Rituals of Defilement: 

_Frenzy_

Food in _Frenzy_ is a basic visual metaphor for the devouring abuses of man-against-man.

Donald Spoto, _The Art of Alfred Hitchcock_

Seeing a rotten fruit full of worms, Mair, the Urubu demiurge, exclaimed, “That would make a nice woman!” and straightaway the fruit turned into a woman. . . . In a Tacana myth the jaguar decides not to rape an Indian woman after he has caught the smell of her vulva, which seems to him to reek of worm-ridden meat. . . . Here again, then, we are dealing with stench and decay which, as has already been established, signify nature, as opposed to culture. . . . And woman is everywhere synonymous with nature.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, _The Raw and the Cooked_

Curiosity in an animal is always either sexual or alimentary. . . . In knowing, consciousness attracts the object to itself and incorporates it in itself. . . . But this movement of dissolution is fixed by the fact that the known remains in the same place, indelibly absorbed, devoured, and yet indefinitely intact, wholly digested and yet wholly outside, as indigestible as a stone.

Jean-Paul Sartre, _Being and Nothingness_

Having begun with a discussion of Hitchcock’s _Blackmail_, this study ends appropriately with _Frenzy_ (1972), which is concerned with many of the same issues as the early film. In particular, both films include a rape that has proven to be very problematic to Hitchcock’s critics, though for opposite reasons: in _Blackmail_, the difficulty is that _nothing is shown_ (only shadows of the characters projected onto the walls), whereas in _Frenzy_ too much is shown, nothing is left to the imagination. In the later film Hitchcock provides the kind of “incontrovertible evidence” of rape that Durnat had found lacking in _Blackmail_ and that enabled him to disqualify the heroine’s view of her own experience.

Some critics have looked at the increasing use of graphic violence in Hitchcock films as evidence of a rather sick mind. For example, in his biography of Hitchcock, Donald Spoto has documented Hitchcock’s obsession with filming a rape/murder and has condemned the director as
something of a dirty old man. The way the biographer tells it, Hitchcock’s career may be seen as one long frustrating bout with cinematic impotence until he managed finally to achieve full orgasmic satisfaction with Frenzy: “Unable to realize a rape in No Bail for the Judge he had hinted at it in Psycho, metaphorized it in The Birds and, against all advice, included it in Marnie. Now at last—encouraged by the new freedom in the movies—his imagination of this sordid crime could be more fully shown in all its horror.”

But precisely because Frenzy seems to take crimes against women to new lengths, and because it seems to be the culmination of an entire career, a lifetime of obsession, it provides a good occasion for us to reflect back and draw together some of the themes that have been important in this study. At the same time I will use this analysis as an occasion to say something about Psycho (1960), a film whose impact was such that no subsequent Hitchcock film can be talked about without reference to it. In a way, though, I have never really not been discussing Psycho—to my mind, the quintessential horror film.

After an opening sequence showing the discovery of a woman’s body floating in the Thames, a necktie around her neck, Frenzy dissolves to a shot of the mirror image of the film’s hero/antihero, Richard Blaney (Jon Finch), former Squadron Leader of the R.A.F., putting on a necktie exactly like the one used by the strangler. He goes into the bar where he works and has a drink, whereupon the proprietor, Felix Forsythe (Bernard Cribbins), enters and reprimands him for stealing. Blaney claims he was going to pay for the drink and is defended by the waitress, Babs Milligan (Anna Massey). From the altercation that ensues, we are made to understand that Forsythe is motivated by jealousy over the relationship between Blaney and Babs. The scene ends with Blaney being fired and having to pay back a loan to Forsythe, so that he is left financially strapped.

Blaney runs into a friend, Bob Rusk (Barry Foster), owner of a wholesale fruit market. Bob is exceedingly friendly, offering money, a bunch of grapes, and a tip on a horse. Instead of betting on the horse, however, Blaney spends all his money on drink, and when he learns from Bob (leaning out over his apartment window to introduce his “old Mum”) that the horse has actually won, he walks off in a rage, trampling on the grapes as he goes. He pays a visit to his ex-wife, Brenda Blaney (Barbara Leigh-Hunt), owner of a matrimonial agency, and picks a fight with her in her office. After they make up, she invites him to dinner at her club, where Blaney again becomes enraged at the thought of his bad luck in comparison to his wife’s success. He apologizes for his temper when he breaks a brandy glass in his hand, and then the two take a cab to her house. Although Blaney clearly expects to spend the night, the next shot shows him sleeping at the Salvation Army, where an old man tries to steal money Brenda has slipped him on the sly.

In the next scene, Bob Rusk, alias Mr. Robinson, enters Brenda’s office. He has clearly been here before, and Brenda, nervous as well as contemptuous, tells him that she cannot accommodate his desire for women who will submit to his “peculiarities.” In this prolonged scene, Rusk first intimidates, then rapes, and finally strangles Brenda, the camera dwelling on every lurid detail of the latter action. The secretary, Monica Barling (Jean Marsh), returning from lunch, sees Blaney go by and after she discovers her employer’s body, assumes that Brenda’s former husband has committed the murder. Inspector Oxford (Alex McCowen) and his men from Scotland Yard begin investigating the crime, while Blaney, unaware of what has occurred, takes Babs to the fancy Hotel Coburn. After showing them to their room, the porter recognizes the description of Blaney in a newspaper and alerts the police, but the pair have seen the headlines in the newspaper put under their door and have escaped. They find temporary refuge with one of Dick’s R.A.F. comrades, Johnny Porter (Clive Swift), whose wife, Hetty (Billie Whitelaw), is convinced of Blaney’s guilt and reacts angrily at being forced to shelter him.

Babs returns to the bar the next day and quits after a quarrel with Forsythe. Rusk overhears the argument and offers to put Babs up for the night. They go to his apartment and the camera follows them just to the door and then slowly, silently moves back down the stairs and out into the street. That night Rusk puts Babs’s body, stuffed in a potato sack, into a truck and returns home, where he discovers that his tie pin is missing and realizes that it is in the hand of the dead woman. He goes out to the truck, which starts moving after he climbs in, and begins a frantic search amidst the lurching and careening of the truck until he finally reaches the pin clutched in the hand of the corpse. Rigor mortis at first prevents him from retrieving it, however, so he tries unsuccessfully to cut off a finger and then snaps the fingers open one by one to get at the pin.

Blaney’s friends refuse to help him after Babs’s murder, so he seeks out Rusk, who manages to frame him by hiding in his apartment and alerting the police to his presence there, having first placed Babs’s clothes in Blaney’s suitcase. Blaney is found guilty and sent to prison, vowing all the way to avenge himself on Rusk. Meanwhile, the inspector has been discussing the case with his wife (Vivien Merchant) as she serves him grotesque meals she has learned to make at a school for continental cooking (soup with fish heads, pig’s trotters, etc.). Mrs. Oxford insists all along that Blaney is innocent of murdering his wife since a “crime de passion” after ten years of marriage seems unlikely. “Look at us, we’ve only been married eight years and you can hardly keep your eyes open at night.” Evidence finally convinces the inspector of his error, but Blaney has in
the meantime broken out of prison and returned to Rusk’s apartment. He
begins to beat the body lying in bed with a tire jack, but it turns out to be
another strangled corpse. The inspector surprises Blaney, who for a mo-
ment believes himself to be further incriminated. Just then a sound on the
stairs causes the inspector to motion for silence, and Rusk enters the room
pushing a heavy trunk. The inspector observes mildly, “Why, Mr. Rusk,
you’re not wearing your tie,” the trunk falls, and the film ends.

Shot in London, Frenzy marks a return of the director to his roots, a
move that was paralleled by one from the studio to the streets—and hence
to a more “realistic” style of filmmaking. This return to London is em-
phatically signaled in the credit sequence when the camera (suspended from
a helicopter) drifts over the Thames and under Tower Bridge. A
dissolve reveals an overhead shot of a crowd gathered in front of some
large buildings on the banks of the river. As the camera cranes down, the
words of the politician haranguing the crowd (among whom stands Alfred
Hitchcock in a bowler hat) gradually become audible. The politician is
promising to restore the “ravishing sights” of London, to eradicate the
“waste products of our society with which for so long we have poisoned
our rivers.” He continues, “Let us rejoice that pollution will soon be ban-
ished from the waters of this river.” He is interrupted by one of the spec-
tators who yells out in alarm as the gaping crowd rushes forward to witness
the sight of a naked female corpse floating face down in the Thames, a
man’s tie around her neck. The sequence ends with a male voice saying,
“I say, that’s not my club’s tie, is it?”

This sequence is remarkable for many reasons. While on the one hand,
London is here and throughout the movie strongly evoked, Hitchcock ex-
hibits the utmost contempt for tourism—and most especially for what one
might call cinema as tourism (in this respect the film is markedly different
from Vertigo, which, as Virginia Wright Wexman has argued, indulges us
in the tourist’s view of San Francisco). Later on two doctors, well-dressed
and seemingly eminently civilized men, will reveal just what it is that the
tourists crave. As they stand at a bar in a pub, one of them says that in
one way he hopes the murderer, who rapes his victims and then strangles
them with a necktie, won’t be caught because “a good juicy series of sex
murders” is “so good for the tourist trade.” Foreigners, he observes, “ex-
pect the squares of London to be fog-wreathed, full of hansom cabs, and
littered with ripped whores.” As regards the third expectation, Hitchcock
devotes himself with a vengeance to giving the tourists what they want—
or at least, if it is not quite accurate to say that the film is “littered with
ripped whores,” nevertheless, the shots depicting sexual violence or the
results of sexual violence are some of the most disturbing ever shown in
the cinema. If many critics have found these images to be more palatable
than they ought, this is surely at least in part a measure of the extent to
which sexual violence is condoned in patriarchal society. As I argued at
the outset of this study, whether a viewer endorses or condemns the sexual
violence in the film is partly a matter of interpretation, of the viewer’s own
predilections and experience. To use a metaphor suggested by the film
itself, one man’s meat may be another man’s poison.

At the same time, although by the end of the film we might be inclined
to agree with the porter who says, “Sometimes just thinking about the lusts
of men makes me want to heave,” and although, as Robin Wood has con-
tended, the main female characters are more sympathetic than anyone
else in the film, there is little doubt that part of what makes the crime
Hitchcock depicts so repellent has to do with an underlying fear and loath-
ing of femininity. This paradoxical state of affairs is simply a more
extreme version of the ambivalence towards femininity I have traced
throughout this study. In Frenzy ambivalence can be related to the polarity
woman as food vs. woman as poison (source of “pollution,” “waste-prod-
uct” of society, to use the politician’s words). To understand how woman
functions throughout the film as both edible commodity and inedible pol-
lutant (the stench of femininity alluded to in the myths studied by Lévi-
Strauss) helps us to achieve a deeper insight not only into this particular
film, but of some of Hitchcock’s major concerns throughout his career.

That eating and copulating have frequently been posited as analogous
activities in Hitchcock films has certainly not gone unremarked in the
criticism. However, the tendency—most pronounced in the Spoto biog-
raphy—has been to put this parallelism down to the imagination of an
overweight pervert. Such a view has unfortunately obscured the extent to
which Hitchcock films put into bold (and rather comic) relief an equa-
tion that seems to exist at the heart of patriarchal culture itself. As Lévi-
Strauss observes in The Savage Mind, there is a “very profound analogy which
people throughout the world seem to find between copulation and eating.
In a very large number of languages they are even called by the same term.
In Yoruba ‘to eat’ and ‘to marry’ are expressed by a single verb the general
sense of which is ‘to win, to acquire,’ a usage which has its parallel in
French (and also in English), where the verb ‘consommer’ [to consummate]
applies both to marriage and to meals.”

In Frenzy when Bob Rusk, owner of a fruit market, forces himself
sexually onto Brenda Blaney he says, “There’s a saying in the fruit busi-
ness, we put it on the fruit: don’t squeeze the goods until they’re yours. I
would never, never do that.” (Of course, he proceeds directly to contradict
himself and violate “goods” which are not his.) As he sits on her desk,
Rusk comments on Brenda’s “frugal” lunch, and then he begins to eat the
(English) apple she has brought. When he is finished raping and strangling
her, he spies the apple, resumes eating it, puts it down, picks his teeth
with his tie pin, and again takes up the half-eaten apple (shown in closeup) as he leaves. Now, given the numerous references to gardens in the film (Forsythe sarcastically says to Babs and Blaney when they are talking outside the pub, “This is Covent Garden, not the Garden of Love”; Rusk tells Blaney that his “Old Mum” lives in Kent, “the Garden of England”; etc.), it seems plausible to argue that the Adam and Eve myth is being invoked, but that a deliberate reversal is effected: here the man eats the apple, “knows” the woman, and is responsible for her destruction.

In The Savage Mind Lévi-Strauss suggests that the common cultural “equation of male with devourer and female with devoured” may be intended to reverse the situation man most fears. Lévi-Strauss refers to the sexual philosophy of the Far East where “for a man the art of love-making consists essentially in avoiding having his vital force absorbed by the women [possessors of the *vagina dentata*] and in turning this risk to his advantage.”[6] (We recall the analysis of *Murder!* in which the hero takes the risk of hystericization and feminization in order to achieve masculine control over the narrative.) Thus it is possible to see in the film’s brutality toward women still one more indication of the need expressed throughout Hitchcock’s works to deny resemblance to—absorption by—the female, a need that for Lévi-Strauss lies at the inaugural moment of culture and of myth (it is no accident that *The Raw and the Cooked* begins with several myths about the disorder introduced by boys who refuse to leave the world of women to enter the separate men’s house and ends with a chapter entitled “The Wedding”).[7] Yet, as we shall see, the identification of male with devourer and female with devoured may not always have the psychic effect of negating the imagined ability of the female to absorb the male, since food is frequently endowed with the power to transform the eater into its likeness.[8] You are, after all, what you eat.

Lévi-Strauss’s linguistic analysis suggests once more the connection we have encountered so often between men’s hostility to woman (the need to “win” or conquer her, to “acquire” possession of her) and fear of the female other. Behind all this fear and loathing of woman, this desperation to acquire mastery over her, lies the threat of the devouring mother, a familiar figure in Hitchcock—so familiar indeed that by the time of *Frenzy*, Hitchcock need do no more than place her picture prominently on display in the villain’s apartment, have him quote her on several occasions, and get her to pop her head out the window in a cameo appearance. After *Psycho*, the public understands through these slight allusions and without the necessity of elaborate psychiatric explanations exactly who is responsible for the murderous “lusts of men.” We might say (taking our cue again from Lévi-Strauss) that the film *knows so well* who the culprit is and what motivates the crimes that it can dispense with the full articulation of the theme. Traces of it remain, however, displaced into bit parts: for example,

when Blaney first visits his wife he observes a brief Thurberesque vignette occurring between a newly paired couple, a large, loud, domineering woman and a meek, mousy, little man. The man suggests they go right for the marriage license, and the woman asks, “What’s your hurry? We’ll go to my place first.” As the two descend the stairs to the street, the camera holds on them in a long take while she tells the man how her late husband used to get up every morning at 5:30 to clean house, a task which he had completed by 9:30 when he brought her her coffee in bed. And he was so quiet the whole time that in thirty years he never woke her once. “A neat man, was he?” her partner asks. “He liked a tidy place,” she replies, “So do I come to that.”

It has been part of my task in this book to suggest how fear of the devouring, voracious mother is central in much of Hitchcock’s work, even where it is not immediately apparent. By “voracious,” I refer to the continual threat of annihilation, of swallowing up, the mother poses to the personality and identity of the protagonists. Far from being the mere gimmick criticism has tended to consider it, the mother’s psychic obliteration of her child in *Psycho* is paradigmatic of the fear haunting many Hitchcock films, at least since *Rebecca*. Julia Kristeva has theorized that such a threat constitutes the very “powers of horror." In Kristeva’s account, phobia and the phobic aspects of religion are all ultimately linked to matrophobia and are concerned with warding off the danger of contact with the mother: “This is precisely where we encounter the rituals of defilement... which, based on the feeling of abjection and all converging on the maternal, attempt to symbolize the other threat to the subject: that of being swamped by the dual relationship, thereby risking the loss not of a part (castration) but of the totality of his living being. The function of these religious rituals is to ward off the subject’s fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother.”[9] Drawing on the work of Mary Douglas, who considers defilement to be connected with boundaries and margins, Kristeva claims that the feminine/maternal is deemed a “pollutant” because it is experienced as subversive of male symbolic systems and masculine notions of identity and order. Kristeva’s language in the above quote, describing feelings of being “swamped,” of “sinking” into the morass of the maternal, uncannily captures the experience of *Psycho*, in which the reaction of Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) to his “possessive” mother is to conduct his own ritual of defilement, murdering Marion Crane (Janet Leigh), meticulously cleaning the bathroom of her blood, throwing her body into the trunk of a car, and pushing it into the swamp, which slowly sucks it down. Thus do men’s fears become women’s fate.

It is commonplace, at least since Rohmer and Chabrol’s study, to consider Hitchcock a Catholic director, especially insofar as he is concerned with the themes of guilt and original sin. It seems to me possible
to deepen this insight of the religious nature of Hitchcock's work, endeavoring to get beyond the platitudinous in order to understand the strong hold Hitchcock has had on the public imagination right up to the present day. Thus we may speculate that Hitchcock films enact "rituals of defilement," evoking and then containing the fear of women that lies at the heart of these rituals.

The association of women with defilement, with filth, is as strong in Hitchcock as it is in the "savage mind" analyzed by Lévi-Strauss. In Psycho Marion Crane is identified with money ("filthy lucre"), bathrooms, toilets, blood, and, of course, the swamp. In an earlier film, Shadow of a Doubt (1943), Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten), who murders wealthy widows, sees the world as a "foul sty," a "filthy, rotting place," and he delivers a speech (significantly, at the dinner table) in which he speaks of men who work hard until they die leaving their wives to throw their money away: "Eating the money, drinking the money, . . . smelling of money. . . . Faded, fat, greedy women." In Frenzy, the association of women with pollution is made explicitly in the film's opening sequence, and the film is "littered" with shots of grotesque-looking female corpses (Hitchcock had been dissuaded from showing spittle dripping from the tongue of Brenda Blaney in the shocking closeup of her after the murder). Babs's body, dusted with potato flour, spills out of the truck and onto the road, and the potato dust which Rusk brushes off himself after the truck episode is the clue leading to his capture as the murderer. (Earlier Blaney was incriminated for his wife's murder because traces of her powder were found on his money.) Finally, the body of Babs is paralleled with the repellent, virtually inedible food the inspector's wife gives him to eat, food like pig's feet, which the inspector nearly gags on while reconstructing the potato truck episode with his wife. He relates how the corpse's fingers had been snapped open to retrieve an incriminating object, and as he speaks of this, his wife snaps breadsticks in two and crunches on them.

The corpse of woman is a figure of extreme pollution. "Impure animals become even more impure once they are dead," writes Kristeva; "contact with their carcasses must be avoided" (p. 109). As if reversing the scene in Psycho, in which—to the audience's great satisfaction—Norman Bates painstakingly restores the bathroom to its pristine state after stabbing Marion Crane to death there, Frenzy shows its villain, who has neatly disposed of the body in the potato truck, returning to the corpse and grubbing around among the potatoes and the body parts, searching for the tie pin that might incriminate him. While critics have frequently noted Hitchcock's detachment in this late film, evidenced in his sparing use of point of view shots, it is important to note that this particular sequence employs several point of view shots, drawing us into an immediate experience of the man's grotesque encounter with death. The feeling is very much one of violating an ultimate taboo, of being placed in close contact with the most "impure" of "impure animals": the carcass of the decaying female. It is as if Hitchcock is punishing the spectator for years of guilty movie-going pleasures, as if the kick in the face Rusk receives from the corpse's foot is repayment for all the times cinema has fetishized the female body, dismembering it for the sheer erotic pleasure of the male spectator. When Rusk peels back the potato sack to get to the hands (he has, unfortunately, put the body into the sack head first), we are witness to a kind of macabre strip tease, a complete deromanticization of the necrophilia that Hitchcock insisted was at the heart of Vertigo. Ultimately, the corpse gets its vengeance, since in spite of his efforts to clean himself, Rusk is unable to eradicate the pollution which has contaminated him. In this way the film works yet another variation on Hitchcock's perennial theme of the powers of a dead woman.

These powers are also exerted on the chief inspector, whose wife forces him to partake of a symbolic feast of the corpse. The later scenes at the dinner table may be paralleled with and contrasted to the earlier one of the rape. In the first scene, Rusk sexually attacks a woman he likens to food; unable to achieve orgasm, he explodes in a murderous rage and strangles her. In the later scenes, the inspector eats food that is likened to a woman; and though he experiences great difficulty consuming his meals he remains civil to his wife. She, on the other hand, seems to be wreaking revenge on her husband because of his lack of sexual inclination (a deficiency in the "lusts of men"). In contrast to Rusk, then, who exerted brutal control over the woman, Oxford seems very much at the mercy of his wife.

The scenes at the dinner table, flitting as they do with connotations of cannibalism and hence of extreme pollution—i.e., the idea of feeding off the "carcass" of the dead woman—are the culmination of the motifs of food and filth pervading the film. According to Kristeva, dietary prohibitions are based upon the prohibition of incest (an analysis confirmed by Lévi-Strauss) and thus are part of the "project of separation" from the female body engaged in not only by the Biblical text, which Kristeva analyzes at some length, but by patriarchal symbolic systems in general. Speaking of nutritional prohibitions, Kristeva writes, "[T]he dietary, when it departs from the conformity that can be demanded by the logic of separation, blends with the maternal as unclean and improper coalescence, as undifferentiated power to be cut off" (p. 106). The inspector's cannibalization of the female would obviously be an extreme form of this unclean, improper coalescence, violating in the most immediate way the separation of female body and male law.

Here again Hitchcock makes rather extensive use of point of view shots and in so doing it might be said that he forces the spectator into
symbolically sharing the unholy feast with the inspector—metaphorically incorporating what he literally incorporates. Interestingly, in film theory incorporation has been considered to be the basis for "secondary identification"—that is, identification with characters: "character representations are taken into the self and provide the basis for a momentary subjectivity." According to Freud, incorporation may be seen as a preliminary stage of identification, one which expresses a fundamental ambivalence toward the object: "The ego wishes to incorporate this object into itself and the method by which it would do so, in this oral or cannibalistic stage is by devouring it." The ambivalence is such that, on the one hand, the subject wishes by devouring the object to destroy it and, on the other hand, both to preserve it within the self and to appropriate its qualities (this is truly wanting to have one’s cake and eat it too). The cannibalism in *Frenzy* seems to me to be the ultimate expression of the ambivalence towards women we have seen to be operating in Hitchcock films, which seek with equal vehemence both to appropriate femininity and to destroy it—hence that curious mixture of "sympathy and misogyny" found in these films.

Kristeva speculates that "defilement reveals, at the same time as an attempt to throttle matrilineality, an attempt at separating the speaking being from his body. . . . It is only at such a cost that the body is capable of being defended, protected—and also, eventually, sublimated. Fear of the uncontrollable generative mother repels me from the body; I give up cannibalism because abjection (of the mother) leads me toward respect for the body of the other, my fellow man, my brother" (pp. 78–79). At the end of *Frenzy* the film brings together for the first time the three male protagonists—villain, "wrong man," and officer of the law. The chief inspector speaks on behalf of propriety, civilization, and sublimation when he observes wryly, "Why, Mr. Rusk, you’re not wearing your tie," thereby restoring us to a world in which men are in control of themselves and their "lusts." It is a world from which women are altogether excluded, having been expelled from it mostly by brutal means, their power throttled. Throughout the film the specter of this power has been continually evoked and subsequently choked off. Babs Milligan is the sexually active woman, unrestrained by marriage (the inspector remarks to Forsythe, who wonders if she will return from her night with Blaney, "Don’t worry, these days ladies abandon their honor far more readily than their clothes"). Other women, like Hetty, wife of Dick’s R.A.F. buddy, are threatening because they dominate within marriage. Still others, like the bespectacled, prudish secretary, keep "a sharp eye on men" and seem to despise them altogether. Finally, Brenda Blaney, as head of a matrimonial agency, is an especially dangerous figure of female power because she has usurped male rights of exchange: no longer are women objects of exchange among men (as, for example they were in *Blackmail*); rather it is the woman who delivers men over to other women who proceed to enslave them. Brenda passes some of the money she makes off this trade to her down-and-out husband, who is embittered because he is not as successful as she, and sends him off to spend the night at the Salvation Army, which he calls the "hotel for bachelors." The film suggests that Brenda’s marital and sexual rejection of her husband is avenged by Rusk, since the shot of Dick sitting in the dirty Salvation Army bed holding up the money his wife has given him is immediately followed by the scene of Brenda’s rape/murder. As he has done so often in the past, Hitchcock here plays on the notion of the transference or exchange of guilt, only by this point it is clear that such an exchange—the only kind seemingly now possible among men—is a result of women’s having usurped male prerogatives and refused to allow themselves to serve as objects of exchange in the usual male rituals like marriage. Thus extreme rituals of defilement become the last, bleak hope for patriarchy.

That *Frenzy* is such an extreme film has generally been attributed to the loosening of censorship that was occurring in the movies at the time it was made and that presumably permitted Hitchcock greater scope for his prurient imaginings. It seems to me more useful, however, to consider *Frenzy* not simply as the reflection of the dirty mind of a frustrated old man nor even of a new "freedom" in sexual mores, but rather as a cultural response to women’s demands for sexual and social liberation, demands that were, after all, at their height in 1972 when *Frenzy* was made. In this connection, Mary Douglas’s observation about the kind of society in which ideas about sex pollution are likely to flourish is most illuminating. According to Douglas, sex is likely to be pollution-free in a society where sexual roles are secure and enforced directly. "When male dominance is accepted as a central principle of social organisation and applied without inhibition and with full rights of physical coercion, beliefs in sex pollution are not likely to be highly developed." On the other hand, ideas about sex pollution tend to thrive in societies where male dominance is challenged or where other principles tend to contradict it. Douglas’s insight is of enormous importance for feminists. It is not because male dominance is so firmly entrenched that ideas about women such as those found in *Frenzy* are held, but rather because it isn’t. These ideas come about as a result of inroads made on the system by women who insist on crossing the borders designed to separate male and female spheres. The resultant "boundary confusion" is threatening to man’s sense of social and personal identity, making him feel contaminated, unsafe. In other words, when men are no longer able to use women to consolidate their (oedipal) relations with one another and hence to ensure their separateness from the female, the kinds of psychological fears discussed throughout this chapter—fears
of the “totality” of one’s “living being” sinking “irretrievably into the maternal”—are aroused.

This is not to say that the film endorses all the violence it portrays, despite feminist analyses of *Frenzy* that assume Hitchcock’s total appropriation of his villain’s behavior. I have argued in previous chapters that Hitchcock’s fear and loathing of women is accompanied by a lucid understanding of—and even sympathy for—women’s problems in patriarchy. This apparent contradiction is attributable to his profound ambivalence about femininity, ambivalence which, in *Frenzy*, reaches an extreme form that I have accounted for psychoanalytically by analysis of the cannibalism motif. In Freudian theory, as we have seen, the individual at the cannibalistic stage wants to destroy the object by devouring it, but he also wishes to preserve it and to assimilate it. To say, then, that Hitchcock films seek both to destroy and preserve femininity is not to admit to a failure to arrive at the correct interpretation of the films, an inability to decide once and for all whether or not Hitchcock is really a misogynist. Rather, it is to acknowledge how pervasive and how deep the ambivalence is in these films, and to begin to understand just why it is we cannot decide.

By this I do not mean to glorify the undecidability of interpretation the way certain varieties of deconstructionist criticism do. The consequences for women of the negative aspect of ambivalence are too dire. But I do mean to insist on the importance of the fact that woman is never completely destroyed in these films—no matter how dead Hitchcock tries to make her appear, as when he inserts still shots in both *Psycho* and *Frenzy* of the female corpse. There are always elements resistant to her destruction or assimilation. Thus, at the same time that *Frenzy* undoubtedly shares some of the contempt for and fear of women exhibited by the men in the film, it also portrays the main female characters more sympathetically than most of its male characters. Even more importantly, the film links the sexual violence it depicts to a system of male dominance rather than confining it to the inexplicable behavior of one lone psychopath: thus both Blaney and Oxford are shown at different points in the film wearing ties similar to that found on the neck of the corpse floating in the Thames; moreover, this tie appears to be the tie of a certain men’s club, as the male onlooker in the opening sequence reveals. Finally, the ironic nature of this sequence, in which the corpse appears as if in response to the politician’s remarks about the pollution of the rivers, enables us, if we choose, to take a distance from the equation of woman with pollution and even to see it as a male projection.

In fact, the film provides plenty of evidence of this kind of projection. When a female bartender asks the doctors who have been speaking of the
murderer, “He rapes them first, doesn’t he?” they reply, “Yes, well, it’s nice to know that every cloud has a silver lining.” At another point in the film Rusk says, “Mind you, there are some women who ask for everything they get.” Yet in the very way it depicts sexual violence, the film belies the notion, common in patriarchy, that women actually want to be raped and either invite or deserve sexual victimization.

The graphic depiction of sexual violence in *Frenzy* has been the source of some critical controversy, as I mentioned earlier. Donald Spoto, we recall, castigated Hitchcock for showing the “sordid crime” in “all its horror.” For Spoto, as for so many critics, much of Hitchcock’s distinction had lain in the discretion with which he had treated such subject matter in the past (and notably in *Psycho*): “The act of murder in Alfred Hitchcock’s films had always been stylized by the devices of editing and . . . photographic wizardry. [But in *Frenzy*] Hitchcock insisted on all the ugly explicitness of this picture, and for all its cinematic inventiveness, it retains one of the most repellent examples of a detailed murder in the history of film.” Of course, one might ask why, if a sordid crime like rape/murder is to be depicted at all, it should not be shown “in all its horror.” In fact, it could be argued that the stylization and allusiveness of the shower scene in *Psycho* have provided critics with the rationale for lovingly and endlessly recounting all the details of its signification in the very process of self-righteously deploring its signified, the crime of rape/murder. In *Frenzy*, by contrast, Hitchcock’s use of graphic details, his casting of ordinary, non-fetishized women in the various female roles, and his refusal to eroticize the proceedings as he had in *Psycho*—teasing viewers with shots of Janet Leigh in her brassiere and Janet Leigh stripping so that even while she is being stabbed to death we irres sistibly wonder if we’ll get a glimpse of her naked breasts—all this makes the crime he is depicting more difficult for the spectator to assimilate—more “repellent,” in Spoto’s word. In the assault scene in *Frenzy* the woman’s anguish is stressed as the camera shows her in closeup uttering a psalm. These shots and her words clash grotesquely with those of Rusk to whom the camera keeps cutting and who repeatedly utters the single word, “Lovely” (until, enraged by his own impotence, he yells, “You bitch,” and begins to strangle her). In contrast to *Psycho*, which in promotions and in the film itself had titillated spectators with hopes of seeing Janet Leigh’s breasts but which had withheld the full sight of the desired objects, *Frenzy* shows an extreme closeup of the woman’s breast as she struggles to pull her bra back over it, all the while murmuring the words of the psalm. It is all anything but lovely; it is infinitely sad, pathetic, among the most disturbing scenes cinema has to offer.

The film, then, veers between disgust at the “lusts of men” and loathing of the female body itself, treated in several scenes as an object of
ghoulish humor, so that many critics have justly pointed to the film's utter
cynicism about sex and the relation between the sexes. This cynicism
seems to provide some critics with a convenient excuse for not dealing
with the issue of misogyny at all: the logic seems to be that since Hitchcock
shows contempt for women and men, there is no reason to single out his
treatment of women for special discussion—no reason, then, for consider-
ing why women are the exclusive objects of rape and mutilation in the
film or why it is their "carcasses" that litter the film's landscape and not
men's. The extreme of this blindness can be seen in statements like Spoto's
about the "devouring abuses of man against man." For feminists there is
an obvious need to keep the problem of violence against women at the
center of the analysis (as it is at the center of the film); nevertheless, we
cannot afford to ignore the full complexity of the film and its attitude toward
women.

When Rusk comes to the matrimonial agency, he is, as we learn, in
search of a woman—a "masochist," the inspector says—who will submit
to his peculiar appetites. The film makes it quite clear that he does not
find what he is looking for. At one point Brenda says, "All right, I won't
struggle," and he tells her that he wants her to struggle, "some women
like to struggle." As Rusk's reply suggests, and as the female spectator
very well knows, Brenda's refusal to struggle is not the masochistic sub-
mission the man desires—not the acquiescence that in his eyes mas-
querades as resistance.17 This is a small detail, perhaps, but it is signif-
ificant. It provides yet one more indication of the fact that despite the
considerable violence visited on women in the movies—and by proxy,
women at the movies—their capitulation to male desires and expectations
is never complete. Or, to put it another way, for a whole variety of reasons
which it has been the task of this book to explore, we may suppose that
while women are important consumers of the films, the films themselves
do not utterly consume women.