Critics have argued that Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963) is exemplary in depicting male aggression against a female protagonist.\(^1\) *The Birds* lends itself to such a discussion, particularly the initial portion of the film which concentrates on the conflict between Mitch Brenner and Melanie Daniels.\(^2\) However, conflict among the female characters is equally important in *The Birds*, especially in the relationship between Melanie and Lydia Brenner (Mitch’s mother). Indeed the centrality of the mother’s role in the film makes it possible to consider *The Birds* as the middle film of a trilogy including *Psycho* (1960) and *Marnie* (1964).

I believe that in *The Birds*, as in *Psycho*, the heroine is punished by the hero’s mother because of the heroine’s desirability to him. This process is a result of the male character’s inability to successfully resolve an Oedipal relationship. In *Psycho* the mother and son are united in the character of Norman, whose psychotic behavior is revealed and explicated at the end of the film. *The Birds* is interesting precisely because it contains no such resolution.

In fact *The Birds* cannot be fully explained at a manifest level because of a process of distortion deriving from a latent level and appearing in the text as the supernatural—namely, the wild birds. For this reason a psychoanalytic model is most appropriate. My contention is that the birds’ aggressive behavior is a displacement for maternal possessiveness (exemplified by Lydia Brenner) to which Melanie poses a threat. In this view, the bird attacks function primarily as extensions of Lydia’s hysterical fear of losing her son, Mitch.

There is no suggestion that Mitch’s relationship with his mother is actually incestuous, but they do operate as a “couple” throughout the film. With Melanie’s arrival in Bodega Bay the narrative seems to pose the question, “Who will be Mitch’s ‘wife’?” Throughout *The Birds* the characters assume shifting roles within an Oedipal family configuration.

The film initially establishes a three-way female rivalry over Mitch between Annie Hayworth (the schoolteacher), Melanie, and Lydia. Annie’s jealousy is quite apparent during her first meeting with Melanie, directly pre-
ceding the sequence where Melanie surreptitiously enters the Brenner home and is then attacked by a sea gull. Annie correctly assumes that the lovebirds Melanie wished to give Cathy (Mitch’s adolescent sister) are some kind of sexual exchange between Mitch and Melanie. As Melanie drives away Annie’s intense gaze follows her. This dissolves to a shot of Melanie’s hand writing a note “To Cathy” (which she will place next to the birdcage in the Brenner house).

As the film progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the central conflict is between Lydia and Melanie. When Melanie meets Lydia for the first time in a cafe, a few minutes after Melanie has been attacked by the gull, similarities in their hairstyles and clothing are evident which heighten our sense of their rivalry over Mitch. Lydia is obviously displaced when Mitch invites Melanie to dinner during this sequence which ends on Lydia’s reflective gaze.

At this point it is possible to retroactively consider the first “bird attack”—a gull deliberately swoops down on Melanie in her boat—as an expression of Lydia’s jealousy. Better yet, we might see it as a kind of relay from Annie to Lydia, since this same sort of transference initiates the bird assault during Cathy’s birthday party.

I suggest that the wild birds are the expression of a form of “surveillance” built into the structure of the transitions between sequences in the film. The dissolve from Annie’s face to Melanie’s hand at the end of their first meeting links Annie’s house to the Brenner house, Melanie’s destination. And Lydia’s gaze, which ends her first meeting with Melanie, dissolves to a shot of Melanie returning to Annie’s house (opening a scene during which Melanie and Annie notice wild birds flying overhead). It is as if Lydia “followed” Melanie back, the birds functioning as an extension of her look.

In almost every case the transitions between sequences are initiated by the glance of female characters and operate to connect these characters across time and space in the narrative. Significantly, such transitions precede virtually all of the fourteen instances where the wild birds appear to us in Bodega Bay prior to the final sequence of the film. This provides further evidence for the link between female characters and the birds.

Transitions:
1. Annie at mailbox. Dissolve to CU of Melanie’s hands as she writes note, “To Cathy.”
   - Gull attack on Melanie in boat.
2. CU of Lydia’s face in restaurant. Dissolve to Melanie walking through Annie’s gate.
   - Birds flying over Annie’s porch.
   - Sound of birds as Melanie gets out of her car.
4. CU of Lydia’s face in the kitchen. Dissolve to Mitch and Melanie walking to her car.
   - Birds on telephone wires.
5. Mitch walking to the house, his back to the camera. Dissolve to Melanie entering Annie’s house.
   - Bird on the porch.
6. Melanie and Annie on either side of the door. Fade to Mitch and Melanie walking up the hill.
   - Attack on the birthday party.
7. Two little girls between Mitch and Melanie after the birthday party attack. Dissolve to Lydia looking out window.
   - Attack of birds through the fireplace.
8. Melanie at window watching Lydia leave in the truck. Dissolve to LS of Lydia’s truck arriving at Fawcett farm.
   - Discovery of Dan Fawcett’s body (and dead birds).
9. Lydia’s face as she lies down. Dissolve to Melanie in her car driving up to the school.
   - Attack on school children.
10. Melanie at the steering wheel of a car after the attack on the school children. Dissolve to Melanie talking to her father on the phone at the cafe.
    - Attack on the gas station and telephone booth.
11. Birds filling the sky after the gas station attack. Fade to Mitch and Melanie walking up to the school.
    - Discovery of Annie’s body (crows on the house and school grounds).
12. Melanie, Cathy, and Mitch in the car outside Annie’s. Dissolve to Brenner house, track to Mitch boarding it up (with Melanie’s assistance).
    - Flocks of birds fly in the distance.
13. CU of Melanie looking up at the birds. Dissolve to Lydia sitting to the right of the piano.
    - Attack on the Brenner house.
14. Mitch and Melanie in the foreground. Lydia and Cathy in the background. Dissolve to fire in the fireplace; cut to Lydia on piano bench.
    - Attack on Melanie.

The wild birds function as a kind of malevolent female superego, an indirect revelation of Lydia’s character. She is a possessive mother, intent upon furthering a symbiotic, Oedipal relationship with her son. During the final bird attack on the Brenner home Lydia grasps at Mitch’s arm in a manner identical to the way in which the gulls had just attacked him.

There is no suggestion, as there might be in a science fiction film, that she has control over the birds. But the wild birds call up associations which point to their suitability as a displacement of energy from Lydia. They are evocative of the mythological “Harpies,” which were depicted as flying creatures, part bird
and part woman, armed with hooked beaks and claws. The birds also call to mind "Furies," which were represented as female "avenging spirits" who punished moral transgression.

From the beginning of the film, when Melanie lets a canary loose in a pet shop, birds are associated with female hysteria and destructiveness. But the appearance of the wild birds is more specifically linked to maternal anxiety which seeks to punish any form of sexual expression. Melanie's real "crime" has nothing to do with her pranks; rather it is her desirability to and desire for Mitch, since this threatens to upset the equilibrium Mitch and Lydia have as a "couple."

Mitch's relationship with his mother has the Oedipal double edge of child/husband. The postal clerk confuses Melanie by referring to Lydia "and the two children," meaning Mitch and Cathy. Mitch spends every weekend at home and calls his mother "dear" and "darling." Their scene alone together in the kitchen during Melanie's first evening at the Brenner house has strong domestic overtones (Mitch dries the dishes). During this scene, Lydia questions Mitch about the propriety of Melanie's conduct, bringing up a gossip column rumor that Melanie had jumped nude into a fountain in Rome the previous summer.

In the next scene Mitch acts as a relay for Lydia, using the statements she made to him to "cross-examine" Melanie who sits in her car like a defendant in a witness box. But there is also a sexual double entendre in their banter; Mitch is clearly interested in Melanie. We hear the ominous sounds of bird calls during this conversation, and at the end of the sequence Mitch suddenly notices birds lined up on the telephone wires behind him. Lydia's jealousy, poetically understated to Mitch during the kitchen sequence, erupts at this point in the gathering of birds who survey the scene.

Interestingly, the film actually refers to the Oedipal formulation of the Brenner family, only to deny it. Annie tells Melanie in the next sequence, "Maybe there's never been anything between Mitch and any girl," but then asserts that Lydia is not a "jealous woman," nor a "possessive mother . . . with all due respect to Oedipus." However, her explanation of Lydia's behavior remains unconvincing and confusing. Again we see how a psychoanalytic model is helpful, since the text denies (repressed) contradictions to which it cannot admit at a conscious level. Lydia's jealousy is expressed instead through the bird assaults which become increasingly vicious as Mitch and Melanie grow closer. Two of these scenes in particular bear close examination for the ways in which a connection between the birds and maternal possessiveness can be inferred: Cathy's birthday party and the final attack of the film which is against Melanie alone.

Just prior to the birthday party Mitch jokingly tells Melanie, "You need a mother's care, my child." This leads to a serious exchange between the two which is quite telling:

Melanie: You know what a mother's love is?
Mitch: Yes, I do.
Melanie: You mean it's better to be ditched?
Mitch: No, I think it's better to be loved.

We sense that Melanie's compulsive joke playing is a reaction to her mother's abandonment of her (cf. *Marnie*, where the mother is the cause of her daughter's antisocial behavior). Melanie's lines suggest how iniquitous "motherly love" is in this film.

The camera pans with Mitch and Melanie as they walk together down the hill to the birthday party; it stops on Annie who reacts with a grimace at the sight of them together. Annie turns to look at Lydia, then there is a closer shot of Lydia as she looks in the direction of Mitch and Melanie. As she leaves the frame, we cut back to Annie glancing at the sky as a child's voice cries, "Look, look!" We see a shot from Annie's point of view of a bird, followed by a shot of the bird striking Cathy against the head. Cathy, blindfolded while playing a children's game, says, "No touching allowed." This sequence of events leads to a particularly violent assault upon the children. Significantly, it is preceded by a relay of looks from Annie to Lydia (both of whom are obviously jealous).

Why is Cathy attacked in the party sequence? I believe she is being punished specifically for her insistence that Melanie come to the party and in general for encouraging Melanie's continued presence in Bodega Bay. Indeed, Cathy's function as a character is crucial in driving the narrative forward. Mitch goes into the pet shop where he first meets Melanie to purchase lovebirds for Cathy. Melanie goes to Bodega Bay to deliver the birds "To Mitchell Brenner," as she writes on an envelope, before deciding ultimately to give them "To Cathy." In order to find out Cathy's name Melanie makes her first trip to the schoolhouse and meets Annie. Because of this gift, Cathy immediately befriends Melanie when she comes to dinner and convinces her, through Mitch, to stay for the party.

In fact, a second question the narrative poses is "Who will be Cathy's 'mother'?" Lydia and Melanie alternate during the film in assuming a mother's role toward Cathy. This conflict is of course connected to the first question of which woman, Lydia or Melanie, will be Mitch's "wife." Throughout the film there is a play between Mitch/Melanie and Cathy as a family (especially when Annie's body is found), and Mitch/Lydia and Cathy (with Melanie as a threat to that structure).

In addition to Cathy being punished for befriending Melanie, something along the lines of a malicious initiation rite is going on at the children's party. It is Cathy's eleventh birthday party and also her entry into puberty. For Lydia she is "a child" even though earlier Cathy asks Melanie, with respect to the lovebirds, "Is there a man and a woman?" That is, she is beginning to wonder about sexual identity. At the party there is a double meaning in Cathy's response when the bird strikes her, "No touching allowed." She believes another
child has hit her. But at another level, it is an oblique reference to Melanie and Mitch who are at the same moment walking together as a pair.

More importantly, Cathy is blindfolded. There is a sense that the perverse mother's love portrayed in this film is responsible for a kind of castration of both men and women, boys and girls. And loss of sight is a customary figure for castration. The bird attacks in the film often take place against objects associated with vision—windows, glasses, windshields, a telephone booth. During one attack Mitch says to Lydia, Melanie, and Cathy, "Cover your eyes." Later, a little girl's glasses are broken in an assault upon the schoolchildren. This notion of castration is certainly implied by the death of Dan Fawcett, whose plucked-out eyes are evocative of the original, mythological Oedipal figure. (Perhaps Lydia's discovery of Fawcett is a vision of her relationship with Mitch carried to its logical conclusion.) Furthermore, Melanie effectively loses her sight at the end of the film.

In the cafe scene which follows the attack on the schoolchildren Lydia is absent, but her role is appropriated by another woman—also a mother. Like Lydia she has two children, a boy and a girl, and no husband, and she holds her children under her arms (wings) like a mother hen. Female hysteria is again connected with the wild birds, since her anxious departure from the cafe precedes a bird attack on the gas station. It is this woman, again acting in place of Lydia, who afterwards literally attacks Melanie as the "cause of all this," and screams at her, "You're evil, evil!"

In a sense Melanie is the cause since the entire narrative moves toward punishing her. The first and last bird assaults are against Melanie, the final one being a conclusion promised throughout the narrative. The attack on Melanie, which takes place upstairs in the Brenner house when she goes to investigate the sound of bird wings, takes on the nature of an obligatory scene. When Melanie enters the room and points her flashlight at the bed off of which the birds arise, we see that there are crows and sea gulls. Both species of birds are consumed by the fire. This dissolve indicates that this action is somehow related to Lydia. The firelight reflected on Lydia's face in the first shot further strengthens this connection.

The transition into the "Melanie attack" sequence is significant. A shot of Melanie and Mitch (standing in the foreground) and Lydia and Cathy (in the background) dissolves to one of a fire burning in the fireplace. The fire is on the left-hand side of the frame, just where Melanie and Mitch were standing in the first shot. 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. The firelight reflected on Lydia's face in the first shot further strengthens this connection.

In this regard the attack on Melanie in the upstairs bedroom can be compared to the shower scene in Psycho. Norman is acting out the role of his mother, jealous of his desire for another woman, when he stabs Marion to death. Similarly, the birds can be seen as an expression of Lydia's jealousy. Melanie does not die but is badly injured by the birds who swoop at her in a fashion very much like the thrusts of Norman's knife.

Melanie loses consciousness as a result of this final assault by the birds. This sequence, like many others in The Birds, is based on point-of-view cutting between Melanie's glance and the object of her glance. In a deep sense, then, the final assault against Melanie is an attack on her subjectivity.

We know that in this film loss of sight is a kind of castration, which is exactly its import here. When Melanie first regains consciousness she cannot see at all and strikes out blindly at Mitch. Later Mitch comes into the house to take her, Lydia, and Cathy out to the car. He sits down next to Melanie who does not respond but stares blankly ahead. Melanie's head is bandaged just above her eyes. She has to be led from the house. In a tone of voice suggesting insanity, she says, "No, no," reacting to a sight which jars her out of her stupor—wild birds covering the porch and yard of the Brenner home.

This makes for an interesting comparison with Marnie. Marnie's cure is expected to be ultimately beneficial, but in the process she regresses, actually speaking in a child's voice. Melanie is also reduced to the state of a child—like another Cathy. In fact Melanie is attacked in Cathy's bedroom where the birds have broken in through the roof. Moreover, Melanie is only discovered because Mitch and Lydia are looking for Cathy. Lydia calls, "Is Cathy there?" as Melanie finally succumbs to the attack and falls to the floor. In a sense the answer to that question is yes since Melanie has been "castrated," or in other words reduced to a state of helpless impotence analogous to that of a child.

All of the things which make her an adult woman—which make her desirable, capable of desire, hence powerful from Lydia's point of view—have been destroyed. The immediate result of each bird attack, from the very first one in the boat, is that Melanie's perfect coiffure is disarrayed. Her impeccable grooming, her poise, her beauty are systematically destroyed in the course of the film. Before the last attack on the Brenner house we see that her expensive dress is smudged, she wears no lipstick, her hair is no longer perfectly arranged. In the final assault against her this process is completed: her face, arms, and legs are badly cut, her hair is pulled away, and her clothes are torn.

The film especially draws attention to her fingernails. From the opening scene in the pet shop in San Francisco to the point at which she opens the door to Cathy's room before the brutal assault, the redness of her nails is prominent. By contrast, when Melanie sits next to Lydia in the car at the end, a closeup of her hand on Lydia's reveals that Melanie's nails are chipped and without polish. Her fingernails are one indication of her power—her claws, to use bird imagery. By the close of the film, she has been declawed, rendered impotent, castrated.

Melanie's loss of power is also figured through her car. Initially it gave her
the power to come to Bodega Bay, which in turn enabled her to form a couple with Mitch. When she and Mitch go to the schoolhouse for Cathy and find Annie dead, Mitch ends up driving Melanie's car. At the film's conclusion she is banished to the back seat, joined by Lydia.

What kind of a resolution is this? The lovebirds, Melanie's gift through which Lydia and Mitch's relationship was first threatened, are brought along at the last minute through Cathy's persuasion: this suggests that the element of conflict is still present. Furthermore, the wild birds have not been brought under control and we are uncertain whether they will attack again.

On the other hand it is clear 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. And Lydia certainly appears victorious when confronted with Melanie's traumatization. Only now does Lydia smile at her and hug her in response to Melanie's eyes searching Lydia's face like those of a grateful child. Significantly, Lydia is the only manipulation character who has not been personally attacked, who emerges unscathed. The last shot of the car driving away can be considered a point-of-view shot from the perspective of the birds, underlining the impression that they have (Lydia has) achieved dominance.

Notes


2. Note that Bellour and Bergstrom have analyzed early sequences in Bodega Bay.

3. The same assumption is later made by Lydia; both women respond knowingly, "I see," when told that the birds are lovebirds.

4. Bellour, in "The Birds: Analysis of a Sequence," describes the first attack on Melanie by a sea gull as "the symbolic punishment which strikes her in Mitch's look in the metaphorical form of the killer birds" (p. 19). Bergstrom, referring to this Bellour article in her "Enunciation and Sexual Difference (Part I)," comments, "Why this should be the effect of Melanie's gift (of the lovebirds) is given only a veiled explanation" (p. 47). Bellour had referred to the "indiscipline" in Melanie's "look," but neither he nor Bergstrom offers a wholly sufficient account of why the gull represents Mitch.

7. Melanie's and (the pet shop saleswoman) Mrs. MacGruder's cries sound like bird cries. When Mitch returns the bird to its cage he says, "Back in your gilded cage, Melanie Daniels." This is significant since we learn in the same scene that Melanie is a practical joker who has had to appear before a judge, and Mitch, who is a criminal lawyer, tells her she should have been "put behind bars." Also, the prank for which Melanie had to appear in court resulted in the breaking of a window—a clear connection to the destructiveness of the birds later on and another link between Melanie and Lydia.
8. Annie says Lydia "is not afraid of losing Mitch," only of "being abandoned," and that Mitch "had just been through a lot with Lydia after his father died," and "didn't want to risk going through it all again."

9. In some sense Mitch functions from the beginning of the film as Cathy's "father." He wants to obtain lovebirds for her which are neither "too demonstrative" nor "too aloof," but "just friendly." Regardless of what age he is meant to be he appears old enough to be her father. Yet

one could argue that there is a "construction" of the father taking place through Mitch's dead father's portrait to which he is only slowly introduced. It is alluded to by Melanie and Mitch during Lydia's phone conversation with Brinkmeyer and visible merely in portions during Melanie's conversation with Cathy at the piano. It is seen fully and at an angle only after a bird attack in the Brenner living room. It assumes significance in a later attack on their home when Mitch rests on the piano bench under the portrait as Lydia sits in a chair next to him. Prior to this scene Lydia, very much the hysterical wife, screams, "If only your father were here." One could argue that Mitch is being pulled in the direction of becoming the "image" of his father, i.e., Lydia's "husband," at the same time he is developing a relationship with Melanie.

10. Stephen Heath, in his article "Difference," cites Freud, who notes the "substitutive relation between the eye and the male organ...in dreams and myths and phantasies," giving the Lady Godiva legend as an example of "blinding castration" punishment, Screen, vol. 19, no. 3 (1978): 87. If we reformulate this to another correlation, namely that between vision and power, we can understand blindness as a figure of castration for both males and females.

11. Jacqueline Rose writes that one should "note that in this moment, all the men have been evicted from the image which shows the group of women crowded together as the support of the 'woman' who comes forward to accuse." Paranoia and the Film System, Screen, vol. 17, no. 4 (1977): 95.

12. In his interview with Truffaut on the film, Hitchcock explains the paucity of bird cries at this point by saying it is "as if the birds were telling Melanie, 'Now we've got you where we want you.'" François Truffaut, Hitchcock (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967): 224.

13. Bergstrom writes, "When Norman, impersonating his mother, kills Marion, it is as the mother killing a rival for her son's affection" (p. 57).

14. Bellour writes, with regard to the gull attack on Melanie when she is in the boat, "Her look has been wounded, for it is only metaphorically, and for the sake of the rest of the plot, that the gull does not strike her eyes," in "The Birds: Analysis of a Sequence" (p. 30).

15. In terms of closure, compare how Melanie is stunned after the first gull attack and has to be helped out of the boat by Mitch.

16. The significance of the site of this invasion cannot be overlooked since it is a reminder of Cathy's "culpability."

I thank Michael Renov and Frank Tommaso for helpful discussions. I am also grateful to Michele McGlade for her critical reading of the manuscript, to Stephen Mamber for useful suggestions, and to Edward Branigan for his encouragement and valuable comments.