
The Threat of the Gothic Patriarchy in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*

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In 1952, Daphne du Maurier, already known for her popular mystery and wartime novels, crafted a sparse tale of ecological revolution and global destruction. “The Birds” confronts readers with a world gone mad, a world in which normally harmless birds unexpectedly begin to attack the human population of Great Britain in a concerted, orchestrated assault. The brief story follows the chilling plight of Nat Hocken and his family as they attempt to fortify their small seaside cottage against a relentless avian siege. The terror of the story comes primarily from the menacing birds, but the inability of the British government to protect its citizens taps into the more realistic fears of its contemporary readers, in light of both the Nazi bombings of World War II and the undefined threats of the newly established Cold War. By filming a loose adaptation of du Maurier’s story in 1963, Alfred Hitchcock reinvented the tale under the guise of a melodramatic romance: instead of a stable, nuclear family, the movie revolves around a middle-aged playboy son and the wealthy and headstrong woman with whom he has fallen in love. However, by retaining du Maurier’s flocks of murderous birds, Hitchcock also created his only supernatural horror film, a movie that crosses the boundary into science fiction and leaves viewers with an uncanny and unresolved conclusion (very much in the tone, if not in the details, of du Maurier’s story). Thus, both du Maurier’s original tale and Hitchcock’s film version depict possible versions of the apocalypse, a world where nature has turned against humanity to cause inexplicable turmoil and carnage.

Much has been made of the ambiguous meaning of the birds themselves,¹ the most obvious and prevalent connection between the film and the original short story, but the greater threat to the protagonist Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) is in fact the human members of the Brenner family, a patriarchal structure presented in the grand tradition of the female Gothic mode by both their family home and the looming portrait of the deceased Frank Brenner. In fact, Christopher D. Morris’ somewhat controversial reading holds that the birds in Hitchcock’s film are little more than a MacGuffin, a “metaphor for reading” that has more to do with representation than interpretation (251); that is, Hitchcock reduces

the terrifying flocks of psychopathic birds to simply a catalyst, an unexplained peripheral phenomenon used to move the Gothic elements of the social drama forward. Instead of relying exclusively on du Maurier's source text, Hitchcock develops a less obvious sense of menace and terror by tapping into the Gothic literary tradition, creating a cinematic adaptation that is more of an assemblage of antecedents rather than the expected effort at one-to-one fidelity.² In the end, Hitchcock avoids a simple translation of du Maurier's story; instead, *The Birds* represents a dark exploration of the modern American Gothic. Although the birds indeed prove a physical danger to Melanie's safety, she is ultimately destroyed as an independent subject not by the monstrous threat of avian horde, but by the imposing power of the entire Brenner family, a patriarchal structure metonymically represented by the ancestral house, a Gothic site that initially appears to be a place of safety.

Of course, by the time of *The Birds*, Hitchcock already had some established experience with Gothic literature, traditionally Gothic narratives, and Gothic themes and imagery. For instance, *Rebecca* (1940), coincidentally based on another text by du Maurier (1938), depicts a quintessential female Gothic narrative, from the curious wife to the imposing mansion to the hidden family secret. Furthermore, although *Notorious* (1946) is not overtly Gothic in its plot structure, much of the film does take place in a daunting mansion that hides many secrets from its imperiled heroine. Finally, *Psycho* (1960), adapted from the 1959 pulp thriller by Robert Bloch, continues to investigate the symbol of the dark and foreboding house, complete with a fractured personality and perhaps Hitchcock's most horrific family secret—a macabre variation on the “madwoman in the attic.” The tenacity of such recognizable images and tropes, from nineteenth-century Romantic literature to twentieth-century horror cinema, has been investigated by Jerrold Hogle: “The longevity and power of Gothic fiction unquestionably stem[s] from the way it helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural, throughout the history of western culture since the eighteenth century” (4). In other words, all four of these films by Hitchcock unabashedly address the psychological underside of the otherwise normal family, reflecting and manifesting contemporary concerns regarding female independence, patriarchal control, family tradition, and the tensions between social classes.

What makes *The Birds* unique among this set of arguably Gothic movies is its ability to challenge both audience expectations regarding a Hitchcock film and the anticipated protocols of the Gothic mode itself, in particular the Gothic tradition of a single monstrous villain. As in du Maurier's short story, the

overt threat—the obvious source of danger—comes from a collective, a horde of monstrous, if diminutive, figures; nevertheless, the avian menace depicted in *The Birds*, particularly the physical attacks against the body and mind of Melanie Daniels, remains inherently Gothic in essence. According to Judith Halberstam, “The Gothic nature of this film lies in its insistence upon the multiplicity of readings for any set of weird phenomena, its seeming persecution of a single female victim, and its apparent alignment of female desire with excess and male desire with both conservatism and monstrosity” (128). Because of the established association between the Gothic and the supernatural, it comes as no surprise that the most popular key to understanding the complex metaphors present in the film lies in linking the birds themselves to established Gothic concerns of femininity, repression, and patriarchal dominance. However, any reading of *The Birds* must be considered in connection with another, equally important Gothic trope instead: the imposing home of the established Gothic patriarchy.

From its inception by Horace Walpole in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the Gothic mode has been defined by rather strict generic protocols, characteristics that must be identified when claiming a particular text to be fundamentally Gothic in nature. According to Hogle, one essential characteristic of the Gothic mode is “an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space” (2), and Charles Perrault establishes a defining element of the Gothic tale to be “a grand, mysterious dwelling concealing the violent, implicitly sexual secrets of this *home fatal*” (qtd. in Williams 38). *The Birds* clearly manifests these expected characteristics of the Gothic, most directly and literally in relation to the space of the Brenner family home on the shores of Bodega Bay. In fact, Eric Savoy argues that “the house is the most persistent site, object, structural analogue, and trope of American gothic’s allegorical turn” (9); and for this reason, a closer investigation of the role of the house in *The Birds* is critical for any thorough understand of the film.

Hitchcock’s other Gothic films each explore the central trope of the “haunted” house, a mysterious location that both directly and indirectly menaces a vulnerable heroine. Anne Williams claims, “The imposing house with a terrible secret is surely one—possibly *the*—‘central’ characteristic of the category ‘Gothic’ in its early years” (39), and the same can be said about Hitchcock’s films that preceded *The Birds*. In *Rebecca*, for example, the imposing mansion of Manderlay plays a central, almost anthropomorphized role. The house represents Rebecca’s lingering influence over the life of Maxim de Winter (Laurence Olivier) and proves to be a site of threat and menace towards the new Mrs. de Winter (Joan Fontaine) because of the ominous behavior of Mrs. Danvers (Judith Anderson). In *Notorious*, the lavish Sebastian home not only conceals the secret activities of exiled Nazi agents

but also becomes the dangerous site where Alicia (Ingrid Bergman) is slowly and systematically poisoned by her husband and her scheming mother-in-law. *Psycho* is the most overtly Gothic of these three films because the looming house of Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) literally hides the desiccated corpse of his mother, whom Norman had murdered and in whose name and guise he continues to kill others. For all three of these movies, then, houses become literal sites of familial secrets and dangerous deceptions.

Yet in each of these examples, Hitchcock has rendered the houses as explicit locations of peril and menace; in *The Birds*, on the other hand, the Brenner home is initially presented as a place of warmth, hospitality, and safety. That is, Manderlay towers above Mrs. de Winter and virtually devours her with its vast rooms, heavy curtains, and chiaroscuro lighting; Alicia is similarly dwarfed by high ceilings and looming antiquated ornamentation; and the dark and obviously phallic Bates house lurks threateningly above the relatively diminutive hotel below. Hitchcock presents things quite differently in *The Birds*. For Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor), his mother's house in Bodega Bay represents a weekend retreat, a stark contrast to the lonely bachelor apartment he keeps in San Francisco. Furthermore, when the audience first sees the house, it appears in the distance across the bay as a large, white structure framed by large trees—an almost idyllic vision of the pastoral made all the more assuring because of its untarnished color. Cinematically, the Brenner house in *The Birds* could hardly be rendered more differently than the Bates' house in *Psycho*: the former is brightly lit, lightly colored, and implicitly inviting, whereas the latter is cloaked in shadows, dark, and fundamentally foreboding. In addition, when Mitch welcomes Melanie into the home, she finds the familial comforts of food, warmth, and a sense of hospitality.

However, once Mitch recognizes the threat posed by the birds, he nails boards across all the doors and windows of his house, making it a fortress and place of refuge, and the concluding sequences of the film chronicle the birds' relentless siege upon those defenses. The familiarity of the "home as castle" thus dramatically shifts into the discomfort of "home as prison."³ In one of the few analogues to du Maurier's story, the Brenners and Melanie cannot leave the protective structure of the house, and they must spend a visibly uncomfortable night cowering in corners or lying in the fetal position on the couch. In other words, Mitch's comfortable home has become decidedly *uncanny*, what Freud defines as "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (124). As *The Birds* progresses, the Brenner house becomes increasingly less familiar to both the film's protagonists and to the viewing audience. For one thing, the boards covering the windows make the once brightly lit location drab

and sinister, an effect that becomes even more Gothic in tone when the power goes out and the characters are forced to use candles. Furthermore, the diegetic soundtrack fills the house with the eerie noises caused by the flocks of birds and their relentless assault on Mitch's external fortifications. Therefore, rather than being associated with the light, warmth, and comfort of the first part of the film, the environment of the house comes to evoke almost primal fears of the dark, fears of impending danger, and fears of being caught in a blind by a menacing threat.

Even though Freud's conception of the *unheimlich* is often used in the investigation of horror cinema, scholars more often apply it to monsters or people rather than the literal home the word in fact evokes; after all, the German term *heimlich* has "home" at its very root. In his review of Daniel Sanders' *Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache*, Freud presents definitions of *heimlich* that include both "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, dear and intimate, homely" (126) and "concealed, kept hidden, so that others do not get to know of it or about it and it is hidden from them" (129). *Unheimlich* is therefore clearly the antonym of the first definition, but it can also be used in opposition to the second; that is, *revealing* the hidden or repressed, "everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open" (Freud 132). In *The Birds*, the Brenner house thus begins the film as a *heimlich* place because of the qualities one normally associates with an archetypal "home"; however, later, because of actions that must be taken in response to the unexplained avian invasion, it becomes literally *unheimlich*, a location antonymic to "home." Nevertheless, and at the same time, it continues to function as a *heimlich* location where the protagonists are concealed and hidden from the birds—but even that perspective becomes *unheimlich* when the family is ultimately forced to emerge from their fortress and flee Bodega Bay.

In the end, the traditional patriarchy of this *unheimlich Heim* proves to be of a greater threat to Melanie than the one posed by the birds themselves. The real peril explored by Hitchcock's *The Birds*, then—and in marked contrast to the physical threat of Nat's family in du Maurier's original tale—is the attack on Melanie's perceived independence and autonomy, not her physical safety.⁴ First of all, Melanie's progressive relationship with the Brenner house recreates the traditional Bluebeard myth. Williams explains how "Bluebeard's secret is the foundation upon which patriarchal culture rests: control of the subversively curious 'female,' personified in his wives" (41). The Brenner home similarly represents a patriarchal legacy, a legacy once controlled by Frank Brenner, but now managed by his widow Lydia (Jessica Tandy). Melanie invades that space initially through curiosity and mischievousness and later by directly threatening the established,

and implicitly Oedipal, patriarchy. The first instance of transgression occurs when Melanie boldly enters the home through the unlocked front door, trespassing into the domestic space of the Brenners in her secret quest to give Cathy (Veronica Cartwright) a pair of lovebirds for her birthday. Then, on her return trip across the bay, Melanie is inexplicably attacked by a seagull, an event that notably follows her act of invasion. The bird swoops down at her head, drawing scarlet blood and marking her as a transgressive woman.

Later in the film, Hitchcock makes the active antagonistic force of the Brenner family explicitly clear: the possessive and needy Lydia. When Melanie next invades the Brenner house, this time at the invitation of Mitch, the paranoid Lydia stringently objects. Annie (Suzanne Pleshette) will later attempt to explain the older woman's behavior towards Melanie: although she isn't possessive or in love with her son, "with all respect to Oedipus," she is obsessively worried about being abandoned and left behind. However, by invoking Oedipus, the dialogue is clearly drawing audience attention towards the very psychological condition Annie is trying to discount. Granted, Mitch is not trying to take the place of his deceased father in any literal, sexual sense, but the relationship between Lydia and her son *does* represent a similar "unnatural" family construction. As in *Psycho*, the mother figure wants to possess her son, forcing him to take and maintain the place of the missing father by keeping other female interests at bay. This "reverse Oedipal" dynamic manifests when the possessive mother kills, destroys, or drives away any woman who would presume to take her place at the side of her son; in other words, this Oedipal mother wants to be in the position of her own daughter-in-law. In *Psycho*, the psychological manifestation of Norman's mother prevents him from replacing her; in *The Birds*, Lydia drives Annie away and is openly hostile towards Melanie. In both cases, the status quo becomes most important—the family must remain the way it is, with the son, ideally, acting in the role of the absent father (i.e., the displaced patriarchy).

However, Annie's other admonition to Melanie about Mitch's mother does prove correct: Lydia wants her family to remain with her in their home. Williams emphasizes that the story of Bluebeard "suggests how a 'central term' of Gothic, the 'haunted castle,' may be read as a complex metaphor for the structures of cultural power (whether private or public, sexual, political, or religious) and for the gender arrangements such institutions both found and mirror" (47). For Lydia, her house represents the old power dynamic that had existed when her husband was alive; by equating her existent matriarchal power with her husband's absent patriarchal power, the very structure of the house itself acts as a metaphor for the Brenner family "institution" and Mitch's place within it. This fundamentally

Gothic rendition of unstable family dynamics appears somewhat famously in Hitchcock's earlier films, but in *The Birds*, the menace shifts, at least symbolically, from the mother to the (absent) father.⁵ Lydia remains as the active steward of the family in the wake of her husband's death; because the "house" represents Frank's now impotent patriarchal authority, Lydia's presences functions as a form of haunting. In other words, despite Lydia's powerful maternal force, the power play at the heart of *The Birds* is really primarily about the patriarchy. That is, Lydia isn't acting completely on her own, despite her own compelling desire and rash actions to possess her son, so much as she is maintaining an illusion that things haven't changed for the family at all. She is acting for and on behalf of the missing patriarch to preserve the Brenner "house," a house that represents both the physical dwelling and the Brenner (i.e., the male) family line.

As in other Gothic stories, the house in *The Birds* thus plays a dual role. Williams explains how "the house embodies the family history [and] reminds us that the word 'house' has two meanings relevant to Gothic fictions—it refers both to the building itself and to the family line" (45). In other words, Lydia's home functions as both a physical setting and as a metonym for the Brenner lineage. Lydia wants to preserve the "house" the way it is: she methodically cleans up whenever anything falls out of place, as the tense sequence following the sparrow attack through the fireplace illustrates. As the investigating sheriff discusses the uncanny avian assault with Mitch, Lydia methodically collects the remnants of her shattered tea service. In addition, as has already been established, Lydia strives to keep Mitch close and isolated within the family by running off potential mates like Annie and Melanie. Her obsessive desire to control the future of the family even at the risk of preventing the continuation of the family line through Mitch manifests her compulsion to usurp and then continue the patriarchal control that seems to have existed when Frank was alive. Furthermore, most of the action that takes place in the Brenner house occurs in the living room, appropriately enough around the "family hearth" of the fireplace, and it is in that room where a stern portrait of Frank Brenner hangs.

The portrait of Frank represents both the family order that once was and the man whom Mitch is supposed to become; most of all, it represents the lost past. Savoy emphasizes how Edgar Allan Poe regularly used the face of the dead ancestor to represent a conflict between the actual face of the dead and "its allegorization of this gaze as an act of intuitive, incomplete historical reconstruction" (13). In other words, the "face of the tenant"—be it a corpse, a ghost, or a portrait—stands as a reminder of the past and can impose a sometimes terrible onus on the living members of the family. Such family portraits play an almost pivotal role

in the tradition of the American Gothic, particularly in one of the most famous stories of familial dysfunction, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). In Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, the scowling portrait of Colonel Pyncheon lords over his destitute scions, reminding them of their failure to realize his dreams of wealth and representing the family's lost land claim. In the fitting and symbolic resolution to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Holgrave reveals the now worthless cache hidden behind the painting, and "the portrait, frame and all, tumbled suddenly from its position, and lay face downward on the floor" (315-316). The symbol of the extinct patriarchy, the "ghost of the tenant," literally falls, and the new Pyncheon family line, created by the union of Phoebe with her familial enemy Holgrave, triumphs over the lingering power of the displaced patriarchy, and a kind of "happy ending" can result.

The Birds explores this use of prosopopoeia through the portrait of Mitch's father in a way similar to the one depicted by Hawthorne. After the sparrows from the fireplace destroy the precise order of the living room, the portrait hangs at an oblique angle—Frank Brenner's realm has been disturbed, set off kilter—and the camera perspective clearly emphasizes Lydia's attempt to straighten the frame. In other words, Lydia once again tries to stand in for and preserve the traditional patriarchy, rather than establishing a new sense of matriarchal control. Yet instead of allowing Lydia to succeed in righting the portrait or having it fall from the wall, Hitchcock has a dead bird tumble from the top of the frame, which startles Lydia, who then lets the picture return to its crooked angle. At that moment, Melanie finally speaks up, offering to stay the night and presumptively taking Cathy upstairs to go to bed. The disturbance of Frank's patriarchal family order, as symbolized by his crooked portrait, is thus tied directly to Melanie's intrusion into the family and her attempted usurpation of Lydia. At this point in the film, then, Lydia's own matriarchal power is demonstrated to be in decline; Melanie is indeed working her way into Mitch's life, and the disrupted portrait emphasizes the dead Frank's patriarchal dissatisfaction with both the situation and Lydia's inability to do anything about it.

The growing threat of Frank's symbolic power is emphasized again later, as the besieged family wait tensely in the living room for the assault by the birds to begin: Lydia and Mitch sit around the piano directly beneath the portrait, whereas Melanie and Cathy huddle together on the couch in front of the fire. This blocking of the scene underscores not only Lydia's tie to the past and her attempted dominance of her son but also the threat Melanie poses by luring Cathy away from the dead patriarch. Furthermore, even though Mitch is a lawyer, when he is at home, he "is always a spectator, rarely an object or subject; he is subsumed, as Lydia tells him,

by the portrait of his father who represents the real law in the house, the law of oedipal desire” (Halberstam 133). In other words, even after the initial assault on the home by the birds, the portrait of Frank continues to represent the authority of the old patriarchy of the home, hanging, albeit crookedly, in open defiance of both the birds and of Melanie.

Melanie’s curiosity gets her into trouble one last and terrible time when she chooses to explore the upstairs of the house alone the night of the birds’ orchestrated assault on the Brenner house.⁶ Being the only one still awake, a condition that clearly separates her from the Brenners and codes her as an outsider, Melanie picks up an overtly phallic flashlight and cautiously climbs the stairs to search out the source of some strange noises. Robin Wood explains that Melanie goes upstairs alone to investigate the sounds of the birds because “on a level just below the conscious, Melanie retains the sense, despite all she has been through, that nothing very awful will happen to *her*: she retains, that is, a residuum of complacency which has yet to be beaten out of her” (170). Melanie acts independent and autonomous for the last time, and the fate awaiting her upstairs is foreshadowed by a high-angle shot down the stairs that recalls the menace created by a similar investigation of the house in *Psycho*. Furthermore, by moving from the relatively public rooms on the main floor into the intimate space of the sleeping rooms, Melanie is again transgressing her relationship with the family, moving on her own accord from the space of social discourse to one of sexual intercourse. Most importantly, she discovers the sounds are coming from Cathy’s room. Symbolically, the young girl represents the point of weakness in the house’s defenses: the birds break in through the ceiling of her room, just as Melanie “broke into” the family largely thanks to her connection with Cathy.

Once inside the intimate space of Cathy’s bedroom—ultimately revealed to be the true “heart” of the house, as Cathy ends up binding the family together even more than the portrait of Frank—Melanie is relentlessly assaulted by bird after psychotic bird. By the time Mitch can rescue her, the future patriarchal authority to the rescue of the now helpless female figure, Melanie is virtually mute and essentially blind because of her hysterics and apparent hallucinations. Margaret Horwitz reads blindness as both a symbol of castration and a clear reference to the original Oedipus myth (284); after Melanie survives “an attack on her subjectivity” by the swarming birds, she regains her consciousness but not her sight, illustrating how “Melanie has been ‘castrated,’ or in other words reduced to a state of helpless impotence analogous to that of a child” (285). Furthermore, Melanie’s fingernails “are one indication of her power—her claws, to use bird imagery,” and by the end of the film, they are visibly chipped and unpolished: “she has been declawed,

rendered impotent, castrated” (Horwitz 285). By invading the intimate spaces of the Brenner home, Melanie has had her threat of female autonomy crushed by powers beyond her control; she has lost the phallus (evinced as well by her dropping of the flashlight), lost her subjectivity, and been reduced to one more child for Lydia to take care of—the only relationship the matriarch seems willing to have with Melanie.⁷

The Birds thus ends ambiguously, with the newly constituted family driving slowly off into the distance through the massed flocks of waiting birds. In Lee Edelman’s description of the film’s ending, he notes how “in a landscape that pulses with volatile birds, they pack themselves into Melanie’s car still clinging, albeit desperately, to hope, that thing with feathers, in the form of the lovebirds that Cathy refuses to leave behind: hope, that is, for the future—for the *reproductive* future—that Cathy and the lovebirds together ought normally to guarantee” (253).⁸ This rather optimistic reading of the resolution ignores the telling staging of the characters in the car and the behavior between Lydia and Melanie. First, Mitch is driving, even though it is Melanie’s car; in other words, the patriarch figure has (finally) taken control and intends to determine the destiny of the family. Second, Melanie is now in the back seat, relegated to an inferior status behind even Cathy, who sits next to Mitch in the front. Finally, Lydia cradles the silent Melanie in her arms, almost happily doting upon her as an infant rather than as the woman who had earlier threatened to take her son away from her.⁹

In other words, Melanie—and in a way, the entire Brenner family—has simply moved from one cage to another, and by co-opting her car, Mitch has turned the vehicle into another, equally oppressive version of the patriarchal house. With Melanie’s fire, her independent spirit, sufficiently quelled, the physical structure seems to have served its purpose; instead, a new family unit has been formed with Mitch replacing Lydia as its domineering head. In other words, Mitch’s own patriarchal authority has not only replaced Lydia’s insufficient matriarchal one, it has also supplanted that represented by his father’s portrait, which is logically, and tellingly, left behind. Halberstam sums up the implications of this tableau in the car: “Throughout the film [Melanie] has actively and aggressively pursued Mitch much to the disapproval of his mother and now finally she is completely under his power and his mother has become her mother as she becomes infantile” (131). In the end, therefore, rather than protecting her from the physical threat of the birds, the Brenner home (that is, both the physical dwelling and the family unit) has effected Melanie’s virtual destruction.

Unlike du Maurier’s short story, Hitchcock’s *The Birds* does more than simply relate a series of frightening supernatural events; at its core, the movie manifests

anxieties concerning the independence of women and the threat that autonomy ultimately means for the traditional, patriarchal family. The birds themselves can be, and have been, read as a metonymical representation of the power of the misogynistic patriarchy, and their behavior certainly contributes to the cowering of Melanie Daniels. However, the unexplained presence of the birds, a presence so central to the plot and meaning of du Maurier's story, can also be read as simply a MacGuffin, a plot device used by Hitchcock to catalyze one of his favorite narrative themes: the destructive force of the patriarchy via a domineering maternal figure. In other words, when *The Birds* is read through the lens of Gothic fiction, the Brenner house itself functions as a symbolic location for familial authority and so-called traditional gender roles. In fact, Melanie becomes a feckless Gothic heroine, trapped in her own modern-day version of the Bluebeard myth—with the misguided and possessive Lydia acting on behalf of the dead patriarchy—and her curiosity and independence lead her first to transgress the dynamics of Lydia's family and finally to be punished for such behavior. Melanie enters the Brenner home as both an independent woman and a threat to Oedipal stasis; she leaves the house an infantilized and passive child. Her integration into the family has indeed been assured, but as one of Lydia's children rather than as a rival for Mitch's attention.

Notes

¹ For example, Tony Magistrale claims, "the natural order rebels supernaturally until Melanie's transgression against the gender structure is corrected, and she reassumes her 'rightful place' in the patriarchal order" (78); and Margaret Horwitz similarly argues, "The birds' aggressive behavior is a displacement for maternal possessiveness (exemplified by Lydia Brenner) to which Melanie poses a threat" and that "the bird attacks function primarily as extensions of Lydia's hysterical fear of losing her son, Mitch" (279).

² For more explanation and discussion of my theory of assemblage adaptation, see my "Assemblage Filmmaking: Approaching the Multi-Source Adaptation and Reexamining Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*."

³ In the words of Robin Wood, "the house becomes a cage ... a sunless box, in which the prisoners must come to terms with themselves and each other or finally succumb to the birds; and perhaps must die anyway" (168).

⁴ I use the term "perceived" here because although Melanie appears to do what she wants and go where she wishes, her opulent lifestyle and spontaneous behavior are made possible by her father's wealth. In the larger scheme, then, Melanie is already a prisoner to the patriarchy before the film even begins. However, she *thinks* of herself as free and independent, and her systematic cowering over the course of the narrative thus demonstrates the power of the Gothic patriarchy to destroy her perception as well as her reality.

⁵ In *Rebecca* and *Notorious*, the threats to the new, young wives are almost exclusively matriarchal ones—the mothers (or the mother figures) and their maternal relationships with

their sons are the core problems. *Psycho* presents a similar structure, although in the case of Mrs. Bates, the mother exists only on a psychological level through Norman.

⁶ Before this scene takes place, a dissolve replaces Melanie and Mitch with a shot of the house's fireplace: "They appear to be consumed by the fire. This dissolve indicates that the configuration of Mitch and Melanie as a couple must be destroyed and that this action is somehow related to Lydia" (Horwitz 284). The superimposition foreshadows the film's climax and underscores the destructive potential of Lydia's familial authority.

⁷ Although it is beyond the scope of this investigation, the metatextual parallels between Melanie's loss of subjectivity and Hedren's own experiences at the controlling hands of Hitchcock himself are both fascinating and disturbing. As Donald Spoto points out, Hitchcock took over all aspects of Hedren's life during the shooting of *The Birds*, and the scene in the upstairs bedroom became a reality for the young actress, with days of being attacked by live birds resulting in a real-life psychological breakdown that mirrored the one suffered by Melanie in the film (484-485).

⁸ Bernard F. Dick makes an even more astounding claim regarding the film's conclusion:

The perverse ending makes it clear that everyone gets what he or she wants, except for Annie, the only truly tragic character in the film. As Mitch, Cathy, Lydia, and the bandaged and traumatized Melanie prepare to leave for San Francisco, conceding victory to the birds, Lydia holds Melanie against her. For the first time, Lydia looks benign, even maternal—not because she has accepted the idea that her son would marry, but because she knows he is not going to marry Melanie, who is obviously going to need plastic surgery, if not psychotherapy. (244)

⁹ Horwitz emphasizes how Melanie is relegated to the role of a child by the end of the film, implying that "Lydia and Mitch are 'reunited'; now they have two 'children.' It is as if Mother is in the back seat with the younger child who is sick, while Father, in the front seat, drives with the older child next to him" (286).

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