attention in the broader literary field. Thus, the seemingly benign disparity between the objectives of the film studio and the novelist, and their respective applications of efficiency, become more concrete in this context, as the motives of one seemingly threatened to dispel the aspirations of the other.

Despite Halasz's enthusiastic review, the option on *The Maltese Falcon* was allowed to expire a few days later. However, interest in the literary property was not dead, for studio executives continued to mull over the prospects of the adaptation, gauge interest in the property at other studios, and debate casting for a potential film version. In early June, a preliminary acquisition agreement was drawn up between Warner Bros. and Knopf. Days before a formal contract was completed, Hammett's agent offered the author's services for the prospective adaptation, but Warner Bros. had little interest in such an arrangement.³⁹² No doubt he would demand a higher weekly salary than studio writers already under contract. More important, he was unaware of and thus might not possess studio "temperament," knowledge of the Warner Bros. system, or a grasp on studio style. Whereas Hammett viewed his novel as a unique stylistic innovation and might project *his* adaptation in the same light, Warner Bros. perceived *The Maltese Falcon* as a resource through which it could continue the strategies and methods already in place.

Warner Bros. formally acquired *The Maltese Falcon* on June 23, 1930 and immediately began to set casting and budget priorities for the film, slated for a January

³⁹² "Notes on *The Maltese Falcon*, 21 Apr 1930 - 7 June 1937," Warner Bros. Collection, File: 12558A, Box: Dashiell Hammett, Legal (2/3).

1931 production and a release in the spring of that year. Even before the contract between Knopf and Warner Bros. was signed, Jack Warner and Darryl Zanuck had pegged top-tier studio star John Barrymore for the role of the enigmatic Spade, which signified the studio's intent to position *The Maltese Falcon* as a high profile 1931 release. So too did the proposed budget of \$300,000, a modest sum for other major studios but an A-level project at Warner Bros.³⁹³ But the plan began to change in late 1930, when it was feared that Barrymore might leave Warner Bros. for MGM and, in any case, the Barrymore vehicle *Svengali* (1931), seemingly more in tune with the star's image, became a higher priority at the studio.³⁹⁴ Zanuck and Warner had imagined Sam Spade as a tough, suave romantic lead and the lengthy treatment and evolving script for the film had emphasized these facets of the detective's personality with clear allusions to Spade's sexual prowess. Without Barrymore and with no clear replacement for the male lead, *The Maltese Falcon* was reconceived as a vehicle for Bebe Daniels, a recent Warner Bros. signee who the studio hoped would become one of its top attractions.³⁹⁵

For the studio, the project was a bit behind schedule, but it was clearly back on track. In January, Roy Del Ruth was assigned to direct, while the search continued for a suitable Sam Spade. With the focus of the film now on the cagey criminal Wonderley, the male lead would now need to satisfy the romantic melodrama elaborated even further in script

³⁹³ "Notes on *The Maltese Falcon*, 21 Apr 1930 - 7 June 1937," Warner Bros. Collection, File: 12558A, Box: Dashiell Hammett, Legal (2/3).

³⁹⁴ *Svengali* was indeed Barrymore's last film under his current contract with Warner Bros., and the actor signed a long-term deal with MGM that year. Nevertheless, the studio's instincts about the potential were accurate, as *Svengali* turned into a runaway hit for Warner Bros., playing for 49 weeks at first-run theatres in New York and Los Angeles.

drafts.³⁹⁶ And, since *The Maltese Falcon* was now positioned as a vehicle for Daniels, Warner Bros. had no reason to use a well-known contract employee in the detective role, especially when that actor might be more advantageously assigned to another project. So, in early January 1931, RKO loaned Ricardo Cortez to play detective Sam Spade, at a salary of \$1,250 per week plus a \$3,750 bonus payable to Cortez's home studio.³⁹⁷ Daniels was the star and would receive top billing in all publicity, and her salary, at \$10,000 per week, was about nine times more than that paid to Cortez. In fact, her total salary for the picture represented over 25 percent of production costs and nearly 15 percent of the entire projected budget—twice as much as total story costs (\$18,862 for acquisition and development) and twice as much as all prop, set, and wardrobe expenses.³⁹⁸ Even though Cortez would appear in more scenes than Daniels and work on for nearly twice as many weeks, the latter was a larger investment and thus a more valuable asset in the project. Before and after production, Zanuck and Jack Warner even considered changing the title of the film—from *The Maltese Falcon* to *Woman of the World*—to reflect this revised casting arrangement. After all, Daniels' could be used to greater effect in future projects than could the modestly selling novel. If *The Maltese Falcon* adaptation was a hit and Daniels was well-received in the film, the actress could easily be assigned to projects that would quickly capitalize on her appeal while her wage

³⁹⁵ Daniels, already well-known as a silent film actress, would indeed become a bankable star for Warner Bros. in a string of musicals, most notably *42nd Street* (1933).

³⁹⁶ "'The Maltese Falcon ... Screenplay by Maude Fulton and Brown Holmes,'" undated, Warner Bros. Collection, File: MALTESE FALCON (1931), Box: The Maltese Falcon (1931), 1.

³⁹⁷ "*Maltese Falcon* Artist Contracts: Warner Bros. and Ricardo Cortez," 8 Jan 1931, Warner Bros. Collection, File: Picture File, Box: The Maltese Falcon (1931), 1.

would remain static. Thus, Warner Bros. was simply trying to maximize the value of its resources, of which Daniels was a costly one.

True to the Warner Bros. strategy, the script, casting, and publicity were modified to highlight Daniels and build her appeal for future projects. Subsequent drafts of the script now concluded the film in a jail cell, where Spade and Daniels' incarcerated Ruth Wonderley (known also as Brigid O'Shaughnessy in the novel) would say their goodbyes and the latter would shed a tear in anguish, for "the only man she had ever seen that she couldn't beat."³⁹⁹ At this stage, the prospective film adaptation would not only modify the ending featured in the Hammett novel and focus on a new protagonist, it would also attempt to inject pathos by presenting the inner thoughts of its main characters, a sharp contrast from the third-person narration of the novel, a formal experiment on the part of Hammett, which strived for objectivity and forebode access to Sam Spade's psychological constitution or motives (Figure 4.1, below).

³⁹⁸ "Projected Budget for *The Maltese Falcon*, #604," 20 Jan 1931, Warner Bros. Collection, File: Picture File, Box: The Maltese Falcon (1931), 1.

³⁹⁹ "*MALTESE FALCON*: First Draft Continuity," 1931, Warner Bros. Collection, File: *MALTESE FALCON* (1931) First Draft, Box: The Maltese Falcon (1931), 1.



Figure 4.1: An advertisement for *The Maltese Falcon* (1931) clearly positions Bebe Daniels as the film’s protagonist and anthropomorphizes the eponymous statuette.⁴⁰⁰

In January 1931, the cast and crew for the film were filled, a preliminary budget of \$287,462 was set, and shooting began on January 26. In a note accompanying a final shooting script for *The Maltese Falcon* project, Zanuck made the hierarchy of power clear to all participants in the production: “This script is final and the dialogue is not to be changed or altered on the set, unless authorized by the production office.”⁴⁰¹ Roy Del Ruth was an experienced, capable Warner Bros. director, but he was expected to be little more than a manager on the set who could execute the script and enforce the running directives that came down from the production office as efficiently as possible. Even with

⁴⁰⁰ “Pressbook: *The Maltese Falcon* (1931),” PB 8, undated, Warner Bros. Collection, File: 679 – Publicity, Box: *MALTESE FALCON* (1931).

⁴⁰¹ Memo: Darryl Zanuck to *MALTESE FALCON* Cast and Crew,” undated, Warner Bros. Collection, File: Script for *The Maltese Falcon*, Box: *The Maltese Falcon*, 1.

steady oversight by Zanuck, who was provided with daily reports on the number of scenes and minutes of footage completed on the set, the shooting pace slowed as production reached its third week. Del Ruth was averaging only 9.5 scenes per day, while the production schedule called for an average of 12.5. After several days of retakes, shooting finally wrapped on February 26, with slightly less than two hours of usable footage that editors and producers could shape into a 60- to 80-minute film. Even with the extended production, casting changes, and story revisions, the strict scheduling and supervision of the project minimized excessive footage extra footage and thus contained the possibility of further waste.

Despite the extensive adjustments made to accommodate the female lead, executives were unhappy with the story line evident in rough cuts of the film, which focused primarily on the suave Spade and by so doing limited the appeal of Daniels' Wonderley, who in the end represents just another romantic conquest for the womanizing detective. These worries were evident during production as well, as extensive retakes and added scenes enabled Zanuck and Warner to choose among several conclusions for the film. Three reasons persuaded studio producers to concentrate more heavily on Cortez's character in final cuts of the film and to finally select the title *The Maltese Falcon* over *Woman of the World*. First, Warner Bros. had several other films in production, notably *The Public Enemy* and *Little Caesar*, that, while not detective stories, resembled *The Maltese Falcon* in their depictions of shifty but magnetic male leads and the criminal underworlds they inhabit. All three films could reinforce this developing genre from which Warner Bros. could profit and pave the way for future releases. Second, in

anticipation of the success of *The Maltese Falcon*, the studio commissioned Dashiell Hammett to write a second story featuring Sam Spade, which would be a follow up to the impending film adaptation. Sticking with the title and concluding with a scene that frames the preceding narrative within the duties of the detective's occupation—the final cut of the film, like the novel, ends in Spade's office—would take advantage of Hammett's new story about the exploits of Spade and of audiences familiar with the novel, which was selling modestly for Knopf but was popular in its *Black Mask* serialized form. Third, despite the inclination to use *Falcon* as a vehicle for Daniels, her appeal clearly existed in other areas, namely her sonorous voice, which the studio planned to use in several upcoming musicals. Even though Cortez, who would conceivably play Spade again in a future film about the detective, was under contract to RKO, he still cost less per week than Daniels. Any subsequent Spade films could conceivably be cheaper to produce, even as they worked to enhance the value of the story and character for future iterations.

However, Hammett never completed a satisfactory story and his writing contract was terminated, and *The Maltese Falcon*, released in late May 1931, befuddled critics and failed to attract audiences. Cortez's performance, full of sexual innuendo and self-satisfied grinning, stood in stark contrast to the steely, inscrutable Spade of the novel and to the hardened calculating protagonists of *The Public Enemy* and *Little Caesar*. While no reliable figures exist to confirm such an inference, the film most likely failed to produce a return on investment. However, Warner Bros.' low-risk strategy enabled the company to quickly absorb the disappointment and move on to other projects. Even with

the \$300,000-plus cost of producing and releasing *The Maltese Falcon*, it was a modest investment and, like any other film, Warner Bros. had continued the stream of product to its first-run exhibition outlets for three weeks, and its second run theaters for several weeks thereafter. The failure of Cortez to animate the character of Spade was in fact of long-term benefit, at least according to logic in circulation at the studio, as now the commission of another Spade vehicle was unnecessary and the box office appeal of the actor, under contract to RKO not Warner Bros., was of negligible consequence to the studio.

RECYCLING AND *SATAN MET A LADY* (1936)

More than any other major studio, Warner Bros. recycled its story materials into multiple film releases. The practice began early in the company's history and became more prevalent in the 1930s, when between 15 and 25 percent of all Warner Bros. films were based on films previously produced by the studio or one of its competitors. (This figure does not include the frequent practice at the studio of producing films with startling similarities to movies released by other studios.)⁴⁰² Recycling became especially prevalent after Warner Bros. divided its production operations into A and B units, diminished its overall acquisition budget, and decided to rely more on its own writers to formulate story ideas. Like its internal management strategy, recycling was a proposition with significant benefits. It allowed for considerable costs savings through the drastic

⁴⁰² For example, after noting the resemblance in theme and setting between Warner Bros.' soon-to-be released *Jezebel* (1938) and the Selznick International Pictures blockbuster prestige release *Gone With the Wind* (1939), producer David O. Selznick pleaded with Jack Warner and Hal Wallis to limit any correspondences between the two films, which Selznick feared would hinder the respective box office potential of both.

reduction of acquisitions fee. With minimized story development costs, the overall risk associated with producing and releasing the film receded. As the company's multiple adaptations of *Falcon* illustrate, recycling also amortized the costs associated with and extended the value of original story materials and guaranteed the continuous use of company resources, including actors, crew, and exhibition outlets.⁴⁰³

On the other hand, recycling also carried clear risks. Audiences could either ignore a film it viewed as an unoriginal or, even worse, resent the producer responsible for the release and diminish the value of its subsequent film releases, as well as the related studio style and the current and future star appeal of studio-owned talent. Among all major filmmaking corporations, Warner Bros. feared these risks the least. First, it's corporate strategy placed primacy on many of the benefits associated with recycling, especially the maximization of company resources, the elimination of waste, and the condensation of any aspect of the production process, in this case story development. Second, it perceived stars as assets that should be deployed to optimal efficiency. In this respect, star appeal folded into the company's operational strategy (i.e., continuous use) and short-term profitably (return on investment through low-cost productions). Third, and most important, the Warner Bros. studio style was based on the realism and topicality communicated through its films, rather than the originality of story lines, as well as fast-paced, violent action and ripped from the headlines plots. For this reason, audiences may

⁴⁰³ Hereafter, I use the term *Falcon* to refer to the group of story materials related to the various synopses, treatments, screenplays, and film adaptations produced at Warner Bros. and deposited in the studio's story archives. In this sense, any single film adaptation or novel remains relatively finite, especially in comparison to the constantly expanding, increasingly amorphous *Falcon*.

have resented the practice of recycling at Warner Bros. less than if it had occurred at another studio associated with a different studio style, such as MGM, Fox, or Paramount.

Released as a film adaptation in 1931, 1936 and 1941, *The Maltese Falcon* was also subject to recycling. The hiring of Hammett in early 1931 to compose another story around Sam Spade demonstrated Warner Bros.' clear intention to extend the life of its original \$8,500 investment and increase the value of the story and characters it now owned. However, the concrete consideration of recycling the story, rather than extending it in a series, began in late 1933, after theatrical producer Lawrence Stallings inquired about acquiring film rights to *The Maltese Falcon*. Hammett and Knopf had sold the theatrical rights to the book to Stallings, and he hoped that a Broadway hit would pave the way to a cinematic adaptation of his prospective play. The following day, Jack Warner wired Jacob Wilk:

We contemplate remaking MALTESE FALCON as talking picture before [1934 is] over as this is as good a mystery as [we] can buy or write. [We] see no reason why we should sell this to Stallings unless [for a] big price.

Clearly, Warner intended to use the sudden interest in the story to raise the price of the literary property. While awaiting a response from Stallings, Warner Bros. inquired about the availability of the theatrical script, but negotiations stalled until May 1934, when the studio and the producer agreed on an option in which Warner Bros. could either sell any rights it might have to a filmed version of the play for \$5,000 or acquire the motion picture rights to the stage version for \$25,000. After several more weeks of negotiation

and speculation over whether the Stallings play would actually be produced, the deal was broken off—“Forget MALTESE FALCON and Stallings,” Warner ordered.⁴⁰⁴

With a theatrical version of *The Maltese Falcon* in the works, a sharp decrease in the literary acquisition budget at Warner Bros. (as an extension of Harry Warner’s “sane economy” policy), and the mild reception of the 1931 film adaptation, the literary property appeared ripe for recycling in the spring of 1934. Studio writer Kenneth Gamut was assigned to compose a one-page story summary for Jack Warner, who hoped to capitalize on the renewed interest in the story.⁴⁰⁵ Even more important for the prospects of a remake, MGM had produced a box office smash in its adaptation of *The Thin Man* (1934), which opened in June 1934, and the Hammett novel was a bestseller as well. The runaway success of novel and film had effects on the popularity of Hammett’s earlier works as well, and *The Maltese Falcon* experienced a sharp spike in sales.⁴⁰⁶

In June of 1934, immediately after negotiations between Warner Bros. and Lawrence Stallings ended without an agreement, Hal Wallis asked Harry Joe Brown, recently hired from Paramount, to read a synopsis of *The Maltese Falcon*, adding, “I think we can get

⁴⁰⁴ “Notes on *The Maltese Falcon*,” 21 Apr 1930 - 7 June 1937, Warner Bros. Collection, File: 12558A, Box: Dashiell Hammett, Legal (2/3).

⁴⁰⁵ “Kenneth Gamut, Story Summary: *The Maltese Falcon*,” 24 May 1934, Warner Bros. Collection, File: 2056, Coverage, Box: The Maltese Falcon (1931).

⁴⁰⁶ Knopf’s \$2.50 hardbound edition of the book rose from 3 copies sold in 1933 to 74 in 1934, and Grosset & Dunlap’s \$1.00 hardbound jumped from 893 to 3,043 over the same time period. The first Modern Library edition of *The Maltese Falcon* appeared in 1933, and sold 5,000 copies in its first year in print. In 1935, with Hammett’s popularity at a peak, Knopf released a Dashiell Hammett *Omnibus*, priced at \$2.00 and selling 2,808 copies that year. “Affidavit of Joseph Lesser: Warner Bros. and Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. versus CBS,” undated, and “Memo: Alfred Knopf to Arthur Farmer,” 25 Jan 1951, UT-HRC Knopf Archive.

another screenplay out of it by actually making the book.”⁴⁰⁷ Even though Wallis was relatively new to the position of associate producer in charge of production, his years as Darryl Zanuck’s right-hand producer are evident in his espousal of Warner Bros. corporate priorities—exhausting the utility from all company resources and perceiving even slight variations in a story property as the formulation of a product with new value and public demand—in the short memo to Brown. While the dealings with Stallings created interest in a second adaptation, the project did not get off the ground until a year later. By that time, a second installment of *The Thin Man* was on the horizon at MGM, the appeal of Hammett had risen even further, and the as-yet-unnamed remake of *The Maltese Falcon* was slotted in the 1936 production schedule.

In July of 1935, Harry Joe Brown, whose deliberate working methods drew the ire of Jack Warner and by extension Wallis, was fired as producer of the adaptation and replaced by Henry Blanke.⁴⁰⁸ While most Warner Bros. producers held relatively little power compared to unit producers at rival studios, Blanke was a notable exception. Starting out in 1930 as a producer for Warner Bros. on Spanish language versions of studio releases, Blanke was inculcated to studio efficiency on shoestring budgets, and his experience as a thrifty manager and an adept communicator with Zanuck and later Wallis allowed him to move up the ranks steadily to associate producer (uncredited) and finally to supervising producer in 1934. Blanke earned an unprecedented level of autonomy at Warner Bros. and was as close to a unit producer, a prevalent role at other studios, as the

⁴⁰⁷ “Memo: Hal Wallis to Harry Joe Brown,” 27 June 1934, Warner Bros. Collection, File: 2056, Satan Met A Lady—Story Memos and Correspondence, Box: Satan Met A Lady (1936).

studio had until the formal establishment of its B production unit, which allowed for greater and more efficient productivity at the studio. Blanke was also more interested in innovation than were his managers Zanuck and Wallis, each of whom valued the low-risk and rapid pace enabled by formulaic scripts and standardized operations.⁴⁰⁹ Nevertheless, Blanke was a company man, and he could be trusted to keep a production running on schedule and within its budget. Even if he debated the commands of Wallis, Blanke held an implicit knowledge of studio style and Warner Bros. corporate strategy, and he acted accordingly. Finally, his inclination to inject originality into the second *Falcon* adaptation would be a necessary ingredient to differentiate it from its predecessor and to avoid potential resentment for the recycled project.

With Harry Blanke at the helm and Wallis looking closely over his shoulder, pre-production on the *Falcon* remake gathered momentum and the producers began to exploit the benefits available through the practice of recycling. To take advantage of the popularity of *The Thin Man*, Wallis and Blanke envisioned a “free adaptation” of *Falcon*, one which would transform the story from intense drama to screwball comedy.⁴¹⁰ An initial script, entitled *The Money Man*, replaced the eponymous bird statuette with a jewel-filled ram’s horn, and transformed San Francisco from a chilly, misty city to an exotic tropical locale. Characters shared the same overarching goals—i.e., obtaining the priceless ram’s horn—with those of the original book and adaptation, but in name and

⁴⁰⁸ “Memo: Hal Wallis to Harry Joe Brown,” 6 July 1935, Warner Bros. Collection, File: 2056, Satan Met A Lady—Story Memos and Correspondence, Box: Satan Met A Lady (1936).

⁴⁰⁹ Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 200, 211-12.

⁴¹⁰ “Memo: Hal Wallis to Roy Obringer,” 5 Dec 1935, Warner Bros. Collection, File: Satan Met A Lady—Story Memos and Correspondence, Box: Satan Met A Lady (1936).

other ways they differed. For example, the sophisticated, sinister Casper Gutman was substituted for the cruel yet incompetent Madame Barabbas (Alison Skipworth), while the loyal secretary Effie Perine became the flighty sexpot Murgatroyd (Marie Wilson). Even with this series of alterations in the original story materials and the multiple script drafts produced in November and December 1935, total story costs for the film totaled a mere \$6,461, or about one-third of the cost incurred for the studio's first adaptation and thus representing yet another benefit of recycling for the studio.

Casting ascribed to the prevailing tenets of resource management as well. Studio contract actor and projected star Warren Wilson was designated to play detective Ted Shane, a character more in the mold of *The Thin Man's* droll Nick Charles (William Powell) than the book's icy detective or the first film's sophisticated Don Juan protagonist. As in *The Maltese Falcon* (1931), the remake was originally conceived as a vehicle for the male lead, but the low initial investment in both Wilson and story development costs enabled producers and writers to remain flexible when Bette Davis was assigned to the film. Davis was a top studio star and fresh off critical and commercial successes in *Of Human Bondage* (1934) and *Bordertown* (1935), as well as an Academy Award nomination for *Dangerous* (1935). By any reasonable estimation, Davis' salary of \$5,000 per week was incommensurate with her value to the studio. This fact encouraged Warner Bros. to cast the actress even more frequently before her contract expired—six productions in 1936 alone—and to capitalize on Davis' persona, a tough woman with the wits to match that of any man, in a string of productions, including *The Petrified Forest* (1936), the latest *Falcon* adaptation, and *Golden Arrow* (1936).

While *The Petrified Forest* featured a strong script and cast, the other two films had cut-rate budgets and formulaic story lines. After being formally assigned to the *Falcon* remake (as the Ruth Wonderley equivalent Valerie Purvis) in early December 1935, Davis refused to report to the set. For Warner Bros., the addition of Davis at her contracted salary held immense benefits: heightening the visibility of the production and the box office potential of the film while ensuring a paltry casting budget. With the threat of a holdout in plain sight, the part of Valerie Purvis had also been offered to Tallulah Bankhead, who had left movie acting in 1932 but was known for her portrayals of sultry, hard luck women in several MGM films of the early 1930s. While Bankhead may have performed adequately in the role, the money necessary to lure her back to a film studio would have pushed the budget up and, more importantly, negated the potential value accruing to Warner Bros. through the use of a contract player in the role. Moreover, the addition of Davis had triggered a series of modifications in the script—to conform to her star persona—and production schedule—to fit the actress' packed agenda. Without its star, the production (a 24-day shoot that had already begun on November 30) threatened to grind to a halt, thus disrupting the efficient operations of the studio. Sensing the need to take a hard stance, Jack Warner promptly suspended Davis, and the actress relented days later and joined the production on in early December.

Even before production, the *Falcon* remake was guaranteed to surpass its predecessor in an area that Warner Bros. valued highly: cost. With minimal expenses for story development and casting, the total projected budget for the remake was \$183,000, nearly 40 percent less than *The Maltese Falcon* (1931). William Dieterle, a German émigré who

had worked in several productions with Davis, was assigned to direct. The director was adept in several genres—from gangster pictures, to historical epics, to prestige biopics—and at a range of budgetary expectations. The studio could depend on him to not only be receptive to but also to immediately incorporate the constant advice handed down from Wallis via Blanke during shooting. For example, Dieterle and Blanke worked tirelessly to clarify the plot and character motivations whenever Wallis identified a point of confusion and, later in editing, they improved the pacing of the film after a complaint by Wallis.⁴¹¹ William Dieterle understood company expectations, and he worked quickly and efficiently. The production concluded within its budget and extended only one day beyond the original shooting schedule after additional scenes were added to address Wallis' concerns. Even more remarkable was the director's ability to avoid costly retakes and excessive coverage: Dieterle shot a mere 85 minutes of footage for the film, which would eventually be cut down to 66 minutes, the typical length of Warner Bros. B pictures.⁴¹²

Even with the efficient practices of Dieterle and Blanke on the set, the commercial positioning of the film adaptation was in flux. Between November 1935 and June 1936, the film adaptation went through various name changes, among them “The Money Man,” “Filthy Lucre,” “The Man With the Black Hat,” “Beware of Imitations,” “Every Girl for Herself,” “Hard Luck Dame,” “Men on Her Mind,” and the eventual choice “Satan Met A Lady.” While the last four titles emphasized the presence of Davis in the cast—

⁴¹¹ “Memo: Henry Blanke to Hal Wallis,” 30 Jan 1936, Warner Bros. Collection, File: Satan Met A Lady—Story Memos and Correspondence, Box: Satan Met A Lady (1936).

immediately after her official addition to the cast, Jack Warner ordered Hal Wallis to change the name to “something with a Bette Davis atmosphere”—the fact that “The Maltese Falcon” was never under consideration as a title indicates Warner Bros.’ intent to distance *Satan Met A Lady* from both the 1930 novel and its own 1931 film adaptation.⁴¹³ By so doing, the release could eliminate possible generic connotations conjured by the original book title, better forge a connection with *The Thin Man*, and avoid audience resentment for recycling story materials produced just three years earlier.

This was an impression supported by the film’s publicity campaign. A trailer for the film heavily emphasized Davis’ presence as the lead character in a series of intertitles above images that convey the consistency of the Purvis role with both the star’s persona and the Warner Bros. studio style (Figures 4.2 through 4.5, below).

⁴¹² “Daily Shooting Reports,” undated, Warner Bros. Collection, File 1493: SATAN MET A LADY (MEN ON HER MIND), Box: Satan Met A Lady (1936).

⁴¹³ “Memo: Jack Warner to Hal Wallis,” 6 Dec 1935, Warner Bros. Collection, File: Satan Met A Lady—Story Memos and Correspondence, Box: Satan Met A Lady (1936).



Figure 4.2-4.5: Screen shots from the trailer for *Satan Met A Lady* articulate the star appeal of Davis.⁴¹⁴

The trailer positions *Satan Met A Lady* as an adaptation with a series of sources, including Bette Davis's persona as developed in previous films and Warner Bros. films (including *The Public Enemy*, the title cited in all caps), and the literary and film versions of *The Thin Man*. In the process, authorship for the upcoming film is dispersed and assigned to multiple parties, of which Hammett is merely a distant participant, responsible for a version of *The Thin Man* rather than *The Maltese Falcon* (Figure 4.6, below).

⁴¹⁴ "Trailer: *Satan Met A Lady*," (supplementary feature in *The Maltese Falcon*, dir. John Huston, 101 min. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1941, DVD).



Figure 4.6: One of the final shots in the *Satan Met A Lady* trailer credits Dashiell Hammett with authorship of 'The Thin Man' rather than the lesser-known *The Maltese Falcon*.

This marketing strategy is reinforced in the pressbook, where *Satan Met A Lady* is described as a “mystery comedy,” and all mentions of Hammett in posters, newspaper ads, and lobby cards identify him only as the author of *The Thin Man* and avoid all reference to his name and *The Maltese Falcon* (Figure 4.7, below).⁴¹⁵

⁴¹⁵ For example, one sample newspaper ad in the pressbook included text above the title that stated, “A new thriller for the author of ‘The Thin Man’ that will make a laughing wreck out of you,” while a sample poster claimed, “Another great laugh-and-thrill hit from the author of ‘The Thin Man’.” In these ways and others, the publicity campaign for the film attempted to encourage a generic categorization and an adaptation lineage that was far different than the 1931 version of *The Maltese Falcon*. “Pressbook: *Satan Met A Lady*,” PB 15, 24, undated, Warner Bros. Collection, File: 692 - Clippings and Pressbook, Box: *Satan Met A Lady* (1936).



Figure 4.7: A sample newspaper ad featured in the *Satan Met A Lady* pressbook refers to Hammett only as "author of 'The Thin Man.'"⁴¹⁶

Neither *The Thin Man* series (A-level productions with top stars in leading roles) nor the presence of Davis (the clear leading attraction in all publicity for the film) could guarantee the commercial or critical success of *Satan*, with its low budget and, as critics complained, confusing plot, flimsy humor, and derivative story. As an adaptation, it was a failure on three levels: as an adaptation of the original book—one reviewer observed that it “was not up to usual Dashiell Hammett standards” and another cited it one of

⁴¹⁶ “Pressbook: *Satan Met A Lady*,” PB 15, undated, Warner Bros. Collection, File: 692 - Clippings and Pressbook, Box: Satan Met A Lady (1936).

Hollywood's "major crimes [in] transferring books and plays to the screen"; as an improvement on the previous Warner Bros. film—another reviewer acknowledged the first film adaptation and wondered why a remake was even necessary; and as an exploitation of Hammett and *The Thin Man* series—as Wallis feared, critics were puzzled about the film's complex plot and found many of the jokes to fall flat.⁴¹⁷ As a low-budget, low-risk formula feature that enabled the continuous use of company facilities, crews, stars, and story materials, it was less of a disappointment. On the one hand, *Satan Met A Lady* did not play in Warner Bros. large first-run theaters in New York and Los Angeles; on the other hand, the film's low profile and its minimal resemblance to the original novel and first film adaptation meant that a future opportunity might be available to produce yet another iteration on *The Maltese Falcon*.

PRODUCTIVITY YIELDS PROSPERITY: *THE MALTESE FALCON* (1941)

And it didn't take long for Warner Bros. to entertain such an idea. Once again, outside interest in the *Falcon* led Warner Bros. executives to reassess the value of the literary property. Agent Leland Hayward offered the company \$10,000 for its motion pictures rights to the novel, but he would not identify the studio financing the offer (RKO and Universal were suspected). Even though the bid exceeded the original acquisition cost of the novel and Warner Bros. had already recycled the story material and thus its present value to the studio may have eroded, Jack Warner declined Hayward's offer.

Holding on to the rights to *The Maltese Falcon*, and thus to *Falcon*, fit with Warner Bros.

⁴¹⁷ "Review: *Satan Met A Lady*," *New York Morning Telegraph*, 23 July 1936; William Boehnel, "Review: *Satan Met A Lady*," *New York World-Telegram*, 23 July 1936, 10; "Review: *Satan Met A Lady*," *New York*

corporate strategy. Story materials were in high demand after the dissolution of Warner Bros. B production unit, especially those properties that were both commercially viable and of minimal expense. *Satan Met A Lady* had been invisible in the first-run markets, this limiting the risk of audience resentment for a subsequent remake. Moreover, with several texts related to *Falcon*—including a book, several novel summaries and synopses and multiple story treatments, continuity scripts, and screenplays—now deposited in the studio’s story archives, the number and variety of plots, themes, characters, and generic associations had increased. Any future adaptation could be based on any combination of these materials. In this respect, *Falcon* represented an even richer text from which the studio could adapt and thus the literary property became a more valuable asset to the company. If Jack Warner sold the rights to the book, all of those materials would become useless, and the labor required to produce them would be wasted.

Warner Bros. sought to avoid waste not only by cutting costs but also by limiting idle resources, a term that applied to both property and contracted employees. So, in the fall of 1939, studio writer Charles Belden was commissioned to write yet another story treatment and screenplay. As had the treatment and evolving script for *Satan Met A Lady*, Belden’s work, entitled “Clock Struck Three,” retained the basic plot of the novel but changed the setting and characters significantly.⁴¹⁸ Apparently, the reworking of *Falcon* did not impress Warner, Wallis or executives in the Story Department, as no action was taken at the studio after the submission of the script. Despite this decision, “Clock Stuck

Daily News, 23 July 1936; Collected in Warner Bros. Collection, File: 692 - Clippings and Pressbook, Box: Satan Met A Lady (1936).

Three” indicates that the growing story materials related to *Falcon* had been identified as viable fodder from which to derive yet another production.

No further action was taken on *Falcon* until more than a year later, when screenwriter John Huston, one of the most reliable writers at Warner Bros., set the process in motion that would lead to a third adaptation. Entering the film industry in 1930 as a dialogue editor on low-budget horror films for Universal, Huston eventually ascended in the mid-1930s to credited screenwriter (as well as uncredited script doctor) for some of Warner Bros.’ most important prestige vehicles, including *Jezebel* (1937). Huston’s contract with the company was set to expire in early 1941, a time when he seemed almost indispensable. He was in the midst of a startling run of productivity, having either just completed or currently working on a string of screenplays—for *Dr. Ehrlich’s Magic Bullet* (1940), *High Sierra* (1941), and *Sergeant York* (1941)—upon which the company had high hopes. Huston was inclined to stay with Warner Bros. In negotiations, he asked not only for the expected salary increase but also for the opportunity to direct at least one motion picture. While there were few writer-directors working successfully at Hollywood studios during this period, agreeing to Huston’s terms seemed like a logical choice with minimal risk, as the company retained the right to assign him to direct the production of its choice (a clause did stipulate that said production could not be a B-level picture). Moreover, his background as a screenwriter indicated that he could produce a quality

⁴¹⁸ “Screenplay: ‘Clock Struck Three,’” 19 Oct 1939, Warner Bros. Collection, File: 2876 - The Maltese Falcon Picture, Box: MALTESE FALCON.

script in a timely fashion and that in doing so he would remain attuned to the feasibility of executing the script in production.

John Huston's assimilation to Warner Bros. doctrine of efficiency and his application of that ethos to the production of *The Maltese Falcon* would benefit both the quality and commercial viability of the film adaptation. Like studio executive producers Darry Zanuck, Hal Wallis and Henry Blanke, Huston had been at Warner Bros. long enough to understand corporate strategy and studio style. As a result of this long-term exposure, he had internalized the Warner Bros. "system" and been converted into a docile body of the kind most valued by Jack Warner. Huston offered no resistance to the close scrutiny that employees were subject to and had little compunction about taking advice from company executives and studio producers. In addition, Huston was adept at the breakneck working pace common at the studio and he was willing to make pragmatic choices to accommodate this mandate. In effect, rather than innovating current practices and striving to persevere through restrictive studio controls (qualities often ascribed to auteurs), John Huston conformed to company expectations of his working methods and artistic control over the film.

After signing his new contract, Huston lobbied for the right to direct yet another remake of *The Maltese Falcon*. Apparently, he felt previous adaptations had failed to transpose the unique combination of fast pacing and reserved tone conveyed in the book's narrative. It should be of little surprise that his request was granted, for the *Falcon* story materials had been sitting idly for roughly five years and appeasing the favored writer with this story material was a smaller risk than assigning him a hotly anticipated

adaptation or a more complex, costly prestige vehicle. By the spring of 1941, Huston had already composed a screenplay, which by his own account involved cutting and pasting pages from the novel onto script pages and then transcribing all dialogue and writing in stage directions. While this version of the story development process may have fit nicely into Warner Bros. story department lore and been consistent with the practice of churning out formulaic film scripts at a rapid rate, it is nevertheless unlikely. Huston, a studio employee since 1930 and an integral part of the story department shortly thereafter, was surely familiar with the various incarnations of *Falcon*, not only the two previous film adaptations but also the various story summaries, treatments, and scripts, and he must have been aware that George Halasz, the first studio reader of the novel, had indicated the potential of lifting dialogue directly from the novel into a film script. Halasz had made the suggestion out of expediency and efficiency, while Huston's comments have been taken as a sign of his devotion to the "spirit" of the original novel.

The third Warner Bros. film adaptation, eventually entitled *The Maltese Falcon*, is a film adaptation whose source is comprised of the experience accumulated, failures and successes, during Warner Bros.' decade of ownership of the literary property. More than the input of any individual star, director, or producer, this corporate history informed the film at numerous stages of its development. The first lesson Warner Bros. had learned was in casting. By necessity or design, *The Maltese Falcon* (1931) and *Satan Met A Lady* (1936) each were positioned as star vehicles for leading studio actresses. However, the Spade of the novel was a steely, calculating, brilliant detective who not only successfully solves the plot's mystery and is featured in every scene but also influences the actions of

other characters. Reducing Spade's role in film adaptations thus threatened plot coherence and necessitated the invention of several additional scenes for the Wonderley/O'Shaughnessy character. The third version of *Falcon* eliminated this difficulty by refocusing on Spade and following the character through the entirety of the story. But now a new problem arose: who at the studio had the ability and the appeal to play such a singular character with such central importance to the narrative? Wallis immediately zeroed in on George Raft, one of Warner Bros. top stars whose contract enabled him to refuse parts. Famously, Raft declined the role, complaining that it was a recycled story with an untested director and could damage his appeal. With a long list of potential candidates, the producer moved to Humphrey Bogart, who since early May 1941 had been identified as the second choice. Bogart had been a supporting actor for several years at the studio (mostly in gangster pictures and similar fare) before rising to stardom first as trucker Paul Fabrini, a supporting role in *They Drive By Night* (1940), and then as the desperate, sensitive fugitive Roy 'Mad Dog' Earle, the leading role of *High Sierra* (1940). Like Bette Davis prior to *Satan Met A Lady*, Bogart was commercially in demand, underpaid, and had a persona that matched the tough talking Spade. Bogart was currently unhappy with the terms of his contract, but he quickly accepted the lead assignment for Warner Bros., which planned to maximize the value of its affordable star by giving him top billing in publicity for the film.⁴¹⁹ The trailer produced for the film, and exhibited in Warner Bros.' owned-theaters, demonstrates this

⁴¹⁹ "Casting: The Maltese Falcon," 19 May 1941, Warner Bros. Collection, File: 2056 – MALTESE FALCON (1941) Story, Box: MALTESE FALCON.

approach. As in the *Satan Met A Lady* trailer, a series of intertitled shots introduces the film's lead. However, instead of relying on the star persona of the actor (as had been done with Davis), *The Maltese Falcon* trailer introduces and defines the desirable traits of Bogart and the character of Spade, both of which were relatively unknown at the time (Figures 4.8 through 4.11, below).



Figure 4.8-4.11: In this series of shots, Humphrey Bogart is introduced as a tough romantic lead in the trailer for *The Maltese Falcon* (1941).⁴²⁰

Thus, the trailer attempted to build the value of its star and its characters, both managed by and under the legal control of Warner Bros., in a manner that raised the appeal of the film and allied with the long-term motives of the filmmaking corporation—

i.e., turning Bogart into a box office star, reinforcing studio style, and pushing the commercial value of *Falcon*. For this last reason, the trailer also announced its direct lineage with the novel version of *The Maltese Falcon* and Hammett's role in conceiving the story (Figures 4.12 and 4.13, below).



Figure 4.12-4.13: Two successive screen shots from the trailer for *The Maltese Falcon* (1941).

These two shots create a direct lineage between *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and the 1930 novel and assign a form of authorship, an author-function, to Dashiell Hammett.

Simultaneously, they conceal the practice of recycling by ignoring the previous *Falcon* adaptations and the story materials in Warner Bros. archives that strongly influenced *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). (So too did other forms of publicity, which are contained in the original pressbook for the film. [Figures 4.14 and 4.15, below].)

⁴²⁰ "Trailer: *The Maltese Falcon*," (supplementary feature in *The Maltese Falcon*, dir. John Huston, 101 min. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1941, DVD).



Figure 4.14-4.15: Two ads, featured in the pressbook released in anticipation of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), focus on the characterization of Spade.⁴²¹

Warner Bros. used its past experiences with *Falcon* in clarifying the narrative and characterizations of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). The Hammett novel features a complex plot, a series of murders, and no explanatory information provided by the third-person narrator. Like many works in the detective genre, only the protagonist possesses the acumen to solve the crime. Perhaps because of the secondary importance of Spade, the first and especially the second adaptations confused critics both in their plotting and in

⁴²¹ "Pressbook, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)," PB 17, undated, Warner Bros. Collection, File: 715, Box: THE MALTESE FALCON (1941).

the mysterious history of the falcon statuette. Wallis had expressed his concerns about the clarity of *Satan Met A Lady* during production, and he was not about to let the same thing happen in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). As production on the picture began in early June 1941, Wallis wished Huston “good luck” on his directorial debut. This would be the first of many notes from the production head to the director, usually conveyed through Blanke. The mediocre reception of *The Maltese Falcon* (1931) and the droll, leisurely performance of Ricardo Cortez offered a model for Spade that the present production would play against. After viewing dailies during the first week of production, Wallis wrote to Blanke,

All of the action seems a little too slow and deliberate, a little labored and we must quicken the tempo and the manner of speaking the lines. ... [Bogart’s delivery in an early scene] does not make for the punchy, driving kind of tempo that this picture requires. ... Now that [John] is familiar with this fact the dailies from this point on should show a marked change.⁴²²

To these suggestions, Huston was a receptive listener, as his reply, sent to Wallis the following day, makes clear: “Regarding your note yesterday – I am shrinking all the scenes and speeding up all the action. ... I mention these things only to reassure you that as I am making each scene, I am keeping the whole picture in mind. This picture should gain in velocity as it goes along.”⁴²³ Here, Huston not only expresses his willingness to incorporate the suggestions of the production head, but he also indicates his knowledge of

⁴²² “Memo: Hal Wallis to Harry Blanke,” 12 June 1941, Warner Bros. Collection, File: 2056 – MALTESE FALCON (1941) Story, Box: THE MALTESE FALCON.

⁴²³ “Memo: John Huston to Hal Wallis,” 13 June 1941, Warner Bros. Collection, File: 2056 – MALTESE FALCON (1941) Story, Box: THE MALTESE FALCON.

studio style in his acknowledgement of the “velocity” required in both production and the Warner Bros. studio style.

During the production of *Satan Met A Lady*, Wallis frequently expressed his concern about the clarity of the plot, a problem that was never fully resolved. On *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), Wallis and Jack Warner worked to ensure that the same issue did not plague the present version of *Falcon*. Wallis frequently suggested to Blanke and Huston methods of clarifying dialogue, specific scenes, and character motivations. Even with these revisions, Warner, after viewing a cut of the film in early September, sent a long note to Wallis that stressed the necessity of “telling the audience what the hell it is all about” as early in the film as possible.⁴²⁴ To this directive, Wallis, Blanke, and Huston created scrolling text that would unfurl immediately after the title credits, thus ensuring that audience members would understand the nature, value, and origin of the bird statuette around which the action of the story would revolve. The desire to ensure clarity did not stop here either, for the film’s trailer and advertisements also appealed to audiences by offering detailed explanations of the falcon statue and the Spade character (Figures 4.16, below; also see Figures 4.8 through 4.11, 4.14 and 4.15, above, which articulate the star appeal of Bogart in the promotion of the film).

⁴²⁴ “Memo: Jack Warner to Hal Wallis,” 6 Sept 1941, Warner Bros. Collection, File: 2056 – MALTESE FALCON (1941) Story, Box: THE MALTESE FALCON.



Figure 4.16: The trailer for *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) opens with a shot of Casper Gutman (Sydney Greenstreet) explaining the origin of the black bird.

Thus, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) could be said to aspire not only to the thematics, plotting, and dialogue of the 1929 novel, but also to the various lessons contained in *Falcon*, which helped to ensure quality and efficiency.⁴²⁵

Through the efforts of John Huston, Henry Blanke, and Hal Wallis, along with a host of other studio employees, *The Maltese Falcon* reflects the corporate strategy of Warner Bros. Its minimized story development process and economical and efficient production proved Huston's worth as a director by ensuring Warner and Wallis of his studio "temperament," and Huston's knowledge of the Warner Bros. system led to his assignment on subsequent productions. The film's terse dialogue, brisk pace, and lurid subject matter were staples of the Warner Bros. studio style, which for various reasons,

⁴²⁵ Executives at the studio did not use the past experiences with *Falcon* solely to differentiate *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) from its two Warner Bros. predecessors. They also perceived those materials as models after which they could pattern the current film. The most obvious instance of this practice exists in the similarities, rarely acknowledged in film scholarship, between the 1931 and 1941 film adaptations, which extend beyond story development and into the films themselves. In fact, the two are so alike in scene construction, set design and dialogue that one could argue that *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) is adapted more so from its Warner Bros. predecessor than from the 1930 novel.

previous adaptations of *Falcon* had refused (see *Satan Met A Lady*, a production that aspired to exploit the popularity of a recent film from MGM) or failed (*The Maltese Falcon* [1931], a precursor to the full implementation of Warner Bros. style of the mid-1930s and later) to do. In its exhibition of these traits and resemblance to and dissimilarity from previous iterations of *Falcon*, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) implicitly signified company values (i.e., low cost and minimal risk), operations (high productivity and recycling), and long-term policies (efficiency).

CONCLUSION

After three attempts, in 1941 the studio had finally turned *The Maltese Falcon* into a box office attraction. Reviewers were effusive in their praise for the film, describing it as a “first-rate,” “classic” mystery thriller and an ideal vehicle to showcase Bogart’s talents. Later that year the film received three Oscar nominations.⁴²⁶ While not a hit of the same magnitude as *Sergeant York*, also in release that year, the modestly budgeted *The Maltese Falcon* by all accounts turned a tidy profit for the studio and was a boon in other areas. The value of *The Maltese Falcon* and its related elements accrued rapidly, allowing Warner Bros. to benefit in the ensuing years from a popular form (later dubbed film noir), a burgeoning marquee star in Humphrey Bogart, a reliable, efficient director in Huston, and an iconic character in Sam Spade, who achieved wide renown and, as a result, became locked in a struggle for the control of his likeness and iteration between multiple

⁴²⁶ “Review: *The Maltese Falcon*,” *New York Daily Mirror*, 4 Oct 1941; “Review: *The Maltese Falcon*,” *New York Telegraph*, 4 Oct 1941; “Review: *The Maltese Falcon*,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, undated; Collected in Warner Bros. Collection, File: 684 – The Maltese Falcon (1941) Press Clippings, Box: MALTESE FALCON.

individuals, including author Dashiell Hammett, and corporations, specifically Warner Bros., publisher Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, and radio broadcaster CBS.

The guidelines of the formal contract (dated June 23, 1930) acquiring the *The Maltese Falcon* and its *Black Mask* serialization from Knopf and Hammett stipulated that Warner Bros. retained ...

The exclusive right, for the purpose of such sound records and photoplays, to adapt, use, dramatize, arrange, change, transpose, make musical versions of, add to, interpolate in and subtract from said writings, the language, title and dialogue thereof, and to translate the same into all languages of the world. ... all other now or hereafter existing dramatic, exhibition or other presentation rights in the writings, and without limiting the generality of the foregoing, including talking motion picture rights, and/or other analogous rights, as well as the right to transmit and exploit scenes and pictures taken or adapted from or based upon said writings, the language, title and dialogue thereof.⁴²⁷

According to its strategy of squeezing maximum use out of its company resources, Warner Bros. took full advantage of the rights outlined in this contract, from the three adaptations produced between 1931 and 1941, to the various radio play adaptations released to promote upcoming film versions or simply to receive further compensation for ownership of the story, and later to television rebroadcasts of the 1941 film and its unsuccessful efforts to produce television programming based upon the story's characters and the scenarios featured in *The Maltese Falcon*.

From James Cagney to Bette Davis to Humphrey Bogart, Warner Bros. was well known for overworking its stars in an attempt "to maximise their productive potential," as Nick Roddick claims. This was just one facet of its overall corporate strategy, however,

which to function properly stipulated that contracted employees, studio facilities, exhibition outlets, and even story materials be used continuously. However, unlike props, sets, soundstages, and theaters, employees and literary sources also represented a kind of raw material, capable of being shaped to accommodate constantly changing conditions. An inevitable negative effect of this policy came in the form of employee exhaustion and unrest—so Warner Bros. sought to promote its producers from within and develop the public appeal of its actors from the ground up, rather than signing established stars to expensive contracts—as well as audience resistance to consuming similar stories over and over again—hence the “ripped from the headlines” subjects that could constantly be updated to maintain currency. Again and again, Warner Bros. was able to anticipate these obstacles and adapt accordingly, all the while attaining high productivity from its resources and minimizing wasteful practices.

One might also perceive that *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) suffered from a similar type of exhaustion under Warner Bros. corporate strategy—that the multiple film adaptations released between 1931 and 1941 deformed and degraded a literary work originally conceived to derive literary distinction for its author, Dashiell Hammett. After ceding the rights to the story and characters he formulated, Dashiell Hammett was indeed transformed through the legal transaction into a mere bystander, left to witness the repeated recycling of *The Maltese Falcon* into various generic categories and media forms. More than that, Warner Bros.’ multiple iterations of the story and its characters

⁴²⁷ “*Maltese Falcon* Motion Picture Rights Agreement,” 23 June 1930, Warner Bros. Collection, File: 12733 – MALTESE FALCON (1941) STORY LEGAL, Box: MALTESE FALCON.

produced a larger textual source, *Falcon*, which absorbed the 1930 novel into the myriad generic connotations (mystery, crime, thriller, romance, comedy) and a broadly applicable cultural and commercial value. Such is the effect of any film adaptation, which necessarily expands the scope, visibility, and meaning of a literary work from which it draws its title, characters, and scenarios.

However, this process did not diminish the appeal or value of *The Maltese Falcon* (1929), nor did it relegate Hammett to obscurity. While Hammett composed the original novel with the idea of earning a reputation through the application of the tenets of literary efficiency, Warner Bros.' dogged execution of a very different form of industrial efficiency, of which film adaptation was a part, had helped to achieve Hammett's original design. Warner Bros.' recycling strategy ultimately heightened both the commercial appeal and the cultural significance of the literary property. Mass market paperback versions of *The Maltese Falcon* sold hundreds of thousands of copies in 1943 and thereafter, the 1941 film adaptation was deemed a paragon of the mystery genre, and Sam Spade and the eponymous black bird statuette ascended to iconic status.⁴²⁸ If Warner Bros. had produced only one film adaptation, *The Maltese Falcon* (1931), it seems safe to predict that these effects would never have occurred.

⁴²⁸ Sales of *The Maltese Falcon* rose sharply in early 1942, when the third Warner Bros. film adaptation was still in theaters, and peaked the following year. In 1943, Pocket Books published a \$0.25 paperback edition of *The Maltese Falcon*, which sold nearly 650,000 copies in the first three of its release. Between March and October of 1943, Grosset & Dunlap sold over 15,000 copies of a \$0.50 version of the novel. Knopf repackaged *The Maltese Falcon* for a third time with *The Complete Dashiell Hammett* (1943), which sold 6,280 copies in its first year. "Affidavit of Joseph Lesser: Warner Bros. and Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. versus CBS," undated, and "Memo: Alfred Knopf to Arthur Farmer," 25 Jan 1951, UT-HRC Knopf Archive, Box 714, folder 12.

Warner Bros.' steady devotion to the story also increased the demand for Hammett, who had effectively ceased fiction writing after 1934.⁴²⁹ Rather than shunning the lucre of the culture industry in which *The Maltese Falcon* was enmeshed, Hammett attempted to profit from it. He found work in Hollywood as a screenwriter, a script doctor, and later a Story Department executive at MGM. He also formulated the stories for several entries in *The Thin Man* series. Still, this wasn't enough for Hammett, who wanted to cash in on the demand for the falcon and for Spade, just as Warner Bros., Knopf, and other corporations had been doing for several years. In 1948, he signed a contract with CBS to formulate scenarios and compose scripts for *The Adventures of Sam Spade*, a weekly radio program based on the exploits of the now famous detective. Just weeks after the debut of the program, Warner Bros. and Knopf jointly filed an injunction, attempting to halt production of the series because it infringed on their rights to *The Maltese Falcon* and its characters. A lengthy, well-publicized legal battle ensued. Finally, after Hammett had won a preliminary case, in January 1949 an appellate judge dismissed Hammett's case, deeming,

It is not the mere fact of authorship ... that governs the rights in a literary work or the "characters" thereof. The rights are governed by the contracts of the parties and by the status of the "property" rights in the work. Hammett's case herein is constructed on the flimsy notion that mere 'authorship' ... is what governs the rights.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁹ During this period, Hammett suffered through a series of physical ailments and a suffocating case of writer's block that severely limited his literary output after the release of the wildly successful *The Thin Man* in 1934.

⁴³⁰ "Brief of Appellee, Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc.," undated, Warner Bros. Collection, File: 12553, Box: Dashiell Hammett Legal (2/3).

The decree not only forced CBS to either cease broadcasting *The Adventures of Sam Spade* or acquire an appropriate license from Warner Bros, it also highlighted the unstable definition of authorship, as the court's quotation marks around the term implied. Authorship may entail invention of a work or character but it does not equal ownership, which is subject to immutable contractual arrangements and legal decisions. Ironically, that legal contract and the flexibility of the category of "author" enabled Warner Bros., through the process of film adaptation, to assume another, more lucrative and powerful form of authorship over *The Maltese Falcon*—to invoke the story and its characters in whatever context it wished and to use Hammett's name and image in the fashion most suitable to the commercial and cultural aspirations of its numerous and varied iterations of *Falcon* in 1931, 1936, 1941, and beyond.

CHAPTER 5

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Brand-Name Literature: Selznick International Pictures, Prestige Marketing, and the Blockbuster Adaptation

*In the cultural field, competition often concerns the authority inherent in recognition, consecration and prestige. – Pierre Bourdieu, *Language & Symbolic Power*⁴³¹*

In a December 1935 memo to the board of directors of the newly formed Selznick International Pictures (SIP), production head and chief executive David O. Selznick assessed the competitive environment of the contemporary film industry and outlined the company's plans for film production and releasing:

There are only two kinds of merchandise that can be made profitably in this business—either the very cheap pictures or the expensive pictures. . . . If we don't deliver really top notch product, we are not going to get terms and we are going to take a terrible beating after the first few pictures. There is no alternative open to us but to attempt to compete with the very best.⁴³²

Selznick had learned this lesson first hand—most recently as a producer at MGM, which specialized in and was widely recognized as the leader in the “expensive pictures,” replete with lavish sets and marquee stars, and earlier at RKO, where he served as the head of production at the studio and as executive producer of such films as the

⁴³¹ Bourdieu, *Language & Symbolic Power*, 7.

spectacular, epic *King Kong* (1933). Based on Selznick's own experience, the product-category choice for SIP was clear: "expensive pictures" were the only avenue by which the company, a major independent producing its own films but not distributing or exhibiting them, could become competitive, maintain profitability, and subsist into the future.

Still, Selznick's use of the terms "merchandise" and "product" to categorize Hollywood motion pictures seems odd. After all, he is not describing just any type of retail good, he is referring to cinematic texts, each of which may bear close similarities to another but nevertheless is creatively formulated and produced and is intended to appear unique to contemporary audiences. More surprising is the fact that Selznick uses this term in a discussion of his company's corporate strategy, which diverged remarkably from Warner Bros. (thriving off of the "cheap pictures") in that SIP would release films that not only were costly to produce, but also, and more importantly, *gave the impression* that the company spared no expense in production. Such was the studio style—A-level productions that offered visible signifiers of their cost and by so doing transformed each picture into a glamorous, requisite movie event—Selznick hoped would distinguish SIP from the major and major-minor filmmaking corporations it would be competing against.⁴³³

⁴³² "Memo: David O. Selznick to John Wharton," 16 Dec 1935, Reprinted in David O. Selznick, *Memo from David O. Selznick*, ed. Rudy Behlmer (New York: Viking, 1972), 100. Hereafter referred to as *Memo*.

⁴³³ SIP films attempted to establish the company as the most prestigious and financially daring of all corporations producing Hollywood films at the time. For example, its third release, *A Star is Born* (1937), told the story of a naïve young actress (Janet Gaynor) and a jaded alcoholic actor (Fredric March) on the opposite slopes of fame, and, in Selznick's own words,

By investigating the literary acquisition, development, production, and marketing of film adaptations in general, and of the 1938 novel *Rebecca* in particular,⁴³⁴ this chapter reveals that those characteristic signs of quality were communicated both in SIP films, the “expensive pictures,” and in the external features surrounding them, or those processes that sought to change a standard film release into a cultural event and, as a result, secure favorable distribution and exhibition terms for the company, boost box office performance, and consistently compete with the likes of MGM and RKO. (It is in this sense that SIP films, each unique but all serving a common function, represented a kind of “merchandise” through which the filmmaking corporation could implement its larger business goals.) Film adaptation played a central role in the implementation of corporate strategy, and *Rebecca* (1940) is a pivotal product in the history of SIP.⁴³⁵ The

... was really a concept of my own ... to try to disprove what I had long believed had been a tradition until this time, that pictures about Hollywood could not succeed. ... The trouble with most films about Hollywood was that they gave a false picture, ... they were not true reflections of what happened in Hollywood (Selznick, *Memo*, 98).

Whether *A Star is Born* achieved these aspirations was not as important as the professed goals themselves: to present a story that appealed to audiences, and to depict that narrative in a way that distinguished Selznick’s company from other studios (i.e., to present a “true picture” of Hollywood)—the fact that the film utilized Technicolor represented the most visible signal of SIP’s will in this respect. *A Star is Born* earned over two million dollars and garnered six Academy Award nominations.

⁴³⁴ Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 1938 (New York: Avon, 1971). *Rebecca*, dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 130 min. Selznick International Pictures/UA, 1940, DVD.

⁴³⁵ While significant as Hitchcock’s American directorial debut, *Rebecca* was meant to be and is an SIP picture, the collaborative vision of several individuals employed by the company and then influenced by industry censors and the preferences of the prospective audience. In his series of interviews with Francois Truffaut, Hitchcock relinquished his auteurist responsibility for the adaptation of *Rebecca*—“it’s not a Hitchcock picture”—and dismissed the book as a “novellettish” example of “a whole school of feminine literature at the period” (quoted in Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much* [New York: Methuen, 1988], 43). This article maintains that filmmaking corporations, not individual auteurs, are responsible for the acquisition, development, production, and marketing of film adaptation and should be attributed authorship of those texts. Nevertheless, auteur-influenced criticism has offered perceptive insights on *Rebecca* and Hitchcock. Notable examples include Modleski, “Woman and the Labyrinth: *Rebecca*,” in *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, 43-55; Robin Wood, *Hitchcock’s Films* (South Brunswick and New York: A.S. Barnes and Tantivy, 1966); Mary Ann Doane, “*Caught and Rebecca: The Inscription*

literary source and ensuing film adaptation, as well as the elaborate marketing campaign around the release of the film, sought to reinforce a *brand identity* that the company had been developing over the preceding years and through several film releases. This branding process influenced the reputation and industrial viability of SIP and inflected *Rebecca*, a narrative communicated within and outside of the film text, in a manner that coincided with the intentions and motives of the young filmmaking corporation.⁴³⁶ As a text positioned within a continuing corporate strategy that sought to use film adaptations to distinguish its producer, this chapter demonstrates that *Rebecca* cannot be understood properly without acknowledging the influence of previous and subsequent SIP films. The most important of these was *Gone With the Wind* (1939), which *Rebecca* aspired to aesthetically and thematically and exceeded in production efficiency, marketing savvy, and profitability. In this manner, *Rebecca* not only communicates the SIP brand; it also reveals the past, present, and future of the filmmaking corporation that produced it.

FILM ADAPTATION, ACCORDING TO DAVID O. SELZNICK

In an eight-page memo, dictated by David O. Selznick and sent on 12 June 1939 to recent SIP signee Alfred Hitchcock, the successful independent producer and studio chief offers critical commentary on Hitchcock's 80-plus page treatment of *Rebecca* and, in the process, summarizes his approach to the adaptation of popular literary properties:

of Femininity as Absence," *Enclitic* 5-6 (Fall 1981-Spring 1982): 75-89; Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

⁴³⁶ In *Brand Management: A Theoretical and Practical Approach* (New York: Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2003), Rik Riezebos defines a brand as "every sign that is capable of distinguishing the goods or services of a company" (32). Therefore, a brand is not the company or product name nor is it the product itself. Rather, it exists in the collection of signifiers that express and distinguish a product or its maker, or both.

The few million people who have read [*Rebecca*] and who worship it would very properly attack us violently for the descriptions which are indicated by the treatment; ... I have never been able to understand why motion picture people insist upon throwing away something of proven appeal to substitute things of their own creation.

... The only omissions from a successful work that are justified are omissions necessitated by length, censorship, or other practical considerations. Readers of a dearly loved book will forgive omissions if there is an obvious reason for them; but very properly, they will not forgive substitutions.

... This is not theory. I have too long and too successfully resisted attempts to movie-ize successful works not to be sure that my process of adaptation is sound. While others monkeyed around distorting original works, I insisted upon faithfulness in a long list of transcriptions. ...

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 ..." etc.⁴³⁷

Here, Selznick rejects the treatment on the grounds that Hitchcock misunderstands the qualities of a successful film adaptation, which should re-produce not only the story and structure of the novel, but also the minor details that elicit the strong sense of identification forged with its readership. This was a model of adaptation that had turned a profit in previous films Selznick produced for other studios, such as *Dinner At Eight* (1933), *Anna Karenina* (1935) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935) and for recent SIP projects, such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1938). Adapting internationally renowned literary sources enabled the fledgling company to streamline the story development process, while such releases promised a built-in audience that could convince distributors and exhibitors of the commercial potential of SIP films. Such adaptations also offered another sign that SIP releases were "prestige" pictures that

rivalled the expense and quality of those produced by its competitors.⁴³⁸ While *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1936) were commercial successes, SIP's focus quickly shifted from the adaptation of popular classics to contemporary best-selling romances like *Gone With the Wind* (1936) and *Rebecca* (1938), two novels in more recent public memory and, as a result, enabling SIP to obtain more value from the theory of adaptation Selznick articulated to Hitchcock.⁴³⁹

The production executive had more to rely on than just theory, though, for the accuracy of his guiding principles were in evidence in the adaptations Selznick had supervised for SIP and his previous employers, and they were in application on an unprecedented scale in SIP's current production, *Gone With the Wind* (referred to as *Wind* internally at SIP and hereafter in this chapter). In a 6 January 1937 memo to Sidney Howard, Selznick anticipates his June 1939 letter to Hitchcock by stressing the importance of strict adherence to Margaret Mitchell's blockbuster novel, even its logical inconsistencies and weak plot elements. Selznick writes, "I urge that we abide by Miss Mitchell's failures as well as her successes, because I am frankly nervous about anybody's ability—even Miss Mitchell's—to figure out which is which. I think that she herself might very well rewrite the book into a failure."⁴⁴⁰ Essentially, Selznick argues

⁴³⁷ "Memo: David O. Selznick to Alfred Hitchcock," 12 June 1939, Reprinted in Selznick, *Memo*, 266-269.

⁴³⁸ For an extended explanation of "prestige" filmmaking by Hollywood studios in the 1930s and 1940s, see Tino Balio, "Production Trends: Prestige Pictures," *Grand Design*, 179-211.

⁴³⁹ Just a few years prior, Universal had distinguished itself through the adaptation of "classic" fiction into a series of horror films. This policy fit well with the company's poor financial condition, industrial positioning, and desire to fit public domain literary works and their associated cultural discourses (sources that proved quite flexible and conducive to modification) to match the themes, subjects, and characters of an existing genre.

⁴⁴⁰ Reprinted in Selznick, *Memo*, 150-51.

that film adaptations should reproduce and thus preserve rather than interpret their sources.

In choosing literary sources for adaptation projects, SIP searched for properties with broad appeal and literary cachet. With *Wind* and then *Rebecca*, the company refined its literary acquisition strategy by identifying the demographic characteristics of that audience and then tailoring elements of publicity and the film narrative to those potential spectators. *Rebecca* was a runaway international bestseller about a young woman (the narrator, but unnamed throughout the novel) who marries an older gentleman, Maxim DeWinter, and moves into his cavernous mansion dominated by a battery of servants and the aura of his deceased wife, the title character Rebecca. *Rebecca*—an English romance novel variously categorized by reviewers as gothic, class study, mystery, and thriller—carried with it a large, predominantly female audience, a powerful demographic with the leisure time and discretionary income to visit the cinema to see the novel transcribed to the screen. (Later findings by the Audience Research Index service revealed that women composed 71 percent of the audience for *Rebecca*.)⁴⁴¹ Furthermore, *Rebecca* focused on the British aristocracy and thus conveyed a sheen of quality, of prestige (this despite Selznick's belief that the novel was merely "ordinary").⁴⁴² Because of the novel's

⁴⁴¹ Susan Ohmer, "The Science of Pleasure: George Gallup and Audience Research in Hollywood," in *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, eds. Richard Maltby and Melvin Stokes (London: BFI, 1999), 69.

⁴⁴² Prior to the publication of *Rebecca*, du Maurier had earned a reputation for popular romantic fiction set in exotic locales and often featuring male narrators. Her work sold strongly in England but modestly in the United States, where she was relatively unknown prior to the publication of *Rebecca* in 1938. Richard Kelly identifies *Jamaica Inn* (1936), which directly preceded *Rebecca*, as du Maurier's first foray into "gothic romance" and as the work that began to build an international reputation for the author, due in large part to a 1939 film adaptation also directed by Hitchcock (*Daphne du Maurier* [Boston: Twayne, 1987], 47-52).

storyline and devoted readership, this literary property represented a compelling opportunity for the independent studio SIP to differentiate itself amongst its competitors and to iterate its corporate identity and thus distinguish itself to consumers.

BRANDING FILM, MARKETING *REBECCA*

Filmmaking corporations of the classical Hollywood studio system used their films to develop brand recognition and build customer loyalty, especially with those cinema patrons having access to first-run theatres.⁴⁴³ A particular film represented for a studio a short- *and* long-term investment: that is, a product through which a high rate of return might be recouped in the form of box office receipts and rental fees, and a corporate identity might be developed, elaborated, or reinforced. In essence, this represents a branding strategy, in which a company creates a brand for dual the purposes of differentiating itself and its products and injecting “added value” into the product. In the cinema, an impression of additional value might coalesce in the form of popular stars or genres.⁴⁴⁴ Brand associations graft that added value onto the company, which it can then

According to Jeffrey Sconce, “prestige” adaptations were attractive to and developed by studios as “pre-sold commodities, proven stories with audience interest and an aura of ‘quality’ ripe for exploitation” (141). Selznick’s letter to Hitchcock identifies these same reasons (i.e., economic and cultural value) as goals in the adaptation process.

⁴⁴³ According to John Philip Jones, in *What’s in a Name?: Advertising and the Concepts of Brand* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1986), branding emerged out of the needs for copyright and patent protection, product differentiation, company recognition and product quality guarantees in an increasingly impersonal consumer market (28). The practice has evolved in today’s film industry to apply more often to character and story series franchises than the filmmaking corporations themselves. A highly identifiable figure like Batman can yield for AOL Time Warner a number of profitable merchandising opportunities, including action figures, soundtracks, fast food and snack product tie-ins, tee shirts, posters and more, while raising the visibility of the film, its characters and stars, and the filmmaking corporation. Thus, the film represents both an entertainment product and an advertising vehicle, which yields long-term ancillary marketing opportunities. SIP was an innovator in identifying these opportunities. For an analysis of differentiation and standardization in Hollywood films, see Chapter 9 of Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*.

⁴⁴⁴ Riezebos, 17-18.

use in future projects. For example, Universal Pictures' series of horror films beginning in the early 1930s (*Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, and so on) were important both for their profitability and for their roles in initiating a particular aesthetic style of film and filmmaking that became synonymous with the company through the rest of the decade and into the 1940's. Reinforcement of this style was present in these film adaptations and elaborated by the company through marketing practices (communicated to prospective audience members and to exhibitors) in an attempt to distinguish not only the company's films, but also the entire moviegoing experience attached to them.⁴⁴⁵ Returning to the example of Universal, *Frankenstein* (1931) conveys a particular version of the familiar story created by Mary Shelley and elaborated in frankenstein discourse while it instantiates an industrial positioning particular for the company.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁵ Universal called attention to the moviegoing experience by publicizing the ambivalent excitement of attending a screening of one of its horror films. *Frankenstein* was marketed as the most frightening tale ever told and advertisements (for example, in the 28 Nov 1931, edition of the *Atlanta Constitution*) carried a tongue-in-cheek "friendly warning" that the film may agitate those who have "a weak heart and cannot stand excitement or gruesomeness." However, those potential audience members who do "like an unusual thrill ... will find it in *Frankenstein*." See Bernd Schmitt and Alex Simonson, *Marketing Aesthetics: The Strategic Management of Brands, Identity, and Image* (New York: Free Press, 1997), for a useful discussion of the relationship between branding and the aesthetic environments created by many companies to reinforce that brand.

⁴⁴⁶ Thus, approaching films as brand builders allows for a reading of the text in question *and* of the filmmaking corporation itself. The contention that a product expresses a broad cultural-economic position by its originator occurs both in theoretical discussions of the processes and effects of branding and in the socio-linguistic criticism of Bourdieu, whose work is particularly attuned to the crucial influences of market conditions on the creation and dissemination of artistic texts (often assumed to be relatively immune to such). In *Language & Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu constructs a model of linguistic communication in which no utterance (expanded by Bourdieu to represent a range of communication, including artistic and corporate expressions) is immune from the market upon which it is issued. All speakers hope to achieve at least two goals with their utterances: intelligibility and, more importantly, symbolic profit that attaches "social value and symbolic efficacy" to its arguments (67). For a discussion of the short- and long-term value of branding, and its relation to the development of aesthetic marketing campaigns, see Schmitt and Simonson, 17-18.

As a major independent production company, SIP differed in an important structural way from the “factory system” said to pervade major and major-minor studio operations in the 1930s and 1940s; it lacked vertical integration—more specifically, it relied on competing studios and theatre chains (most owned by those competitors) to distribute and exhibit SIP films. This was a considerable obstacle to economic profitability (and attempts to build brand recognition) in the Classical Hollywood studio system. As Mae Huettig observes in her 1944 economic analysis of the film industry, “Despite the glamour of the Hollywood film, the crux of the motion picture industry is the [movie] theater ... [where] most of the money is invested and made.”⁴⁴⁷ Just as important, theatres represented the site where a studio could ensure the conditions of reception for its product and, as a result, where its brand identity could flourish. Patrons of a particular theatre in the Classical Hollywood studio era could expect a certain type of experience with each visit that was reinforced by, rather than wholly dependent upon, the product on the screen. In effect, the brand could gain consistency and value through these companies’ careful control of the products and the sites of exhibition. A major studio like Warner Bros. churned out more than 50 films per year—of varying budgets and divergent purposes and modes of exhibition—with the intent of maximizing use of its studio space, contract talent, production crews, distribution channels and movie houses. On the other hand, SIP produced at most a handful of big budget, prestige pictures, its films were distributed by United Artists, and it owned no cinemas to exhibit its product.

⁴⁴⁷ Mae Huettig, *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry* (1944), Reprinted in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 285.

Moreover, using a double feature format at the point of exhibition, a major studio like Warner Bros. could guarantee an audience for two of its films instead of one. SIP was both constrained by this lack of material and enabled to produce one, more expensive feature with a longer running time and (sometimes) higher admission price.⁴⁴⁸ Despite David O. Selznick's reliable track record and expensive, star-studded productions, his company's independent status always jeopardized, at best, the terms his films received from the majors on distribution and exhibition and, at worst, his ability to secure extended theatre engagements and star talent.⁴⁴⁹ In the face of these industrial deficiencies, SIP depended heavily on the quality of its films and the intensity of its marketing campaigns: a Selznick picture 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; in turn, promoting and presenting

⁴⁴⁸ See Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, especially Chapter 4, 57-82. According to Riezebos, prestige products require unique premium pricing strategies ("prestige pricing" and "price-skimming policy"), which encourage customers to assign a high quality to the branded product. Ticket pricing for *Wind* (and *Rebecca* to a lesser degree) was determined according to a "price skimming policy," in which a high initial price declined gradually in accordance with sliding demand for the product (288). In effect, the elevated ticket prices represented a requirement in SIP's brand building strategy, for it maintained a consistency to the aura of "prestige" the company attached to the film, SIP, and to the moviegoing experience.

⁴⁴⁹ These arrangements made Selznick especially attuned to "overcharging" by theatre owners. In a 23 January 1941 memo, he expresses his dismay with such expenses as "screening": "another reason why we should collaborate with these smaller producers in checking up expenses and in mutually deriving advantages from giving each other the benefit of our dealings with United Artists." University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, David O. Selznick Collection (hereafter referred to as Selznick Collection), folder 170 3. These kinds of difficulties for SIP and other independent production companies led to the formation of the Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers (SIMPP), which fought block booking, supported anti-trust lawsuits against the major studios, and encouraged the creation of independent production companies. For a more detailed account of SIMPP, see J.A. Aberdeen, *Hollywood Renegades: The Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers* (Los Angeles: Cobblestone Entertainment, 2000) and *The Hollywood Renegades Archive*, <http://www.cobbles.com/simpp_archive/index.htm>. As another response to unfavorable distribution terms, Selznick briefly formed Selznick Releasing Organization (SRO), to distribute *Duel in the Sun* and *The Paradine Case*. SRO enabled Selznick's new company, Vanguard, to pay 60 percent less than the costs usually charged by United Artists (Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 404-407).

pictures in this manner could allow the company to leverage favorable terms from distributors and exhibitors.⁴⁵⁰

The big five and to a lesser degree the little three were able to maintain stability in personnel and production practices, distribution channels, and exhibition, which allowed their brands to be connected directly to the products they were releasing week after week. Such a relationship between a product, its maker, and the point of consumption falls into the “product-plus” category of brands, in which the brand is communicated directly through the product. Lacking stability and resources, SIP had to go to even greater lengths than the major studios to establish the unique qualities and value of its brand of films for consumers.⁴⁵¹ SIP distinguished itself through a “brand-concept” approach, where the brand is less dependent on the product than on a carefully crafted idea that the company signifies in a variety of ways and through a multitude of outlets (Figures 5.1 and 5.2, below).

⁴⁵⁰ In *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), Richard Maltby defines the event movie, a variation on the blockbuster film, as a late 1970’s phenomenon, “in which as much commercial importance [is] attached to the merchandizing [sic] of ancillary goods ... as to the movie’s performance at the box office” (486). Clearly, *Rebecca* should not be categorized in this light, but it does represent an important precursor to this trend, as do the marketing and merchandising campaigns for subsequent films produced by later SIP incarnations, David O. Selznick Productions and Vanguard.

⁴⁵¹ SIP had difficulties with distribution throughout its history. As an anonymous *Cinema Journal* reviewer of an earlier version of this chapter observes, because of the single screen construction of contemporary theatres and the heavy reliance on public transportation, audiences often were restricted to whatever films were playing in the vicinity of their homes. Consumer choice was contingent upon availability (exhibitors were often at the mercy of the major studios, which attempted to block book their films and squeeze out competitors) and convenience. This was especially so outside of urban first-run markets. For additional information on this system, see Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, especially 66-69 and 77-79. However, SIP and most producers of A-level feature films concentrated heavily on those urban areas that offered first-run and neighborhood theatres. As Susan Ohmer’s discussion of the exhibition strategies for *Wind* demonstrate, SIP believed that more money could be made there through higher admission prices and extended engagements, which the company secured for *Wind* and *Rebecca*. SIP pictures had to do especially well in first-run markets to secure distribution for current and future releases, and to sustain visibility and secure theatre engagements as the films moved gradually to cinemas outside of urban areas.



Figure 5.1-5.2: These two images preceded the title credits of each SIP film and attempted to conjure the stature the filmmaking corporation hoped to attach to its releases and to itself.

According to Rik Riezebos in *Brand Management*, a brand-concept encourages consumers to associate a lifestyle or vague but influential set of feelings with a company. In other words, branding a concept requires considerable time and creativity, but if developed successfully it can be highly malleable and applicable to a variety of products. Just as important, the brand-concept strategy can allow a company to communicate to consumers while bypassing conventional market controllers, such as distributors.⁴⁵²

This is precisely the strategy SIP needed to create name recognition for and attach values to the studio and its films, and to overcome its distribution and exhibition problems.⁴⁵³ Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the company devoted more creative and economic energy to marketing and commercial tie-ups (now dubbed tie-ins)

⁴⁵² Rezebos uses the more descriptive “brand-as-a-concept” moniker rather than the synonymous “brand-concept.” Nike might be the most identifiable contemporary “brand-concept” practitioner. The increase in branding concepts rather than products has become more prominent in recent decades, signaling a shift from a “product-driven” to a “market-driven” advertising approach on the part of many companies (14-15).

⁴⁵³ In this and the following three paragraphs, I describe the marketing campaign deployed by SIP for *Rebecca*, the formulation and execution of which fell at different moments in the chronology that led from literary acquisition, to production, to the release of the film and its reception. However, an analysis of the marketing campaign in its entirety—as opposed to an attempt to fit portions of it within a production

than any other Hollywood studio—major, minor, or independent. *Rebecca* would be the film adaptation upon which SIP's innovative and resourceful style of publicity would take hold.⁴⁵⁴ A twelve-page company-wide report composed by SIP marketing executive Lynn Farnol in January 1940 detailed just how extensive this campaign was for *Rebecca*.⁴⁵⁵ Book tie-ups were similar to those devised for *Wind*: a \$2.75 hardbound version was advertised in newspapers such as the *New York Times* with copy that read, “David Selznick, who foresaw the possibilities of *Gone with the Wind* before publication, has paid an equally high price for *Rebecca*”; a \$1.39 version included a two-color wrapper band featuring studio stills of the film's stars; and a \$0.69 mass-market paperback pushed sales to over one million copies and led Selznick to later muse, “even I had under-estimated the audience awaiting *Rebecca*.”⁴⁵⁶ To further saturate the market with du Maurier's novel, a 50-day full-length newspaper serialization appearing in eleven major dailies with a combined circulation of 5.5 million readers was augmented by an additional serialization in *Ladies Home Journal* and “General Newspaper Advertising” that tied *Rebecca* to *Wind*. (Farnol notes that this connection had to be made “carefully,

history—complements the discussion of branding above, while it presents the most effective context for an analysis of the variations on the novel that SIP instituted outside of the film text.

⁴⁵⁴ Thomas Schatz points out in a personal communication (2 Aug 2002) that the originality, breadth, and intensity of SIP's marketing campaigns were rivaled at the time only by Samuel Goldwyn, Inc., another major independent studio, and reached a crescendo in *Spellbound*, which used the film to advertise such products as surrealistic artwork and film score tie-ups.

⁴⁵⁵ Selznick Collection, folder 170 14. Print and radio publicity customary for many high-profile studio releases at the time included interviews and feature stories in newspapers, national magazines, and fan publications. *Rebecca*'s marketing campaign exceeded those campaigns utilized by other studios and, by so doing, simultaneously increased the visibility of its product and elaborated upon and extended the thematic meanings and cultural associations of the story.

⁴⁵⁶ “Memo,” 28 Feb 1940, Selznick Collection, folder 170 5. The company did not miss its opportunity to publicize this phenomenon, as a 25 April 1940 press release announced, R.H. Macy and Co.'s “window and interior displays” related to *Rebecca* had raised sales of the \$0.69 movie edition by four to six percent at the store. Selznick Collection, folder 170 5.

... because any comparison ... that made *Rebecca* look trivial or unimportant was bad.”⁴⁵⁷)

Farnol’s comment hints at the correlation SIP hoped to establish between *Wind* and *Rebecca* in its marketing campaign for the latter. To solidify that association, the company invoked the brand-concept of prestige, an aura that it relentlessly evoked and attached to itself and its films. While book and film publicity were important and helped heighten the popularity of du Maurier’s novel and awareness of SIP’s upcoming adaptation, the company’s merchandising campaign for *Rebecca* went beyond *Wind* and introduced a series of products that signified prestige. Commercial tie-ups included an expensive furniture line (sold through W&J Sloane; Figure 5.3, below) and wallpaper patterns.

⁴⁵⁷ Selznick Collection, folder 170 14. See footnote 471 for a description of the emergence of mass-market publishing in the romance genre.

Remember this room in "REBECCA"?

"This was a woman's room, graceful, fragile, the room of someone who had chosen every particle of furniture with great care, so that each chair, each vase, each small, infinitesimal thing should be in harmony with one another, and with their own personality....There was no intermingling of style, no confusing of period, and the result was perfection in a strange and startling way...vividly alive, having something of the same glow and brilliance that the rhododendrons had massed there, beneath the window. And I noticed then that the rhododendrons.... had been permitted to the room itself. Their great warm faces looked down upon me from the mantelpiece, they floated in a bowl upon the table by the sofa, they stood, lean and graceful, on the writing desk beside the golden candlesticks."



It's the morning room at Manderley...echoing still of the tragic Rebecca...crystallizing the first mistress of that fabulous country seat. Daphne du Maurier does it with singing words. Sloane translates it here into a design for the actual room.

You don't have to have the facile pen of a du Maurier to picture your room to Sloane decorators. They will read between the lines...put your individuality into colors, woods, fabrics. And they can do it...as no one else can...because theirs are the imaginations of artists; theirs a world of treasures to draw on.

Watch for the
Selznick-International Film
of "Rebecca"

W&J SLOANE FIFTH AVENUE AT 47TH • NEW YORK
WASHINGTON • SAN FRANCISCO • BEVERLY HILLS

Figure 5.3: A full-page ad for the *Rebecca* line of home furnishings featured in *The New Yorker*.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁸ This ad, featured in the January 20, 1940 edition of *The New Yorker*, fits with the logic of other segments of the *Rebecca* marketing campaign, in which the audience, by consuming a selection of product

A line of paint colors—devised at a time when SIP was considering filming in Technicolor—“capitalized on the highly respected standing of Joseph Platt as the *Rebecca* and *Gone with the Wind* designer,” explains Farnol. In addition, the “Rebecca Luxury Wardrobe” (produced, sold, and distributed by Kiviette-Gowns, Inc.) and “Rebecca Makeup Kit” contributed to the prestige brand-concept, implicitly advertised the upcoming release of the film, and promised ancillary income for the company (Figures 5.4 and 5.5, below).⁴⁵⁹



Figure 5.4-5.5: Window displays for the *Rebecca* line of clothing, which promised the consumer a level of glamour commensurate with Rebecca herself, promoted the upcoming film, and reinforced SIP prestige.⁴⁶⁰

tie-ups, is encouraged not only to acquire and experience the prestige associated with the novel and film adaptation but also to assume the identities of the texts’ primary characters (“Advertisement: Remember this Room in *Rebecca*?”, *New Yorker*, 20 Jan 1940 [courtesy of *The New Yorker*]).

⁴⁵⁹ According to contracts, SIP’s royalties were ten percent of the gross selling price minus any retailer discounts. Selznick Collection, folder 170 14.

⁴⁶⁰ “Rebecca Luxury Wardrobe, window displays” (supplementary feature in *Rebecca*, dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 130 min. SIP, 1940, DVD).

In return, SIP agreed to include Kiviette gowns and Robert Dudley hats in the film. While the “Wardrobe” was noteworthy for its breadth (formal evening gowns, handkerchiefs, hats, umbrellas, raincoats, negligees and nightgowns, and costume jewelry), within the context of the adaptation of du Maurier’s novel, it is more intriguing for its ostensible attachment to what one might call the Rebecca legend. These were products that the fictional title character—according to one ad, “that famous little lady that wasn’t there”—might have worn.

And so, outside of the film narrative and prior to the film’s release, SIP instituted a crucial divergence from the novel. The book version resisted portraying Rebecca in tangible form; her memory is often invoked, and her presence permeates Manderley, but she is conjured only through the memories of others and through the multitude of possessions that she left behind in the mansion. With Rebecca wardrobe and makeup lines (and several posters for the film, which depicted a shadowy figure behind the title [Figure 5.6, below]), SIP used this detail of the novel—that is, her vague but palpable presence—to project thousands of would-be Rebeccas into commercial culture.

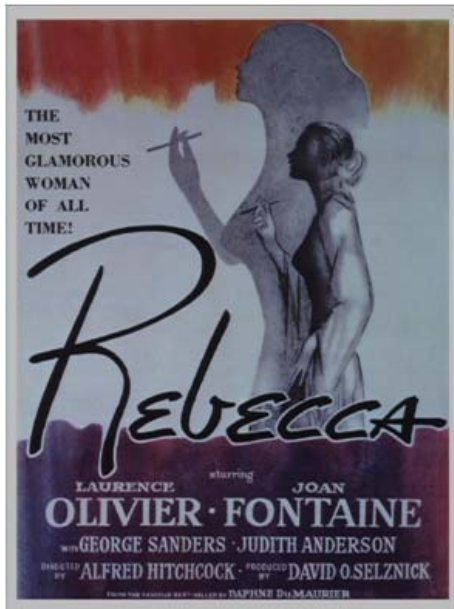


Figure 5.6: A poster for *Rebecca* features the vague image of a woman, possibly the elusive title character, in the background.⁴⁶¹

While the book offered only cursory descriptions of the title character’s appearance, the “Rebecca Luxury Wardrobe,” Rebecca look-alike contests, and select advertisements for the film seized upon the ambiguity of the character’s identity and allowed anyone to be as glamorous, mysterious, and beautiful as the original Mrs. DeWinter.⁴⁶² However, the novel portrayed Rebecca in a different, less glamorous light. Early in the narrative, she is described as an ideal of beauty and domestic proficiency; later, she is revealed to be cruel, vain, and uncompassionate. SIP’s description of Rebecca as “that little lady” in its ad campaign attributes a benign aspect to a domineering, villainous character, described

⁴⁶¹ “*Rebecca* poster” (supplementary feature in *Rebecca*, dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 130 min. SIP, 1940, DVD).

⁴⁶² Such contests were held in ticket lines preceding the film’s Radio City Music Hall opening and at special *Rebecca*-themed dances. For the former, first prize consisted of \$150 and a special “Hollywood screen test.”

in the novel as abnormal and by literary critics as a demonic “site of disease.”⁴⁶³ Clearly, the success of the “Rebecca Luxury Wardrobe” depended on this truncated presentation of the title character in the marketing campaign and in the film. SIP bypassed traditional marketing channels by producing the conditions through which thousands of women could produce this alteration of the source material and simultaneously advertise *Rebecca* (and in turn SIP) to the far reaches of consumer society.

The lessons learned in *Wind* encouraged SIP to broaden its reach with *Rebecca* by supplementing traditional publicity practices with marketing through related product lines. As a result, prestige became a function of pre-release marketing and ancillary products, which was then reinforced by the film. Kay Brown, SIP’s East coast story editor and publishing house liaison, stated in a 10 October 1939 memo to Selznick, “I believe it will be the finest exploitation that has ever been done in fashions. ... I don’t care whether we make little or much money just so long as the promotion is consistent with the standards I have set for it.”⁴⁶⁴ Brown’s hopes for the marketing campaign lie not so much in short-term profitability as in the long-term connotations that might become attached to the quality and consistency of the exploitation and, in turn, the film and SIP. Such a campaign could ensconce SIP and *Rebecca* in the public consciousness and expand the scope and meanings of the text (novel *and* film), thus protecting the

⁴⁶³ Du Maurier, 271; Kelly, 55; Nina Auerbach, *Daphne du Maurier, Haunted Heiress* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 110.

⁴⁶⁴ Selznick Collection, folder 170 14. Among Kay Brown’s duties for SIP were to maintain close relationships with the New York publishing community for SIP, stay alert to possible literary properties, and to consult with Selznick on story development.

commercial promise of the film adaptation.⁴⁶⁵ In this light, *Rebecca* represents for SIP both a product and an image for consumption, as well as an industrial indicator of a corporation's short- and long-term strategy.

FROM WIND TO REBECCA⁴⁶⁶

SIP films relied on large budgets and elaborate productions overseen by Selznick personally.⁴⁶⁷ With *Wind* and *Rebecca*, SIP found the ideal types of literary properties with which to express its corporate interests. Both novels are romantic dramas with female protagonists who feel out of place in their surroundings.⁴⁶⁸ The primary action of both novels is organized around a large, historically significant home. These dwellings, with their aristocratic owners and batteries of servants, resist the influences of contemporary society until, inevitably, they are burned to the ground. (It seems to be no coincidence that SIP films also featured the image of an immense house, the facade of the company's offices, at the beginning of each release [see Figures 5.1 and 5.2, above].) Like SIP's first two pictures, *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *The Garden of Allah*, these two adaptations demanded elaborate set and costume design (especially for *Wind*), features

⁴⁶⁵ In *Wind*, SIP attempted to create a level of prestige in its marketing campaign that justified higher ticket prices during exhibition while, privately, the company protected the viability of its product and the unique identity it was trying to develop through the film by challenging Warner Bros. over the content and release date of the similarly-themed *Jezebel* (1938). Schmitt and Simonson describe efforts such as these as structural, aesthetics-oriented marketing, which more effectively solidify brand loyalty, "allow for premium pricing," streamline marketing messages and suppress the need for "information clutter" in advertisements, and "afford protection from competitive attacks" (21-23).

⁴⁶⁶ My production history of *Rebecca* draws primarily from the two most comprehensive accounts of the film, Chapter 15 of Schatz's *Genius of the System* and Chapter 3 of Leonard Leff's *Hitchcock and Selznick* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Both critics rely heavily on the Selznick Collection. Because of the frequent overlap of each production history, I will only refer to Schatz or Leff individually when one differs significantly from the other.

⁴⁶⁷ Selznick explicitly cites the desire for creative autonomy as his primary reason for leaving MGM and forming SIP (Selznick, *Memo*, 97).

that would become aesthetic trademarks of SIP releases.⁴⁶⁹ Most importantly to SIP and to subsequent decisions on story adaptation and production, both books were tremendous commercial successes upon release, especially with female readers: *Wind* and *Rebecca* were among the top-selling books of the twentieth century up to that point. But SIP went further than merely estimating book sales to project the possible revenue available through an adaptation. It also utilized sophisticated research services to determine the size and demographic characteristics of film audiences. For *Wind*, SIP used information gathered by George Gallup's Audience Research Index, which projected a potential audience of 55 million, to negotiate better terms with the film's distributor, MGM, and to determine efficient publicity and exhibition strategies.⁴⁷⁰ With literary properties, SIP could identify a potential audience, design a film adaptation with that audience demographic in mind, and produce an efficient, targeted marketing campaign to publicize those adaptations to that audience.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁶⁸ Kelly corroborates this assessment of the narrator of *Rebecca*, who often cloaks her descriptions of Maxim DeWinter and Manderley in medieval imagery (54-56).

⁴⁶⁹ Schatz observes that these two films, while released under the SIP name, were acquired by and developed at MGM. Thus, *Wind* "marked the birth of Selznick International Pictures" (179-80).

⁴⁷⁰ Ohmer, 61-80. ARI research was in its infancy during the period at which SIP used its findings to identify and acquire literary sources and negotiate distribution contracts. Eventually, ARI evolved to advise filmmaking corporations on the appeal of titles, casting, and story elements.

⁴⁷¹ SIP's ability to recognize the value of contemporary romance novels (or category literature) in maximizing profits, streamlining production, and creating brand recognition preceded even the publishers of that genre. As mentioned above, SIP arranged for the publication of a mass-market paperback movie edition of *Rebecca* that catapulted sales of the novel and raised awareness of the upcoming film. According to Radway, only in the late 1940s and early 1950s did publishers begin to utilize category literature "to predict demand. . . . That prediction was ultimately dependent on the capacity to control the interaction between an identifiable audience and a product designed especially for it" (28-29). When distribution networks and production practices made mass-produced paperbacks a lucrative publishing venture, companies such as de Graff, Gross, and Doubleday realized the importance of brand building—that is, of introducing an imprint (also called a series or line) that already-identified readers would readily associate with the category. This practice progressed in the 1960s and 1970s to effectively dissolve the notoriety of

With a general idea of the types of audiences SIP films should attract, Kay Brown searched for suitable source material and encouraged Selznick to read *Gone With the Wind* and *Rebecca* prior to publication. Selznick's reluctance to pay the high price necessary to acquire story rights subsided with the tremendous advance sales of each novel.⁴⁷² In a May 1936 memo to Brown, in which Selznick toyed with the idea of casting Ronald Colman as the male lead for *Wind*, the producer mused that if the book were successful enough, it could virtually sell the film itself, obviating expenditures on star talent and marketing.⁴⁷³ This scenario was ideal from the standpoint of SIP's position within the film industry and Selznick's personal views on adaptation. With a ready-made, knowledgeable audience, the company could spend less money on top talent rented from rival studios; instead, it could concentrate on the accurate reproduction of sets and costumes from the novel.⁴⁷⁴

Wind took over three years to bring to the screen, was the most expensive movie ever made in Hollywood up to that point, and taxed Selznick's energy for an extended period of time.⁴⁷⁵ However, in case *Wind* failed, SIP needed to start a safer, more practical project—one that was consistent with the prestige formula as exhibited in *Wind* and

the individual novel or author, as consumers came to depend on their previous experiences with the series when purchasing a romance (28-35).

⁴⁷² As was customary at SIP, upon receiving the condensed story and galley proofs of *Wind* from Brown in New York, Selznick briefly reviewed the short version and sent the complete novel to story editor Val Lewton in California. Lewton disliked Mitchell's book and he discouraged Selznick from acquiring it.

⁴⁷³ SIP paid \$50,000 for the rights to *Wind* in June of that year, but six weeks later Selznick was prepared to spend as much as \$65,000 for the story ("Memo: David O. Selznick to Katharine Brown," 28 May 1936, Reprinted in Selznick, *Memo*, 143-44).

⁴⁷⁴ As further evidence of this emphasis, *Wind* went through five directors during its production, with Victor Fleming taking screen credit.

⁴⁷⁵ For a comprehensive history of the film's production, see David Alan Vertrees, *Selznick's Vision: Gone with the Wind and Hollywood Filmmaking* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997).

previous films. To lighten Selznick's responsibilities, SIP negotiated to bring young English "producing director" Alfred Hitchcock to the United States. Hitchcock, a top director who could make the high quality films the company hoped to be known for, could take over partial control of the films he directed for SIP and allow Selznick to concentrate on *Wind*. So, in the spring of 1939, Hitchcock was signed to an exclusive seven-year contract. The first picture Selznick envisioned for Hitchcock was not *Rebecca*, but *Titanic*, another historical epic of public memory and a story that was similar to *Wind*.⁴⁷⁶ But, while Selznick and Hitchcock mulled the possibilities of the *Titanic* disaster, excitement about Daphne du Maurier's novel continued to mount in the corporate ranks. The story bore striking similarities to *Wind*, but demanded a smaller cast and budget. *Wind* was a financial risk, a Technicolor blockbuster of unprecedented proportions that would differentiate SIP's brand identity for consumers. Selznick freely admitted the possible drawbacks involved with *Wind*. A ten-page article on Selznick and *Wind* in *Life*, entitled "Hollywood's Selznick: The Man who Made 'Gone With the Wind' Gambles \$4,000,000 on a Smash Success," offered details of the literary acquisition, casting, "epic" production, and even negotiations with the PCA. Clearly, this story publicized the film to *Life* readers; it also distinguished Selznick and his company as risk takers and caretakers of "classic" fiction.⁴⁷⁷ Audience research identified a huge potential demand for a film adaptation of *Gone With the Wind*, but the massive

⁴⁷⁶ *Titanic* would not only allow the opportunity to construct a lavish set that might tower over (literally and figuratively) its actors and director, but also, as an historical adaptation, frame the cinematic destruction of that set, as in *Wind* and later *Rebecca*, as an inevitability brought about by its own excess and audacity. See Eric Schaeffer, "The Sinking of David O. Selznick's *Titanic*" (*Library Chronicle of the University of Texas at Austin* [1986]: 57-73), for an overview of the aborted project.

production budget placed the company's future in peril. *Rebecca*, by contrast, was a safe corporate move: it explored similar themes as its predecessor but it could be produced and depicted on a diminished and more efficient scale. In effect, the financial dangers created by *Wind* were offset by the brand associations built in previous SIP films and corroborated by *Rebecca*.

SIP outbid Samuel Goldwyn's independent studio for the right to adapt du Maurier's novel for \$50,000 (the identical price paid for *Wind*) and Hitchcock was assigned to write the initial treatment. Selznick's response to Hitchcock's first effort was less than positive, as the long memo regarding the director's initial treatment attests. The producer began to search for a scriptwriter while the director began work on a second treatment. Meanwhile, Selznick set studio manager Henry Ginsberg to work on a preliminary budget. Ginsberg's initial estimate—\$883,560.43—was submitted to Selznick in June of 1939. In his response, Selznick demanded significant cuts, specifically in the area of set construction, wardrobe, and casting.

I was shocked by the cost of the sets, which totaled \$90,000 for the principal set items. ... Hitchcock has some excellent ideas as to how to avoid building sets, including our most expensive ones. Also, I have told Lyle to use *Gone with the Wind* sets as freely as possible. I would rather take the gamble on having to make changes later for *Gone with the Wind* retakes, which even if we had to, would cost us no more than building new sets for *Rebecca*, than I would take the reverse gamble and not use any of the *Wind* sets. ... Apart from the big saving there is to be effected on the sets, we are going to try to save money on the cast. ... Also, in my opinion, the ladies' wardrobe item is absurd. ... I don't think we ought to build a single costume for this picture. The lead should be outfitted

⁴⁷⁷ Henry F. Pringle, "Hollywood's Selznick," *Life*, 18 Dec 1939, 76-85.

entirely from stock things purchased around town and the other costumes ought also to be stock.⁴⁷⁸

These desired changes—which, when executed, dropped the budget to \$689,238—speak volumes about Selznick's conception of *Rebecca* and of that film's relation to the more expensive *Wind*. Ginsberg's revised budget would suggest that, as in *Wind*, du Maurier's novel represented a valuable component of the adaptation, with story and continuity costing \$80,000, Hitchcock \$77,000, and lead actors \$51,000.⁴⁷⁹ However, sets and wardrobes, which could be exchanged between the two projects, were a different matter. Because *Wind* was the more expensive production and would be released first, *Rebecca* would be forced to assimilate to the standards set by its predecessor. *Wind's* grand scale could be justified and its value confirmed not only by its performance at the box office or at awards ceremonies but also by the extension of its assets through *Rebecca*. More important to Selznick, this practice allowed SIP to give the *impression* of prestige while it settled into a profitable mode of production similar to rival studios.

I can't help but feel that our departments are trained to do things in the most expensive possible way and that nobody gives a thought to the cheaper way of doing things, even if a picture, such as *Rebecca*, has a comparatively short cast, practically no physical problems, and a simple wardrobe problem, etc. . . . I think something as drastic as this is needed at this time to once and for all prove to the organization that *Gone with the Wind* is finished, and that we are trying to make some pictures that will make some money.⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁸ "Memo: David O. Selznick to Henry Ginsberg," 25 July 1939, Selznick Collection, folder 171 2.

⁴⁷⁹ Final budget reports show that the production costs of *Rebecca*, with 13 days of retakes and an intense marketing campaign, ballooned to over one million dollars. Story and continuity eventually swelled to \$82,269, direction to \$92,805, star salary to \$56,361, and cast salaries to \$75,899. "Daily Budget Reconciliation," 6 Feb 1940, Selznick Collection, folder 170 3.

⁴⁸⁰ "Daily Budget Reconciliation," 6 Feb 1940, Selznick Collection, folder 171 2.

Selznick's mandate ensured that the film would diverge in several ways from the original story—ways that reveal SIP's corporate history. This is apparent in the film's costume ball scene. In the novel, du Maurier dresses Giles and Beatrice Lacy, the brother-in-law and sister of Maxim DeWinter, in Middle Eastern garb, one of many allusions to England's colonial past and decaying aristocracy. The couple's disguise of beads, veils and draperies, robes and face makeup slowly dissimulates as the night progresses, allowing the second Mrs. DeWinter to view them as pallid shells of themselves; for du Maurier, this image represents a crucial and affective metaphor for the state of the British Empire in the mid 1930's.⁴⁸¹ The SIP film adaptation also depicts the run up to the Manderley ball; again, choice of costume plays a crucial part in reading the scene and the interests of the author. Giles Lacy is now outfitted in a vaudevillian strong man costume. If a viewer is not aware immediately of the artificiality of this stock studio attire, then the inflatable dumbbell, which the servant Robert bounces on the ground as he takes it from Lacy, emphasizes the point (Figures 5.7 and 5.8, below).

⁴⁸¹ Du Maurier, 226. In "The gentry, bourgeois hegemony and popular fiction: *Rebecca* and *Rogue Male*," in *Popular Fictions: Essays in Literature and History*, ed. Peter Humm (London: Methuen, 1986), 151-172, Roger Bromley interprets the novel from a similar perspective, in which du Maurier offers a bourgeois "solution" to a shifting class composition in England in the 1930's.



Figure 5.7-5.8: Giles Lacy (Nigel Bruce), wearing a strong man outfit at the Manderley Ball. His rubber dumbbell accessory bounces on the floor before he picks it up (right).

This scene demonstrates that subtle variations between a film adaptation and its literary source emerge from motives and economic imperatives specific to the filmmaking corporation; moreover, those minor differences affect the adaptation's thematic trajectory. The second Mrs. DeWinter's outfit at the ball, patterned after a dress worn previously by Maxim DeWinter's mother and Rebecca, clarifies the distinction between novel and film adaptation (Figures 5.9 and 5.10, below).



Figure 5.9-5.10: At left, Mrs. Danvers (Anderson) encourages the Second Mrs. DeWinter (Fontaine) to wear a dress featured in a Manderley portrait. At right, the Second Mrs. DeWinter at the Manderley Ball, in the costume previously worn by Rebecca.

Within the diegesis her wardrobe mistake continues a series of social miscues, further distances her from Maxim, and heightens her discomfort at Manderley and her tension with Mrs. Danvers; extra-diegetically, the dress functions more subtly to connect *Rebecca* to the prestigious *Wind* and maintains continuity with the SIP brand. Joan Fontaine's dress was beautiful and expensive looking, but it was also on loan from the wardrobe of *Wind*.

One of the most explicit elaborations on a scene from du Maurier's novel is the extending burning of Manderley that closes the film. The spectacular fire sequence was becoming, after *Wind*, a trademark of SIP films. Famously, *Wind*'s conflagration was filmed over a number of days on the MGM back lot and made use of sets from previous productions, including *King Kong*.⁴⁸² Margaret Mitchell's presentation of the scene (covering about five pages) was brief in relation to the rest of her 1000+-page tome.⁴⁸³ However, Selznick envisioned the burning of Tara as the centerpiece of his epic adaptation—"our one chance, particularly since we are in Technicolor, to give them a sensational stunt."⁴⁸⁴ Selznick circulated memos expressing his concern over escalating costs, but the producer still believed that the spectacle was a necessary component for an SIP adaptation and that the sacrifice of the exterior sets would be worth it.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸² For a detailed account of the development and filming of *Wind*'s extended fire sequence, see Chapters 3 and 4 of Vertrees, 55-183.

⁴⁸³ Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind*, 1936 (New York: Avon, 1973).

⁴⁸⁴ quoted in Vertrees, 74.

⁴⁸⁵ Vertrees, 83-84. The scene seems to have achieved its desired effect, as it contributes to critics' impressions of the film as a "big, bold, and overwhelming" experience (Richard Sheridan Ames, "Review: *Gone With the Wind*," *Rob Wagner's Script*, 23 Dec 1939, 16), which showcases its considerable investment of "time, effort, talent, and money" (James Shelley Hamilton, "Review: *Gone With the Wind*," *National Board of Review Magazine*, January 1940, 19-20). The prestige image was disseminated further by the news coverage of *Wind*'s Atlanta premiere. *Time* devoted its cover to the event, while *Life* featured a

As for *Rebecca*, the indulgences lavished on its predecessor had no place. Selznick's budget memo makes this clear.⁴⁸⁶ 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 DeWinter 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 (Figures 5.11 through 5.14, below).

five-page pictorial ("G With the W," *Time*, 25 Dec 1939, 30-33; "Gone With the Wind": Atlanta Premiere Stirs South to Tears and Cheers," *Life*, 25 Dec 39, 9-13). For another example, see Frank Daniel, "Cinderella City: Atlanta Sees 'Gone With the Wind,'" *Saturday Review of Literature*, 25 Dec 1939, 10-12.

⁴⁸⁶ Selznick's insistence that *Rebecca* not duplicate the excesses of *Wind* bears similarities to the conclusions reached by the second Mrs. DeWinter as she adjusts to life at Manderley. As a detached observer, she is dazzled but also confused and ultimately overwhelmed by the opulence endorsed by Rebecca DeWinter and still on display at the estate. She cannot account for the large meal services served daily by the battery of servants; she has no command of the in-house technology like the direct line to Mrs. Danvers; and she loses herself more than once in the maze of corridors in the vast estate. Her solution to these difficulties (she scales down her activities, confines herself to a select number of rooms, and takes her lunches at odd hours to avoid large meals and the intimidating surveillance of the Manderley staff) mirrors the logic underlying Selznick's instructions for SIP employees with respect to the production of *Rebecca*. Selznick presents a similar analysis of the "old" mode of production signified by *Wind* and argues that *Rebecca* should inaugurate a new, more practical standard of efficiency for SIP.



Figure 5.11-5.14: A spectacular fire sequence provides the dramatic conclusion for *Rebecca*.

To ensure that possible re-shoots would not cost too much, two models were constructed to stage the conflagration in vivid fashion. This altered ending reveals once again that, while *Rebecca* aspired to remain consistent with *Wind's* prestige and spectacle, it did so on a diminished scale. Burning Manderley allowed SIP to reinforce its brand and communicate a number of distinct statements: to audiences, as in the elaboration of the burning of Atlanta in the *Gone with the Wind* adaptation, SIP spared no expense in presenting visually stunning images to consumers; to rival studios, this independent studio distinguished itself by purchasing the most expensive stories, producing them on a large scale, and attracting the largest audiences; to distributors and exhibitors, an SIP

picture was an unparalleled cinematic event that could bring patrons into theatres at a higher price admission price than other studio releases.

While concerns over textual fidelity, fiscal management, and product delineation were instrumental in presenting *Rebecca*, additional stages of the filmmaking process encouraged variation between literary source and film adaptation. The Hays office forced a crucial change upon the presentation of Maxim DeWinter, who, in order for the film to pass production code standards, had to be punished for murdering his wife. SIP's solution was to make the death an apparent accident, thus bypassing Hays office concerns and building the appeal of Olivier's character.⁴⁸⁷ This modification of the character also implies a more sympathetic portrayal of DeWinter's late wife, which falls in line with the image of Rebecca developed in the marketing campaign. (In the novel, her murder is justified because of her previous conduct.) The desire to dress like the title character in the "Rebecca Luxury Wardrobe" may seem more palatable to consumers.

Another important stage in the making of *Rebecca* did not involve meetings over script development or production disagreements, but the preferences of the potential audience. In SIP previews, the studio used comment cards to draw important feedback from viewers, and company executives observed real-time responses and reactions to

⁴⁸⁷ This modification encouraged the Hays Office to soften its opposition to the film's allusions to "sexual perversions" and "illicit sex." "Rebecca Analysis Chart," 14 Feb 1940, PCA File, File: "REBECCA (Selznick, 1938)." While the Office's influence on *Rebecca* was relatively modest in comparison to many other contemporary films, Albert Deane's 27 Mar 1940 report to Joseph Breen on "Recent Releases" attributes the film's quality to the PCA: "From start to finish 'Rebecca' is a masterful job, and one can see that this has been accomplished not without a great deal of Breen buffing and polishing." This reference may represent merely an attempt by Deane to ingratiate himself to his superior, but it also reveals the Hays Office's conception of its primary, but often invisible, role in the filmmaking process, even in relation to those productions on which it mandated relatively few changes. PCA File, File: "REBECCA (Selznick, 1938)."

each scene by sitting in on the screening. By all accounts, the December 1939, and the February and March 1940 preview exhibitions of *Rebecca* in Southern California were extremely successful. For example, all but four (of 164) respondents at a February 13 preview in Santa Barbara designated *Rebecca* either “excellent” or “very good.” Most complaints focused on sound quality: Olivier's delivery was barely comprehensible to American viewers and the score was erratically audible. Comment cards asked such questions as the viewer's impression of the various performances and his or her knowledge of du Maurier's book and previous SIP releases. Selznick's own five-page list of comments and ideas indicated his disdain for the special effects used in the film's concluding shots of the Manderley fire. The ending and other minor coverage shots were redone and dialogue was re-recorded at the end of January 1940 and concluded by February 3. Running time was shaved from 150 to 130 minutes. Audience response for the re-cut version was even better. Eight respondents at the February 13 Santa Barbara and eleven at the March 13 Inglewood screenings indicated that the film “followed the book perfectly,” despite the fact that the film extended and thus altered du Maurier's ending, and it exonerated Olivier's character from responsibility for his first wife's death.⁴⁸⁸

Without exhibition channels, SIP still had to fight to guarantee long-term screening engagements and appropriate theatrical advertising for the picture. Selznick haggled with

⁴⁸⁸ “*Rebecca* Preview Reports,” Selznick Collection, folder 4314 4. Perhaps the audience’s willingness to overlook the differences between the film and its source extends beyond their appreciation of the film narrative. Through exposure to *Gone with the Wind*, the audience might have expected the fire sequence’s inclusion as an indispensable component of the SIP brand. As mentioned earlier, the *Rebecca* marketing campaign had already modified the personality and physical presentation of the story’s title character.

United Artists, SIP's distributor, over advertising expenses while he corresponded with head of publicity Lowell Calvert over promotional strategies at various theatres:

Can we get comparisons with other recent pictures on the *Wind* opening? I think it is of vital importance to future bookings of *Rebecca* that Los Angeles engagement be very successful. I think that ad appropriation is very small. Fourteen hundred was spent on *Grapes of Wrath* for film arts and ... I think it important that we have even bigger campaign than *Wrath* had. If we spend more can we get the theatre to spend more, and I mean substantially more on both sides?⁴⁸⁹

Selznick's anxiety over the marketing campaigns of competing films was defused by the decision to once-again exploit the overwhelming popularity of *Wind*. Two trailers were developed that advertised both films and linked them in succession as Selznick International Pictures prestige releases (Figures 5.15 through 5.20, below).

⁴⁸⁹ “Western Union Telegram: David O. Selznick to Lowell Calvert,” 20 Jan 1941, Selznick Collection, folder 170 3.

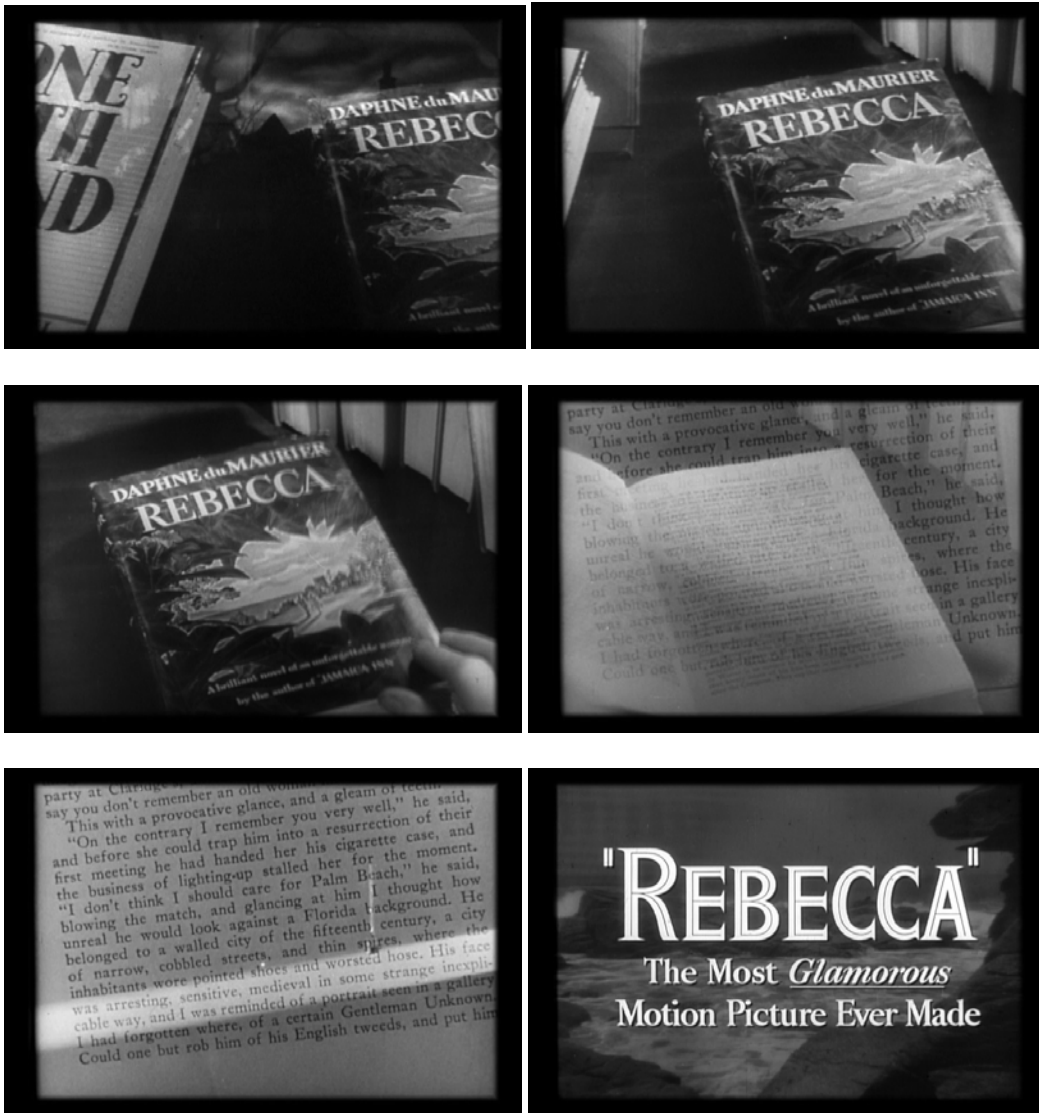


Figure 5.15-5.20: In a single shot from the *Rebecca* trailer, the camera pans from a literary version of *Gone With the Wind* to that of *Rebecca*, before a hand opens the latter to a relevant page. This and two subsequent shots (bottom left and right) reinforce the notion that the upcoming film adaptation would be a mimetic re-creation of the du Maurier novel and a ‘glamorous’ extension of the SIP brand identity.

The trailer capitalized on the popularity of *Wind* and implied that the same level of care and attention to detail was taken with each film adaptation and expense with each

production. The fact that *Rebecca* took far less time to produce, cost one third as much, and recycled many of the sets and wardrobes from *Wind* was not elaborated in publicity materials.⁴⁹⁰

Informal research indicated that SIP's brand strategy (and its use of film adaptation to execute that strategy) was succeeding. An informal survey conducted during *Rebecca*'s opening weekend at a San Francisco theatre offered proof. Of those surveyed, almost three-quarters were women. Just over 40 percent of attendees reported that reading *Rebecca* had lead them to attend, while another 20 percent claimed either that reading a newspaper or magazine serialization or that "hearing about the book" motivated them. Here was evidence of the built-in, predominantly female audience the novel could bring in to theatres, at least for the opening weekend. While these figures underscore the popularity of the book and the success of SIP in raising awareness of the story, Selznick was more gratified by the percentage of respondents who had decided to see *Rebecca* based on their familiarity with him and SIP. Around 70 percent of patrons said that they had come, "because [they] like the productions of David O. Selznick" (whereas less than 10 percent claimed Hitchcock's association with the film was the reason they were there); at another screening, over 70 percent of the 300 attendees indicated, "[they] knew

⁴⁹⁰ In fact, the critics who did identify continuity between *Wind* and *Rebecca* in their reviews usually compared their mutual fidelity to their respective sources or their large box office potential. *Newsweek* observed, "David O. Selznick earned the gratitude of Margaret Mitchell's admirers by modeling the film 'Gone With the Wind' closely after the novel. For his first offering since then, ... the producer has turned out an even more faithful adaptation of a bestseller" ("Rebecca': Grim and Gripping, Film Hews to Lines of Novel," *Newsweek*, 18 Apr 1940, 34-35). *The Hollywood Spectator* predicted (accurately) that *Rebecca* was "too fine a creation" to challenge the records of its SIP predecessor (Welford Beaton, "Review of *Rebecca*," *The Hollywood Spectator*, 1 Apr 1940, 24-26). Likewise, in *Newsweek*'s review, the staggering popularity of the source novels, which produces a legion of demanding devotees, exerts considerable

Rebecca was made by the makers of *Gone With the Wind*.” In a memo accompanying the survey results, Selznick indicated that these numbers would serve as “a guide to our advertising on the film, and our future pictures.”⁴⁹¹ The final cut of *Rebecca* was successful by several traditional measures—the film was the second-highest grossing picture of the year behind *Wind* and won the Academy Award for best picture in 1940 (*Wind* won in 1939). The film trailed only *Wind* in box receipts and industry recognition (see Fig. 5.21, below).

pressure on the narrative independence and flexibility of the film adaptations that follow while also diminishing their financial risk.

⁴⁹¹ “Survey of Patrons of UA Theatre, San Francisco, CA,” 31 Mar and 1 Apr 1940, Selznick Collection, folder 172 8; “Memo: David O. Selznick to Lowell Calvert,” 8 Apr 1940, Selznick Collection, folder 172 8.

Figure 5.21: *Wind* and *Rebecca* played throughout large urban markets in Spring 1940, as these announcements in *The New Yorker* attest.⁴⁹²

Rebecca surpassed *Wind* in other less visible ways: it enabled the company to formulate a more efficient and profitable mode of production, convinced SIP of the value of audience research in acquiring literary properties and then producing and marketing those film adaptations, and solidified a brand identity that could influence consumers beyond the weeks (or even months) that *Wind* or *Rebecca* played in first-run theatres.

⁴⁹² “Announcements: *Gone With the Wind*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Rebecca*,” *New Yorker*, 29 Mar 1940 (courtesy of *The New Yorker* and Radio City Music Hall).

BRAND-NAME LITERATURE

Jeffrey Sconce concludes his analysis of David O. Selznick Productions' 1944 version of *Jane Eyre* by commenting, "The Hollywood adaptation of a literary property during the 1930s and 1940s operated as an interpretative transformation that represented both a reading of the work and a reading of the audience."⁴⁹³ SIP's acquisition, adaptation, and marketing of *Rebecca* corroborate this assertion. Hoping to accommodate the expectations of a knowledgeable audience and a demanding circle of stockholders, the company read the book in a way that would ensure its commercial presence (and, SIP hoped, success) in the marketplace. And this long, complex process is not attributable to the unique aspirations of a single auteur. Although both Selznick and Hitchcock were crucial to the development of the final product, neither could take sole responsibility for the success or failure of the film. Such a perspective would ignore both the contributions of "minor" SIP personnel involved in the filmmaking process—for example, Kay Brown or Joseph Platt—and the historically contingent corporate strategy deployed by Selznick International Pictures that led it to invest money to produce this particular story. In 1935, David Selznick asserted his independence when he resigned from MGM and sought investors for a new production company. However, he understood that individuals did not make movies, corporations did; so he formed Selznick International Pictures. The eponymous name of this new organization, as well as the "producer" title that concluded each film's opening credits, ensured that Selznick would be viewed as the corporate figurehead. But Selznick knew enough not to drive his

company into the ground by producing a string of personal statements as any good auteur might. Instead, he did what all studios did: he attempted to guarantee corporate longevity by making films that would signify a distinctive identity—i.e., a brand—that enabled customers to distinguish SIP from its competitors.

For Hollywood studios, the adaptation of literary properties represented (and still represents) a relatively safe way to differentiate themselves from one another while tapping into a built-in audience that might ensure strong box office performance.⁴⁹⁴ Examining the range of adaptations produced and the modes of corporate reading deployed in the studio system can reveal the unique ways in which these companies expressed themselves within the economic and narrative standards of the Classical Hollywood cinema. For example, one can only wonder what Universal might have done with du Maurier's novel. In fact, one can *only* wonder about such a scenario, because, for a number of reasons, Universal would not have been interested in the story to the same degree as other studios might. And, if it had acquired *Rebecca*, the novel would have been adapted in a drastically different way.⁴⁹⁵ In the film adaptation process, filmmaking corporations not only build brand identities, but also *brand* literature with their own interests, values and aspirations, and use literature to build and disseminate that brand to

⁴⁹³ Sconce, 160.

⁴⁹⁴ Or, as an example in line with the strategies of current media organizations, the exploitation of a single character—such as Batman, Spider-Man, the Hulk, or Harry Potter—into a lucrative franchise, which might include a series of films and other product lines.

⁴⁹⁵ Hypothetically, such a project may have conformed to Universal's expertise and financial strictures and attempted to enhance the gothic elements of *Rebecca*. A modest production budget would have certainly confined most of the film to the cavernous, relatively isolated Manderley, which for Universal would hold clear similarities to the labyrinth domiciles of the company's 1930s horror films. For the same reasons, Universal may have decided to visualize *Rebecca*, yet another "undead" character that in a sense terrorizes other characters in the narrative.

their advantage. More specifically here, I hope to have demonstrated how one company identified and expertly exploited the tangible value available in a popular literary text and, in the process, subtly shifted the meanings and associations to blend more efficiently with a corporate identity developed and elaborated in past, present, and future adaptation projects.

While SIP transformed *Rebecca* in several important ways, it did not defile or subvert the themes present in the novel. A 25 April 1940 press release by the company claims,

Aside from his implicit service in bringing literary masterpieces to movie audiences, David O. Selznick has been a direct influence on the sale of books. Each time, his picturization of a novel has given an enormous boost to sales in bookstores all over the country.⁴⁹⁶

David O. Selznick's company's "influence" on *Rebecca* went far beyond the publishing industry; it also widened, rather than limited or stifled, the presence and discursive meanings of the novel. An intense, innovative marketing barrage and film adaptation placed the novel's author, characters, and narrative in new contexts that inevitably expanded the meanings and cultural associations of *Rebecca*, which now became affiliated with a successful Hollywood production company, furniture, clothing and paint companies, and even the newspaper trade. Whether such a process represented a "service" to the novel, its author, and society in general is open to debate, just as is the status of Daphne du Maurier's and Margaret Mitchell's novels as "literary masterpieces." Regardless of the context, SIP repeatedly argued for these books' cultural

⁴⁹⁶ Selznick Collection, folder 170 5.

indispensability in an effort to attach prestige to SIP, as well as the literary and film versions of *Gone with the Wind* and *Rebecca*.⁴⁹⁷

From 1939 to 1941, SIP's three films in release, *Gone with the Wind*, *Intermezzo* and *Rebecca*, grossed more money than those of any other studio, most of whom were making between 40 and 50 movies per year. Ironically, bureaucratic inefficiency would not dismantle SIP (per his prognostication during the production of *Rebecca*, Selznick was right about the final scenario, but he was wrong about its cause); box office success and the threat of massive tax penalties prompted the company to liquidate its assets. Unlike the Manderley estate or even many of SIP's own counterparts, the company lacked the personnel and property holdings in which to reinvest its windfall. As did the aristocratic families featured in SIP's two latest successes, the company seized on this unforeseeable circumstance as an opportunity to alter its operations under a new, streamlined moniker—David O. Selznick Productions (DOS). In a revised policy befitting majors like Warner Bros., DOS maximized the labor potential of its employees by loaning them out to other studios for selected projects and pocketing the overage. Or better, DOS assembled and then sold “film packages” composed of stories, cast and crew members it had specially selected and developed.⁴⁹⁸ Even this new corporate identity

⁴⁹⁷ In an internal memo to Joseph Breen at the Production Code Administration, Albert Deane admits that, while he had heard discussions about du Maurier's novel on numerous occasions, he had not read the book or a story synopsis. Still, after screening SIP's film version, Deane calls *Rebecca* “masterful, ... because the whole production has been geared, in all processes of preparation, to the spirit of an adult theme being treated in an adult fashion.” Obviously, such an assessment reflects both on SIP, its film, and the source, as is evidenced in Deane's focus on the “treatment” of *Rebecca's* themes. “Recent Releases,” 27 Mar 1940, PCA File, File: “REBECCA (Selznick, 1938).”

⁴⁹⁸ See Schatz for more information on SIP's transformation into DOS (*Genius of the System*, 322-39). This formula for assembling films undercut the control major filmmaking corporations held over project development and contributed in part to the demise of the Classical Hollywood era.

bore the mark of SIP. DOS and Selznick could point to its prior successes to raise the asking prices for a particular package or individual employee when negotiating with other studios. (And, more personally gratifying, the eponymous moniker allowed Selznick to continue to produce press releases announcing the mogul's altruistic "service" to film and literature.)

Just as the economic and aesthetic ideals, narrative, and even props of *Wind* wove their way through the production, narrative, and marketing of *Rebecca*, so too did the assets and thematic interests of SIP bear on DOS and its later progeny, Vanguard. For example, the belief, cultivated by *Wind*, that lengthy, technically and visually dazzling, and costly historical epics were the markers of a prestige filmmaking that would attract audiences en masse resurfaces in *Duel in the Sun* (1946). Or, consider the parallels of *Mister Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948), adapted from a humorous architectural story and later novel by *Fortune* editor Eric Hodgins and co-produced by DOS and RKO at a moment when the days of the studio system and of David Selznick himself as a prominent producer were essentially numbered. The film stars Cary Grant and Myrna Loy as a husband and wife who simply cannot bear the cramped New York City apartment they share with their two daughters and live-in housekeeper. Their solution, to move to a large, historically significant house in Connecticut, would seem to contradict the logic espoused in *Rebecca* and *Wind*, in which the destruction of such homes allows one to break from the psychological, political, and economic pull of history. But those familiar with the corporate history of DOS might know that the company's films, and *Blandings* in particular, could not settle with such a resolution.

After realizing the massive renovations needed to make their recent purchase livable, the Blandings—in a response similar to that made by SIP years earlier when the company liquidated in order to reinvent itself—decide to raze the decrepit structure and rebuild a more modern and efficient “dream house,” one similar to a house that DOS was giving away to one lucky audience member as part of a massive marketing campaign connected to the release of the film.⁴⁹⁹ As *Gone With the Wind* and *Rebecca* did for SIP, the acquisition and adaptation of *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* inevitably disclosed elements of the history of DOS and its earlier incarnations, as well as the independent filmmaking corporation’s ability to quickly adapt to changing industrial circumstances.

⁴⁹⁹ *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, dir. H.C. Potter, 94 min. David O. Selznick Productions/RKO, 1948, videocassette. In her ideological and industrial interpretation of the film, “Hollywood, the Dream House Factory,” *Cinema Journal* 37 (Summer 1998): 19-36, Catherine Jurca argues that *Mr. Blandings* demonstrates the struggling studio system’s willingness to employ pro-capitalist rhetoric to defuse suspicion of communist influence in the film industry and patriotically assist with the ongoing housing shortage in the United States. By illustrating the trials of modern city dwelling and logistical and financial drawbacks of large-scale renovation and construction projects, *Mr. Blandings* tacitly discourages its audience from building a “dream house” of its own. Instead, the film encourages viewers to pursue more affordable, less complicated options, such as the suburban communities currently under construction by William Levitt’s company on Long Island.

CHAPTER 6

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Conclusion: Future Research

I plan to expand this project into a book-length manuscript by adding two full chapters that could offer a more complete picture of the approaches to film adaptation in the context of the Classical Hollywood Era and further demonstrate the relationship between corporate strategy, industrial positioning, and practices of film adaptation.

One proposed chapter cites documents at the University of Southern California's Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Special Collection and other archives to demonstrate the manner in which major filmmaking corporation MGM used film adaptation to implement a cycle of socially relevant "message films" in the late 1940s. During this period, the majors had been ordered by judicial decree to divest themselves of theater holdings in order to break the monopoly they had long held over the film industry. With the impending loss of control of their theaters, traditionally the film industry's "cash cow," the financial stability of these companies was now tenuous. And, with the increasing power of actors, directors, and producers through packaged production deals and their concomitant reticence to sign long-term contracts, the carefully crafted identities and studio styles of these companies were also in jeopardy.

Perhaps no filmmaking corporation of this era was more dependent both on its stars to fashion its studio style than MGM and on its theaters to reinforce that identity. Long

recognized as the most prestigious major, MGM had built that reputation through the cadre of glamorous stars who were always on display in lavish productions, many of them musicals and ensemble pictures, showing at its opulent Loews theaters. Clearly, with the changing industrial environment, the rise of television as an alternative to movie attendance (as well as the continued popularity of radio as an entertainment) and the steadily declining movie attendance figures, MGM needed to formulate a strategy that could quell the threats posed by these trends, which promised to erode not only its longstanding competitive advantage within the film industry but also its cultural relevance.

MGM attempted to protect its cultural identity and industrial position by producing films that communicated a different style and message than had many of its releases. In short, its penchant for glamour, sophistication, and opulence would be replaced with a newfound dedication to topical stories, which sought to inform spectators of the company's political and social sensitivity. Each film's subject matter, level of realism, and theme would assume primary significance in this new studio style, while the marquee stars and expensive sets that previously acted as advertisements for the studio's prosperity would recede in importance, as they now threatened to distract from the story. In essence, the MGM style would still communicate prestige, but that quality would be depicted in a much different manner.

Louis B. Mayer named Dore Schary head of production at MGM in 1948, and the latter, with this strategy in mind, immediately directed studio writers and producers to develop scripts that could entertain *and* educate post-World War II spectators about

contemporary social and political issues. Schary had been producing low-budget human interest films since the early 1940s, but later in that decade, topical films became a priority at the studio. When MGM screenwriter Ben Maddow read the galley proofs to William Faulkner's *Intruder In The Dust* in 1948, he advised studio executives to retain the rights to the book immediately. The experimental, regionally based modernist novel— a mystery story that addresses racial prejudice in a small Mississippi town— seemed unlikely fodder for a profitable translation to film that would be exhibited to a nationwide audience. However, Schary sensed an opportunity to implement the cycle of social problem films through a prestigious adaptation, and *Intruder In The Dust* (1949) became the first project under the new Schary regime.

The advertising campaign created by MGM to promote *Intruder In The Dust* (1949) liberally used William Faulkner's name and frequently depicted images of the book, a policy that crafted a train of authorship and generic classification for the adaptation that bore similarities to those of the other filmmaking corporations examined in this dissertation (Figure 6.1, below).

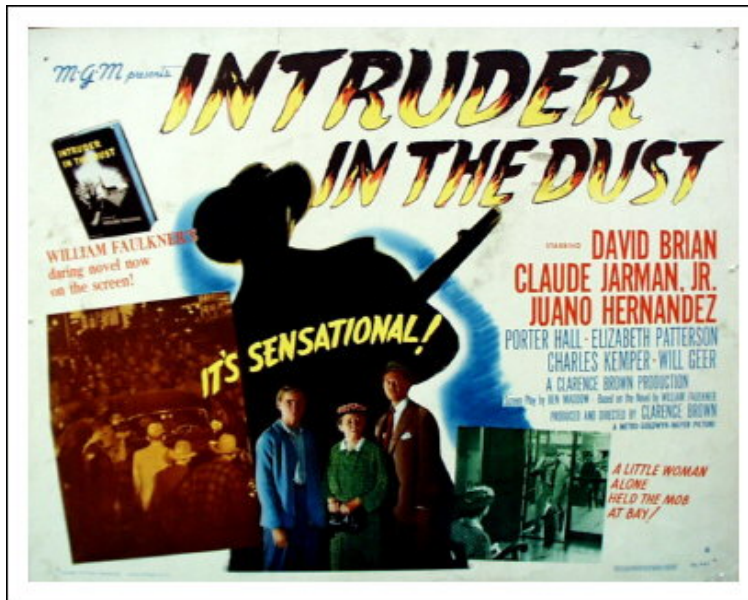


Figure 6.1: An original poster for *Intruder In The Dust* (1949) features an image of the book and attempts to combine sensationalism with social relevance and literary cachet in constructing an argument for the film's appeal.

For example, Universal cited the name and biographical legend of Edgar Allan Poe and the literary works associated with him to buffer censors, graft cultural respectability and commercial potential onto Universal releases, and buoy the horror genre. And, Warner Bros. announced Dashiell Hammett's relationship to the company's film adaptations according to the commercial and cultural status of the author and the generic aspirations of each film release. Finally, SIP continually highlighted its position as producer to distinguish itself from competitors and to craft a desirable brand identity, increase profitability, and ensure corporate longevity.

The second proposed case study will use archival resources available at the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library and the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Center for Film and Television Research to examine "poverty row" filmmaking

corporation Monogram Pictures, founded in the early 1930s and primarily a producer of “shoestring-budget” feature and short films during the next two decades. Specifically, this chapter will examine the *Charlie Chan* series of films, released in the mid- to late-1940s, in order to highlight the distinct manner in which Monogram was able to subsist (and at times thrive) despite the clear competitive disadvantages minors like itself faced within the film industry.

As with the stability realized through Universal’s programmer policy of the 1920s and 1930s, Monogram’s thrifty mode of production and the demand for its B pictures allowed the company to eke out small but consistent profits throughout the 1930s by fulfilling a niche that other filmmaking corporations did not desire or could not perform. A so-called minor studio that produced but did not distribute or exhibit its films, Monogram generally avoided direct competition with majors such as MGM and major independents like SIP. In fact, its releases were often included as the first portion of a double bill and in this respect Monogram represented a valuable supplier of product after the transition to double feature exhibition. The company also provided a steady flow of films to those independent theaters that operated outside of first-run markets and where the releases of the majors infrequently played.

Monogram’s stability and profitability was dependent primarily upon the steady, efficient production of low-budget genre pictures (mostly westerns but also many horror films) and series films. An examination of the latter category, a variety of film adaptation that resembles both the cycle of horror films produced by Universal and the recycled releases of Warner Bros., in this proposed chapter will allow me to demonstrate

the obstacles and benefits of Monogram's position within the film industry. I will argue that the company held a scavenger-like relationship with many of the major and major-minor filmmaking corporations operating during this period, and by so doing Monogram was able to maintain success in a field dominated by other companies.

The ability of Monogram to fulfill the demand for product created along with the rise of the double feature (a difficult period for other firms due to the heightened control over exhibition channels exercised by major filmmaking corporations through the practice of block booking) was one advantage of its industrial position, and the company's capacity to extract value from a story property with diminished appeal was another. As the contentious relationship and eventual litigation between Warner Bros. and Dashiell Hammett demonstrated, the beneficial aspects of literary acquisition often extend from the related ownership of the motion picture rights to a specific character or scenarios and settings within that work. The rights to depict detective Samuel Spade represented a desirable asset not because of the character's current popularity but because of its considerable flexibility to appear in subsequent films, radio broadcasts, and television programs.

For Monogram, the Charlie Chan character carried similar commercial promise. However, there was an important difference, one that seemed to represent an obstacle for Monogram: Fox had already produced twenty seven *Charlie Chan* films in the 1930s and early 1940s, thus proving the appeal of the character but also seeming to exhaust its value. Nevertheless, all of the sixteen *Charlie Chan* releases produced between by Monogram 1944 and 1949 turned a profit for the company. Monogram's decision to

produce these films and their eventual success seems attributable to three separate factors, which I plan to explore in this case study. First, the mode of production—that is, low budgets and fast productions—exercised at the studio generally hedged the risk associated with such an endeavor. This premise was further validated by the pre-existing appeal of both the Charlie Chan character and lead actor Sidney Toler, who had played Chan in multiple Fox vehicles and continued in the role at Monogram (Figure 6.2, below).



Figure 6.2: An original poster for *The Red Dragon* (1945) makes apparent the film's connection to the *Charlie Chan* series.

In addition, the nature of series production allowed Monogram to amortize acquisition, set, wardrobe, and other costs through the multiple productions of the series. (In this

respect, Monogram could realize the same benefits that Universal achieved during its development of the horror genre.) Second, Monogram films often reached a different audience than those of Fox, especially in those instances when they were released in second-tier and “outback” theaters, where an earlier Fox *Charlie Chan* picture may have never appeared. Third and most important to the general success of the company during this period, Monogram served a scavenger-like function within the Classical Hollywood Cinema, as the company was able to thrive through such practices as featuring actors and story materials introduced by other companies and, as has been mentioned, providing the B picture in the double feature format. With the latter policy, Monogram’s releases benefited from the appeal of the A picture, which was produced by another company and served as the prime attraction of the program. With the former policy, Monogram often signed actors and acquired story materials introduced and made famous in films produced by other companies.⁵⁰⁰ For example, Bela Lugosi starred in multiple Monogram horror films after achieving fame as Count Dracula, while Boris Karloff appeared as the protagonist in the *Dr. Wong* series of films. And, in a scenario similar to its re-introduction of the *Charlie Chan* series, Monogram signed many of the lead actors who achieved fame as “The Dead End Gang” in several Warner Bros. films, produced a series that renamed the group of characters “The Bowery Boys,” and presented them in new stories. These examples offer evidence of Monogram’s corporate strategy, which salvaged the star personae of many actors, as well as numerous characters and scenarios

⁵⁰⁰ It should be noted that Monogram also had a reputation as a training ground for young actors and directors, who often left the company for the more lucrative contracts and exposure offered by other filmmaking corporations.

of previous films, made famous by those majors and major-minors that had neither the interest nor the means to continue to profit from these assets.

The rationale behind and the approach to film adaptation utilized by MGM and Monogram, respectively, represented an extension of their long-term goals and corporate strategies. For MGM, *Intruder In the Dust* (1949) and other message films refined studio style and, more broadly, helped MGM adapt to shifting modes of production and exhibition. For Monogram, the Charlie Chan character and series filmmaking offered the opportunity to make the most of the company's relatively weak position within the film industry. In these respects, the value of acquisition and the key decisions made in the adaptation process paralleled those of the companies discussed throughout this dissertation. The significance of *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and Edgar Allan Poe—and the discourses enveloping them—for Universal Pictures lay within the strategy of maintaining fiscal constraint while establishing a dependable generic category through which the company could generate consistent profits and establish a presence in first-run theater markets. Warner Bros. acquired *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) because, in the short term, a potential film adaptation would fit prevailing studio style and allow for a condensed story development and production process. In the long term, ownership of *The Maltese Falcon* accorded with Warner Bros.' recycling policy and its commitment to efficiency, for the literary property and eventual film adaptation offered additional value as story materials available for use in subsequent film releases. SIP used *Rebecca* to reinforce a corporate image introduced in previous films and, via a relatively modest production budget and a sophisticated marketing campaign, to articulate that identity with

greater efficiency and less financial risk. For all of these filmmaking corporations, adaptation represented a method through which to execute a corporate strategy, and, as I hope to have shown in this study and in future research, their claims of authorship and approaches to the film adaptation process extended only so far as that strategy allowed.

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