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There's Something British about That: Aural Expressionism and Montage in Hitchcock's Blackmail, Psycho, and The Birds

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THERE'S SOMETHING BRITISH ABOUT THAT:
AURAL EXPRESSIONISM AND MONTAGE IN
HITCHCOCK'S *BLACKMAIL*, *PSYCHO*, AND *THE BIRDS*

by

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A Research Report

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts

Department of English
in the Graduate School
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RESEARCH REPORT APPROVAL

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Approved by:

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TITLE: THERE'S SOMETHING BRITISH ABOUT THAT: AURAL EXPRESSIONISM AND MONTAGE IN HITCHCOCK'S *BLACKMAIL*, *PSYCHO*, AND *THE BIRDS*

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Scott McEthern

This paper examines the use of visual and aural expressionistic techniques used in Hitchcock's films *Blackmail*, *Psycho*, and *The Birds*. Hitchcock's exposure to Soviet montage and German expressionist techniques as a member of The London Film Society may have influenced *Blackmail*, one of his first sound films. Once mastering the aural expressionism techniques he experimented with in *Blackmail*, it is as if Hitchcock reverts to silent film-making in later films with *Psycho* and *The Birds*. The intensity of image and sound is why *Psycho* and *The Birds* are lasting American cultural icons. Rather than whack us over the head like modern day horror films, *Psycho* and *The Birds* stab us precisely in our cultural and individual psyches demonstrating that the horrors we fear most exist within ourselves rather than without.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
SECTIONS	
Introduction.....	1
<i>Blackmail</i>	2
<i>Psycho</i>	11
<i>The Birds</i>	17
Conclusion	24
WORKS CITED	25
VITA	26

Introduction:

When it was first released, Hitchcock's *The Lodger* was considered too "Germanic" for the public and had to be reedited for distribution. As a director, "Hitchcock was eager to be considered an artist of [pure] film" (Deutelbaum & Poague 2). Pure film is the concept that film is a visual medium and stories should be told predominately using visual imagery. Hitchcock was heavily influenced by German Expressionism and Soviet Montage – both of which allowed him to hone the use of purposeful, suggestive ambiguity: Expressionism in the form of visual compositions which act as a counterpoint or subtext to what is objectively occurring in the frame and montage in the use of suggestive cutting sequences to manipulate audience perception.

These techniques were in direct contrast to British cinema at that time which was considered stodgy and predictable. The differences between British film and the international film styles influencing Hitchcock may have been most succinctly synthesized by the gossipy neighbor in *Blackmail*. During the famous breakfast scene she says, "A good, clean, honest whack on the head with a brick is one thing. There's something British about that. But knives? *sniff* Nope, knives is not right." British cinema whacked audiences over the head with the obvious. Hitchcock was trying to gently stab audiences with subtleties. His films attempt to subvert the status quo: he removes the veneer of aristocratic ideals and reveals humanity's deviant and lascivious nature underneath. He could not, as the gossip contends, simply whack audiences over the head with the sexual deviancy of Fane in *Murder!* or show Alice's rape in *Blackmail*; instead he relies on techniques of expressionism and montage to convey taboo concepts and ideas. Early films like *The Lodger*, *Blackmail*, and *Murder!* demonstrate Hitchcock's development of cinematic conventions as a result of artistic and social constraints. *Blackmail* is a seminal film in particular. It is exceptionally complicated because of Hitchcock's use of sound: he translates

visual expressionism into a new form aural expressionism.

In *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, Robin Wood states that “a Hitchcock film...is more analogous to a poem than a novel” because “his films derive their value from the intensity of their images” (Wood 164). Wood goes on to state that this is especially true for *The Birds*, and I would argue for *Psycho* as well. In a way, each is a modern silent film, relying more on visuals than dialogue to tell the story, interspersing the visual story only with dialogue when necessary in the same manner that silent film used title cards. As with silent film, layers of sound and music become significantly more important in the storytelling than the dialogue.

Bernard Herrmann composed the score for *Psycho* and was a sound consultant on *The Birds*. *The Birds* introduced the use of a studio tratonium which converted electronic sounds into music¹. Hitchcock blends the techniques of montage with visual and aural layering to create stunning effects in *Psycho* and *The Birds*. Having mastered the aural expressionism techniques he experimented with in *Blackmail*, it is as if Hitchcock reverts to silent film-making with *Psycho* and *The Birds*. The intensity of image *and* sound is why *Psycho* and *The Birds* are lasting American cultural icons. Rather than whack us over the head like modern day horror films, *Psycho* and *The Birds* stab us precisely in our cultural and individual psyches demonstrating that the horrors we fear most exist within ourselves rather than without.

Blackmail:

In *Blackmail* (1929), Alice White is seemingly committed to her police officer beau, Frank. She feigns being angry with him at the film's beginning because he has kept her waiting. They reconcile on their way to a harried, crowded dinner only to end up in another disagreement

¹ *All About the Birds*. Dir. Laurent Bouzereau. Universal Studios, 2000. DVD.

because she is so indecisive about going to a movie. The root of her indecision lies in her desire to go out with Crewe, the artist sitting at the next table. Frank storms out expecting another mini-resolution but sees Alice leaving the restaurant with Crewe instead. Alice and Crewe end up outside Crewe's apartment where he coaxes her to go up with him. Charles Bennett argues in "Conversion to Sound" that although Alice is saving herself for Frank, she is also "attracted to the sensual possibilities that the artist offers but is terrified of succumbing to them" (80). She should be terrified because Crewe repeatedly asks her if she's frightened. The introduction of this question and its repetition is a warning Alice does not hear. She goes up, against all social conventions, is attacked or raped by Crewe – Hitchcock's ambiguity here is a result of the same social conventions – and ends up stabbing Crewe with a breadknife.

After walking around in a catatonic state all night, she returns home to face Frank – both in the form of a picture over her vanity and in person later in her father's store. In the meantime, Frank has been put on the case and discovers Alice's glove at the scene of the crime. He conceals the evidence then confronts her about it. Just as he does so, a new character inserts himself between Frank and Alice. Tracy arrives with the matching glove which cements his relationship with the couple and shifts the balance of power between characters.

For the next twenty minutes Frank and Tracy negotiate the terms of blackmail. Repeatedly, Hitchcock reduces "Alice to a silent object between two male subjects" (Modleski 21). She is voiceless as they negotiate her fate. In the book *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, Tania Modleski contends that this is a "recurring, almost archetypal shot in Hitchcock's films" because it places the heroine between a figure of the law and a figure of lawlessness. Alice's placement and her "discomfort indicate that *both* men are threatening to her" (28). In *The Lodger*, Daisy is often in the same position between the Lodger and Joe. Both films are "an exercise on the

traditional conflict between love and duty” according to Maurice Yacowar in his text *Hitchcock’s British Films* (99)². Frank and Alice can do little besides wait and listen to Tracy whistle gaily while he eats their breakfast.

Frank receives a call from Scotland Yard. Crewe’s landlady has identified Tracy as a potential suspect in the murder. Frank goes back into the parlor to turn the tables on Tracy. Tracy says that when Scotland Yard arrives, “the surprise won’t be for me.” The camera pans to Alice who looks up guiltily. However, Tracy could mean that the surprise will be on Frank because Tracy is planning to escape. The cutting causes the audience to assume he’s speaking exclusively about confessing Alice’s crime to the police. However, Tracy does indeed jump through the parlor window and escape when the police arrive. Hitchcock cuts between scenes of the ensuing chase and Alice sitting at a table contemplating turning herself in. Tracy is chased to the top of the British Museum where he falls through the glass ceiling just as he is about to reveal the truth. Alice is not allowed to tell the truth in the end either. She goes to the police station to confess but is cut off by a telephone call. Frank and she walk down the hallway in the police station like a robotic, joyless couple walking down the aisle. Though she doesn’t go to jail, the “happy” ending of *Blackmail* is ironic because it suggests “that the bond linking the man and the woman is his knowledge of her guilty secret...that the union is founded on the man’s ability to blackmail the woman sexually” (Modleski 30).

Yacowar’s contends that “*Blackmail* is Hitchcock’s first essentially subversive film” (99). On one level it is a “film far ahead of its time and a penetrating document about sexual politics in a patriarchal society” (Bennett 78). But on another level it is about subverting cinematic norms. Hitchcock relies on the Kuleshov effect to manipulate his audience’s perceptions. The Kuleshov

² Joe and Frank have to decide whether to fight for the women they love or uphold their duty to the law. Alice and Daisy are cautionary characters for this dilemma as well. It would seem that their choice of deviant or erotic love with strangers is the wrong decision over their future (and boring) wifely duties to Frank and Joe.

effect demonstrated that the viewer's interpretation of a shot is contingent on the context, or the sequence of shots surrounding a particular subject. Hitchcock is playing with the Kuleshov effect both visually and aurally throughout *Blackmail*. The visual effect occurs primarily in his use of the jester painting. The sound effect occurs predominantly with car horns.

The first time we see the jester painting is in Crewe's apartment. Alice looks out the window and sees the police officer by the lamp post. The officer may remind her of Frank and her obligations to him. The officer may simply sooth her knowing that law and order are close by. When she looks up from the window the camera cuts to a close up shot of the jester's face then quickly pans back to show the entire figure pointing and laughing at Alice. The camera then cuts back to Alice who responds with the same gesture as the jester: pointing and laughing at the painting and remarking that it is "quite good." The jester's "first appearance suggests one of those symbolic motifs used to...comment on narrative action" according to Tom Ryall in his book *Blackmail* (45). Its repeated presence throughout the film will serve as a running commentary on the conflicts between and within the characters. Ryall contends that the "image of the mocking jester confirms her presence" alone in the artist's apartment as unwise (46). However, her response invites the audience to laugh and enjoy the picture, despite its sudden appearance and grotesque quality.

The second time we see the jester is after the attack-murder when Alice is looking for her dress. This action snaps her out of her somnambulist state momentarily. She pulls her dress off the canvas to reveal the jester's face, again in close up. The camera then cuts to her facial expression which is wide eyed with horror at the realization of what has just occurred. It is as if Crewe himself is laughing at her. Her reaction this time is to tear at the canvas. The image has not changed, but the context has. His laughter is no longer inviting: it has become derisive

laughter mocking her loss of purity.

The next morning Frank is perusing the apartment for clues. We see a medium shot of Frank by the painting, then the camera cuts to the jester's canvas torn last night by Alice. The jester seems to be saying "I know something you don't know." Frank glibly holds the tear up and reviews the canvas then walks away dismissively. The camera follows a whistling Frank as he touches the dress Alice danced in, then pauses to look at the androgynous nude Alice painted with Crewe. The camera cuts to the nude, then back to Frank viewing the nude. He sees and picks up the glove and is about to announce the clue when he sees the victim – the camera actually zooms across the apartment and ends on a close up of Crewe's dead face. It is Frank's turn to be a somnambulist as he robotically turns to check that the glove is indeed Alice's. He looks directly into the camera, at the audience-accomplices, then the camera cuts to the jester pointing and laughing at Frank. Frank *cannot* be looking directly at the jester – when the camera cuts back to Frank, we can see the painting over his right shoulder. This is an example of montage being used to distort space and time. The flash of the jester is in Frank's mind as he finally "gets" the joke.

The "joke" keeps getting dirtier and seamier as the movie progresses. This also gives the jester a *Picture of Dorian Gray* quality. As the characters' actions become more complicated and immoral, the jester's laughter appears to be more menacing and lascivious. As with the first Kuleshov experiment, this face hasn't changed – it is, in fact, formed in dried paint. What has and continues to change is the context in which the picture is set.

The jester painting is seen again after Mr. White gives up his dining chair to Tracy in the parlor. As Tracy sits down, the camera cuts to the jester being taken into evidence. The joke is becoming more grotesque. Now the joke is on both Frank *and* Alice. Before Tracy appeared,

the murder-evidence issue was isolated and intimate – an issue just between Frank and Alice (and, perhaps the jester). Now, Tracy knows and the couple is trying to contain the situation. The cut to the jester reminds us that the audience knows just as much as Tracy – if not more.

The last shot of the jester is at the end of the film. The final scene is of a silent Alice surrounded by men. The ‘natural order’ is restored. Last time we viewed this spot, Alice was in the position of power – of knowing something Frank didn’t (her joke with the police officer). Her knowledge and subsequent laughter left *him* silent. The film might be construed as a morality tale – ladies, know your place and stay there or else you might end up worse than Alice. Be silent, even in mock laughter. Now, she pretends to laugh at the men’s joke, but produces no sound; she only mimes laughter. She looks up and the camera cuts to the jester being carried under the arm of an officer, pointing at her and producing the laughter she is incapable of producing herself. Hitchcock’s jester “does not need sound to convey the many tones and meanings of his laughter...the clown’s unheard laughter is all the more eloquent” in light of the raucous laughter of the men at the end (Yacowar 114).

Hitchcock parallels the Kuleshov visuals with aural techniques throughout the film as well. One sound that gets repeated throughout the film is car horns. The first time we see Frank and Alice walking out of the police station, Alice is pretending to be angry with him. Frank tries to grab her elbow to lighten her mood. He reaches for her elbow and at that instant, we hear a single-horn: a short, abbreviated honk. It is as if her elbow made the noise. Once she’s laughing and not resisting his arm on her elbow, we hear the classic, complete “barooo-gah” of a car horn. Here the noise adds a note of comic relief to the lovers’ disagreement. As they cross the street a few scenes later to enter the restaurant, Frank reaches for her elbow and the gesture is again accompanied by a single, abbreviated honk.

The next instance we hear the horn is when she is standing outside Crewe's apartment explaining where she lives. The camera cuts from a medium shot of her and Crewe, to a close-up of Tracey eavesdropping intently. As the camera cuts back to Crewe and Alice, the same, complete horn sounds – “barooo-gah.” In this context, the same sound has an altogether different meaning – it sounds like a warning for Alice to go home. Here, it becomes an admonition; she's not supposed to be here with Crewe and there's danger around the corner in the form of Tracy. The danger is further defined by Crewe asking her “Are you frightened?” He asks her twice then states “You are frightened.” He then asks, “What's the harm?” and grabs her elbow as Frank did earlier, trying to turn her toward the door. As punctuation to his question and gesture, the horn serves as a warning rather than comic relief as it did with Frank. Crewe's endeavor is interrupted by Tracy. In the interlude, Alice stands in the liminal space of the doorway, listening to another shorter “baroo-gah.” The horn sequence is inverted with Crewe – long, short, long – compared to when she's with Frank – short, long, short. Both instances might be evoking a subconscious SOS for Alice – an experiment synthesizing visual components of German expressionism in a new sound medium.

The next horn sequence occurs when she leaves Crewe's apartment after his murder. She walks in a catatonic nightmarish state which is “constructed through a variety of expressionist techniques, with Hitchcock both running through his repertory of silent film techniques and introducing sound effects” (Ryall 48). Her catatonic walk home is a blur of images except for “all the limp, exposed hands [which] are the choice of Alice's guilty imagination” (Yacowar 107). She reacts to the traffic officer's stiff, outstretched arm, remembering Crewe's “dead hand shot,” and hurriedly crosses to the sound of a complete car horn (Ryall 48). It is the same sound as with Frank and Crewe, but like the jester, it seems to be mocking and sounds almost like

laughter now.

As she wades zombie-like through a crowd of laughing people, the horn is sounded again, as if joining in the laughter but directing the laughter at her. Multiple horns honk in succession as she stops and views the marquis signs. One of the signs is a “neon cocktail shaker that Alice...sees transformed into a neon carving knife mechanically, repeatedly stabbing at the ‘cock’ in ‘cocktail’” (Poague 88). As she processes this visual stimulus, the horns honk around her, having a conversation she cannot understand – or perhaps the horns are taking the place of people’s conversations around her. Either way, the horns sound remarkably like geese and ducks cackling away as she succumbs to her own subconscious which isolates her from the rest of society.

The last instance of horn honking is in the final chase scene with Tracy. Horns here are short, staccato bursts, occurring in repetition of four to five honks. The sound accompanies shots of policemen searching for Tracy. As Tracy thirstily drinks at the fountain outside the British museum, two soft honks are heard in the background. The camera cuts to a gaggle of cops preparing to enter the museum and the horns increase in sound and number. While drinking, he could hear them coming in the distance, and the camera’s cut to the officers and louder honking seems to confirm it. This resembles horns earlier when Alice was wandering the streets and horns supplanted the speech of bystanders. Here the horns stand in for the verbal language of the cops – reflective of Tracy’s subjectivity now. His voice and subjectivity are different, so it would stand that his horns sound different than Alice’s. The horns employ an aural Kuleshov effect where same sounds are used but as the context changes, the significance and meaning of the sounds changes as well.

Hitchcock’s use of sound effects in *Blackmail* is operatic. Upon their introduction to the

stage, the epic characters of opera each have their own sound score. It announces them on stage and their music will often take on multiple shades of meaning during the course of the opera.

The music reflects the external conflicts between characters and, more importantly, reveals to the audience the inner turmoil of the characters. Hitchcock seems to be employing Wagnerian operatic techniques to identify the inner psyche of the characters using the new medium of sound in cinema. His use of sound as another form of sensory expressionism is mastered by the time Hitchcock makes *Psycho* and *The Birds*.

Though *Psycho* (1960) and *The Birds* (1963) are both modern sound films, they both rely heavily on silent film technique. Both films are interspersed throughout with scenes that last three to four minutes and contain no dialogue, and many of which are either completely silent or contain only the sound score. Both contain sections of film over ten minutes in length that make them 'essentially silent film' segments. Because of the nature of sound films, title cards are no longer a convention; however, I refer to segments as being 'essentially silent film' under the pretense that there is so little dialogue in certain scenes that were it a silent film, it would require one to two title cards to convey the abbreviated dialogue that does occur. In segments of 'essentially silent film' in *Psycho* and *The Birds*, the dialogue is included for two reasons: 1. it is necessary for comprehending the plot or 2. it is necessary to break up the silence / dialogue-free segments. The fact that so many 'essentially silent' segments occur in three to four minute bursts leads one to conclude that audiences might not be able to bear that much film without dialogue. Except in certain situations, and only once or twice per film, does Hitchcock go beyond the magic four-minute mark with these silent segments.

Psycho:

Psycho has a running time of 109 minutes. Roughly forty-five minutes are dialogue-free. This means that forty percent of *Psycho* is essentially silent film in nature. The first silent segment in *Psycho* occurs as Marion is packing to leave. She is shown in a black bra and slip stuffing the money into a black purse – a stark contrast to the white bra and slip she was wearing at the film’s introduction, with the white purse to match. Already, Hitchcock is symbolizing Marion’s turn toward evil: “we all carry within us somewhere every human potentiality, for good or for evil, so that we all share in a common guilt...the greatness of *Psycho* lies in its ability, not merely to *tell* us this” but more importantly, to *show* us (Wood 148). This packing segment lasts roughly two minutes (10:45-13:35³). After this, she is shown in close up leaving Phoenix in her car listening to the imagined monologue of Sam greeting her. It could be argued that the inner-monologue maintains the essentially silent nature of Marion’s long drive because it is not dialogue between characters on screen. Additionally, the echoey quality of the speech places it in the realm of sound effect rather than on-screen spoken dialogue. After seeing her boss as he crosses in front of her stopped car, his voice interrupts her monologue – cutting off Sam and starting a train of thought that pursues her to sleepiness and a black fade.

When the camera’s eye opens again, we see Marion’s car on the side of the road as a police car pulls up behind it. The packing in her room to the point where the officer asks her to “Hold it right there!” is four minutes in length. The dialogue between Marion and the officer is minimal – enough to break up the solitude of the preceding frames and to create character motivation for Marion’s stop at the Bates Motel. She will not want to rouse suspicion like this again before arriving at Sam’s. The next dialogue-free section lasts a little over two minutes and is of Marion

³ These are time markers from *Psycho*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Universal Home Video, 1998. DVD. These time markers are marked in minutes:seconds and hour:minutes:seconds.

driving away from the officer onto the used car lot. Marion seems to be chased by Herrmann's intense music score and this silent segment is broken with the salesman's greeting, "be right with you!" (15:20-17:40).

The scene in the car lot is followed by a long driving sequence which can also be considered essentially silent film. The long drive from the car lot to the Bates Motel is nearly ten minutes in length and is interspersed with Herrmann's score and the inner-monologues of her boss, co-worker, and the oil mogul piecing together her disappearance with the money⁴. Wood contends that "Hitchcock makes it possible for us to continue to identify with Marion, involving ourselves in her guilt as easily and unthinkingly as she herself becomes involved" (144). Herrmann's score and "Hitchcock's use of it, all serve to involve us in Marion's condition. With her, we lose all power of rational control, and discover how easily a 'normal' person can lapse into a condition usually associated with neurosis" (145). Our identification with Marion becomes solidified in this ten-minute essentially silent segment of film. As her situation becomes more tangled and a happy ending seems more improbable, the drive becomes nerve-wracking. According to William Rothman in *Hitchcock the Murderous Gaze*, "as Marion's suffering intensifies, the camera subjects her to progressively tighter framings" (264). The combination of Herrmann's aggressive violins layered with the sound and visual effects of the rain make the cabin of the car nearly suffocating. After the music crescendos she has "no traffic behind her, [and] for the first time she is framed against a plain black background" and we listen to nothing but the rain against her car (265). The intensity of close up shots combined with the music and sound effects make

⁴ As silent film relied on visual cues to clue audiences into segments of film that represented flash-backs or dream-sequences, in sound film, aural effects are used. Hitchcock chooses to stay close to Marion in the car rather than cut to an actual dream-sequence or potential flash-forward. I am arguing that the subjective nature of the monologues used in the driving sequence separate it from traditional dialogue. In fact, no characters overlap one another or are heard talking *to* one another – Marion is only capable of creating each character's voice one at a time. These factors lead me to classify the monologues as sound-effects and thus, the ability to define the long drive as an 'essentially silent film' segment.

the forced identification with Marion complete. The essentially silent nature of the long drive enforces the audiences' relationship with Marion. The drive "conveys a sense of endless journey leading nowhere...as the imagined voices become more menacing, darkness gathers... she has plunged herself into the chaos world, which finds here its most terrifying definition" (Wood 145). This ten-minute silent segment is broken when Norman runs down and says "Hey I'm sorry, I didn't hear you in all this rain....Dirty night." (23:15-33:30). Dirty night indeed.

The longest and most intense silent segment of *Psycho* is Marion's murder and Norman's subsequent cleaning up his "mother's" handiwork. During their dinner in the parlor, Norman "launches into his great monologue on private traps, a fit companion piece to Charles's speech in *Shadow of a Doubt*. As Norman speaks, Marion listens more and more intently, comprehension beginning to dawn in her eyes" (Rothman 281). She recognizes Norman's condition and it "gives Marion her chance of salvation, which she takes" (Wood 145). The beginning of the longest silent film segment in *Psycho* occurs when Marion tells Norman "goodnight" and exits the parlor⁵. Norman removes a picture on the wall revealing a peep-hole. Rothman contends that since the plaster has been torn, the jaggedness of the hole links it to "the hole Alice tears in the clown painting in *Blackmail*....This hole-within-a-hole is charged symbolically: it is an eye, and it is an emblem of female sexuality" (Rothman 289). Rothman's own still-image of the frame evokes a stronger connection to the image of the eyeless socket of his mother⁶. The jaggedness makes the image of Norman before the hole seem as if he is standing in front of a gigantic skull, as if he is exposed and miniscule in front of her gaze. The hole has become a God's eye – his Mother can see him from everywhere – especially here. It is an homage to surrealism – his mother's mummified skull is larger than life here in his private parlor.

⁵ Her "goodnight" becomes a parting for the audience as well since it is the last word we hear her utter in the film.

⁶ Compare figure 5.77 on page 289 with figure 5.196 on page 327.

Norman peeks through and we see Marion on the other side. The camera cuts to “an extreme closeup of Norman’s viewing eye, viewed objectively from the side” (ibid). When the camera cuts back to Marion’s room, she is in her robe: “Hitchcock has played a trick on us: the cut to the viewing eye coincided with the moment Marion was completely naked. While we were viewing this eye, it was viewing Marion naked, a view of which we were deprived” (ibid). We continue to watch Marion perform math calculations in her robe as Norman returns to the house. Marion is trying to figure out how to repay the \$700 she used for the new car. Her bank book indicates she has less than \$800. She rips up the calculations and flushes them down the toilet and the “music, which has kept up a constant low-key, somber accompaniment, falls silent, underscoring the intimate sound of flushing water” (Rothman 292). Some critics contend that her intention to return to Phoenix is not set and that she is continuing on to meet Sam and follow through with embezzling the \$40,000; her own lack of funds and inability to repay the money point to this as a possibility. However, her intentions become moot as she steps into the shower and all we hear is running water.

According to Rothman “thirty-four shots...lead up to Marion’s death” (302). This is intense montage, as Marion’s actual murder lasts only a minute: the shower curtain is pulled back by “mother” at 47:13 and Marion’s naked body falls onto the floor with the shower curtain at 48:13⁷. It is astonishing to contemplate the impact of such a small segment of film on the cultural consciousness at large. One of contributing factor is the “sudden high-pitched shriek of violins, so compelling suggestive of an attacking birdlike creature that creates the shock that

⁷ I’ve double-checked this time signature multiple times to make sure the “:13” second mark is correct. It seems to be, at least on the DVD from Universal that I am referencing. One can debate the specific time the murderous act “ends,” but the moment the curtain is pulled back is at 47:13. If so, this is one of the few time markers that does not fall neatly and cleanly on the “:15” second mark as so many others do throughout the two films. Hitchcock loved the number 13; perhaps this is his doing or the creation of Universal Studios to further mystify Hitchcock and his work.

constitutes *Psycho*'s best-known effect" (Rothman 298). The aural intensity is created by the layering of sounds because Marion's screams are "nearly drowned out by the shrieking violins that muffle it" (Rothman 300). This same layering affect will become even further intensified in *The Birds*. In addition to the violence of the scene is the senselessness of the murder. According to Wood it "is not merely its incomparable physical impact that makes the shower bath murder probably the most horrific incident in any fiction film" but the "*meaninglessness* of it" (146).

The eye of Norman is paralleled with the dead-eye of Marion as her corpse lies on the floor of the bathroom: "with the camera *spiraling* outward from it. It is as if we have emerged from the depths *behind* the eye, the round hole of the drain leading down into an apparently bottomless darkness, the potentialities for horror that lie in the depths of us all" (Wood 149). At this moment "The sound of the shower is simultaneously transmuted into what might be called an 'aural closeup' of the water going down the drain" (Rothman 308). The intense eye imagery cannot be ignored. It seems as if "this eye also appears to peer out from within the drain; a hole-within-a-hole if this eye is the double of...Norman's peephole" (Rothman 308). When the camera pans up, it focuses the gaze of the dead-eye on the newspaper hiding the money. I would argue that like the doubling of Norman's peephole, this dead-eye is engaging in ocular dialogue with Norman's voyeuristic eye: it sees and knows but is incapable of relating what it has seen to the audience, as Norman's eye did. This harkens back to surrealism according to Christopher Morris in "*Psycho's* Allegory of Seeing:" "surrealism's protest often took the form of an assault against ocularcentrism – against the privileged status accorded the sense of vision" (361). This is antithetical to Raymond Bellour's argument in "Psychosis, Neurosis, Perversion" where he states that the "camera becomes...the eye-phallus" and "transforms the camera into pure eye" (Bellour 354). The power of *Psycho* lies in the intensity of visual imagery and aural expressionism

combined with philosophical and psychological ambiguity. We are not sure of what we are seeing – in fact, we cannot believe what we are seeing because no filmmaker to date had killed the protagonist in the first third of the film. It is as if Hitchcock’s visual symbolism is telling us that “No one...ever sees truly; each is condemned to the search for a signifying presence ultimately exposed as illusory...as a substitute for nothingness” (Morris 361).

This long silent film segment runs for sixteen minutes and forty-five seconds. The only dialogue delivered in that time is four-seconds of Norman shouting “Mother! Oh God! Mother! Blood! Blood!” (49:26-30). Norman comes down and begins the cleansing process. The audience can only watch and wait because:

not even in *Vertigo* – has identification been broken off so brutally. At the time, so engrossed are we in Marion, so secure in her potential salvation, that we can scarcely believe it is happening; when it is over, and she is dead, we are left shocked, with nothing to cling to, the apparent center of the film entirely dissolved. (Wood 146)

We attach ourselves to Norman because he is the only character in our field of vision and we need a new center (ibid). He has also been presented to us very sympathetically – despite his voyeurism of Marion which he stopped as she went “in there” to bathe. Norman is “like a scared animal in the headlights of a car” as he drops the bucket “hastily...on the ground as he looks anxiously about him” (Thomas 374). This is a significant point of connection – he is seemingly sympathetic and we do not want him to get caught by whomever is driving the car that highlights him in that moment. Later when Marion’s car stops sinking he looks around himself “giving the same impression of being completely at a loss. He is not so much helpless at such moments as *bewildered*, as if the world’s workings are arbitrary and beyond his comprehension” (ibid). We hold our breath at the horror not of the car sinking but of the car *not sinking*, and not hiding

Norman's mother's crime. As in the car with Marion, our loyalties have become solidified in this intense silent film segment with Norman. Our ocular truth has been completely redefined in just less than seventeen minutes of essentially silent film viewing.

"The characters of *Psycho* are *one* character, thanks to the identifications the film evokes, in us" (Wood 147). Our identifications do not simply shift to Norman, they become supplanted onto Arbogast and his investigation as well as Lila and Sam's after Arbogast is murdered. Rothman contends that "*Psycho* is the masterpiece that culminated the period in which Hitchcock and his public were in closest touch, and announced...its necessary ending" marking that "the cycle of Hitchcock films has likewise run its course" (248, 340). Critics have suggested that *Psycho* was the film in which Hitchcock's relationship with his audience changed. Perhaps this is the analogous moment when Hitchcock comes out from behind the camera as the silhouetted figure in the shower scene to actively destroy that relationship, giving himself permission to experiment in *The Birds* and later films without feeling beholden to audience expectations any more.

The Birds:

Contrary to *Psycho* we are not forced to identify with our female protagonist in *The Birds*. In *Psycho* we get close up shots and reverse shots of Marion driving: subjectively and objectively, what we see until we get to the Bates Motel is almost exclusively her point of view. *The Birds* gives us a "view from the static landscape from high above. Identification, in other words, is not insisted upon. *The Birds* is far more 'open' than *Psycho*: we are at liberty to respond in different ways" (Wood 155). We see a birds-eye-view shot of Melanie as she rushes down the staircase of the bird shop to impulsively find out who Mitch is. This singular act brings about her demise: if she had let him leave and simply continued on with her plans, she would not have experienced

the terror at the end of the film. Additionally as she drives out to Bodega Bay, we are not afforded the intimate shot-reverse-shots of Marion's driving experience; we see Melanie from a God's eye view in the form of an extreme long shot. The desire to identify with Melanie is "offset by certain enddistancing effects. During the journey across to the Brenner's landing stage we are made to look *at* Melanie, not with her." The use of long shots and back projection have the effect of :

giving an air of unreality to her situation, of isolating her from the backgrounds, of stressing her artificiality by making it stand out obtrusively from natural scenery. These close-ups are interspersed with long shots that give us Melanie isolate, a tiny, defenseless figure in a vast open space....This makes it impossible to identify with her completely as she delivers her present: *we* are expecting birds to attack, but she isn't. (Wood 157).

This distance and isolationism is perhaps why Hitchcock gives himself permission to attack Melanie so brutally at the film's conclusion.

The bird delivery across the bay is one of the first silent film segments in this film, lasting roughly five minutes. *The Birds* has a running time of 119 minutes. Roughly forty-seven minutes are dialogue free. This means that nearly forty percent of *The Birds* is essentially silent film in nature. The romantic comedy of the film's beginning holds until Melanie receives the first attack from the gull as she returns from the bay. As she comes out from hiding when Mitch gazes at her through binoculars, we hear and begin to see "seagulls abruptly fluttering and squawking across the foreground of the image [and] we think for a second that the attacks are beginning" (Wood 157). They hold their attack until Melanie is almost to safety on the other side of the bay. Mitch's response that "that's the damnedest thing I ever saw!" emphasizes the meaningless of this and all subsequent bird attacks in the film.

The second silent segment is the attack of the birds on the school children. Melanie arrives at the school and exits her car to the orderly singing of the school children. She enters the school, pantomimes with Annie about meeting her outside, then exits. Throughout, the children keep singing. Melanie walks to a bench, sits down to smoke a cigarette. Behind her we are afforded the view of a crow landing on the jungle gym. The camera cuts to Melanie then back to the jungle gym where four crows sit. The camera cuts to Melanie then back and we see eight crows. The exponential and silent growth of the flock behind Melanie is exacerbated by her inability to see it. It takes Melanie two full minutes to smoke her cigarette. In that two minutes the jungle gym becomes covered by more crows than we can count. For a full thirty seconds Hitchcock refuses to cut back to the jungle gym and keeps the camera frozen on Melanie, unknowingly smoking while horror masses directly behind her. Hitchcock uses the absence of the camera's gaze in the same way he uses silence to build tension – what we cannot see brings us fear. Just as silence heightens tension prior to the horrors in the bathroom in *Psycho*, the silence of both sound and gaze heighten the horror when Melanie's eye lights on an approaching crow. The camera cuts to a point-of-view shot – *finally* – and we follow the crow through Melanie's eyes to witness the impending doom that has gathered behind her.

The birds attacking the school children as they attempt to flee to safety exemplifies the film's poetic power which it derives “from the absolute meaninglessness and unpredictability of the attacks, and only by having children as the victims can its underlying emotions of despair and terror be conveyed” (Wood 162). As in the shower scene in *Psycho*, the tension is heightened with Hitchcock's layering of sounds. The unnatural screams of the birds bleeds together with the screams of the children and together they create a chorus of chaos as they run/fly to the end of the hill. This is a stark contrast to the orderly chorus the children sang moments before. The only

sound separating the beasts from the children is the flapping of wings. However, the children's stomping, running feet beat in counterpoint so it becomes difficult to separate child from crow. The attack ends as Melanie, Cathy, and Cathy's friend enter a car and Melanie ineffectually honks the car horn in defense – adding another layer to the existing cacophony. This silent segment lasts seven minutes, from the time Melanie arrives at the school to the birds' disappearance and a fade to the interior of the Tides restaurant a short while after the attack (1:08:00 – 1:15:00).

The attack of the children is followed by two, four-minute segments relying heavily on visual storytelling combined with aural expressionist techniques: the town attack and Mitch and Melanie walking back to get Cathy from Annie's. The town attacks contrast “the world of order and tranquility” in the school and general store, with the “arbitrary destructiveness” of the birds” (Wood 166). No one in the restaurant wants to believe in the school attack. Why would birds do that? Conveniently, an ornithologist is present to explain why it *couldn't* have happened. This explanation receives a counterpoint in the drunken Irishman's exclamation that “It's the end of the world!” In the restaurant is where the “film itself is quite insistent that either the birds can't be explained or that the explanation is unknown” (153). It may have to suffice that the birds attack because Hitchcock “delights in disrupting a normal, everyday atmosphere with some alarming event” (154).

As different parties try to explain away the unexplainable, the unexplainable occurs again – the birds attack the gas station attendant and the best kind of mayhem ensues. Gasoline runs all the way toward the bay and is ignited by a man lighting a cigar. As Melanie yells at him to be careful, the flames lick their way up the hill toward the waiting gas tank. Melanie's horror is visually portrayed poetically in a series of four jump cuts. Melanie wears roughly the same

expression of frozen fear as she follows the line of the flame climbing up the hill: left, left-center, center, right. In each frame, Melanie is purposefully frozen while the remaining characters behind her move and shift to watch what is going to happen. It is made more surreal in that her face is still and frozen in each frame as the faces behind her move and continue to react. This creates a surreal effect because she is only capable of these freeze-frame movements—unable to look but unable to look away. The super stylized nature of these shots parallel Lydia's viewing of Dan Fawcett's bloody, eyeless face. The horror is too much to absorb in a single, sustained viewing and must occur in short bursts as the brain tries to understand the horror that the eye is projecting onto it. These four jump-cut reaction shots are also a direct reference to the Kuleshov effect. Hitchcock adhered "to the conclusions reached by Kuleshov to the effect that audiences use clues around an actor's appearance...to project onto the character their own expectations and responses, the actor's expressions having little to do with their readings" (Thomas 368). Melanie's face is not a photograph but is frozen like one. Perhaps she is a mirror for our own reactions at what we see – we too are shocked and horrified at the images before our eyes on the screen.

As the birds hover over the town in pre-attack mode, Hitchcock makes "us aware of the impurity of our feelings," the desire to witness mayhem and horror for entertainment. This is "not the first time we have been encouraged to reveal our impure feelings in order to have them chastised" (Wood 168). As Norma's viewing eye, we are complicit in wanting to see things that are probably best left unseen. But, like Melanie, we cannot *not* look away. In the "stunning aerial long shot of the town with its blazing center, with bird after bird hurtling down to attack...we are suddenly the birds" (166). This is another reason we have difficulty identifying with Melanie – we want to see birds attack and at some point that means *she* will be attacked. If

we identify too closely with her, we cannot derive the enjoyment from the bird attacks which we have paid to see.

The final attack sequences occur in the Brenner home, which has become a cage of its own, keeping the inhabitants in, free – hopefully – from attack from the outside. This section of essentially silent film is thirteen minutes long (1:37:00-1:50:00). It begins with Mitch moving from orifice to orifice making sure the gaps are filled, the windows and doors are boarded and nothing can get in. Then the birds attack. The sound is unnatural, unnerving, and otherworldly. Each character reacts quite differently: Lydia grabs Cathy and runs throughout the space searching for safety, looking much like a bird beating its wings against the side of a cage trying to escape. Mitch's check of the windows was ineffectual as he battles one-on-one with a seagull that has broken through his defenses. He strangles it as it pecks his arm and hand incessantly. He rips a lamp out of the socket and uses the cord to secure the shutters. Melanie folds in on herself in a corner of the sofa then gets up and proceeds to roll across the wall like the famous protagonist in Charlotte Perkins Gillman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." The layering of bird wings flapping, screeching and screaming is overwhelming for the characters. We see Mitch "talk" to his mother and Cathy as he returns them to a semblance of normalcy in the wing-back chair but cannot hear the dialogue. Melanie tries to tend to his wounds and they too engage in silent dialogue that is drowned out by the screams of the birds. The attack on the house is an attack of sound. Once the birds leave we see:

three successive shots of ceiling and upper wall slowly filled by the characters' heads – Mitch, Melanie, Lydia, in that order – rising up from the bottom of the screen, hesitant and fearful, straining to catch sounds in the sudden silence. The shots are angled and framed so that the ceiling seems to press down on them, so that the very instant of relief

seems laden with a sense of doom. (Wood 169)

These shots are echoed later in George Romero's zombie films where the characters are blocked into a confined space, hiding from a terror that exists outside the house. What becomes central is not necessarily the birds themselves: "Hitchcock focuses our attention on the development of character, situation, and relationship, on the birds' *effect* rather than on the birds themselves, an on complex effects rather than simple effects" (167). The true horrors lie within, not without.

The essentially silent nature of the film continues nearly to the end. After the attack, we view the characters sleeping, exhausted from their psychological battles. Melanie though hears flapping. After determining it is not the lovebirds, she slowly walks up the stairs in a shot completely reminiscent of silent film. In *Metropolis* one sees the shot of the female figure framed in the spotlight of the man's lantern in the caves. Melanie's ascent is similar to that stylized spotlighting. Technically, she should not be in the spotlight – she should be directing the spotlight. However, the bronze vase at the top of the stairs serves as a reflector, lighting her slow ascent toward her doom. As in *Psycho*, Hitchcock wanted Melanie's death to be a silent murder⁸. She sacrifices herself in the attic room: "in its close-up details of hands and face, gesture and expression, as the birds tear and batter the collapsing girl, some of the most horrific and beautiful images he has given us – some of the most desolate, conveying the extremity of human anguish" (Wood 171). As she collapses, she mumbles something about getting Cathy out of the house and Mitch beats her body with the door in an attempt to get her out. The birds crucify Melanie – pecking her hands and ankles no fewer than four times (eight shots total of hands/ feet/ ankle puncturing).

The chaos of the bird attack, particularly in this final attack on Melanie, emphasizes "in more general terms than before the frailty and precariousness of ordered, meaningful existence" (166).

⁸ *All About the Birds*. Dir. Laurent Bouzereau. Universal Studios, 2000. DVD.

Melanie is wrapped nun-like around the head and neck with bandages. As she lays on Lydia and looks up mercifully into Lydia's face, it evokes images of *The Pieta* – Jesus' bloodied body being tended to by Mary. Perhaps Melanie is meant to be a sacrifice, to teach us the dangers of complacency.

Conclusion:

According to Bellour, "The principle of classical film is well known: the end must reply to the beginning" (341). Both *Psycho* and *The Birds* negate this principle – neither returns to the beginning and both are left ambiguously open. There is no end, no dénouement to *The Birds*: just "the cries of the birds, as well as their sheer domination of the landscape as Mitch and Melanie flee from Bodega Bay" (McCombe 271).

Context is key in Hitchcock's films. In *Blackmail*, "not a phrase, term, character, mood, object, situation, or moral value remains a constant. All is in flux; all for meaning depends upon context" (Yacowar 110). The same can be said for *Psycho* and *The Birds*. Hitchcock manipulates the context of key components of his films using montage and expressionistic techniques. His struggle to get produced within the confines of British cinema lead him to innovations in subversion that heighten his craft as an auteur. This dissatisfaction leads him out of Britain to America where he takes a stab at his art in a new environment. The silent film techniques in tandem with experimental sound scores and layering techniques place *Psycho* and *The Birds* in cinematic categories of their own. This is perhaps why they have become embedded in the cultural DNA of American cinema and in our cultural consciousness as well.

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