

THE BIRDS

BY BENJAMIN RYAN

In the way that Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* would later ruin trips to the beach, Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* first destroyed a day in the park. Released in 1963, this chilling portrayal of ornithological takeover shocked audiences with its cutting edge special effects (real attacking birds!) and its pessimistic approach to human life. Today, though somewhat dated for a generation spoiled by computer animated dinosaurs, *The Birds* holds its own as a provocative exploration of human sexuality and its connection to violence and punishment.

As in any Hitchcock film, the cinematic power lies not solely in visual stimuli, but in Hitchcock's ability to connivingly seduce the viewer into an association with the villain. Never one to take the highroad sexualitywise, Hitchcock's particularly nasty brand of misogyny often propels this association. While *Vertigo* plays on necrophilia (little did we know what we were rooting for when we hoped that Scotty would transform Judy back into Madeline...), and *Psycho* on a cross-dressing, out of whack Oedipal complex, *The Birds* manipulates the audience into justifying, and even rooting for, violent rape.

The film's dubious heroine is

Melanie Daniels, a young coquettish socialite from San Francisco who travels to the tiny hamlet of Bodega Bay with a pair of "love birds"—both a practical joke and a piece of seductive bait for an unsuspecting gentleman. However, not only are her fur coat and tailored lime green Edith Head frock overdone for the sleepy town, but her burning sexuality is blindingly out of place—a lascivious spark in the hay. And as Melanie wages a battle to keep her tidy peroxidized coif in place through the duration of the film, we can only wish its unfortunate demise for the sake of putting Melanie in her place. As soon as she arrives, *The Birds* progressively assault and wreak havoc upon the town. And the terrified civilians beg "Why are they doing this?" In answer, an analogy is drawn between overpopulation of birds and humans. *The Birds* are merely behaving like humans—overcrowding the earth and dominating the lower species.

It seems no accident that Melanie is one of two women of reproductive age in the film, and that the other is gouged to death. On one level, *The Birds*

appear calculating enough to destroy the humans through an attack of their reproductive population. But on another level, they represent the human mind's desire to punish a woman's sexuality—a dangerous fire which inevitably leads to overpopulation. We can only agree with the accusations of the woman who says to Melanie, "They say this all started when you got here. I think you're the cause of all this. I think you're evil. EVIL!" Melanie herself is not evil, but we begin to agree that her flirtatiousness and her desire to reproduce called for the siege. Thus, Hitchcock clinches us for the climax. Melanie is nearly pecked to death in a tiny attic. The room is literally a bedroom and figuratively a cage. Hitchcock puts the woman, and the human in their place. Though the audience's surface reaction is one of terror for Melanie, their subconscious moralistic tendencies have already justified the attack as a vindication. Hitchcock successfully plays out an id and ego conflict within the viewers' unwitting minds, turning them into a crowd of rape-rooting villains.



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