

## Study Guide on Alfred Hitchcock's The Birds (1963) by Dr. Matt Wanat

Alfred Hitchcock directed The Birds during the fifth of his six decades making movies, beginning in Great Britain and, from the early forties on, mostly in Hollywood. The father of the modern “thriller” and creator of some of the most entertaining movies in film history, Hitchcock also made films layered with subtle details and visual and aural sophistication. Hitchcock’s best films are fun—suspenseful, exciting, humorous, scary, romantic—but they are also rich with thematic and symbolic subtexts. This study guide is an introduction to Hitchcock’s The Birds, a film about a plague of birds that besieges a coastal village in California. Given current fears of everything from flu to terrorism, The Birds is an exceptionally relevant film insofar as it explores the psychology of mass fear and the possibility of sudden, catastrophic destruction.

Before we begin, there are a number of terms relevant to the analysis of film and literature that I would like for us to define. My definitions of these terms are specific to our purposes in this study guide; therefore, I recommend that students and instructors cross reference this list with definitions in another dictionary or glossary of film or literary terms. The following terms will be repeated throughout this study guide:

**Text**—Anything that can be read: literature, theater, film, television, advertising, etc.

**Allegory**—The events of a narrative tell an explicit story but also hint at another implicit story. M. H. Abrams distinguishes between two types of allegory (4):

- **Political and Historical**—In this case, historical or political events are subtly embedded in a story from another time or setting, and/or a story with different characters. Readings of Orwell’s book Animal Farm (1945) as a narrative about a totalitarian regime like Stalinism, Miller’s play The Crucible (1952) as a narrative about the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) trials of suspected American communists, or the X-Men films (2000, 2003, 2006) as narratives about freedom of choice (e.g., sexual orientation) and the Patriot Act would all constitute readings of texts as political or historical allegory. In each case, the stated plot and characterization of the text differs from the potential subtext.
- **“Allegory of Ideas”**—In this type, “abstract” spiritual and philosophical ideas are dramatized by characters and events in a text. In many early cases, for example Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress (1678), characters and places are named for abstract ideas: “Faithful, Hopeful, and the Giant Despair,” or “the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and Vanity Fair” (Abrams 5). However, allegories of ideas need not be so direct in all cases. Ideas about human existence, human psychological and social development, human sexuality, human spirituality, and human philosophy are often allegorized in the arts without turning characters or places into abstractions.

**Symbol**—Some object, person, or concept used to represent an idea or series of associations other than itself. For example, in a Christian culture the word “cross” summons images of a visual “cross” as symbol of Christ’s death and resurrection or, more generally, self-sacrifice, martyrdom, persecution, or any number of other related ideas.

**Mise-en-scène (pronounced: meez-on-sen)**—Literally translating “putting in the scene,” this theater term is used by film scholars to refer to the arrangement and manipulation of everything within the frame of the screen at any given moment. This arrangement and manipulation might include any of the following: props, setting, costumes, number of characters, positions and proximity of characters among one another and the camera, lighting, film stock (black and white or color), depth of field (i.e., How much of the foreground and background is in focus?), and other basic elements of shot composition: long shot, medium shot, close-up, high angle, low angle, and etcetera.

**Motif**—The repetition of an image, action, or idea throughout a text.

**Point of View**—This term has a different meaning in film than it does in literature, so I will define each medium’s use of point of view separately.

**Point of View in Literature**—Often used interchangeably with narration, point of view in literature refers to the psychological point of view from which a story is told:

**First-Person**—Story is told by a narrator who refers to herself or himself as “I.” Jim Phelan summarizes fellow narrative theorist Gérard Genette’s types of first-person narration as follows (Phelan 798):

- Heterodiegetic—The narrator is outside of the story that she or he tells. The narrator did not seem to take part in the story.
- Homodiegetic—The narrator is inside the story that she or he tells. The narrator took an active role in the events of the story.
- Autodiegetic—The narrator tells his or her own story.

**Second-Person**—Much rarer than first-person or third-person, the narrator of this type is “you.”

**Third-Person**—The narrator never says “I”; rather, the narrator refers only to “he,” “she,” “it,” or other non-personal pronouns or character names. Different people define the types of third-person narration differently. I will use Abrams (142-144), supplemented by a common third type:

- Omniscient—The narrator knows and can choose to reveal all, from characters’ actions previous to the actual plot of the story to characters’ thoughts.
- Limited—Sometimes the narrator’s ability to see is “limited” to only certain characters or events.
- Objective—The narrator can only see or will only admit to seeing events as they occur, and has no access to characters’ thoughts and motives.

**Point of View in Cinema**—While films sometimes use voice-over narration and, therefore, occasionally use a form of first-person or third-person narration similar to that in literature, the words “point of view” when applied to film usually refer to the direct or indirect alignment of the camera with the visual points of view of characters. In short, we see events through the ideas of the characters. Here are related terms:

**Point of View Shot**—A shot that appears to be through the eyes of a character.

**Over-the-Shoulder Shot**—An indirect point of view shot in which the camera looks over the shoulder of a character in the frame, usually suggesting a correspondence between what the camera sees and what the character sees.

**Shot/Reverse Shot**—A pattern of editing (i.e., cuts in the film) in which a shot of a character looking is matched with another shot to suggest what the character is looking at. Shot/reverse shot editing is the most common means of shooting dialogue in film. For example, a scene might open with a “two-shot” (i.e., shot of two characters) used as an “establishing shot,” but then move to a series of “one-shots” in which each character is assumed to be addressing the other character. When we see someone looking in a movie and then see another shot that seems to be in the same setting, we assume an “eyeline match” has occurred, i.e., we assume that the character is in fact looking at the object or person in the following shot.

**Suture**—Films do contain shots that are not tied to any character’s point of view. For example, “establishing shots” used to show us where we are in terms of setting are often “objective,” i.e., not tied to a specific point of view. However, since very early in the silent era, most films have chosen to tie a large number of their shots to characters’ points of view, especially the points of view of protagonists—though antagonists’ points of view are common in “genres” (types of films) like horror, where we might look through the eyes of a shark or a psychopath stalking prey. By connecting many or most shots to the points of view of characters, films “suture” us into the story, making us forget that everything we see in the film is really through the point of view of a camera that is pointed based on the agenda of the filmmakers. Films that violate this suture by drawing attention to the camera often seek to remind us that we are actually watching a movie and not real life.

### Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H. A Glossary of Literary Terms. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981.
- Phelan, James. “Narrative as Rhetoric: Reading the Spells of Porter’s ‘Magic.’” The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. David H. Richter. Boston: Bedford, 1998. 796-808.

## Study Questions

The following study questions are designed for use by high school students or introductory level undergraduate film students, either on their own or in collaboration with an instructor. Because this is not solely a “teachers’ guide,” I have answered none of the questions. I will leave it to teachers, students, and any other interested movie fans to answer or adapt these questions as each potential audience sees fit. Sometimes, however, I have given background context to the questions that may help shape individual responses.

### Category One: From Motif to Meaning

- In the first film class I ever took as an undergraduate, Denison University Professor Elliot Stout used film clips and lecture to argue that The Birds allegorized fears about communist infiltration during the Cold War. I later read similar readings of fifties sci-fi films, movies that no doubt inspired some of the ideas in Hitchcock’s film. For example, Don Siegel’s Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) lends itself to such a reading. Nevertheless, what I found most compelling about Dr. Stout’s reading at the time—indeed, the element of Dr. Stout’s lecture that galvanized my suspicion that good films merit close reading—was the litany of minute details from the film with which the professor supported his analysis. I learned from Elliot Stout to be attentive to repeated **motifs** in cinematic texts. In The Birds, for example, the color red, which is often associated with communism, reappears in some conspicuous places. Much of Dr. Stout’s evidence hinged on this use of the color red. As you watch The Birds, take notes describing every appearance of the color red. Then, note any patterns that arise and begin to analyze these patterns: How does the cinematography of Director of Photography (D.P.) Robert Burks emphasize the color red in the moments you have noted? With which characters is the color red most associated? In which settings is the color most prevalent? Do the characteristics of associated characters and spaces have anything to do with communism? Are there other possible readings of the use of the color red?
- During the famous “Odessa steps” sequence of Soviet propaganda filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein’s The Battleship Potemkin (1925), a woman is killed, apparently shot through the lens of her spectacles. In class when I recently taught the film, my student Zac Griffin suggested that the lookers-on in glasses, who watch the massacre of “the people” by the Czar’s troops, represent the intelligentsia, perhaps punished for watching without acting. Later in film history, in an oft-noted allusion to Eisenstein’s film, Arthur Penn’s American gangster film Bonnie and Clyde (1967) has a bystander to a bank robbery shot through the lens of his specs and later has Clyde lose a lens from his sunglasses before he has is ambushed and killed by the law. These two films bookend a pervasive interest in the **symbolic motif** of eye glasses in the history of film, a motif that has different meanings in different films. Identify one scene in The Birds where eye glasses work as a powerful symbol. Carefully describe the editing and **mise-en-scène** of the scene you choose and speculate about Hitchcock’s purpose for the scene.

## Category Two: Point of View

- Hitchcock not only flawlessly used point of view editing to tell stories, a device common in most Hollywood films, but he is also frequently read by critics as having made filmed commentaries on the very act of looking. Critics have been particularly interested in Hitchcock's films as commentaries on scopophilia and voyeurism. "Scopophilia" refers to the pleasure we derive from looking, and "voyeurism" refers to the sexualized pleasure derived from spying on one who cannot return the gaze. Perhaps the best examples of this motif of looking in Hitchcock's work can be found in Rear Window (1954) and Psycho (1960), both of which ask questions about the morality of looking. In Psycho, for example, film audiences are invited by an **eyeline match** to look with Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) while he watches, through a crude peep hole in the wall, as Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) undresses in the adjacent motel room. We see an extreme close-up of Norman's eye staring, which lingers long enough that we both infer what he is watching and want to see for ourselves. Then, the **reverse shot** shows us Marion's unknowing and unwilling striptease, the editing inviting us to share Norman's voyeuristic desires. Minutes later, however, as we watch Marion shower from a more "objective" point of view, we see a dark figure lurking on the other side of the shower curtain, ready to attack Marion. This is "dramatic irony," since we know what Marion does not, and our privileged point of view, in which we can see what Marion cannot, invites us to feel anxiety about her welfare. Therefore, the first shot of what Marion cannot see (i.e., Norman's spying) empowers us sexually and invites us to identify with Norman's point of view, whereas the second shot of what Marion cannot see (i.e., the killer behind the curtain) articulates the stakes of our privileged point of view since we are helpless to warn Marion. What I have just given is a common enough interpretation of Hitchcock's self-consciousness about point of view in Psycho, but it is by no means the only interpretation of these point of view shots. As you watch The Birds, look for situations in which looking, particularly snooping or spying, are most explicit. What patterns do you notice: Who does the looking? What is the fate of the ones doing the looking? How do the circumstances change based on who is looking or being looked at?
- In The Birds, there is a powerful scene in which Annie Hayworth (Suzanne Pleshette), a former girlfriend of Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor) now replaced with new girl Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren), dies on her porch during a bird attack in which she pushes Mitch's sister Cathy (Veronica Cartwright) into the safety of the house. When Mitch and Melanie discover Annie dead, Mitch carries the tattered corpse into the house. Curiously, Melanie averts her gaze, and, because of the lack of a **reverse shot**, ours as well, leaving us only the image of Melanie covering her eyes as Mitch takes care of Annie. There are a number of possible reasons why Hitchcock edited the film this way, some perhaps related motifs we have already discussed and others related to "connotations" (i.e., suggested meanings) that society attaches to men carrying women through doorways. Explain and defend some possible interpretations of this editing choice.

### Category Three: Allegory

- Consider The Birds from each of the broad allegorical angles below, beside each broad allegorical angle write a specific issue, event, or issue that is being allegorized, and provide details from the film as possible evidence. Evidence might include any number of repeated motifs, character, plot, setting, and dialogue.
  - Political Allegory—
  - Psychological Allegory—
  - Sexual Allegory—
  - Metaphysical Allegory (e.g., religious)—
  
- After the birds attack the children at the school and before and immediately after they attack the gas station, there are debates about the bird attacks between townspeople in the local café. Make a list of characters in the café and identify each character's response to or interpretation of the attacks. Which characters react and which do not? Who is brave, who is cowardly, and who is apathetic? How do different characters explain the attacks? Finally, once you have looked at these characters' responses closely and carefully, discuss the implications of your observation with regards to allegorical reading. Does the evidence you have gathered support a specific allegorical reading? Does it support allegorical reading at all? Explain.