ANNUAL Hitchcock

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Pleasure Garden Virtue The Ring Blackmail Juno Seventeen Rich and Knew Too Much cent The Lady Van Correspondent Mr. Doubt Lifeboat ricorn Stage Fright Downhill Easy The Manxman Game Number The Man Who Young and Inno Rebecca Foreign Shadow of a Rope Under Cap Dial M for Murder Rear Window To Catch a Thief The Trouble with Harry The Man Who Knew Too Much The Wrong Man Vertigo North by Northwest Psycho The Birds Marnie Torn Curtain Topaz Frenzy Family Plot The Pleasure Garden The Mountain Eagle The Lodger The Farmer's Wife Champagne The Manxman Blackmail Juno and the Paycock Murder! The Skin Game Number Seventeen Rich and Strange The Man Who Knew Too Much Waltzes from Vienna Secret Agent Jamaica Inn Sabotage Young and Innocent Rebecca ***Hitchcock Annual 2024*** *The Lady Vanishes Suspicion Foreign Correspondent Mr. and Mrs. Smith Saboteur Shadow of a Doubt Lifeboat Spellbound Notorious The*

Neil Badmington

Staying with Annie Hayworth

I want to stay with Annie Hayworth.

I do not mean that I wish to follow Melanie Daniels and request a room for the night at Annie's house in Bodega Bay. I want, rather, to stay with her as a viewer of *The Birds*, keeping my focus upon her when the critical convention is to move away in the more obvious direction of others. When it comes to character, discussions of Hitchcock's film have tended to privilege Melanie, Mitch, and Lydia. This is perfectly understandable: those three figures are at the center of the narrative, while Annie features in only a handful of scenes. There is no doubt that she is a marginal figure, and we might well borrow Rachel Bowlby's description of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* to note more generally that Hitchcock's body of work "has an exceptionally large population of characters whose existence is marked as minor: characters who teeter on the verge of representational death, but live a small novelistic life all the same in their subordinate, half-hidden ways."[1] In Hitchcock, however, the half-hidden is always more than half-interesting, and it reveals at least as much as it conceals. With this in mind, we should also recall Murray Pomerance's observation that, in Hitchcock, "there are no minor moments, no unimportant scenes, no frivolous decorations; and obsessive attention to only the central, 'starring' performances can distract a curious viewer from the many equally brilliant yet technically smaller pieces of acting work that are typically vital to the structure of the films."[2]

I know of only one other critical essay devoted purely to Annie Hayworth—Laura Maw's lovely autobiographical

celebration of her queerness—and I see this scholarly neglect as something that needs to be addressed.[3] In what follows I will focus on Annie in order to draw out how, as so often in Hitchcock's work, a character who appears to be peripheral and incidental is quietly essential to the wider workings of the film. At times I will move temporarily from Annie herself to consider other aspects of a scene in which she figures. This is not to abandon my commitment to staying with her; it is, rather, to recognize that she does not exist in isolation and that she brings to light certain things that lie beyond her immediate presence upon the screen.

In the Garden

At the beginning of her first scene in the film, Annie is deep in the garden—so deep, in fact, that a strange social incident occurs. When Melanie arrives at the Hayworth house, she rings the doorbell and Annie calls out, off-screen, "Who is it?," to which Melanie replies, quite simply, "Me." Scott Calef's description of Melanie's response captures its curious status. It is, he writes, "a rather odd answer from a total stranger to someone who can't see her."[4] The pronoun "me" lacks pinning precision—it is what Otto Jespersen called a *shifter*—and is too imprecise to identify oneself properly before a stranger, especially one who is out of sight.[5] Unsurprisingly, Melanie's "rather odd answer" prompts a follow-up question from Annie: "Who's *me*?"

It is somewhat puzzling that Annie's "Who is it?" does not receive a precise reply. In the film's opening sequence, Melanie identifies herself by name when telephoning the *Daily News*. What's more, in Bodega Bay's general store just minutes before arriving at Annie's, she provides her name to hire a boat and also announces a determination to discover the "exact name" of Mitch's sister. When the two men in the shop are unable to agree if "the little Brenner girl" is called Lois or Alice, Melanie drives to Annie's to establish the truth. The lengths to which she goes with this detour might be, as Christopher D. Morris puts it, "absurd," but they establish

that she values knowing and giving a proper name: this, after all, is her sole reason for visiting Annie.[6] And yet, when she arrives there in search of a name, Melanie withholds her own name when invited and expected to provide it. Why?

Annie holds the answer. The pragmatic puzzlement in her tone when she asks "Who's *me*?" establishes her—before the two women have even met face to face—as a foil to what the film initially presents as Melanie's narcissism and self-interest (qualities that will be challenged and transformed by the traumatic events in Bodega Bay). At various moments in the first half of the film, we see Melanie enjoy being the subject of a wolf-whistle, check her appearance in both her compact and the glass of Annie's front door, and generally be concerned only with her own desires and interests. Here, ringing the doorbell of a house that she has never before visited, she seems to expect a stranger to know who she is from no more than the word "me," as if her presence alone were enough, as if the shifter were stable in her immaculate orbit. Annie, however, foils such presumptive vanity with her second question that demands to know more than merely "me." Before we have even seen her, Annie acts as an alternative to what Camille Paglia views as the "childish solipsism" of Melanie, and as *The Birds* unfolds, we regularly see this distinction between the two women emphasized, with Annie presented as what Bill Krohn calls "the responsible counterpart to Melanie's spoiled frivolity."[7]

Annie cannot see who is ringing her doorbell because she is in the garden behind her house. Hitchcock's camera shows many things in and around Bodega Bay, but it never takes us into this space. All that we see of it is what we glimpse through the side gate, notably here when Annie emerges to greet Melanie. (We are presumably kept out of the rear garden because, while the neighboring Bodega Bay School was a real building, Annie's house was no more than a façade constructed for filming and dismantled soon afterwards.[8]) Nonetheless, the film associates Annie immediately with the garden, in terms of her location when Melanie arrives, the trowel that she carries, her work gloves

and clothing, and the soil on her face. This association through appearance contributes further to the way in which Annie is presented initially as a foil to Melanie, who stands on the porch immaculately in high-fashion attire and delicate gloves. As Evan Hunter's script states succinctly, Annie "is puzzled by Melanie who, exquisitely dressed and groomed, seems singularly out of place in Bodega Bay."[9]

If Melanie looks "out of place," Annie is evidently an established and important part of Bodega Bay: she runs what appears to be the town's only school, and the man in the general store sees her as a reliable source of local knowledge—a "higher authority," notes Paglia, "the schoolteacher as oracle."[10] Indeed, she soon begins to offer a portrait of daily life in the community when she complains to Melanie about how "the mail never gets delivered to the right place in this town." She seems to be speaking from direct experience, too: there is irritation in her voice.

It is strange, I think, that Annie of all people should receive someone's else post, because her first scene in *The Birds* ends with a shot of her standing next to a mailbox that bears her surname in clear and large capitals (fig. 1). Murray Pomerance is right to propose that "Hitchcock was a master of the frame, and every nuance of his image is vital, no aspect decorative."[11] This particular frame, with its vibrant reds that draw the eye away from the pale background, grants the emblazoned mailbox a certain prominence: it is wider than Annie and is positioned in front of her. The painted name is highly visible, too: its white lettering stands out clearly against the red background. At this point in *The Birds*, of course, we do not need to be told the surname of the woman standing by the mailbox: we have heard it repeatedly. If no aspect of Hitchcock is merely decorative, what is the significance of this shot?

As I see it, Annie's bright and boldly labeled mailbox announces that there really ought to be no doubt about who lives next to the school. And yet, Annie tells Melanie that "the mail never gets delivered to the right place in this town." Something is awry; what ought to be straightforward is not.

Figure 1

The birds will soon make the town feel isolated, but Annie's early passing remark about the lack of a reliable postal service reveals a way in which the residents of Bodega Bay are already potentially cut off from elsewhere. Her reference to misdirected mail identifies trouble that precedes the coming of Melanie and the birds. She is an oracle in more ways than one. Human communication faltered in speech when Melanie said "Me" in response to Annie's question; now we learn that it has already failed repeatedly in writing. Bodega Bay neither functions nor coheres if the mail is adrift, and Annie brings this fact to light as a character who, unlike Melanie, knows the community of which she speaks.

Annie's words reveal that the town cannot be seen as a Garden of Eden upset by the birds and the wild Miss Daniels—even if, as I will discuss below, the animals do later attack Annie's garden. That is to say, among Annie's functions as a character is the undermining of a theory proposed by one of the film's characters about the terror that has descended upon Bodega Bay. "I think you're the cause of all this! I think you're evil!" shouts the mother with the terrified children in the Tides Restaurant, straight into Melanie's face. It is an understandable theory—and the film contains many such speculations—but Annie underscores the fact that

the woman's account is not persuasive. Annie spends her days teaching others, and what she teaches viewers of *The Birds* is that life in Bodega Bay was disrupted before Melanie arrived: there was no prior Edenic calm, no pure peace to be broken by beaks.

After she has complained about the mail, Annie offers Melanie a cigarette and takes one for herself. (Annie, as we will see, puts others before herself repeatedly in the film.) "Did, uh, did you want to see Cathy about something?" she asks as she lights both cigarettes, beginning politely with Melanie's. Melanie replies, evasively, "Well, not exactly." "Oh," says Annie with a knowing nod and a strained smile. Until this point she has faced Melanie in the two-shot, but now she turns and steps away from her, and there is a pause before her next question. (Maw notes that this scene is "orchestrated as much by silence as it is by dialogue."[12]) "Are you a friend of Mitch's?" Annie asks, as the smile leaves her face. Hichcock's careful camerawork creates a new distance between the women: the two-shot is preserved but the camera moves forward to push Annie to the very edge of the frame so that it can focus on Melanie, who pauses before saying "No, not really."

Multiple enigmas operate at this point. Melanie cannot read the reaction to her reply because Annie has turned away from her; all she can do is stare at the back of Annie's head. Annie, meanwhile, cannot be clear about Melanie's motives because Melanie has responded so evasively to questions. And Annie is temporarily inscrutable to viewers because she is almost entirely out of the frame, straining the limits of the two-shot. Her reference to Mitch, however, invites us to read between the lines: all that we know of him so far (from the scene in Davidson's pet store) is that he is a man who likes to flirt and who is inclined to treat a woman unkindly, so we might feasibly conclude that there was once something between him and Annie and that their relationship was troubled; such a history would explain her behavior on the porch. For now, though, we are denied

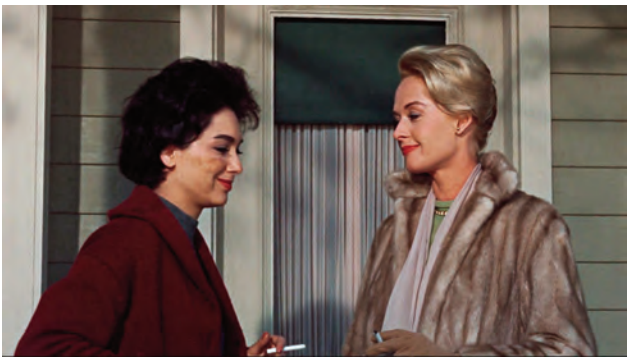

Figure 2

details, as the film cuts to a more conventional two-shot in which Annie is again fully visible and facing Melanie. With this shift comes another change of subject and mood. "You know, I've been wanting a cigarette for the last twenty minutes," Annie says, smiling again. "I just couldn't convince myself to stop. This tilling of the soil can become compulsive, you know."

In Hunter's screenplay, the words "tilling of the soil" stand out on the page: they are presented within quotation marks, as if the phrase were borrowed from elsewhere or that we should read it both literally and figuratively.[13] The noun emphasizes something that has been visible but unspoken since Annie emerged from her garden: she has soil smudged on her face (fig. 2). William Rothman has celebrated Annie's scenes in *The Birds* as "down-to-earth moments" that offer an alternative to the points at which the film strives obviously for profundity.[14] So literally down-to-earth is Annie here that—even when she comes to the front of the house, removes her gardening gloves, and puts down her trowel—her body bears the land that she has cultivated.

Annie's reference to the "tilling of the soil" prompts Melanie to describe what she sees around her in front of the house as "a very pretty garden." Annie explains that it is "something to do in your spare time," adding that there is "a lot of spare time in Bodega Bay." Her words reveal that her compulsive tilling is also an *extensive* tilling, and several shots

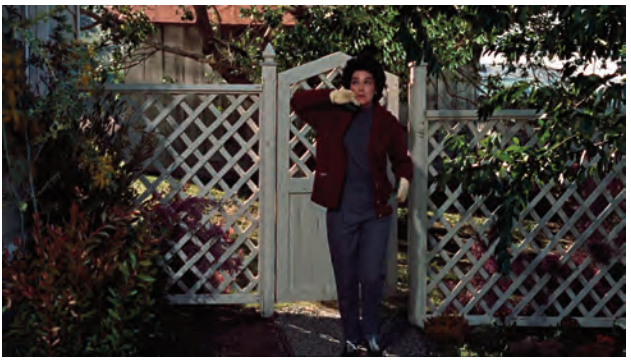

Figure 3

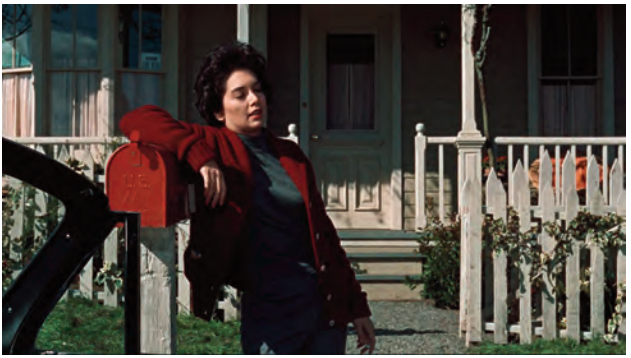

Figure 4

in this scene show her in the context of the gardening work that she has undertaken around her house (figs. 3 and 4).

A little later, when Melanie prepares to leave Annie's in order to return to the center of the town, a reverse shot subtly contrasts Annie's horticultural achievements with the distinctly bare surroundings of the house across the road seen in the background behind Melanie (fig 5). This early association of Annie with her garden lays the foundation for her final appearance in *The Birds*, in which she lies as a corpse amid the greenery that she has cultivated. I will turn in time to that narrative pay-off, that later scene of death.

Figure 5

Before Melanie can reach her car, Annie asks more questions. The first—posed in a wide two-shot—concerns whether or not Melanie took the coastal route up from San Francisco. The query is bland and almost phatic—in that its primary purpose seems to be to sustain interaction, not to exchange information—but its reference to the distant city subtly reminds Melanie that she, unlike Annie, is a stranger in Bodega Bay. The next question, though, is clear in motive: "Is that where you met Mitch?" The directness causes Melanie to stop and turn to face her questioner; she is now on the spot and framed alone in a new shot. "Yes," she says firmly; her earlier evasiveness has vanished. "I guess that's where *everyone* meets Mitch," says Annie, isolated correspondingly in a reverse shot. The implication in "everyone" is that the handsome lawyer has been involved with many women in the past—not just Annie. But it is no more than an implication, for Annie has not been as open with her words as Melanie was with her unequivocal "Yes." The difference is not lost on Melanie, who says, "Now *you* sound a bit mysterious, Miss Hayworth." "Do I?" responds Annie with a self-deprecating chuckle. "I don't mean to. Actually, I'm an open book, I'm afraid. Or, rather, a closed one."

What might we make of this contradictory self-portrait? To say that someone is "an open book" is to say that they are easy to read, that they conceal no secrets, but at this point in

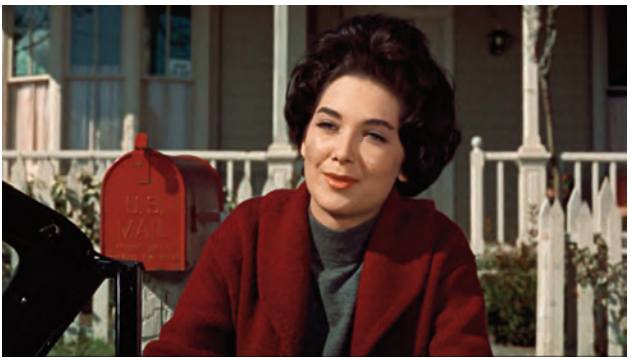

Figure 6

The Birds it is hard to see why Annie would describe herself as "an open book" in Melanie's company: while she has alluded vaguely to a history with Mitch and returned repeatedly to his name, nothing has been made explicit, and when the conversation has strayed too close for comfort, Annie has turned away from her visitor and made herself difficult to analyze. (The inscrutability cuts both ways, too: as Maw observes, this first encounter between Annie and Melanie is characterized by "their inability to read one another fully."[15]) Why, then, does Annie call herself, even passingly, "an open book"? Is she not, on the evidence of her first scene in the film, a character who is more akin to a "closed book"?

The explanation of the "open book" remark comes later in the film, I would suggest, in the scene at Annie's when Melanie returns from dinner with the Brenners. That is the moment at which Annie shares intimate information about her past, becomes an open book, and allows Melanie to read her intimately. I will turn to that scene in detail below; for now, I wish simply to note the effect here of Annie's remark. What the reference to being an "open book" fosters near the end of Annie's first scene, particularly because it is followed so quickly by a contradiction, is a teasing enigma. The Annie who stands by Melanie's car (fig. 6) intimates another Annie who will be more readable, more open than

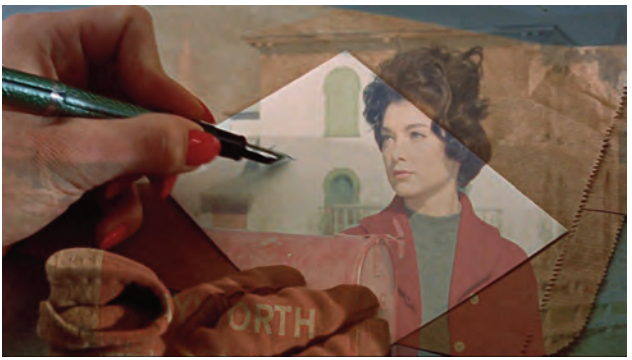

Figure 7

she is at present—to Melanie and to us. Her words, if we stay with them, lead us forward through the film.

While Annie is describing herself, the caged birds in the car begin to make noises. "Oh, pretty!" she says, looking down into the footwell. The word that Melanie used earlier to describe the garden has been redirected from the initial recipient back to the sender as part of the subtle social game played by the two women in this scene. When Melanie explains that the creatures are lovebirds, there is a pause before Annie says, "I see. Good luck, Miss Daniels."[16] Her smile has once again vanished. "Thank you," says Melanie. Now she is the one who smiles, as if accepting Annie's challenge happily. As the car drives away, Annie tracks it with a facial expression that the screenplay describes as "a look of sad resignation."[17] The wind ruffles her hair as she stares, but she is clearly buffeted by more than the Pacific breeze.

This shot of Annie brings her first scene in *The Birds* to an end. The transition to the next scene, which shows Melanie back in the center of the town and addressing a birthday card to Cathy, is accomplished by a dissolve that collapses space and time, thereby linking the two depicted moments and locations (fig. 7). In this hybrid image, Annie appears to be looking at the Esterbrook fountain pen that is inscribing the name that she has disclosed. Because Melanie now has the information from the "oracle" that the men in the post office

could not provide, she can take another step towards Mitch. The past between Annie and Mitch is being overwritten by Melanie's actions, and it is inevitable—because this is a cinematic dissolve—that Annie will fade until all that remains is a here and now in which Melanie is closing in on Mitch. The trace of Annie in the frame as one shot becomes another makes her a figure of the past, too: if we can see Melanie writing in the center of Bodega Bay—if that is where the film has now taken us—Annie's screen presence betrays an absence; she is not *here*, she is not *now*.

Room for Rent

After being attacked by a gull in her hired boat, Melanie returns to the house next to the school, where a short sequence on the porch allows us to learn more about Annie. When Melanie nods toward the window on the left, the film cuts to show the "ROOM FOR RENT" notice that had been visible in the earlier scene on the porch, but only from a distance. Highlighted at the beginning of this second encounter between the two women, Annie's printed sign announces that she has too much space in her house; the connotation is that she has no one with whom to share her living space or the "spare time" to which she alluded earlier.

Steven Jacobs sees in Annie's notice a trace of Hitchcock's *The Lodger* (1926), in which Ivor Novello's character is drawn to the Bunting house by precisely the same words displayed in a window.[18] Many of Hitchcock's other works are filled with rented rooms, too—we need only remember the hotels of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934 and 1956), *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) *Rebecca* (1940), *To Catch a Thief* (1955), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), and *Torn Curtain* (1966), for instance—and in some ways it is more illuminating to consider a connection between Annie and Norman Bates in *Psycho* (1960), who advertises a dozen rooms for rent and has a hobby that fills his time in a house that lies some distance from the beaten track. The connection, however, requires an acknowledgment of a fundamental difference: while Norman

welcomes a young female traveler associated with birds into a rented room only to kill her, Annie does so simply to help the stranger who has arrived from another city unexpectedly at her door. If she lives a little like Norman—"we're all in our private traps," as he puts it—she acts in a completely different manner towards her guest, and Norman's violence throws into sharp relief Annie's quality of caring for others and being genuinely open to their needs.

Annie is evidently not desperate to fill her room for rent in any way that she can—she initially resists Melanie's request to stay for "just a single night," after all—but her left hand is visible in the two-shot when she says that she was hoping to let the space for a longer period, and we can see that her wedding ring finger is bare; the multiple rings on the neighboring digit enhance the signifying absence. There is room upon Annie's hand, just as there is room within her house, and when Melanie explains that she has returned here because "everywhere in town" is "full," she implicitly underscores again the fact that the wooden property next to the school is a site of partial emptiness.

There is an allusion to Mitch's role in creating this situation when coldness creeps into the conversation between the two women. When Annie looks at Melanie's "utilitarian" brown paper bag, she smiles, but the smile vanishes, as it did in the previous scene on the porch, when the conversation turns to Melanie's involvement with Mitch. The visual language changes at this point in the scene, too, as David Sterritt has observed.[19] Annie is now shown alone in a one-shot, and she is closer to the camera than she was previously, to emphasize her solemn reaction to the news that Melanie is staying longer than expected in Bodega Bay. "Did something unexpected come up?" she asks in a tone that matches the distance connoted by the isolating shot. The question is not really a question: her voice and face convey that she knows exactly what has happened in the time that has passed since she gave Melanie the name of Mitch's sister. When Melanie replies, she is also framed alone in a one-shot.

The tension of the initial encounter between the two women has returned, as has the unconfirmed hint of a painful history between Annie and Mitch.

And yet, Annie still welcomes Melanie into her house as a guest for the night with a generous sweep of her arm and an offer of fresh coffee. While she is evidently uneasy at the thought of Melanie's involvement with Mitch, she helps the stranger from San Francisco and, in doing so, sacrifices her own romantic feelings for those of another. Although, as we will soon learn for certain, Annie still cares for Mitch, she cares more generally and actively for others throughout the film.

At this stage in *The Birds* we have seen Annie's house only from the outside. The way that it appears implies that her life is lived at a certain distance from the heart of things in Bodega Bay but not, I think, in lonely isolation. When Melanie first arrives at Annie's residence in her car, having driven from the center of the town to its outskirts, children are shown playing outside the school next to Annie's dwelling. The sounds of their presence often feature in the background during the two women's first meeting on the porch, moreover, confirming subtly from the outset that Annie is not cut off from others, even though she has a room for rent and "a lot of spare time." Her house is presented within its local context, too—we are shown the neighboring school and church, along with the property across the road—which is another way of telling us that Annie is not isolated.

I have already compared her with Norman Bates in order to establish a key difference between the two figures, and it is worth returning to him to shed further light on how *The Birds* positions Annie. In *Psycho*, Norman's troubled isolation is conveyed in part by the way in which the film never shows the Bates Motel and neighboring house within a wider community. Because Marion arrives in rainy darkness, the establishment's neon sign seems to appear out of nowhere, and not even the daytime shots of the location allow us to situate Norman's property within a broader geographical or cultural setting. Norman is cut off from others in a way that

Annie is not, even if she lives alone some distance from the center of Bodega Bay.

Melanie wishes to stay with Annie, of course, because she has been invited to dine with the Brenners that evening. Following the meal, Melanie returns to her lodgings. The ensuing sequence is roughly six minutes long and is the most extensive in *The Birds* to feature Annie. By Maw's reckoning, it is also "the film's most intimate scene," and it is one of revelation, openness, and generosity, despite the ongoing tension.[20]

While the first two scenes involving Annie have shown her outside or on the threshold of her house, we now move inside. Jacobs's wonderful book on Hitchcock's architecture reproduces a memorandum from 1962 in which the director outlined how the interior of Annie's property should look and what it should connote:

> We have a literate person in a modest setting. Her one story home would contain a large number of (a) books that she had from home and school, (b) recently acquired paper backs . . . . She has one or two prints on the walls of her living room. They would be Braque, maybe something Mexican from the Museum of Modern Art, and perhaps even, she might be catholic enough in her taste as to have a Grant Wood piece. . . . Some thought should be given to music in Annie's house. This should consist of a player and piles of records.[21]

Hitchcock's plans more or less became on-screen reality, and one particular record in Annie's living room anticipates the revelation at the heart of this interior scene: when Melanie first sits down, we see that Annie owns a copy of *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner's tale of doomed love. While there is no way of knowing when she last played the disc, its position within the room gives it a recurring prominence during this scene.

However, before Melanie can take a seat in the armchair positioned in front of the stereo (thus allowing the viewer to

see the album cover of *Tristan und Isolde* behind her head), Annie realizes that all is not well and offers Melanie some brandy and "a sweater or something, a quilt"; her generosity continues to be on display, along with her ability to read and respond to the moods of others. The film gives a hint of the sensitive personal history that is about to be shared when Melanie, who has been addressed as "Miss Daniels" twice since entering, proposes that Annie call her by her first name instead. Annie agrees. The distance between the two women has lessened a little, as the subsequent two-shot suggests, coming as it does after an unbroken sequence of separating one-shots.

Something strange occurs at this point in the scene. Annie carries two glasses in her left hand as she returns to the room with the brandy; their number is emphasized when she knocks them together on several occasions while approaching the table. She removes the stopper and fills one of the glasses for Melanie. We might expect her also to pour brandy into the second glass to join her guest, thus completing a gesture of hospitality that would accompany the shift from "Miss Daniels" to "Melanie." She looks at the empty vessel—which is enhanced in the frame because it reflects the white paper on which it rests—but she leaves the glass unfilled and reseals the bottle. (The action is decisive, too: she presses the stopper not once but twice.) There is no toast, no communion here to match the earlier sharing of cigarettes on the porch. If glasses clink in this scene, it is only because they strike each other in transit. Annie's decision not to pour herself a drink signals that, although she and Melanie are now on first-name terms and under the same roof, there is still something of a gap between them, as the persistence of one-shots throughout this sequence implies. A common social act—having a nightcap together—is implied but averted.

Barely sixty seconds after resealing the bottle, however, she changes her mind and pours herself a brandy that leads at last to openness and sharing. Her decision finally to fill her glass occurs when the conversation turns to Annie's past difficulties with the Brenners. The discussion has settled on

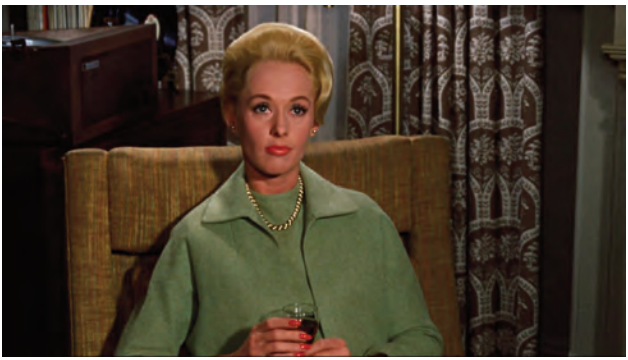

Figure 8

this subject because Annie has asked how Melanie's evening went. At a loss for words, Melanie shrugs and makes a face that settles into an awkward smile. "Did you meet Lydia?" asks Annie. She is off-screen as she speaks so that the camera can show in a one-shot Melanie's reaction to the mention of Mitch's mother: the smile takes silent flight (fig. 8).

Talk turns instead to Annie's reason for living in Bodega Bay, and she soon decides to stop "being coy about this" by announcing that she moved up from San Francisco to be near Mitch, despite their relationship being "over and done with a long time ago." (In Hunter's first drafts of the screenplay, incidentally, Mitch had nothing to do with Annie's decision to relocate from the city; she wished merely "to get away from the superficiality of San Francisco, where she taught at a private school for rich girls like Melanie."[22]) By revealing these intimate facts to a guest, Annie finally makes herself the "open book" of which she spoke when the two women first met several hours earlier.

That opening becomes an even more detailed and generous sharing when Annie is asked to explain what she means when she says, enigmatically, "Maybe there's never been anything between Mitch and *any* girl." Annie moves closer to Melanie and pours herself the brandy before relating how her relationship with Mitch fell apart because of his mother's behavior towards her. If we have been tempted to

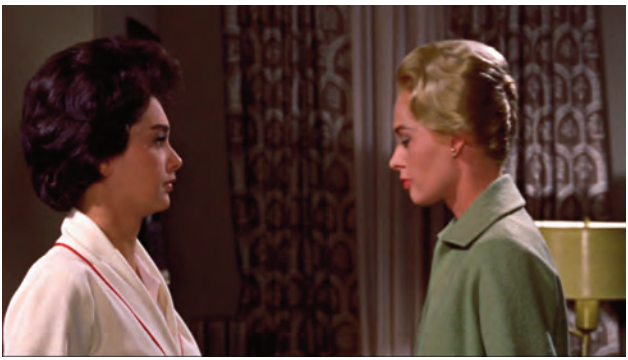

Figure 9

believe that Annie could be an obstacle to the romantic union of Mitch and Melanie, we learn here from Annie that *Lydia* is the true problem: if what she fears is abandonment, she will never want to see her son in a successful relationship. (As if to warn Melanie that her future with Mitch might be at risk of failure, the album cover of *Tristan und Isolde* looms behind her as she listens to Annie's account.) Annie, meanwhile, shifts from being a potential obstacle to acting as an open sharer of information about the dynamics of the Brenner family so that Melanie (who has only just met Mitch and his mother, of course) can be aware of the challenge that she faces. There is a selflessness in this sharing, which Rothman characterizes concisely as "a friendly gesture" on Annie's part.[23]

To some degree, Annie's decision to live close to her former lover aligns her with *Vertigo*'s Midge, whose dwelling contains even more artworks than Annie's does, and who, like Annie, watches as the man for whom she evidently still carries a torch begins a new romantic relationship with a glamorous woman he has met in San Francisco. But if Midge is a figure of evident pain—she is visibly upset at seeing the object of her desire falling for someone else—Annie is far more stoic and displays a generous willingness to enable the new romance that we do not find in *Vertigo*.

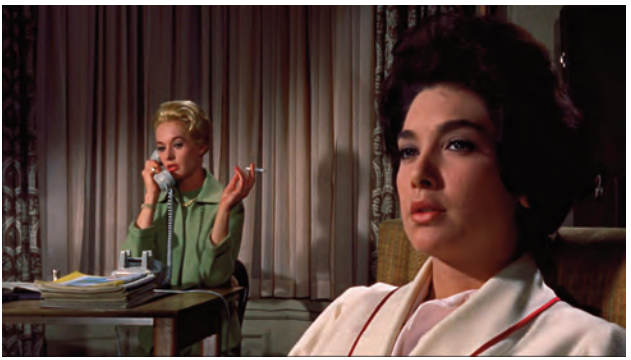

Figure 10

Seconds after Annie has explained her decision to remain in Bodega Bay, the telephone rings. Her smile when she hears Mitch on the line is a subtle visual reminder of the feelings that she cannot contain, and the intimacy of the moment is heightened by the withholding of Mitch's voice from us; his words are heard only by Annie, privately, in a one-shot. But Mitch wishes to speak to Melanie—Annie is merely a means to an end for him here—and as Melanie crosses the room to take the telephone, the two women stand face to face briefly, as if Annie were blocking Melanie's movement towards Mitch; the tightness of the framing makes it impossible for us to see if there is room for Melanie to get by (fig. 9).

The moment passes quickly, though: Melanie moves around Annie to pick up the telephone. As she talks to Mitch, his voice is once again withheld from us—and also from Annie, who is now framed dominantly in foreground. She can no longer hear the voice of Mitch that made her smile moments earlier; he is now talking only to another woman. Annie says nothing while Melanie is on the phone, so while we hear Melanie's words to Mitch with perfect clarity, we watch Annie's calm reaction to hearing another woman talk to her very same object of desire (fig. 10).

Melanie is the less prominent figure in this shot, and a cut soon removes her from view altogether in order to depict Annie alone in profile. She allows her head to fall back, away

Figure 11

from her cigarette, as if in wordless despair, while she listens to one side of a conversation that is evidently about Mitch trying to persuade Melanie to attend Cathy's party the following day (fig. 11). When Melanie finally agrees to Mitch's request, Annie turns her face away, away from Mitch's new love, away from us. She has said nothing, but her actions—highlighted by the composition of the shots—have revealed how painful the moment has been for her.

When the call is over, Melanie asks Annie if she was right to accept Mitch's invitation. Although Annie has evidently been wounded by what she has just witnessed, she makes no attempt to derail Mitch's plans when she replies, "Well, that's up to you." Annie's focus here is on Melanie's desires: she sets aside her own feelings for those of her guest, as she did while she listened without intervention to Melanie's phone call. Melanie disagrees with Annie's statement, suggesting that "it's really up to Lydia, isn't it?" It would be unsurprising if Annie, who has spoken so recently of Lydia's interference, were to agree at this point, but her response is to lean forwards to stress her words: "Never mind Lydia. Do you *want* to go?" she asks. We might expect that the emphasis in Annie's question would fall on the word "you," as she is encouraging Melanie to put herself before Lydia (just as Annie is putting Melanie before herself). But "want" is underlined in Hunter's screenplay and duly emphasized by Suzanne

Pleshette in her delivery of the line.[24] The nuance matters, I think, as it highlights the way in which Annie is focused specifically—here and in so many other places in *The Birds*—on what others want in life and love. Her selflessness is confirmed a moment later, in fact, when Melanie says "Yes" in response to the question and Annie reacts by saying, with a sincere smile, "Then go." While she still likes Mitch "a hell of a lot," she does not allow those feelings to stand in the way of what Melanie and Mitch so evidently desire.

The Birthday Party

The next scene in *The Birds* depicts the birthday party to which Melanie was invited the previous night. At the beginning of the sequence, Annie is barely visible—she is seen only from a distance because the camera is on the sand dune, high above the celebrations—but her voice carries because Mitch and Melanie are climbing the slope in silence. "Very good. Okay, here we go," Annie says while organizing a game for the children, and then, when the film cuts to show Mitch and Melanie at the summit, we once again hear her voice as she says, "Attagirl. Come on—don't let her get you." Mitch and Melanie are privileged visually as they walk—the camera is with them, tracking them—but Annie registers aurally.

We know from the work of critics like Jack Sullivan, Dan Auiler, and Michael Slowik that Hitchcock planned the sound of *The Birds* with remarkable precision.[25] A reason for Annie's voice featuring in shots of Mitch and Melanie at the beginning of this scene is revealed when the latter two figures end their intimate conversation on the dune and make their way back down toward the house. The film cuts first to a high-angle static shot showing them approaching the festivities and then, just as Annie's offscreen voice is heard again, to a low-angle pan that follows Melanie and Mitch as they descend. When the camera continues its movement to the right—without cutting—it brings Annie into view and shows that she is staring at Mitch and Melanie while guiding Cathy through the children's game. Cathy leaves the frame just after Annie

says the word "three." This spoken number, heard in a pan that moves from Mitch and Melanie to Annie, highlights the fact that the couple shown at the beginning of the scene have, in effect, been brought together by a third figure who, though hurt by the blossoming romance, has stepped aside selflessly. We hear Annie when Mitch and Melanie are climbing the dune to convey subtly that she has made their pairing possible with her words and deeds.

Having paused its pan to the right, the camera stays exclusively on Annie for around eight seconds to give us plenty of time to see how intently she is watching Mitch and Melanie. So much so, in fact, that she sends the blindfolded Cathy on her way—"There you go," she says—without even glancing at her. (Is she even referring solely to Cathy here? "You," like Melanie's earlier "Me," is a linguistic shifter. As she is looking at Mitch when she speaks, is he the "you" to whom her words at least in part refer? *There you go, away from me again with another.*) The wounded expression on her face confirms what she revealed the previous night about still liking Mitch "a hell of a lot," but her stoic silence endures.

Annie is so stung by what she is witnessing that she turns away from the couple, just as she turned away during their phone call the previous evening. As she does so, the camera pans further to the right to show Lydia emerging from the house. Now she is the one to stare anxiously at Mitch and Melanie. Like Annie sending the blindfolded Cathy on her way, Lydia moves out of the shot without taking her eyes off Mitch and Melanie. Cathy's party is the only scene in *The Birds* to feature both Annie and Lydia, and the film's careful staging at this point connects the two women: the gaze passes from one to the other as each looks with concern at Mitch and Melanie. A note in Hunter's screenplay is clear about the intention: Annie turns away from the couple towards Lydia "as though she were wondering if Lydia sees what she sees."[26] We have, moreover, been prepared subtly for this moment of double scrutiny: as Robin Wood notes, both Lydia and Annie use the phrase "I see" in separate earlier scenes when they learn that Melanie has come to Bodega Bay bearing

lovebirds.[27] Although there has been tension between Annie and Lydia in the past, here they are aligned with each other.

The film nonetheless maintains a significant distinction between the two watching women. When the birds begin their attack at the party, Annie is the first adult to react to what is happening. "Oh!" she exclaims in a one-shot that makes it impossible for us to miss her response as she runs immediately towards the endangered children (and therefore the attacking animals) in order to protect them. "Help me get the children into the house," she adds, addressing Mitch and Melanie. Lydia also plays a part in the ensuing rescue, but her involvement is much less significant. After Annie leaps into action, thirty-nine shots show the gathering of the children inside before the scene at the party reaches its end. While Lydia is shown in just three of those shots, rescuing only one child (her own daughter, moreover), Annie is captured in eight shots helping to safety multiple children, none of whom is a relative of hers. At Cathy's party, in other words, Annie initiates and orchestrates the saving of the children. Once again, we see her actively thinking of others and putting their needs before her own. Lydia's involvement in the rescue, meanwhile, occurs within strict familial parameters: she is depicted as caring only for her daughter. Her real function—here and throughout *The Birds*—is not to care for others but to be an obstacle to the romantic union of Mitch and his new lover, whom she surveys with solemn disapproval until, in the final stages of the film, her behavior towards Melanie changes.

Out of School and Back to the Garden

After the birthday party, Annie is absent from the film until Melanie visits the school to check on Cathy. This section of *The Birds* is best known for the "jungle gym" sequence—so much so, in fact, that what happens while Melanie is waiting outside the school can overshadow other elements of the scene. There have been many discussions of how the birds gather gradually in the playground while Melanie smokes a

cigarette, but almost no detailed consideration of what happens inside the building.

When Melanie realizes that a large flock of birds has perched outside the school, she rushes inside, where she and Annie work together to develop a plan to protect the children that, in effect, reverses what happened at the birthday party, where the movement to safety involved going from outside to inside. Annie contributes to Melanie's concerned call to "get the children out of here" when she stands in front of the class and outlines what the pupils should do when they leave the school. The joint nature of their effort to keep the children safe is confirmed visually when Annie moves from her isolated position at the front of the class and stands at the side of the room, calling Melanie over to join her as she conveys her final instructions for the escape. As at the birthday party, Annie leads the attempt to help vulnerable children, but now Melanie works alongside her. If Annie was once a foil to Melanie's self-centered behavior, here the two women are joined in altruism. (Since the traumatic birthday party, we have seen Melanie display a new awareness of others and their needs: she notices Lydia's distress at the damage caused to the living room by the sparrows, offers to take Cathy upstairs to bed, brings tea to Lydia when she is recovering from the shock of seeing Dan Fawcett's corpse, and drives to the school to be sure—and to reassure Lydia—that Cathy is safe.)

Pomerance notes that it is "important in reading Annie Hayworth to attend to much more than the spoken script," and a small physical gesture that she makes when directing the children out of the classroom should not be overlooked.[28] When she has issued the evacuation instructions, Annie tells a boy named John to "lead the way." As she signals to him with her left hand, she uses her right arm to move Melanie towards the exit with the pupils. On the sand dune above Cathy's party, Melanie had proposed joining "the other children," and here Annie's gesture guides her to be among "the other children" whose safety she is attempting to preserve. With the movement of her arm, Annie visibly puts others first—quite

literally, in fact, because we see when the birds attack outside that she has been the last to leave the building.

For John P. McCombe, "Annie's educational practices, as well as the socialization the Bodega Bay School offers, are as much the enemy as any other institution in town," and he concludes that "the well-rehearsed exit merely serves to offer up the children as conspicuous targets for the vengeful crows."[29] There is no doubt that the plans for escape outlined by Annie are, for all their good intentions, ineffective: the children are attacked almost as soon as they step outside. If *The Birds* delivers, in Wood's words, "a reminder of fragility and instability that cannot be ignored or evaded and, beyond that, of the possibility that life is meaningless and absurd," we cannot expect that human attempts to do the right thing will go according to plan.[30] At the same time, however, the way in which the assault outside the school unfolds confirms the resourceful (though sacrificial) altruism of Annie's method: because the children and the two women are running away from the birds, Annie, last to leave and bringing up the rear, is the first in line when the creatures strike. Before the crows can reach the children, they must face Annie with her arms outstretched, as if she were trying to make her body a more substantial barrier between herself and her pupils.

Annie disappears from sight amidst the chaos outside the school, and we have to wait nearly fourteen minutes to learn her fate. After the long scene in the Tides Restaurant and the explosion at the gas station, the camera eventually takes us back to the road outside the school where we last saw her. When Mitch and Melanie reach her house, they find her corpse on the path leading to the front door. In death, Annie lies surrounded by what Melanie earlier called her "very pretty garden."

Cathy will soon explain that she returned with Annie to her house, having taken her friend Michelle home following the evacuation of the classroom. Hearing the explosion at the gas station, they stepped out to investigate. "All at once, the birds were everywhere," Cathy sobs. "All at once, she pushed me inside and they covered her. Annie—she pushed me

Figure 12

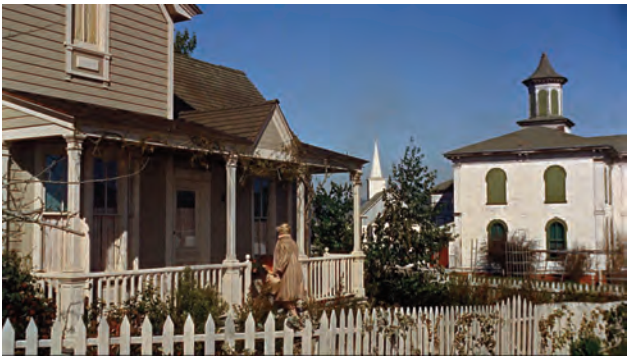

Figure 13

inside." The repetition of "she pushed me inside" emphasizes that Annie's last act in life elevated her concern for others to the level of self-sacrifice; her actions at the party and the schoolhouse have reached their logical conclusion. As Hitchcock himself put it in conversation with Truffaut, "she sacrificed herself to protect the sister of the man she loves. It's her final gesture."[31] Sacrifice surfaces repeatedly and diversely as a theme in Hitchcock's body of work—we might think, for instance, of the fraught mission undertaken in *Notorious* (1946) by Alicia, Flusky serving a prison sentence for Hattie's crime in *Under Capricorn* (1949), or

Figure 14

Father Logan facing the implications of refusing to reveal Keller's secret in *I Confess* (1953)—and Annie's "final gesture" in *The Birds* positions the film firmly within this textual lineage.

Understandably, critics have often paid attention to what the birds have done to Annie's sacrificed body.[32] No one, to the best of my knowledge, has taken a close look at the damage inflicted by the creatures upon Annie's garden (perhaps because the destruction is nowhere near as striking as it is at Dan Fawcett's house). When Hitchcock shows us Annie's body—which is clearly the focus of the scene, just as Fawcett's bloodied face and pecked-out eyes are at the heart of the sequence in which Lydia visits his farm—he reveals that the birds have knocked over a chair on the porch and smashed a plant pot, spilling soil across the planks. The damage is not limited to the chair and the plant pot, however. When Melanie and Mitch approach the house, the camera shows birds perching above their victim. What this shot reveals is that the creatures, in addition to killing Annie and damaging elements of the garden, appear also to have removed some of the vegetation above the porch. Early in the film, we see creeping branches rise above the tiles on either side of the small apex above the porch (figs. 12 and 13). But when Annie's body is discovered, things look very different (fig. 14). With death, the branches are cut back—or pecked

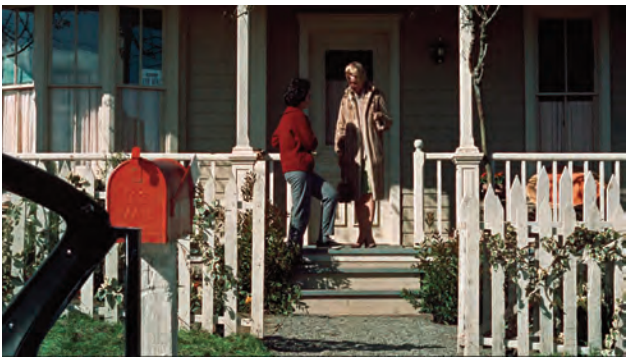

Figure 15

back—on both sides of the apex. The change on the right is particularly significant, as we cannot explain it away pragmatically by speculating that Hitchcock pruned the branches deliberately to make the crows more visible to viewers at this tense moment: there are no birds on the right-hand side of the house.

By itself, this alteration to Annie's garden might not be worthy of much discussion. However, something similar has happened to the picket fence in front of the house. When Annie is alive, the posts immediately to the left of the front gate are covered in part with greenery (fig. 15). But later, when she is dead, that vegetation vanishes, mirroring what has happened at roof-level (fig. 16).

I am not aware of a single critic who has mentioned the disappearance of the branches above Annie's porch or the greenery at the side of her gate. These textual details are small and easy to overlook, no doubt, and there are many far more obvious things to catch the eye in this scene. To my mind, however, we can discover something important about *The Birds* here if we allow ourselves to become D.A. Miller's "too-close viewer"—a figure who looks obsessively for "a whole hidden level of Hitchcock's film-writing that, whether because its signs are too small, or too fleeting, or too peripheral, or too close to the obvious visual focus, we are ordinarily prevented from reading."[33] If we dwell on the tiny, easy-to-miss details

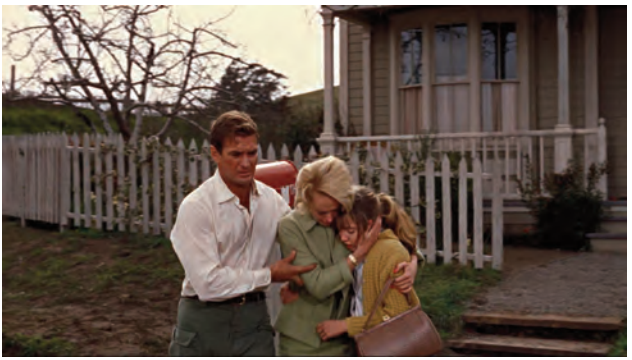

Figure 16

that surround Annie's corpse—if we refuse to be "prevented from reading" them by more conspicuous concerns—we can learn that the birds' brutal attack on her is also an attack upon her "very pretty garden."

Broadly speaking, a garden is a human attempt to control and craft nature into culture. In this light, to acknowledge the way in which Hitchcock's film associates Annie Hayworth with horticulture is to recognize how her presence upon the screen contributes to the formation of one of the familiar theories about the reason for the bird attacks. There is, of course, nothing new in noting that among the speculations about the birds' motives is a sense that the film depicts "the revenge of nature" against culture, against human ways of being in the world. As Wood notes, in fact, Hitchcock himself was "at pains to encourage this view in his rather lamentable trailer" for the film.[34] Equally, there is nothing new in pointing out that none of the various explanations for the attacks that are voiced in the film is ever proven. As Pomerance puts it, "the mystery of the birds—the presence of the birds *as mystery*—is the motor of the film."[35] What has not been addressed in criticism to date, however, is the way in which Annie and her garden contribute to sustaining the central enigma of Hitchcock's film. Her fate—its form and its framing—feeds the possibility that she and her horticultural handiwork are mutilated by a wild nature intent on undoing

the visible work of culture, of cultivation. But this sketched possibility is no more than that: we are furnished no proof, no closing certainty. As Thomas M. Leitch notes, it is in the nature of *The Birds* to resist resolution.[36] And it is in the nature of Annie Hayworth to nourish such resistance.

In addition to considering the relevance of precisely where in Bodega Bay Annie dies, we should not overlook the significance of where in the narrative she meets her death. Hunter's initial draft of the screenplay did not have Annie dying outside her house before the beginning of the last act of the film. Instead, it imagined her in the Brenners' property during the long final avian assault and, notably, being the one who faces death in the attic until she is rescued by Mitch; Hitchcock annotated Hunter's draft six days after receiving it to make Melanie the character who suffers this fate.[37] In doing so, he allowed her to conclude her gradual transformation from narcissism to the kind of self-sacrificing altruism demonstrated so often in the film by Annie. The concern for others passes from woman to woman, as if Melanie has learnt from Annie not to put herself first. When Melanie says "Get Cathy and Lydia out of here" faintly before losing consciousness in the attic, we are a long way from her solipsistic "Me" uttered outside the house next to the school. Beneath the rafters, beneath the feathers, it is as if the gentle ghost of Annie is speaking.

* * * * * *

When we and Melanie first meet her, Annie describes herself as an open book and a closed book. The film never quite allows us to settle this unbound duality, let alone know precisely what she might mean by the statement. I have stayed with Annie across these pages because I think that she is a book to be read more closely than has tended to be the case. There is no denying that she is a creature of the margins, and I have no desire to forge or force a centrality that she does not enjoy. "At first glance," Alex Woloch warns wisely in his book on marginal figures, "the interpretation of minor characters

might seem to be nothing else than a repudiation of the text's own hierarchy of value, bringing to the critical foreground what has been subordinated to the narrative background."[38] My staying with Annie, however, is not meant as "a repudiation of the text's own hierarchy of value"; it is, rather, a desire to see more fully how Hitchcock's film works, how the margins matter to the whole. Written in the open and closed book of Annie Hayworth are quiet clues to the ways of the birds.

Notes

To the memory of my mother (May 1942-February 2025), who saw *The Birds* in the cinema in 1963 and declared it "a bit strange."

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1. Rachel Bowlby, "Untold Stories in *Mrs Dalloway*," *Textual Practice* 25, no. 3 (2011): 398. I owe this reference to Ethan Evans.

2. Murray Pomerance, "Two Bits for Hitch: Small Performance and Gross Structure in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956)," *Hitchcock Annual* 9 (2000): 127.

3. Laura Maw, "Loving Annie Hayworth," in *It Came from the Closet: Queer Reflections on Horror*, ed. Joe Vallese (Glasgow: Saraband, 2023), 145-59.

4. Scott Calef, "Featherless Bipeds: The Concept of Humanity in *The Birds*," in *Hitchcock and Philosophy: Dial M for Metaphysics*, eds. David Baggett and William A. Drumin (Chicago: Open Court, 2007), 77.

5. Otto Jespersen, *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* (New York: Henry Holt, 1922), 123.

6. Christopher D. Morris, "Reading the Birds and *The Birds*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2000): 253.

7. Camille Paglia, *The Birds* (London: BFI, 1998), 31; Bill Krohn, *Hitchcock at Work* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 250.

8. Steven Jacobs, *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2007), 152.

9. Evan Hunter, *The Birds*, final draft screenplay (second revision), March 2, 1962, 25. Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills.

10. Paglia, *The Birds*, 31.

11. Murray Pomerance, "Some Hitchcockian Shots," in *A Companion to Alfred Hitchcock*, eds. Thomas Leitch and Leland Poague (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 238.

12. Maw, "Loving Annie Hayworth," 158.

13. Hunter, *The Birds*, 26. I can find no evidence that the phrase is actually a quotation from another text.

14. William Rothman, "The Universal Hitchcock," in Leitch and Poague, eds., *A Companion to Alfred Hitchcock*, 349.

15. Maw, "Loving Annie Hayworth," 145.

16. In the screenplay, her remark comes with an explanatory note: "Taking this as a further indication of Melanie's relationship with Mitch." Hunter, *The Birds*, 28.

17. Hunter, *The Birds*, 28.

18. Jacobs, *The Wrong House*, 152.

19. David Sterritt, *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 127.

20. Maw, "Loving Annie Hayworth," 147.

21. Jacobs, *The Wrong House*, 153-54.

22. Krohn, *Hitchcock at Work*, 251. See also Walter Raubicheck and Walter Srebnick, *Scripting Hitchcock: Psycho, The Birds, and Marnie* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 66.

23. William Rothman, *Tuitions and Intuitions: Essays at the Intersection of Film and Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019), 169.

24. Hunter, *The Birds*, 66.

25. See Jack Sullivan, *Hitchcock's Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 259-72; Dan Auiler, *Hitchcock's Secret Notebooks: An Authorised and Illustrated Look Inside the Creative Mind of Alfred Hitchcock* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 516-23; Michael Slowik, "Spellbound by Sound: What We Learn from Alfred Hitchcock's Notes on Sound," *Hitchcock Annual* 25 (2021): 1-30.

26. Hunter, *The Birds*, 71.

27. Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 159.

28. Pomerance, *A Voyage with Hitchcock*, 125.

29. John P. McCombe, "'Oh, I see . . .': *The Birds* and the Culmination of Hitchcock's Hyper-romantic Vision," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 3 (2005): 75-76.

30. Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, 154.

31. François Truffaut, with Helen G. Scott, *Hitchcock*, rev. ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 2017), 295.

32. See, for instance, Robert J. Yanal, *Hitchcock as Philosopher* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2005), 175; Robert Samuels, *Hitchcock's Bi-texuality: Lacan, Feminisms, Queer Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 130; Raymond Durgnat, *The Strange Case of Alfred Hitchcock or the Plain Man's Hitchcock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 346; and Paglia, *The Birds*, 74.

33. D.A. Miller, *Hidden Hitchcock* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 69-70.

34. Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, 153.

35. Murray Pomerance, *A Voyage with Hitchcock* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2021), 127.

36. Thomas M. Leitch, *Find the Director and Other Hitchcock Games* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 230.

37. Krohn, *Hitchcock at Work*, 250. See also Raubicheck and Srebnick, *Scripting Hitchcock*, 68.

38. Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 37. I owe this reference to Ethan Evans.