

*Christopher Mulrooney*

## **The Language of *The Birds***

Hitchcock was inspired by Du Maurier's story, of which he seems to have retained only the idea of birds attacking. He engaged Evan Hunter, who had written an adaptation for *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, to work out the screenplay with him. On this evidence, I believe the work to be substantially Hitchcock's, although the only dialogue that can be ascribed to him is an interpolation in the dune scene, which Hunter thought deficient. The restaurant scene, written by Hunter solely, is by comparison essentially undramatic and serves as relief, as well as preparation for the gag that follows. Hitchcock omitted the ending's continuation into a speedy getaway as the birds tear open the soft convertible top of Melanie's Aston Martin and are eluded on a hairpin turn.

Hunter credits Hitchcock with the sequence of Melanie crossing the bay (Hunter would have had her drive around), which is meticulously detailed in the script down to the indication MATTE for the process shots. Melanie Daniels' name suggests the sweetness of honey and dens of lions. Mitch Brenner sounds ardent. Annie Hayworth suggests an affair of the moment. These small details and grand conceptions are what the script is made of, and lest it be thought I am belittling Hunter, he himself disavows any deeper attachment to the work (perhaps out of modesty) than a mutual wish to "scare the hell out of people."

It's almost certainly Hitchcock's greatest film, though it is often described as "second-rate" Hitchcock, placing it in a class with *Jamaica Inn*, *Torn Curtain* and *Topaz*, films which are not second-rate anybody. *Blackmail* is the standard of perfection, a Miltonic *Noh* play, but the rather more Shakespearean elaboration and cinematic drive of *The Birds* surpass the earlier film's congruency to cinematic form (which is stunning and beautiful) by no longer considering the problem, or rather by inventing "a sequence of images" that allows for a visual expression. And yet, it seems equally absurd to say that, for example, *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's greatest play, particularly if you are a critic (like Shaw, who did not think such a thing, and whose "correction" of *Cymbeline* is almost certainly a joke). Only a failure to grasp the scope of *The Birds* can have led Stanley Kauffman in *The New Republic* to describe the acting as "objectionable."

The title is now as familiar as “the Mona Lisa” and must be translated to appreciate its all-encompassing strangeness. *Les Oiseaux*, *Die Vögel*. It's the title of an ornithological book by Roger Tory Peterson in the *Life Nature Library* which was published that same year, 1963. *The Birds* opens in Union Square, a cable car goes by with an advertisement reading “Top of the Mart” as the camera pans left on Melanie (Tippi Hedren) crossing the street and passing behind a poster reading “San Francisco” which fills the screen and allows a travelling matte to complete the pan on the Universal lot as she enters Davidson's Pet Shop (Hitchcock exits the store simultaneously with two small dogs on leashes).

Melanie has come to pick up a mynah bird. He hasn't arrived yet, says Mrs. MacGruder. Melanie asks if he'll talk. Well, yes, says Mrs. MacGruder, well, no, no, you'll have to teach him to talk. This is when Mitch (Rod Taylor) enters the shop. He asks Melanie if she can help him, and is made to repeat the question. They dance, so to speak, around this garden of Eden misnaming the birds until she accidentally sets free a canary in the shop. The two women chase it briefly, until it lands in an ashtray and Mitch covers it with his hat. (“Can the mystical reside in a hat?” asks Bosquet. “It always resides in hats,” responds Dali.)

The scene must be monitored closely, because it lays the groundwork for the “detached-centre” maze that follows, the only analysis possible of the film relying entirely on this rallying love duet in “the language of the birds” (and see *D.O.A.* for a prime example of the form). Melanie scans the sky like a haruspex before entering the shop, and comments on the gulls. “Well, there must be a storm at sea,” says Mrs. MacGruder. “That can drive them inland, you know.”

Only a full-scale analysis taking into account at every moment composition, editing, sound, script and acting will render *The Birds* justice. At least, there are two scenes that register the entire film and can be settled on for the nonce. One is the dumbshow of the final attack on the Brenner home (before Melanie is attacked in Cathy's room), and the other is a little scene in two parts when Melanie sets off from the dock. Her co-star in this scene is Doodles Weaver, who registers dismay and confusion over this high-class dame setting off in one of his motorized rowboats with a pair of lovebirds in a cage. Hitchcock puts the camera on his face in a medium shot to record this silently, then cuts to the boat below the dock. The camera has a view from beyond the prow, Melanie is seated in the stern, and Weaver covers her body almost entirely from view as he reaches behind her to start the motor, before climbing out and up to the dock. There is nothing untoward in this scene except the camera's view, Melanie is serenely undisturbed

and has the same quality of unconcern that Mitch shows in some psychological “moments.”

The film has much technical artifice, and was a long time in preparation. There are various degrees of effect, all of them governed by artistic necessity. The process shots that figure as composites in the scene of the children running into town are utilized in Melanie’s boat trip rather as Hitchcock used miniatures in the Thirties (that is, freely and frankly), but note the insertion of one as a reaction shot when Melanie rises at the sight of the crows on the playground. There is an effect of composition, a heightening of the visual field, just as the trains in *Number Seventeen* introduce another dimension, willy-nilly if you prefer, but regarded as such in the artistic economy of the whole.

At the end of the sequence, Mitch is seen to drive around the bay into town. The delicate line of this idea, which recurs several times and in the last shot, originates in *Vertigo*.

Lydia Brenner (Jessica Tandy) is introduced with two jokes, one in the dialogue and one in the screenplay. She asks Mitch what he’s doing in town, and he says he had to acknowledge a delivery. While she’s reflecting on this, he grins and says, “Mother, I’d like you to meet...” However, Lydia has now taken in his earlier response, and before Mitch can say the name, Lydia asks, “A what?” A couple of lines later, the screenplay reads, “Lydia thinks she understands. This is one of Mitch’s San Francisco chippies.” The enigmatic look on her face is developed from *Psycho*, consciously. This scene and the next tracking shot of the pair outside the Brenner home establish the important resemblance of Lydia and Melanie. After dinner, Melanie sits at the spinet piano under a portrait of Mitch’s father, and plays “a Debussy Arabesque.” Cathy (Veronica Cartwright) discusses Mitch’s work as a lawyer, with a wife-murder story that recalls *Shadow of a Doubt*. Lydia on the phone discusses chickens that won’t eat (the composition of this shot, with Mitch and Melanie seated in the background, is notable).

The relationship between Mitch and his mother is all but telegraphed in the kitchen scene. “I know what I want,” he says, and kisses her on the cheek. He wants a girl just like the girl that married dear old Dad.

The unconsciously passionate dialogue between Mitch and Melanie continues outside, until she drives away and he notices a whole flock of birds sitting on the wires.

The dune scene, which Hunter oddly calls an interpolation (it’s in his script, so he must mean the dialogue changes), originally ended with Melanie whispering into Mitch’s ear what she had planned to teach the mynah bird to say to her old Aunt Tessa, and then, ashamed, suggesting

they go down and join “the other children.” In the film, this is dropped and instead her mother is mentioned (her father runs a newspaper), which causes her to turn away.

Now, as brilliant as all this is, Cathy’s birthday party enters the realm of *El Ángel Exterminador*. The lickety-split editing sets the mark also for the chimney swift scene that follows, and the aftermath, as Lydia picks up the debris, serves as contrast to the slow elaboration of a joke.

Lydia’s come-and-go at Dan Fawcett’s farm is a variant of the *Vertigo* theme and akin to *North by Northwest*. The essence of the scene, which all occurs from her point of view and is very Hitchcockian, comes at the end when she emerges speechless from her pickup truck and pushes Mitch and Melanie apart to pass between them into the house. Later, inside, the two exchange “a long, full kiss.”

Lydia’s expressed fear of being abandoned is the first of two Cocteau themes (*Orphée* is cited at the end when Mitch goes to the garage to find out if there is news on Melanie’s car radio), this being *Les Parents Terribles*. The theme of motherhood is developed in the schoolhouse sequence. Melanie sits outside and smokes a cigarette as the children inside sing an accumulative rhyme, and the crows gather. The broken eyeglasses are perhaps the only reference to *The Battleship Potemkin* in the film (a monologue by Mitch on the revolt of the birds was not used).

There is a curious elision in Hunter’s restaurant scene: one of Miss Bundy’s speeches is left blank, with a note on a vague explanation offered by her, to be obtained from Dr. Stager (presumably this is Kenneth E. Stager, the ornithologist). Miss Bundy picks up the theme by buying a pack of cigarettes from a machine in the restaurant, opening it and lighting one twice. Melanie’s one-two-three-four look at the filling station fire can be traced back through *The Maltese Falcon* to *The Spy in Black* and probably beyond. The continuation of the scene has all the women with their backs to the camera, including Miss Bundy, like Melanie in the dune scene, and a mother becomes hysterical, staring at the camera (Melanie) and raving, “I think you’re evil!” All this is not without dramatic value, and shows the interlocking structures and developments that constitute the form. Annie’s death naturally concludes the sequence.

Now comes the grand attack on the Brenners and Melanie. It begins with Mitch seated at the piano but with his back to it, facing the room. His mother comes in and sits in a small chair against the wall beside the piano. A wide shot shows them in the background on the left, while to the right, Melanie on the sofa is holding a compress to Cathy’s bleeding head. As the birds strike, Mitch jams logs onto the fire. A gull

crashes through the window, he fights it off and pushes it back. His arm is bloodied by gulls pecking at it as he reaches out to close the shutter, agonizingly. Lydia is now comforting Cathy, and both are cowering in a corner (high angle). Mitch puts them in a nearby chair. Lydia grabs his uninjured arm and attempts to stop him from going, but he gently pushes her back and crosses to Melanie, who wants to treat his bloody arm but he waves her back. The shrieking birds are pecking through the door, so he moves a mirrored coat rack against it. The situation is still precarious, so he gets a hammer and nails to secure it. Once he has nailed it the lights go out with a plaintive cry. The attack subsides.

Melanie goes upstairs with a flashlight and is upstairs in Cathy's room. The hole in the ceiling is from *Mrs. Miniver* (and is repeated in the unfilmed continuation of the ending, when the birds tear open the roof of the speeding convertible). The birds attack her, she opens the door a little but is forced against it, fighting ferociously but slowly overcome (the scene may be said to foreshadow *Frenzy* and *Family Plot* in some respects). She calls Mitch's name and softly cries for help.

The final scene has distinctly a flavour of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Mitch is in the driver's seat of Melanie's fast car. Cathy sits in the passenger seat with the lovebirds in their cage on her lap (Mitch's birthday present). Lydia sits behind Mitch cradling Melanie's bandaged head. Melanie is semi-conscious. They drive slowly out through a world of birds standing on the ground, toward the sunlight streaming between clouds, and are lost around a bend in the distance. There is no end title, but a title card has the words A UNIVERSAL RELEASE.

The exact comparison for Shakespearean formality, stylistic ingenuity and magnanimous dispositions of ambiguity is Melville's *Moby Dick*, a thesis no doubt defended countless times.

## Jean-Luc Godard's *Éloge de l'Amour*

This Cantata for Simone Weil has three main advancements. It exhibits a refinement of grammar to the degree that one can speak of punctuation in half-a-dozen places, and even distinguish a period, a comma, an exclamation mark, etc., articulating a virtually seamless, ideally fluid editing, above all of the sound.

Grammar and sound editing; third is a vast or ample reserve of quotation brought to book in three ways: the direct attributed quote (“I don’t seek, I find.” “Picasso?” “Picasso.”). Next, the un-attributed quote, from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* or *Husbands*, say. Finally, and most remarkably, the tacit or vacated allusion, as to Frankenheimer (*The Train*) at the outset, much later to Wilde on American cities, and running throughout a variant of Eliot:

*...I rejoice, having to construct something  
Upon which to rejoice.*

“Every thought should recall the ruin of a smile” (cp. Borges on Whitman), even at the service entrance of a history bought or cajoled from experience.

What is suggested by the colour sequence (“pushed” digital video) is, at first, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, then more clearly films that have another association (*Passion*, *Through a Glass Darkly*, and the television series *As Time Goes By*). This sequence, which by the principles of *Citizen Kane* syntax is also not a flashback, though it takes place DEUX ANS AUPARAVANT and IL Y AVAIT DEUX ANS DÉJÀ (something like Pinter’s *Betrayal*), could be said to affirm the central thesis (love as a structural principle); it throws a dash of salt spray into the wounds.

The rehearsal scenes are an homage to Woody Allen. The Theory of Love presented is akin to the stance of the poet and the Emperor of China. The three ages pose an interesting void (young and old being the subject of a Spielberg & Associates, Inc. takeover, adults remain unaccounted for). Text and song are distinguished, rather as the end of *The Conversation* expresses itself. The swamp of Yugoslavia is sketched impressionistically. “It’s interesting that History has been replaced by Technology, but why Politics by Gospel?” The modern-day Esther exposes herself in front of the Hotel Inter-Continental. René Revel, Gardien de La Paix laid low by the Nazis, is rememorated

(provoking a shorthand résumé of Godard's position on individuals in wartime, comparable to his vision of the Holocaust as an affair of railroad typists), as well as Étienne de la Boétie's *Discours sur la servitude volontaire*. The Confrérie de Notre-Dame...

A battered rowboat christened LA FRANCE LIBRE recalls Fellini's *E La Nave Va*. "Washington is the real captain of the ship," says an American diplomat named Sumner Welles, "Hollywood is the steward."

The discussion of Americas is a blind to obscure the real question: Which America is real, the regime, the commercial presentation, or that other one?

"America has no history, and so it seeks those of others: Vietnam, Sarajevo." This is a theme of recent fiction (see William Golding).

A short piece of film appears to be Adolf Hitler examining concentration camp bodies.

Sight and picture. "A picture, the only thing capable of denying nothingness, is also the sight nothingness has of us."

The Orchestre Rouge. ARCHIVES DE L'AMOUR. Origines et Péguy.

France in the European Union? It belongs with Britain and the United States.

"Rompez, vagues!"

"The measure of love is to love without measure" (St. Augustine).

The Salon.com reviewer said, "Godard has run out of things to say."

**Christopher Mulrooney** has written poems and translations in *Cordite*, *Text*, *Blackmail Press*, *Spring* and *Upstairs at Duroc*, criticism in *The Film Journal*, *Blue Fifth Review* and *Parameter*, and a volume of poetry called *notebook and sheaves*.