Critics of The Birds have rightly sought to connect the thread of domestic melodrama in the film with the attacks of the birds that temporarily interrupt that thread. But what is the nature of this connection? The orthodox interpretation of the film is an Oedipal one. Thus Margaret Horwitz writes: "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." Horwitz's interpretation of the film is echoed by Slavoj Zizek, who writes: "the terrifying figure of the birds is . . . the incarnation of a fundamental disorder in family relationships—the father is absent, the paternal function (the function of pacifying law, the Name-of-the Father) is suspended and that vacuum is filled by the 'irrational' maternal superego, arbitrary, wicked, blocking 'normal' sexual relationship (only possible under the sign of the paternal metaphor)." The irrational maternal super-ego is the liberator of pure chaos: the birds are a figuration of the eruption of a "lawless impossible real" into the domain of the law or the social order.

There is much in the work to favor this interpretation. Melanie Daniel's entry into Bodega Bay on her quest to bring a pair of lovebirds to Mitch Brenner is the occasion for the birds to begin their attack, and she is the object of assault. Furthermore, her association with Mitch is viewed with hostility by Lydia who jealously guards his companionship in a manner that has clear Oedipal overtones. The film jokes about this when, upon her arrival at Bodega Bay, Melanie inquires as to where the Brenners live. "Mr. and Mrs. Brenner?" she asks. "No," is the reply, "just Lydia and the two kids." While Mitch is Lydia's son, he interacts with her as if he were her domestic partner and Lydia reacts to Melanie in the manner that she had reacted earlier to Annie Hayworth: both are her rivals for Mitch's affection. In a particularly telling scene in the Brenner kitchen, Mitch refers to Lydia as "darling" and "dear" as he dries the dishes, while Lydia taunts him with observations about Melanie's notoriety as a good-time girl prone to pranks like jumping nude into a fountain in Rome the previous summer. As Horwitz points out, in the very next scene that follows from a close-up of Lydia in the kitchen, Mitch repeats Lydia's observations about Melanie to her in a manner that suggests his sexual interest, but is accompanied by the increasingly ominous sounds of the birds gathering on the telephone wires against a lowering sky. Mitch casts an alarmed glance in their direction at the end of the sequence.

This interpretation is further supported by considering certain formal aspects of the work that link Lydia to the birds. Jessica Tandy's blank stare (fig. 1) cues the transition to scenes that feature birds gathering or attacking at several junctures within the narrative. The stare, together with her taught mouth, craning neck, and occasionally hysterical cries render her birdlike. So too does her hairstyle and costume. Her hair is black flecked with gray. She consistently wears a black and white speckled wool coat (fig. 2), and later in the Brenner house she sports a black and white speckled wool skirt. The relationship between black and white is central to the figuration of the birds and their relationship to the human. The opposition between black and white signifies morality via its association with light and darkness. It is an idea that is invoked by Daphne du Maurier in her short story from which the film was adapted where the massing of the birds creates premature night and brings a black winter instead of a white one. While the tendency to think in black and white terms may indicate a faulty adherence to absolutes when what is at stake are finer shades of gray, the co-mingling of black and white may suggest the breakdown of category distinctions, an incipient chaos or monstrosity. The black and white motif is announced in the credit sequence as black birds that peck away at the credits flutter against a white background (fig. 3). It is echoed later when a flock of crows attacks the school children against the background of
Annie’s white-walled, black-roofed schoolhouse, which looms on the horizon like some gigantic gothic birdhouse (figs. 4, 5). It is repeated again when black bird and white bird, crow and seagull, combine in the final assault on the Brenner household and on Melanie, alone in the attic.

However, while such a formal analysis points to a connection between Lydia and the birds, it also reveals the inadequacy of imputing the agency of the birds to Lydia alone. The telling bird-like stare that often signals transitions to scenes featuring the birds is not just attached to Lydia but to Melanie (fig. 6), Annie (fig. 7), Mitch, and to a woman with two small children at the café who functions in the story as Lydia’s double (fig. 8). As the film draws to a close and the Brenner family is isolated and entrapped in their homestead under assault from the birds, Mitch, Melanie, and Lydia loom in the foreground of the image low-angled close-ups that dramatize the angular, avian aspect of human physiognomy (figs. 9, 10, 11). The association between the birds and the human beings in general is reinforced through Hitchcock’s deployment of the speckled black and white costume. Melanie dons a speckled black and white wool suit in the opening scene of the film, a point to which I shall return (fig. 12). Mitch wears a black and white flecked jacket in the aforementioned scene with Melanie outside the house, and throughout most of the remainder of the movie sports a gray and white flecked jacket, seagull colors (fig. 13). Finally, the woman in the café wears a black and white flecked wool dress, as well as exhibiting the characteristic wide-eyed avian stare (fig. 14). The association that all the main characters bear to the birds in the film does not discount the centrality accorded to Lydia, but an adequate interpretation must consistently account for their role.

As Robin Wood was the first to point out in his unsurpassed interpretation of The Birds, the script takes great pains to explain why a Freudian interpretation of the film is inadequate. Why does Lydia Brenner behave the way she does, Annie Hayworth rhetorically asks of Melanie Daniels: “Jealous woman, right? Clinging, possessive mother? Wrong!

With all due respect to Oedipus, I don't think that was the case.” Lydia, she continues, was “afraid of any woman who would give Mitch the one thing that Lydia can give him—love.” Doesn’t that amount to a jealous, possessive woman, Melanie asks. “No, I don’t think so,” Annie responds; she is not jealous in the sense that Melanie is implying: “You see, she’s not afraid of losing Mitch. She’s only afraid of being abandoned.” To the extent that Lydia’s relationship to Mitch is incipiently incestuous, it is a symptom of the fears she has of repeating the loss that she has already suffered in the death of her husband. Unable to mourn this loss and to relinquish her attachment, Lydia installs Mitch in her husband’s place and jealously guards her relationship to him. Lydia cannot release Mitch, nor can Mitch leave, for we surmise that he believes that his presence in the house is indispensable to Lydia’s well-being. He’d just been through a lot with Lydia after his father died,” says Annie. “He didn’t want to risk going through it all again.”

If Annie is to be taken seriously, the deeper significance of the birds’ attack lies not in an Oedipal jealousy but in an uncontrolled rage that issues from feelings of isolation and abandonment. The principle agent of this rage is perhaps Lydia, but all the main characters either exhibit anger or have a reason to be angry on account of feelings of emotional isolation. As I have suggested, Lydia’s plight is figured by the woman in the café, who, without a husband, struggles to protect her two children in the face of a cruel and hostile world like a mother hen protecting her young (fig. 14). Annie has been abandoned by Mitch, and her subsequent lifestyle as devoted schoolmarm (to Cathy) and companion to Mitch has memorialized this abandonment, while Mitch himself continues to suffer the burden of his mother’s sense of helplessness. Melanie knows all too well the pain of attachment and loss, the substitute gratifications it leads to, and the kind of anger it instills. Witness her conversation with Mitch on the hill before the birds attack the children’s party.
MELANIE: You see—Rome—that entire summer I did nothing but—it was very easy to get lost there. so when I came back I thought it was time I began finding something again.

[Melanie changes the conversation to a myna bird she bought for a straight-laced aunt who will be shocked by the four letter words it has picked up from her niece. Then the conversation continues]

MITCH: You need a mother’s care, my child!
MELANIE: Not my mother’s!
MITCH: Oh—I’m sorry.
MELANIE: What have you to be sorry about? My mother? Don’t waste your time. She ditched us when I was eleven and went off with some hotel man in the East. 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. Don’t you ever see her?
MELANIE: I don’t know where she is....Well, maybe I ought to go join the other children.

If the Freudian interpretation misconstrues the way in which the birds figure human agency, it is also overly narrow in its interpretation of who and what it is the birds are attacking. For while Melanie and her precursor, Annie, can be seen as the object of Lydia’s Oedipal rage, this is scarcely true of Cathy and the other children who twice become the target of the birds. Although Melanie undoubtedly visits Bodega Bay in search of a mate—the lovebirds she brings are a gift for Mitch—the deeper significance of her quest lies in the fact that the visit to the Brenner house allows her to establish a relationship with a mother whose hostility she can at once experience and forgive, therefore enabling her to discover her own sense of self-worth. Lydia’s problem is that she has a distorted relationship with her children that renders her incapable of the kind of love that allows her to let them go. In the psychotherapeutic narrative of the film, it is Melanie’s task to conquer Lydia’s fear of abandonment by offering the kind of unconditional love that will release Lydia from this fear and by the same token liberate Mitch to become her mate. If Melanie becomes the object of the birds attack because she is a rival for Mitch’s affections, at a deeper level of narrative logic, she becomes the object of attack because she embodies a childlike emotional openness and directness that is so threatening to Lydia (and by extension to everyone who has experienced emotional isolation as a result of narcissistic wounds—humanity as whole). Thus Melanie is at once family therapist and martyr. Melanie bears an intuitive understanding of the kind that Hitchcock generally assigns women in accordance with cultural convention. She also experiences the suffering that accompanies this understanding. In both respects she is aligned with Annie, but Annie’s understanding of human isolation is a result of her encounter with the Brenner household and it leaves her embittered. It is Melanie’s prior experience of isolation and embitterment that offers her the possibility of personal renewal in the role of “family therapist.”

Melanie is closely identified with Lydia’s daughter Cathy, who is the same age as Melanie was when her mother died. As Melanie admits to Mitch, she is, emotionally speaking, a child like Cathy. Melanie’s friendship with Cathy parallels her relationship to Mitch throughout the film and draws out the deeper meanings in the latter. While the lovebirds are a gift from Melanie to Mitch, they are equally a gift from Melanie to Cathy. Her identification with Cathy resonates in two distinct but related ways. She relates to Cathy as a mother to a child in a way that allows her to repair her own damaged relationship to her own mother. This is threatening to Lydia in a manner that demonstrates why Lydia’s rage fails to be explained by Freud’s theories. Lydia shows precisely the same resentment towards Melanie’s relationship to Cathy as she demonstrates towards Melanie’s incipient attachment to Mitch. She reserves a singularly glowering and
prolonged bird-like stare for the moment when Cathy innocently bounds up to and embraces Melanie when she realizes that Melanie has, after all, decided to stay for her birthday party (figs. 15, 16). It is as if Lydia, in her bitterness, imputes the worst of ingratiating and self-serving motives to Melanie for her embrace of Cathy, when really she has done nothing wrong. It is just that Melanie responds to Cathy's warmth and spontaneity in precisely the way that Lydia is unable to do.

Melanie also identifies with Cathy as someone who needs recognition and acknowledgment from Lydia in order to secure a precarious identity. If the first manner in which she identifies with Cathy enables her to become the family therapist, it is this second affiliation that renders her so vulnerable. Her link to Cathy is first made explicit in what seems an otherwise strange and baffling moment in the hardware store where Melanie stops to ask directions to the Brenner household. The store is pretentiously decked out in Hitchcock’s warning colors of yellow and red on white that are only intensified within the claustrophobic interior that anticipates the many images of entrapment in the film. Melanie asks what is the name of the Brenner girl and, unsure, the owner of the store turns for confirmation to Harry, who is out back. From a shot of Melanie looking, Hitchcock cuts to a point-of-view shot of the back of the store: a graphic configuration of the colors of danger (figs. 17, 18). Harry, off screen, responds with the wrong name. In this strangely jarring moment, what Melanie stares at, together with the spectator, is a visual array that seems to defiantly look back at her, suggesting that, in looking, she fails to grasp how it is that what it is that occurs at this moment puts her own identity into question. The items cluttered within Melanie’s visual field, filling every inch of space, provide a kind of visual correlative to the cluttered massing of the birds later in the film in whom the returned gaze is given a deadly embodiment that literally causes her breakdown.

The psychotherapeutic model of human relationships that underpins the narrative of *The Birds* is not that of Freudian psychoanalysis but a different picture of human motivation put forward in object-relations theory, then current and popularized by Harry Guntrip in his book *Personality Structure and Human Interaction*.10 I cannot demonstrate here that Evan Hunter, the screenwriter of *The Birds*, read Guntrip’s work, but his recently published journals on collaborating with Hitchcock suggests that he was regularly consulting with a psychologist over the script of *Marnie* that he was preparing at the same time.11 Hunter’s screenplays for both *The Birds* and *Marnie* articulate a picture of human motivation that centers upon searching for and sustaining contact with others rather than simply upon the satisfaction of desire. According to object-relations theorists, sexual desire is not the well-spring of human action but just one way that the search for attachment is articulated. The overvaluation of sexual desire that is demonstrated in, for example, Lydia’s relationship to Mitch, manifests a distorted form of attachment that issues from a sense of isolation and loss. With its stress on emotional lack and loss of the mother as opposed to sexual desire and its prohibition by the father, object-relations theory is a psychotherapeutic model oriented towards mother-child and especially mother-daughter relationships, since, in traditional role playing, the problem of achieving autonomy from the mother is particularly resonant for little girls.

Critics overlook the textual significance of object-relations theory for *The Birds* because of the unquestioned authority still accorded by some to Freudian or Lacanian explanation when what is at stake in the interpretation of a work is not the truth of a given picture of human motivation but how that picture might inform the text being discussed. Also, arguably, there is a failure to take seriously the fact that Hitchcock is such an important film author because he is a successful collaborator, particularly with writers. The script of *The Birds* must be considered alongside Evan Hunter’s other writings of the time such as the script for *Marnie* and his novel, *Buddwing*, that display striking affinities with specific features of Guntrip’s thought as well as object-relations theory more generally.12
I have tried to bring into relief a picture of human relationships that contrasts with the Freudian interpretation of this film, because I believe that it better illuminates the work. However, it would be foolish to dismiss the Freudian themes entirely for they are so obviously present. What, then, is their place? In an interesting departure from her emphasis upon the birds as an expression of Lydia’s super-ego, Horwitz argues that the birds are associated, in a much more general way, with female hysteria and destructiveness. The birds, she writes, “are evocative of the mythical ‘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.” This line of argument can be made to square with the Oedipal reading if the birds are seen as a kind of maternal super-ego writ large; this is, I think, the spirit in which Žižek interprets the film. The birds represent the perverse alternative to a patriarchal social order that temporarily failed to sustain itself through the male line.

While at first sight this interpretation remains inconsistent with the idea that there is a connection between Mitch and the birds, Mitch can be considered a man who has been “feminized,” who is unconsciously or unwittingly carrying out the desires of his mother. However, the idea of the birds as a universal inscription of a female hysteria is equally consistent with the psychotherapeutic interpretation I have offered here, where the anger arises not so much from the breakdown of the patriarchal line but from a failure to be loved. Since it is women and not men, in western culture, who bear the responsibility for loving, that is, for fostering emotional connection, women are also responsible for its breakdown. In one interpretation the birds are expressive of the death-dealing power of an hysterical femininity that requires containment by the pacifying routines and hierarchy of the patriarchal family and social order. In the other, the power of an hysterical femininity to deal death is a consequence of the power of women to compel emotional response and mutual acknowledgment. Thus is generated the unresolved paradox or conundrum that defines The Birds and generates the Hitchcockian universe as whole. In The Birds, the social world of human interaction, embodied in the microcosm of the American family, is restored by containing feminine agency. Tippi Hedren is literally reduced to a catatonic child-like state. Yet it is feminine agency and the emotional connection it initiates that affords the possibility of the human, social world in the first place.

Thus far, I have focused on the way in which the birds embody the defensive rage that issues from a sense of emotional isolation and abandonment and manifests an inability to acknowledge the other. But why birds? There are, I think, good reasons that Hitchcock uses birds to figure this rage. When we fail to acknowledge the other, in effect we no longer treat them as human: we act as if they do not have the emotional responses, and so on, that we have. Such a failure to acknowledge the emotional responses of others is constitutive of our own failure to emotionally respond. As Stanley Cavell has understood perhaps better than any other contemporary writer, dehumanization of the other is dehumanization of the self. In this respect the birds are carefully chosen for the role they play in the film, for they are an animal to whom it is hard to ascribe emotional responses, and therefore an animal that epitomizes the dehumanized and unresponsive other that the humans in the film threaten to become on account of their sense of emotional isolation. We ascribe emotions to human beings on the basis of their facial expressions and behavior. It is someone’s tone of voice, flushed face, and exaggerated gestures that indicates she is angry. This is not to say that her anger consists in these expressions of anger, since one could be angry without exhibiting it; nonetheless, it is on the basis of this behavior that we understand what anger is.

The application of emotions to animals resides in our capacity to think of animal behavior in terms of human behavior. It is for this reason that we can far more readily respond to a pet Labrador than a cockroach. I do not mean
that our ascription of emotion to animals is merely a fiction, nor that it is inherently sentimental (though it is prone to sentimentalization), just that its limits reside in the limits of our capacity to picture animal behavior in terms of human behavior. This is perhaps why Wittgenstein writes that if a lion could talk we could not understand it, for there is nothing that could count in the behavior of lions as something that we recognize as speech. Birds occupy a place of particular interest with respect to the grounds upon which we ascribe emotional predicates to animals, for in comparison to other animals of their size, they are unusually rigid: their feathers appear as a kind of armor, and they entirely lack facial expression. If their beady eyes suggest an inside, it is a hollow interior. This animal, whose emotions are utterly inscrutable, is also one that, at least to the nonspecialist, seems to exhibit a purposiveness without purpose, in its exuberant song, color, and flight. Thus birds seem to combine the absence of emotion with irrational drive and thereby epitomize blind nature in contradistinction to the human, and this makes them ideal figures for those forces which are destructive of human social life.

However, this is not the only role allotted to birds in the film, for we must not forget the love-birds that Melanie brings to the Brenner household, and to which her bird-like attributes are also connected. In the scene in the bird-shop that opens the film, Melanie meets Mitch who has come to buy a bird, the English slang for a sexually attractive woman, and pretends to be selling them. Her angular posture, the fact that she is framed between bird cages, and her stare all render her bird-like (fig. 12). Mitch is the bird-catcher who shares some of the mannerisms of his quarry. Once Melanie sets out to Bodega Bay, she dons the pale green colors of the love-birds that she brings with her in courtship to Mitch, and this remains her costume for the rest of the film. She is associated with the love birds through their persistent chirping which we hear from off screen while we look at her, and she moves in sync with the love-birds as the car swerves around the bend with a bird-like screech of its brakes. As

Lesley Brill established, the sense of artifice and the motif of bird-catching set out in the opening scenes have a decidedly romantic resonance that is made explicit in the love-birds themselves. In the context of the film's preoccupation with the thematics of emotional isolation, Melanie's avian qualities are better understood here less as a sexual instinct—the reductive assumption of a Freudian interpretation—for she is not straightforwardly seductive in the film. They are better understood as manifestations of a "mating instinct," with its connotations of getting attached or getting close to someone. In this sense Melanie's avian qualities represent the very aspects of her character that seem to provoke those other birds, what we might call the death-birds, to attack her.

The qualities the love-birds represent appear at first sight to be antithetical to the qualities of the death-birds. Here, the affinity between the human being and nature appears beneficial to the human. Melanie's mating instinct challenges the emotional distance and sense of isolation that characterizes the Brenner household and Lydia in particular. This isolation is inscribed in the location of the house at the edge of Bodega bay and it is emphasized by the way in which Melanie approaches the house across the bay by boat. It is underscored through the use of point-of-view editing that draws attention to relationships of proximity and distance in a manner that has been exhaustively analyzed by Raymond Bellour. Yet, as a love-bird, Melanie is endowed with a decidedly cool and detached persona. Her blond hair, pale green suit and off-white fur (feathers), painted nails (claws), and silver sports car all connote a coolly, almost glacially undemonstrative character, self-sufficient but emotionally distant. At first sight, she is scarcely the candidate for family therapist and substitute mother. She is the antithesis of the earthy school marm, Annie Hayworth, whom we first encounter tending her gardens. Yet it is precisely Melanie's avian qualities that allow her to counter the figure of the death-bird, the figure of emotional isolation and aggression. For the very qualities of birds that inhibit us from applying emotional predicates to them are precisely the same qualities that provoke or test us
to find in them the qualities of mind or emotion they appear to lack. In Hitchcock's avian female, we find a particularly telling figuration of Cavell's idea of the unknown woman, a woman who provokes us into acknowledging her humanity by dint of her self-containment and inscrutability, who provokes recognition through merely existing or being.16

Hitchcock's critics would no doubt point out that the image of femininity projected by Melanie Daniels is a decidedly patriarchal one. The equation of Melanie to a bird suggests that her emotions are inscrutable, her actions irrational, and her purposive purposelessness is at the service of sexuality and reproduction. Yet, as usual in Hitchcock's treatment of gender, there is more than what meets the eye. For by exhibiting femininity as pure "nature," Hitchcock's use of Hedren in The Birds (and in Marnie) calls into question the naturalization of gender roles as "second nature." Hedren's avian postures represent an abstract, schematized, hyperbolic conception of femininity. Consider the way she purses her lips (as if she is about to give a peck on the cheek) as she plays a mating game with Mitch (fig. 19). Once established, this gesture is reproduced in her relentless smoking that molds her lips in the appropriate avian manner (fig. 20). Note the way in which she cocks her head (fig. 21) just prior to the first bird attack which ruffles her feathers (fig. 22). Consider, too, the way in which she holds a dressing to the wound she receives on her forehead after the first bird attack in a manner that emphasizes the spindly quality of her arms and her too-feminine, all-too-clawlike finger nails (fig. 23). Once again this gesture is perpetuated through her smoking as she holds her elbow at an acute angle and displays her red claws.

These hyperbolic feminine gestures are of twofold significance. First, Hedren seems to be performing femininity rather than simply being feminine. This performativity of gender is characteristic both of other stars used by Hitchcock, for example the "masculinity" of Cary Grant, and the way Hitchcock uses stars. Hedren in this respect is peculiarly exemplary, for her star persona was one manufactured by Hitchcock himself, who literally put the quotation marks around "Tippi." Secondly, Hedren's performance of femininity is curiously detached from our capacity to ascribe to it a particular sexual object (specifically a heterosexual object). There is a temptation here, of course, to look at her performance in The Birds with the hindsight of watching her in Marnie, where her performance of femininity coincides with a hostility to men and connotes a desire not simply heterosexual.17 However, even in The Birds, while she couples with Mitch, the triangle she forms with Lydia activates Annie's dormant mating instinct (she starts looking and sounding like Melanie) and eroticizes their encounter, most strikingly when Melanie returns to Annie's house to stay the night. Before Annie opens the door, Melanie preens herself (fig. 24), and Annie, as she opens the door, thrusts her breast forward in a provocative gesture of welcome (fig. 25). The house siding that forms a background to the shot serves to inscribe Hitchcock's characteristic compositional motif of parallel diagonal lines that like the color red characteristically indicates warning, threat, or disturbance in the fictional world.18

Melanie's expressions of emotion are so disguised in artifice, play and the projection of an image, that one might indeed begin to wonder whether her expressions of desire are sincere. It is at this juncture that the line begins to blur between those qualities of Melanie's character that make her a catalyst who breaks down the boundaries of human isolation and those qualities of her character that seem to sustain it. Both the love-birds and death-birds are birds, and whether or not we see Melanie's bird-like behavior as evidence of artifice or authenticity depends very much on our attitude or point of view. Cavell has argued that the cinema provokes this skeptical standpoint by virtue of its realism.19 I have argued elsewhere that the Bazinian conception of realism that underpins Cavell's argument is indefensible; however, I believe that his argument can be reconstructed from the standpoint of iconicity, rather than indexicality.20 The realism of cinema lies not in the causal link between image and referent, but in the capacity of cinema to exactly
replicate the coordinates of space and time. By virtue of this capacity, cinema can exactly reproduce the repertoire of gestures and expressions that comprise human behavior. A defining characteristic of Hitchcock’s cinema is the way that he exploits this feature of the medium to bestow an ethical ambiguity or undecidability on the events he presents. For example, when Cary Grant coils his arm around Joan Fontaine at the end of *Suspicion* or the lodger kisses his bride at the end of *The Lodger* under the light of the neon sign that has accompanied the murder of the blonde show girls, do we witness an expression of love or the intent to kill? Or is the point that love is death? The figure of the birds and the bird-like human allows Hitchcock to weave this ambiguity into his very portrayal of the human.

To return to the opening scene of the movie: if the exchange between Mitch and Melanie suggests a romance and incipient attachment that counters the fear of the other, it does not suggest this unambiguously. It is in retrospect striking that Melanie does not wear the costume of a love-bird in this scene but the costume of a death-bird. In the first shot of the film she is framed on the sidewalk by the bird shop where she meets Mitch and buys the love-birds. A boy scout gives her a wolf whistle, and in the same gesture of returning his glance she turns her head skyward to look at the circling birds that will subsequently attack. The qualities that provoke desire and death cannot be readily discriminated. If her play-acting and banter with Mitch is indicative of romance it could also connote a contentment with meretricious, superficial forms of human interaction that, as Wood points out, sustain human isolation. Is this form of behavior a symptom of Melanie (and Mitch’s) self-isolation or the road to a cure?

Other scenes only support our doubt. The rather sharp banter between Mitch and Melanie after her second visit to the Brenner house is accompanied by the screeching of the birds in a manner that suggests not simply the intrusion of Lydia’s specter into the burgeoning love affair, but a destructive rather than a reparative aspect of the romance that is in some sense, constitutive of it. As Melanie swoops down to Bodega Bay in her sports car, she is not simply, it seems, a love-bird, but a bird of prey whose mechanical cry is heard in the screech of the car brakes that anticipate the squawking of the death-birds. Consider, too, the shot in which Melanie purses her lips in pursuit of Mitch (fig. 19). As she ducks down coquettishly on the right of the screen giving all the appearance of a love-bird, dominating screen left is the gigantic black head of the boat engine. Without any marks that identify the object as an engine it looks like a great blot or stain in the visual field that functions as an abstract figure of death, of the death-bird. Is this inert, obscene object the love bird stripped of her appearance and agency? This roval black object an exemplary instance of what Žižek has called the Hitchcockian Blot, an arbitrary element within the visual field that de-natures what we see and draws us into Hitchcock’s realm of supplementary, ironic, and deadly meanings.

The bleak conclusion to be drawn from *The Birds* is that the monstrous in human nature is not something that is produced by, say, bad mothering that instinctive or natural forms of behavior can repair (as the therapeutic discourse of the film might suggest), but that it is impossible to distinguish the good nature from bad, authentic human behavior from the monstrous. This conclusion receives strong support in the way Hitchcock draws an analogy between children and the death-birds. In the therapeutic narrative of the film, children, as I have already suggested, embody the innocence and emotional openness that is threatening to the emotionally isolated adult, and runs counter to forces of destruction and death. However, in certain scenes, the children are connected to the death-birds in a manner that suggests a humanity that is corrupted at its source. It is, after all, a school-house that doubles as the gigantic gothic bird-house from which the birds appear to emerge to attack the children and the parallel between the death-birds and the children is reinforced in several ways. The death-birds mass on the jungle gym, birds and children alike swarm, en masse,
out of the gothic structure. The sounds of flapping wings resonate with the sounds of the children’s stampede, and the screeching of the birds bleeds into the screams of the children. These are images of pure chaos that suggest, at least for their duration, that the human and the death-bird are each other’s mirror image. The human is in perpetual, panicked flight from the other; the bird exhibits the relentless, indiscriminate fury of the other, but the flight and the fury it unleashes are ultimately one and the same.

It is in this context we can better understand the ironic, demonic quality to the depiction of Annie Hayworth, who as keeper of the school house is therefore also mother to the death-birds. Hitchcock inscribes Annie’s demonic aspect quite masterfully in the image of her looking out after Melanie who has just departed (fig. 7). In terms of the narrative this image is quite insignificant, a throwaway, but it also carries an extraordinary symbolic weight. Although Annie nominally looks at Melanie, the image is held long enough for her gaze to seem like a blank stare, a stare that denies its object, the stare of the death-bird whose black and white speckled costume she also wears, her black plumage blowing in the wind. The red sweater has an earthy quality to its texture and color that, together with the white picket fence and its climbing plant, links Annie to the garden and benign nature. However, in a context where the red sweater is juxtaposed with the bright red letter box that dominates the image against a white background, it becomes associated with threat and danger. Furthermore, the vertical lines of the white picket fence are graphically connected to the fence on the right of the character that inscribes Hitchcock’s signature parallel diagonal lines motif. Trivially, the threat posed by Annie is to Melanie, for she is a rival to Mitch, but it has a universal resonance. The universality of the image is suggested in the background that picks up the black and white motif and juxtaposes the square gothic schoolhouse with the pointed spire of the church. Annie Hayworth, earth mother and figure of redemption, could also be the most monstrous, if to be human is to be like the death-bird.

In The Birds Hitchcock poses something of a double-bind. The hierarchy between human and natural orders that the birds threaten by their attacks can be restored only by separating out human and bird-like qualities, yet the positive qualities of romance and renewal embodied in the character of Melanie that are the source of such fascination and pleasure in the narrative depend on blurring the lines between the avian and the human. Brill has shown the way in which the trajectory of outsider status followed by personal renewal that results in social reintegration is a standard feature of romance narratives to which Hitchcock’s films conform. However, in Hitchcock’s films, the kind of qualities of character that compel fascination are precisely qualities that cannot readily be squared with the reestablishment of convention other than ironically or at a cost. In The Birds the social order can be restored only if Melanie can be stripped of her otherness or birdlike qualities, and this happens in her final “rape” by the birds. Yet in losing her “birdlike” qualities, Melanie is threatened with the loss of precisely those qualities that define her. Stripped of her “nature” she loses her human identity as well.

In Hitchcock’s later work, difference or “queerness” and conservatism are increasingly difficult to reconcile; the therapy required has the destructive and self-defeating force of violence. Mitch, a lawyer, cuts a very square and conventional figure in The Birds that is at odds with Melanie’s wild nature, and she is finally tamed only by being reduced to a catatonic state. In this respect, The Birds anticipates the impossible romance of Marnie, where Mark Rutland (Sean Connery) is attracted to a woman whose identity, founded upon her hostility to men, must be destroyed for her relationship with Mark to be possible.

Yet, I wish to insist on the redemptive as opposed to the ironic aspect of The Birds, a quality that can be brought out by briefly comparing the film to Hitchcock’s previous work to which it owes a great deal: Psycho. As a figuration of the monstrous within the human, The Birds rearticulates a complex analogy between bird and human that already exists
in *Psycho* and is announced in the opening sequence of that film. Over the bird’s-eye view of a city we read “Phoenix, Arizona.” Shots of an hotel room where Marion (Janet Leigh) and Sam (John Gavin) are making love evoke the point of view of a bird who glides down, alights on the window ledge, and slips into the room. We spy on a pair of love-birds: Marion Crane and Sam Loomis (i.e., “is a diving bird”). Perched on the edge of the bed, they lean forward to kiss by craning their necks (fig. 26). Janet Leigh’s prominent white (bra-covered) breast is thrust forward during their lovemaking in a manner that is echoed in the posture of Annie Hayworth when she greets Melanie Daniels in *The Birds* (fig. 25).

In contrast to the figure of the love-birds and the possibility they represent of mating and procreation lies the figure of the stuffed bird and the activity of stuffing birds in *Psycho*. Stuffing birds is the hobby of Norman Bates, the queerest character in Hitchcock’s work. The activity of stuffing birds objectifies the absence of the inner that, as we have already seen, characterizes the figure of the bird. Norman, the bird-philosopher, well understands this: “I don’t really know anything about birds,” he tells Marion, referring explicitly to the habits of feathered animals and implicitly to women:

> My hobby is stuffing things. You know, taxidermy. I guess I’d just rather stuff birds because I hate the look of beasts when they’re stuffed. You know, foxes and chimps. Some people even stuff dogs and cats but, oh, I can’t do that. I think only birds look well stuffed, well, because they’re kind of passive to begin with.

But Norman’s hobby is far from innocent: his supreme creation is the stuffed bird he keeps in the attic, his mummy. This “stuffed bird” was created by the act of “stuffing a bird” in the sense that combines both a sexual act—the implied incest between Norman and his mother—and the act of killing. The monstrous figure of Norman’s mummy is condemned endlessly to repeat this act. Animated by Norman, Norman’s mummy swoops down from the gigantic Gothic birdhouse/fortress, endowed with a predatory agency of a singularly destructive kind. Accompanied by the bird-like screech of Bernard Herrmann’s violins, Norman’s mummy devours Marion in an act of sexual frenzy that is visually inscribed in the beak-like stabbing of the kitchen knife (fig. 27). Marion Crane ends up slumped like a bird with a broken neck on the bathroom floor, her blank, wide-eyed avian stare, the stare of death (fig. 28). The figure of Norman’s mummy anticipates a defining creature of modern horror: the figure of the “living dead” that contains, within an emotionally numb exterior, an insatiable appetite for destroying the human.

In *Psycho*, as in *The Birds*, the human as love-bird is confronted with the human as death-bird, but the ambiguity that is thereby accorded the metaphor of human as bird receives a negative resolution in *Psycho*: there is no possibility of redemption through love. The opening scenes of the film unequivocally endow the activity of love-making with a sense of lack, alienation, and sordidness, that prompts Marion into the act of stealing that leads her to the Bates Motel. When Marion arrives there and Norman invites her for a modest meal in his “parlor,” the situation invokes a mating ritual, somewhere between a “call” and a “date.” “You eat like a bird” remarks Norman, captivated, as Marion pecks at a piece of bread held deftly between her fingers (fig. 29). But Marion has no interest in Norman, for his avian qualities bespeak an emotional detachment that seems to justify Norman’s reaction to her half-hearted attempt at therapy: “People always mean well. They cluck their thick tongues and shake their heads and suggest, oh so very delicately.” In any case, Marion is too late to rescue Norman from his mother, for his own avian qualities betray his colonization by a predatory maternal super-ego. His wide eagle-eyed stare beneath the looming figures of the stuffed owl and raven is
too intense for comfort (fig. 30). The earlier scene of lovemaking between Sam Loomis and Marion Crane is ironically echoed in the “perverse” scene of desire that immediately precedes Marion’s murder, where Norman spies upon Marion, now clad in a black bra, through a peep hole (figs. 31, 32). Furthermore, Hitchcock’s camera, initially identified with the love-bird, now comes to occupy the gaze of the death-bird in a series of high-angled shots that accompany the murder of Marion Crane in the shower and when it rises to the position that would be occupied by one of Norman’s stuffed birds as Norman’s mummy swoops down to murder Arbogast on the landing of the gothic staircase.27

“We’re all in our private traps. Clamped in them,” Norman tells us, “And none of us can ever get out. We scratch and claw, but only at the air, only at each other. And for all of it, we never budge an inch.” Norman’s vision of the human condition where mutual acknowledgement and recognition of the other is impossible is realized in the images of human entrapment in The Birds, most notably in the shot at the end of the film where Melanie, psychologically scarred from her ordeal in the attic, claws helplessly at the air, at Mitch, and at the camera/spectator (fig. 33). However, in The Birds, in contrast to Psycho, the force that creates the condition of human isolation and entrapment is externalized in the figure of the birds; it is detached from human agency, even as it is metaphorically linked to it. While various characters in The Birds, and Lydia most of all, exhibit emotional numbness and are deemed to be like birds, no one manifests Norman’s assimilation of avian identity. Also in The Birds in contrast to Psycho, the “death-bird” is not simply a figuration of the maternal super-ego or death-dealing femininity; the rage expressed by the birds is not reducible to Oedipal jealousy. As a consequence, The Birds affords a space for the redemptive aspects of femininity and for the benign aspects of human nature that are absent in Psycho. Whereas in The Birds, melodrama and horror, redemptive femininity and corrupting femininity are held in balance, in Psycho, melodrama simply cedes to horror: the patriarchal social order undergoes catastrophic breakdown, and the restoration of the family is impossible. As a horror film, The Birds, like Psycho, evokes a human nature poisoned at its source to which Melanie, like Marion, is sacrificed. However, in the melodrama of The Birds, Psycho’s catastrophic Oedipal logic is checked by the redemptive, therapeutic narrative of the mother-daughter relationship; Melanie, as family therapist, uses her intuition, her contact with nature, to redeem the Brenner family from emotional isolation.

The final assault of the birds is vicious in the extreme and suggests the sexual frenzy of a rape in keeping with the Oedipal interpretation of the film, but the scene also marks the culmination of the psychotherapeutic narrative of The Birds. Symbolically substituting herself for Cathy, Melanie goes to Cathy’s room upstairs where she exposes herself to an attack of the birds, for there is a large hole in the roof. Melanie is retrieved from the room by Mitch as if brought down from the cross, and her sacrifice finally yields Lydia’s look of acknowledgement as she nestles Melanie in a maternal embrace. Melanie’s reciprocating smile, while tentative, does suggest that she is not completely lost to the world. By leaving their home, the embattled Brenner family undoubtedly expose themselves to further attack. Yet it is precisely because they abandon their isolated, fortress-like homestead and leave in Melanie’s car, thereby rendering themselves vulnerable, that Lydia and hence Mitch open themselves to the possibility of acknowledging the other and overcoming their emotional isolation. Although the birds cackle and deliver a peck or two, their anger has abated. Blackbirds and seagulls, all mixed together in the final feverish attack on Melanie, have sorted themselves out somewhat (although not completely) into groups of black and white—suggesting at least the possibility of a newly constituted equilibrium that mirrors the tentative equilibrium of a new family, a new civilization, heralded by the dawn (fig. 34).
Notes

3. Horwitz, 282.
4. The commingling of black and white can be understood as a universal, formal rendition of the conflation of logical categories that Noël Carroll finds to a central feature of the monstrous. See The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart (New York: Routledge, 1991), 32.
5. Horwitz (282), to her credit, notes that the motivating stare is shared by all the characters, but she does not explain how this fact squares with her singular identification of the bird attacks with Lydia's maternal super-ego.
7. This metaphor is noted by Horwitz, 284.
9. It is, of course, Slavoj Žižek who, via Lacan, has enabled us to understand the role of the returned gaze in Hitchcock's work.
12. Guntrip's own rather reductive, contribution to object-relations theory is centered on the concept of the "regressed ego." This is a state of isolation and helplessness caused by bad mothering that expresses itself in a flight from genuine attachments and the establishment of conflictual and masochistic relationships with others as a defence against regression. When flight is paramount, the subject longs for death; where hope is fostered by the analyst/parent, the patient seeks a return to the womb and rebirth of a restored self. These ideas are less evident in The Birds but are clearly central to Marnie, whose heroine is in perpetual flight from an emotionally neglectful mother figure.
13. Horwitz, 282.
18. William Rothman, who was the first to draw attention to this motif, suggests other meanings that may be attached to it in Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 33.
23. The aural association established between bird, human, and machine is analyzed by Elizabeth Weiss in The Silent Scream (London: Associated University Presses, 1982), 143-45.
25. According to the OED, an obsolete meaning of "loom" is "penis."
27. For further discussion of this sequence see Rothman, 316.