

Prof. Piotr Sitarski, PhD
Department of Film and Audio-Visual Media
University of Łódź, Poland
piotr.sitarski@uni.lodz.pl

Łódź, 30 June, 2025

Review of Milan Hain, *Starmaker. David O. Selznick and the Production of Stars in the Hollywood Studio System*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2023

It is often said that the ultimate aim of the film industry is profit, with films serving merely as a means to that end. In *Starmaker. David O. Selznick and the Production of Stars in the Hollywood Studio System*, Milan Hain offers a compelling re-evaluation of this axiom by proposing that not only films but also individuals — specifically, film stars — functioned as profit-generating commodities. These stars, Hain argues, could yield revenue both through their on-screen appearances and via loan-outs. Through a detailed study of David O. Selznick's career from the 1930s onwards, the author convincingly demonstrates that for Selznick the production of stars was as significant, both symbolically and economically, as the production of films.

Hain's monograph situates itself within the relatively limited body of scholarship devoted to the Hollywood star system. Its originality lies in a methodological shift: rather than focusing on the stars themselves, the study researches the mechanisms of their production and, crucially, the figure of their producer. The book subverts traditional paradigms in film studies by treating stars almost as films: it explores their construction, reception, and interpretation through political, social, and cultural frameworks. Films, in this model, serve primarily as vehicles for the stars. Hain conceptualizes this process as inherently *auteurial*, constructing a nuanced portrait of Selznick — though the term is never explicitly invoked — as a film *auteur*, whose creation are both films and stars he produces. Importantly, this argument is articulated without lapsing into hagiography. The study maintains a balanced view: while Selznick's stars brought him money, he was not a flesh peddler, as hostile rumours suggested, but rather a PR artist, investing in stars and supporting them.

Hain foregrounds Selznick's strategic and data-driven approach to production. Consequently, stars are analysed not primarily as objects of consumption, but as products of a complex and deliberate process of manufacture. Although the author does, in certain places, touch upon the reception of stars by audiences (e.g. in the case of Shirley Temple), these observations remain general and culturally oriented, eschewing psychological or psychoanalytic readings, which would be difficult to substantiate given the historical nature of the subject.

Hain's book consists of a Prologue, an Introduction, and seven main chapters, the final of which functions as a Conclusion. Supplementary materials include tables cataloguing the films made

by Selznick's contracted stars, both in-house productions and loan-outs. The book is comprehensively annotated and supported by a bibliography, an index, and a list of archival collections. Each chapter concludes with a summary section, effectively synthesizing the often richly detailed analytical discussions.

The organization of the study is both thematic and chronological. Hain delineates two primary domains of Selznick's professional activity: film production and star production, the former being dominant in the 1930s and the latter gaining prominence during and after World War II. Particularly commendable is the judicious selection of case studies and the depth of interpretive insight. Hain's choice of star careers underscores the diversity and complementarity of Selznick's strategies in assembling his "stable," including both male and female performers of varying ages and backgrounds. Moreover, he explores a wide array of promotional and image-building tactics, ranging from the complete erasure of a former screen identity (as in the case of Ingrid Bergman) to a more organic transformation, such as that of Shirley Temple.

The Prologue references *A Star is Born*, which the author rightly identifies as an emblematic articulation of the Hollywood star myth — specifically, the culturally embedded American belief that talent, perseverance, and a measure of luck suffice to ensure success. The Introduction presents Selznick as the central figure of the study and articulates the primary research problem: the construction of stars as commodities, intricately packaged within cinematic texts. This section also offers a detailed overview of the rich sources employed in the book. In total, Hain utilizes seven major archival collections across the United States and the United Kingdom, supplemented by daily press and journals from internet platforms. As a result, he draws upon a wealth of production documentation, notably Selznick's memos, which capture his creative intentions and, according to Hain, offer more reliable insights than retrospective memoirs or autobiographies.

Chapter One focuses on what is arguably Selznick's most iconic creation, Ingrid Bergman, and the carefully curated image crafted for her American debut. Hain demonstrates how, in *Intermezzo: A Love Story*, Selznick constructed a persona for Bergman that contrasted both with her former European career and with the prevailing archetypes of European stars in Hollywood. She was portrayed as natural and accessible, in stark contrast to the aloof, ethereal personas embodied by actresses such as Greta Garbo. Remarkably, this image persisted even in later roles that diverged significantly from it, though these later performances receive less analytical attention in the book.

As in subsequent chapters, Hain bases his analysis on both internal studio documents and public promotional materials, evaluating Selznick's strategies in light of contemporary media responses. Where feasible, he also incorporates the results of sociological studies commissioned by the producer, who displayed a keen interest in audience data. The use of visual material — both promotional stills and film frames — is especially noteworthy. Though such material might be considered ancillary given the intensive archival work, in this case the visual argumentation is strikingly persuasive.

Chapter Two investigates loan-outs, focusing on such cases as Ingrid Bergman for *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Dorothy McGuire for *Claudia*, and Jennifer Jones for *The Song of Bernadette*. The chapter illustrates how Selznick secured roles for his stars that balanced immediate financial gain with long-term career development — an approach reflective of his broader business strategy.

Chapter Three examines the careers of Selznick's male stars during World War II — a particularly fraught but profitable period. Hain discusses Alan Marshal, Gene Kelly, Gregory Peck, and Joseph Cotten, whose careers, while promising, yielded lower returns for the studio than those of their female counterparts.

Chapter Four centres on Shirley Temple. Hain selects her as a case study due to the distinctive challenges she posed and the unique strategies Selznick adopted in managing her image. Hain provides a detailed account of her transition from child star to adolescent actress, emphasizing the observation — central to the book — that audiences consume not merely films, but the cultivated personas of stars. Drawing on the controversy surrounding *Kiss and Tell*, Hain illustrates Selznick's insistence on maintaining creative and contractual control, ultimately linking Temple's declining career to Selznick's financial instability rather than solely to the actress herself.

Chapter Five shifts focus to Selznick's postwar career and his engagement with European stars, including Alida Valli from Italy, Louis Jourdan from France, and Hildegard Knef from Germany. In this context, international markets gained new significance, partially compensating for domestic difficulties such as dramatically declining attendance and the post-*Paramount* industry restructuring. Selznick's efforts reflected these shifts and the increasing heterogeneity of Hollywood's star system. Especially insightful is the discussion of *Selznick Stars of 1950*, a project that inadvertently underscored the producer's waning influence. This example transcends film-centric analyses, illuminating alternative mechanisms for star promotion.

Chapter Six returns to Jennifer Jones, providing a nuanced analysis of the personal and professional dynamics between her and the producer, particularly in the context of *Carrie* (William Wyler) and *Stazione Termini* (Vittorio De Sica). This chapter, like those preceding it, reflects Hain's acute sensitivity to the international dimensions of Selznick's enterprise. He recognizes both the opportunities and challenges associated with the global circulation of Selznick's stars and films — an aspect enriched by engagement with the work of Joseph Garncarz.

The concluding chapter, titled "The Selznick Brand" explores the producer's persistent concern with quality and prestige as guiding principles of his star-making enterprise. Hain contrasts Selznick's strategies with those of major studios, exemplified by his dismissal of Betty Grable (from the Twentieth Century-Fox), whom he regarded as lacking the prestige essential to his brand.

This final chapter crystallizes Hain's central thesis: David O. Selznick is best understood as a film (or film production) *auteur*, whose creations were stars rather than films. This interpretation is both innovative and well-grounded in the dual tradition of auteur theory and production studies.

The integration of these two frameworks yields a compelling and methodologically sophisticated account.

In the absence of more substantial critical remarks, I would like to mention two areas where further elaboration might have enhanced the study. First, Selznick's relationships with investors, and the extent to which they influenced his production decisions, merit deeper exploration — as suggested by the correspondence cited on p. 113. Relatively little attention is paid to Selznick's collaborators and to the organizational and logistical processes underlying star production within his company. The auteurist emphasis, while illuminating, may at times obscure the collective nature of such undertakings. And second, Hain notes that Selznick's stable included not only actors but also directors — an aspect that would make for a valuable future study.

In conclusion, I consider Milan Hain's monograph a significant scholarly contribution. The book presents an innovative concept of author-producer, draws on largely unexplored archival materials, and articulates its arguments with clarity and analytical precision. The book advances a well-substantiated thesis regarding Selznick's auteurist role in star production and enriches the understanding of the Hollywood studio system. It has historical depth, erudition, and an awareness of both transatlantic contexts and European film traditions. Moreover, the book is written in a lively, engaging style that makes it intellectually rewarding.

I unreservedly recommend that this work be recognized as a scholarly achievement qualifying Milan Hain for habilitation.