

Paranoia and the Film System*

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' If the image content has been projected onto the P[erception] end, its libidinal cathexis must first have been removed from it. Then it has the character of a perception. In paranoia, the libido is withdrawn from the object: a reversal of this is *grief*, in which the object is withdrawn from the libido ' (Freud: ' A Few Theoretical Remarks on Paranoia,' Sigmund Freud/C G Jung: *Letters*, p 39).

' The aggressive tendency appears as fundamental in a certain series of significant states of personality, the paranoid and paranoiac psychoses ' (Lacan: ' L'Agressivité en psychanalyse,' *Ecrits*, p 110).

This paper emerges from the need to query a semiotic practice which assimilates its own systematicity to an institutionalised psychoanalytic exigency – integration into the Symbolic through a successful Oedipal trajectory. That dissatisfaction with this practice should focus on a film (Hitchcock's *The Birds*) in which the woman is both cause and object of the aggressivity which drives the narrative to a point at which its resolution is coincident with her ' catatonia ' is not incidental to the query. The woman takes up the place of the delusion whose progressive real-isation is charted by the film (in the final sequence, Melanie Daniels fights off (sees) birds which are not there). Since her assignment to this place is the price of the narrative closure as well as the symptom of its subversion, it is from here, properly, that the query can be posed.

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The question of hallucination raises a number of issues:
 the pertinence of the topographical concept of regression and that of paranoid projection for a metapsychology of film;

paranoia as the aggressive corollary of the narcissistic structure of the ego-function; here, considered not in relation to hallucination, but in terms of the imaginary dialectic which is the point of resistance to symbolisation;

the relationship of the latter as *structure* (inversion and reflexion) to certain specific codes of the filmic substance of expression which may indicate, interior to the film system, the necessity of its own dissolution.

Regression and Projection: Development of the Concept and Problems

Freud introduced the groundwork for the concept of regression in the 1895 *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (*Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, London 1953-74, Volume I) in relation to the infant's wishful activation of a mnemonic image during a state of urgency. The infant cathects the mnemonic trace of the desired object as perception. Later on, writing of the hallucinatory nature of dream-cathexes, Freud adduced the evidence of primary memory as explanation of this formal characteristic of the dream: 'We might revert to the nature of the primary process and point out that the primary memory of a perception is always a hallucination' (*ibid*, p 339). The perceptual nature of primary memory can therefore be related to the dream form, but its content (the hallucinatory cathexis of the desired object) is inferred from the latent content of the dream itself: 'That this [dreams as wish-fulfillments] is their nature, is, however, very easily shown. It is precisely from this that I am inclined to infer that *primary wishful cathexis, too, was of a hallucinatory nature*' (*ibid*, p 340).

In Chapter VII of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (*Standard Edition*, Vol V), Freud uses the concept of regression to explain the transformation of dream thoughts into sensory images. Since the lowering of censorship in sleep is sufficient to explain only the conscious emergence of a previously repressed thought content but not its form, there must be a regression through the psychic apparatus which carries the content back to its primary status as perception. Freud insists that the concept is purely descriptive and not explanatory; regression explains the formal transformation, but it has not in itself been explained. The question remains as to what causes the retrogressive movement, and also why the thought travels past the mnemonic image to the hallucinatory revival of the perception. To this second question Freud replies that the dis-

placement of psychic intensities proper to the primary process makes possible the complete reversion to the perceptual system, but he emphasises that this does not constitute an explanation of the phenomena. His reply to the first question – that regression is caused by the loss of motility during sleep – is immediately contradicted by the appearance of hallucinatory phenomena during waking life:

‘ My explanation of hallucination in hysteria and paranoia and of visions in mentally normal subjects is that they are in fact regressions – that is, thoughts transformed into images – but that the only thoughts that undergo this transformation are intimately linked with memories that have been suppressed or remain unconscious ’ (p 544).

The relationship between regression and paranoia is, however, problematic. Freud seems to identify them in this quotation, but six years later, in his correspondence with Jung (Sigmund Freud/ Carl Gustav Jung: *Letters*, Princeton NJ 1974), Freud gives some of his most specific statements on the mechanism of paranoid delusion. Their disagreement centres on the definition of ego-libido, crucial for the later consideration of paranoia in its relation to narcissism. Freud describes paranoia as the outward projection of a rejected idea – the content of a desire – which reappears as perceived reality, against which repression manifests itself anew as opposition. Withdrawal of the cathexis is the precondition of the perceptual registration of the image. Hostility to the object is the endogenous perception of this withdrawal. The clinical picture of paranoia corresponds to the secondary defensive struggle when the libido returns to the object: ‘ With a reversal to unpleasure [the libido] clings to the perceptions into which the object has been transformed. . . . The libidinal cathexis heightens the images that have become perceptions, transforming them into hallucinations ’ (*Letters*, p 40). Gradually all the repressed libido transforms itself into conviction in the perceptual image of the projected object: ‘ Delusion is a libido-inspired belief in reality ’ (ibid). Paranoia can be distinguished from amebtic and hysterical hallucination on a number of counts. Firstly, in the case of the latter, the image of the desired object is over-catheted with libido and transformed directly into perception via hallucination; secondly, there is no reversal of value. In paranoia, there is first a reduction of libido cathexis; the intensification of the hallucination through a return of suppressed libido is secondary. Furthermore, contradicting his earlier statement in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud states that in paranoia there is little regression: the idea appears as a word through audition and not as a visual image. But, he concludes, ‘ I still fail to understand the undoubtedly secondary visual hallucinations; they look like secondary regressions ’ (ibid, p 48). In ‘ A Case of Chronic Paranoia ’ (1896, *Standard Edition*, Vol III,

88 pp 174-85). Freud's female patient experienced first a sense of general hostility from the external world, then the conviction of being watched, and finally visual hallucinations and voices. The auditory and visual hallucinations were simultaneous; between them they make up the sensory strata of the paranoiac phenomenon.¹

Freud therefore disengages the concept of regression from paranoia, but if the topographical definition is suspended (and this only partially, cf above), the temporal definition is central to his description. The withdrawn libido which has been removed from the image of the object returns to the ego and becomes auto-erotic; return to auto-eroticism could be seen as a coalescence of the two forms of temporal libidinal regression – return both to an earlier object and to an earlier mode of functioning. Aggrandisement of the ego (Schreber) is the narcissistic corollary of the constitution of a hostile object world. Note that in this position, Schreber's identification is with the place of a woman.

Lacan throws the aggressivity of paranoid psychosis back to the ontology of the ego-function. By doing so, he gives a structural grounding to Melanie Klein's description of the paranoid position in the early ego-formation of the child. Aggressivity is attendant on the narcissistic relation and the structures of misrecognition which characterise the formation of the ego:

'This form will in effect be crystallised in the conflictual tension internal to the subject, which determines its desire for the object of desire of the other: it is here that the primordial concourse is precipitated into an aggressive rivalry, and it is from this that the triad of the other, the ego and the object is born' ('L'Aggressivité en psychanalyse,' *Ecrits*, Paris 1966, p 113).

Paranoia is latent to the reversibility of the ego's self-alienation. Furthermore, since the projective alienation of the subject's own image is the precondition for the identification of an object world, all systems of objectification can be related to the structure of paranoia. Aggressivity is latent to the system, but it will also be discharged where the stability of the system is threatened. The imaginary dialectic is the inter-subjective equivalent of the narcissism subtending ego-formation; it is the point of resistance to symbolisation and the disavowal of difference.

Paranoia has therefore been referred multiply:

to the basic ontology of the ego-function;

to the systematicity of discourse;

and, as a clinical manifestation, to a delusional reconstruction of

1. Cf also 'A Case of Paranoia Running Counter to the Psycho-analytic Theory of that Disease,' *Standard Edition*, Vol XIV: the woman *hears* herself being *photographed*.

Hallucination and the Film

Suspension of motility on the part of the spectator allows for a partial identification of the film process with the dream, countered by the greater elaboration of the film system and by the fact that the image perceived as real constitutes a concrete perceptual content in the cinema (the images and sounds of the film itself – see Christian Metz, 'Le Film de fiction et son spectateur,' *Communications*, n 23, 1975, pp 108-35). The counter-flux to a full regression is therefore provided by the film itself. On the other hand, the spectator's identification of the film substance with a fictional world constituted as real partly upholds the pertinence of a comparison with regressive hallucination. With this difference. The hallucination of the dream process obeys the dictates of the pleasure principle and consists of a wishful cathexis of the object. The film 'can please or displease'. Identification of the film with the onerotic process stalls, therefore, not on the mechanism of hallucination but on its associated affect. The horror film could be said to insert itself into the space of this disjunction, producing images to *excite* displeasure (always associated with the visualisation/audition of a repressed content), so that it is the reversal of affect which precisely allows the recognition of the repressed image-content in the real. The mechanism comes close to that of paranoia, and it is the specificity of *The Birds* to internalise this mechanism into the narrative content of the film.

At the same time, paranoia could be said to be latent to the structure of cinematic specularity in itself, in that it represents the radical alterity of signification (the subject is spoken from elsewhere). To suggest this is to challenge the idea of the spectator's subsumption into an imaginary totality and to point to the potential splitting of that totality within the moment of its constitution. For the woman, the alterity of signification is the locus from which she is spoken as excluded and also from which she is *taken* as picture – the image representing the moment of freezing of her sexuality (cf Freud: 'A Case of Paranoia Running Counter to the Psycho-analytic Theory of the Disease,' *op cit*).

In *The Birds*, the woman is object and cause of the attack. On the level of narrative, she moves from one form of persecution

2. Cf also Lacan on the difference between paranoia and the dream: 'One could say that, unlike dreams, which must *be interpreted*, the delirium is in itself *an act of interpretation* by the unconscious,' *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité* (Paris 1932, republished 1975), p 293.

90 (Melanie Daniels is known because she is talked and written about – ‘She’s in all the columns, Mitch’) to another (she is accused of bringing the birds to Bodega Bay), so that the attack of the birds becomes the cause of persecution. And again in terms of the positions of identification into which the spectator is drawn. At two points, the spectator is induced into her place. At the point of accusation, the object of the accuser’s look is the camera itself. When the birds attack Melanie Daniels in the attic (the final attack), a rapid shot holds on a bird, its mouth open, flying into the camera. With a reversal exemplary of the fundamental paradox of identification, Melanie’s hallucination in the final sequence is to fight off non-existent birds in the place of the camera previously identified with herself.³ The identification of Melanie Daniels and the place of the spectator are split into the two terms of an aggressive polarisation, implying retrospectively that the aggressivity of the birds is reversible and self-directed.

By internalising the mechanism of paranoia into the film, *The Birds* releases an aggressivity which finally cannot be contained within the terms of a resolution (see below). But this subversion can be read into the conventions of the cinematic institution itself in a way which indicates the very instability of that institution: the constant lapses of a system which would construct itself according to a rhetoric. Taking another film which belongs in the same cinematic context and which has been the object of detailed analysis, and then a segment of *The Birds*, it is clear that this aggressivity undercuts the stability of one of the dominant framing devices of classical Hollywood cinema.

Paranoia and the Film System

In the crop-dusting sequence of *North by Northwest*, the hero, who has gone to meet the non-existent character with whom he has been mistakenly identified, is attacked out of the sky. A detailed break-down of the segment (Raymond Bellour: ‘Le Blocage symbolique,’ *Communications* 23, 1975, cf also Kari Hanet: ‘Bellour on *North by Northwest*,’ *Edinburgh ’76 Magazine*) has revealed its structuration according to a partially sustained series of oppositions between the subject and the object of his vision. This series is unstable, manifesting a constant tendency towards its own disequilibrium, the points of its rupture being precisely the points of

3. Melanie Daniels does not at this point look directly into the camera; her look is off-screen front (implication of the spectator) and to the place of Mitch Brenner (shot/reverse-shot); this duality raises the whole problem of the sexual differentiation of the structure of aggressivity (see Comment below).

attack. On the level of content only, the source of the attack is referred across the segment into the body of the narrative, and a paradigm of means of locomotion is established whose multiple effectivity can be read from the systems of repetition and duplication which it drives and in which it is caught throughout the film. Each system which can be identified in the film text is overdetermined in its relation to the minutest segmental component or unit of the film; the plurality of the system, its fragmentation into a multiplicity of mutually referring units is the condition of its organisation into a narrative, based on a constant (eternal) return or repetition which determines the possibility of its resolution. The system is fragmented but omnipotent, indicating the submission of desire to the dictates of the law, Oedipus as the terminal zone and mover of repetition.

The micro-system, which constantly doubles back and folds over the terms of its own production, duplicates the process of repetition and resolution which characterises the global system of the film text, to which it thus relates in defiance of its apparent autonomy or closure. In this way the codes specific to the cinematic substance of expression, which seem to escape the impress of the diegesis, are nonetheless bound to it.

' But [the convergent effect of symbolisation] is still inscribed and propagated in [the filmic system's] smallest signifying units through the movement of repetition-resolution in which they are perpetually caught. It is much more indirect, since this movement of micro-elements, including all the specific codes of the matters of cinematic expression except the segmentary codes of the larger narrative units, seems always more or less to escape the narration, whereas it is in fact constantly constructing it. To the extent that, destined by its very nature to specify itself essentially in a gradual progression across relatively small segments, it gives the illusion of ceaselessly closing in on itself, *as if stamped with a kind of symbolic atopia by its material specificity and the extreme fragmentation of its semantic contents*. But the indirectness of the effect of symbolisation is precisely what constitutes its strength. Much more pregnant, since it is incessant, irrepressible, it constantly produces and reproduces, and produces because it reproduces, the major rhyme of the narration, of the story (*histoire*) become narration (*récit*). Like the narration, it resolves because it repeats, and repeats because it resolves, constantly directing itself towards its meaning from the starting point of its lack of meaning ' (' Le Blocage symbolique,' *op cit*, p 348, my italics).

It is in the relation of repetition to resolution, therefore, that cinematic specificity can be recuperated by the narrative. But not entirely, and the problems that this raises for analysis indicate precisely the points at which the fissures of the system can be spoken. First, the concept of repetition itself which for Freud indi-

92 cates exactly the demonic insistence of the drive, repetition being the sign of an instance which will not be integrated into a constructed historicity. Second, the elision in the coupling resolution/repetition of the points of rupture which constantly undercut the micro-elemental system. Third, the inescapable 'symbolic atopia' of the filmic substance of expression, which is a function of its *material specificity*.

What then is the cinematic code which dominates the segment in which the aggression of a false imposition of identity is objectified into assault? The segment is structured according to the basic opposition of shot and counter-shot which sustains a dialectic of vision (the look) alternating between the observing subject and the object of his vision. The code occults the position of the camera by setting up an opposition between two terms: the observer and the observed. What is seen is the subject himself and what he sees. The opposition is however a lure *in its very structure*. Firstly, the camera has to identify not only with the subject (Thornhill) in order to show what he sees, but also with the object of vision in order to show the subject. The series can therefore only be structured by a partial activation of the potentially aggressive reversal of its system. Secondly, the fact that the camera must identify with both terms of the opposition, and in the place of one of them cannot be assimilated to a subjectivity, reveals its presence *prior* to the point at which it disengages from that opposition, cancels the observer's centrality and subjects the observer and the observed to a gaze whose signified is attack. The opposition shot/counter-shot therefore contains its own principle of instability prior to the moment of its activation.

The process therefore mimes the dialectic of the imaginary relation, while demonstrating:

that this relation is reversible (it is this which Lacan defines as the paranoiac alienation of the ego);

that the subversion of the imaginary polarisation is not only a function of the fact that the subject is looked at from the point of its own projection, but that the look can in itself be externalised (delusion of being photo-graphed – cf 'A Case of Paranoia Running Counter to . . .', *op cit*).

The dominant cinematic code of the micro-segment reveals both the potential subversion of the system in the moment of its structuration, and, where it breaks, the fact that the intervention of difference is the point of disruption of the code. What needs to be looked at is the way in which symbolisation bars the repetitions of the micro-system, even as it is appropriated as the means of (an imaginary) resolution on the level of narrative content.

The process whereby the dialectic of the look culminates in the release of its aggressivity is demonstrated again in Bellour's breakdown of the Bodega Bay sequence of *The Birds* (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, n 216, October 1969, English translation from the BFI Educational

Advisory Service). In this instance the terms are duplicated as the sequence begins with the opposition between Melanie Daniels as subject and the object of her look, and then introduces as reply (response to the gift of the love-birds) the look of Mitch Brenner whose object is Melanie herself. I will not cover the segment in detail but point out a few points of the analysis which seem to be symptomatic of difficulties that can be read across into the narrative.

At the point where Melanie Daniels is attacked by the gull, the analysis identifies the attack with the reciprocal gaze of Mitch Brenner whose dominant mobility has determined the structure of the preceding shots of the sequence. The gull therefore represents a type of male violation. But this identification is challenged by the fact that Melanie sees Mitch but does not see the gull, which is shown in an anticipatory shot presented only to the spectator. The introduction of an object which is not seen reintroduces the elision of the subject's centrality which we have found to be latent to the opposition itself, but it leaves the gull without cause, unless the latter can be read in the meeting of looks which syntagmatically generates the attack. The gull would not in that case represent an active male sexuality, but the suspension of its possibility which dilutes it into a relation of caring ('Are you alright?' etc . . .). The gull releases the aggressivity latent to the miming of looks between the protagonists, and takes up the place of persecutory object; but the narrative content of that opposition (the developing sexual relationship between Melanie Daniels and Mitch Brenner) is subverted in that moment.

Furthermore, a retrospective reading of the segment according to the alternations which it constructs (alternation between Mitch and Melanie in the shot) produces, if that alternation is followed through and past the point at which a second shot of the gull breaks the opposition, Mitch in the place of Melanie in the shot of the attack itself. In this position, as Bellour points out, it is Melanie herself who is united with the gull. The sequence therefore contains a potential reversal (the gull is Mitch – the gull is Melanie) which shows, firstly, that the aggressivity is a function of the alternation and not derived from one of its terms, and, secondly, that the object of attack can be fused with the subject of attack by applying the principle of reversibility back along the syntagm. This fusion latent to the first sequence of the film in which the birds are revealed as aggressive, anticipates the transition within the narrative from attack to persecution (Melanie Daniels accused of evil and bringing the birds).

The symbolic atopia of the filmic substance of expression is therefore a function of its grounding in an imaginary structuration; the fact that the latter contains its own principle of instability can be referred to the paranoid characterisation of that structure and its attendant aggressivity, and also to the fact that the imaginary

94 is always threatened by an intervening symbolisation. In *North by Northwest*, the symbolic resolution fuses with the imaginary captation of the marital couple, which assures its ideological stability. In *The Birds*, the situation is more complex, because the film internalises the paranoia latent to the cinematic codification.

The Hermeneutics of Delusion

Unlike *North by Northwest* (the detective story which becomes an investigation into the nature of the woman's sexuality) or *Psycho* (detection into a crime whose source is the collapse of sexual polarisation), *The Birds* has no conventional detective content. The film's own tension works between the foreknowledge of the spectator (title of the film), the relative foreknowledge of the main characters (increasing anticipation of attack) and the resistance to knowledge, first of the town and then of the external world. The latter are linked by a series of narrative displacements (Annie Hayworth retrospectively, Mitch Brenner whose displacements in themselves constitute an alternation, and Melanie Daniels, the single journey), and then by a succession of partially abortive attempts at recall (telephone, newspaper, radio) which set up a paradigm of communication systems through the film comparable to that established for means of locomotion in *North by Northwest*.

The system of communication is also the possibility of the action (Melanie phones in order to trace Mitch), as well as its primary instigator (Melanie Daniels goes to the birdshop to collect a mynah bird which should talk, which doesn't talk, which she will have to teach to talk). The film therefore starts on a default of symbolisation displaced onto the absent bird, and then onto the love-birds ('Do you happen to have a pair of birds that are just friendly?'). Its objective could be said to be the establishment of intercourse – sexual consummation between Mitch and Melanie (never represented – the final energy passes between Melanie and Lydia), and the restoration of links between San Francisco and Bodega Bay. The fact that the latter is achieved can be taken as a resolution (with reservations which will be discussed below), but what is most important is the fact that the restoration constitutes an act of persuasion which convinces of the reality of the attack, and disperses it (the birds have started to attack Santa Rosa). The hermeneutic trajectory of *The Birds* is a process of conviction which has achieved its course when the external world recognises aggressivity in the real.

This is the crucial importance of the scene in the cafe (significantly omitted in Truffaut's summary of the plot in an elision that kills Annie Hayworth at the point of the first attack of the

birds on the school)⁴ which shifts between different points of recognition and resistance (recognition by the drunkard and the hysterical mother, resistance by Mrs Bundy whose desexualisation is represented by her age and physical appearance), until the attack itself forces a cognisance which turns the investigation from the reality into its cause – Melanie Daniels. Note that in this moment, all the men have been evicted from the image which shows the group of women crowded together as the support of ‘the woman’ who comes forward to accuse.

It is from the moment when the town recognises the birds that Melanie Daniels’s own relationship to their reality status starts to shift. During this scene a different challenge to the reality of the birds (the birds as hallucination) is depicted by Melanie frantically flaying her arms against the birds whose distance or separation is represented by the glass of the phone-booth itself. Glass, which represents the point of identification of the object which has not yet struck, here assimilated to the act of communication itself which, in the form of the human eye, it already represents symbolically. The relationship between the glass and vision is punned

4. It seems worth giving the whole of Truffaut’s summary here: ‘Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren), a wealthy snobbish playgirl, meets Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor), a young lawyer, in a San Francisco bird shop. Despite his sarcastic attitude, she is attracted to him and travels to Bodega Bay to take two small love birds as a birthday present to his little sister, Cathy. As she nears the dock in a rented motor boat, a sea-gull swoops down at her, gashing her forehead. Melanie decides to stay, spending the night with Annie Hayworth (Suzanne Pleshette), the local schoolteacher. Annie warns Melanie that Mitch’s mother, Mrs Brenner, is jealous and possessive of her son. The next day, at Cathy’s outdoor birthday-party, the gulls swoop down on the picnicking children and that evening hundreds of sparrows come swooping down the chimney, flying all round the house and causing considerable damage. The following morning Mrs Brenner goes to visit a farmer near by and finds him dead, with his eyes gouged out. That afternoon, when Melanie discovers an alarming assembly of crows gathered outside the school, she and Annie organise the children’s escape. As Melanie escorts them down the road, Annie is trapped behind and sacrifices her life in order to save Cathy. Melanie’s courage during these trials inspires Mitch’s love and his mother’s approval of their romance. That evening Melanie and the Brenners board up the windows of their home just in time to protect themselves from the enraged birds which drive suicidally against the house, tear at the shingles and gnaw at the doors to get at the people inside. After peace returns, Melanie, hearing a sound upstairs, goes up to the attic to investigate. There she finds herself in a room full of birds which attack her savagely. Finally rescued by Mitch, the girl is in a state of shock. Taking advantage of a momentary lull, Mitch decides to flee. Between the house and the garage and as far as the eye can see, thousands of birds wait in ominous array as the little group emerges from the battered house and moves slowly towards the car’ (François Truffaut: *Hitchcock*, London 1967, p 9).

96 constantly throughout the film – Michele’s cracked glasses, the schoolroom windows, the discovery of Dan Fawcett, and, symptomatically in a shot only just recorded during a viewing, the shattered glass on the window of the pick-up truck which opens into the camera’s field of vision as Lydia rushes – speechless – out of Fawcett’s house. Melanie in the phone-booth therefore condenses all these images, and establishes the glass as the anticipatory image of a severed communication (her own speechlessness – bar the negative of withdrawal – at the end of the film), and of the fighting off of an object whose place in the real is no longer assured (known). A play too on the potential transgression of the screen barrier itself. Hitchcock gives a second anticipation of this moment of hallucination: the camera retreats on Melanie as she recoils on the sofa during the penultimate attack of the birds, revealing a space whose signified is nothingness.

We can ask what generates the attack by referring back to the material specificity of the cinematic code of expression, which we have seen too to be resistant to symbolisation, fixing subjects in frozen positions which release an aggressivity only matched by that produced when this fixity is challenged in itself. It is of course in the narrative, in the challenge to the imaginary stranglehold which characterises the relationship of mother and son – Lydia and Mitch Brenner – the son being one of the ‘two kids’ (exciting a laugh in response from Melanie) who live in the house across the bay.

And it is fully compatible with the constraints of the cinematic narrative space that at one level it should comment that relation. Note for example the set of semantic oppositions which characterises the dialogue between Annie Hayworth and Melanie Daniels when the former describes the mother’s intervention/obstruction in the sexuality of her son. Mrs Brenner is not a jealous, possessive woman, she is a woman who is afraid; she is not afraid of someone taking Mitch, but of someone giving Mitch (‘the one thing she can’t give him – love’); she is not afraid of losing Mitch, but only of being abandoned. Within the terms of this opposition, it is Lydia’s fear which pre-empts that released by the attack of the birds themselves, and her fear is in each case of an activity; not of the passive remove of her son, but of the intervention of a term which signifies for her an active abandonment rather than a simple loss, abandonment being the aggressive counterpart of remove. Loss has therefore been activated, and it is the possibility of its realisation which produces the attack of the birds – Melanie brings the love-birds to Bodega Bay and signifies her intervention into the original dyad. (Annie’s and Lydia’s response to the designation of the love birds is identical – ‘Love-birds’ ‘I see’ – and also puns on the visual metaphor of the film.)

We should also note that loss of the object and abandonment by the object are multiply and inversely represented through the film. For the mother afraid of being abandoned by her son, there

is the daughter who was ditched by her mother (Melanie Daniels), and for the loss of which the mother is not afraid, there is the loss of the husband, the dead father, whose picture hangs (in a gesture dear to Hitchcock) over the family drama. That the mourning for the dead husband is not complete is indicated during the only dialogue between Melanie and Lydia in the film, and in the delusion of his continued presence which she describes. There is, therefore, an incomplete mourning in the film, which is the beginning, or pretext, of Lydia's own fear (the end of Mitch's relationship with Annie is justified in terms of the recent death of the father), and the birds are also inscribed in this space – the body of the bird which falls from the picture of the father which has been knocked out of place, and the bird wrought in iron on the firegrid taken obliquely in the shots of Lydia lying in her bed.

It seems important that out of the imaginary relation which constitutes a repression of sexuality, the subject is defined as child. The attack of the birds precipitates the sexuality back into the terms of a caring, a dilution represented not only by the scene on the jetty, but again during the 'consummation' of Mitch and Melanie's relationship (which significantly takes place at the point when Lydia discovers the body of Fawcett) – 'Oh, be careful, please!' 'And you be careful' – through the school itself, and through the position of Cathy who mediates between the three terms of Melanie, Lydia and Mitch (actually sitting up into the shot where Lydia articulates the substitutive denigration of her son: 'If only your father were here!'). Again at the one point where it is not Melanie's own look but that of the child which anticipates or signifies the presence of the birds (the attack on the children's party), the moment is directly preceded by Melanie's self-placement as child: 'Well, maybe I ought to go and join the *other* children.' The attack from the sky conjoins on the subject a deferment of sexuality and an inscription of relations within a framework of protection and dependence. The effect of the aggression is therefore revelatory of its source.

The birds therefore emanate from the inherent instability of the film's own system, overdetermined in this instance by a series of narrative relations which direct the energy of the film around the woman, while also using those positions to comment on its own system of repression; by doing so it subsumes the excess of its own aggressivity into a meta-(psycho-)analysis defined as an act of knowledge. That the film is unable to cope with the aggressivity it releases is most clearly indicated by the resolution.

The Resolution

On two counts the resolution of *The Birds* is abortive. First, the

98 'psychosis' of Melanie Daniels; second, the dominance of the birds visually and on the sound track in the final image. The latter is a function of the paradox that for the world to be convinced of the attack, the birds must be seen to be real, so that re-establishment of communication authenticates the reality of the horror. Yet, if the birds dominate the final image, there is nonetheless a partial resolution within the terms of the oppositions set up by the narrative. The conclusion represents Mitch's self-assertion against Lydia, by his insistence that they leave Bodega Bay and go to San Francisco. To do this he must himself get through the birds, and bring the car which is to be the means of escape to the house. By leaving for San Francisco, Mitch forces together the two opposed terms of his sexuality, Bodega Bay, the place of his repression, and San Francisco, the place of his sexual autonomy. San Francisco is also the place of his activity as lawyer. For Bodega Bay, this activity constitutes a transgression and is classified as illicit (Mitch spends his time in the state detention cells), since it is the law itself which is suspended in the relation between mother and son (Lydia: 'Never mind the law').⁵

The end of the film represents a second resolution which refers this time to the nature of Melanie's sexuality. Remember that Melanie is first defined as a 'practical joker', seen in court for having broken a plate glass window (cf p 96), and is therefore presented as the opposite term to the law. Melanie is therefore defined in the first part of the film as transgression. What the narrative then does is to inscribe this transgression in a wild psychology (also dear to Hitchcock, compare the casual denegation of the Oedipal configuration in the dialogue with Annie) which defines her as a motherless child, thereby opening up the space into which Lydia herself can be inserted. The first six shots of the final ten of the film (starting with the first shot inside the car) alternate between the close shots of Lydia holding Melanie and the close-up of Melanie's own face registering a scarcely perceptible smile in response to the holding of the mother. The series is broken once, by the insert of Melanie's bandaged hand grasping the hand of Lydia, a kind of long-distance echo and reparation of the insert which showed blood on Melanie Daniels's finger after the first attack of the gull.

I would suggest therefore that there is a resolution – the radio the departure, the reconciliation – but this only at the expense of the woman. By defining her sexuality as reckless, her intervention into a more absolute transgression can in itself be presented as a violation, which then unleashes the aggressivity of which she is object/cause. What the birds achieve therefore is the subduing of

5. Except where it takes the form of interrogation by the mother of the son; cf of the scene in the kitchen.

Melanie Daniels into the place of infant (the non-speaking child). It is important that the coded repetitions of the final shots gravitate around Melanie and Lydia, while the camera simply holds on the birds whose insistent presence leaves open and outside this structuration the residual aggressivity of the film. 99

The Scream

I have not discussed any sequence of the film in detail but rather chosen to suggest some of the ways in which the latent structure of one of its systems of codification can be read across the narrative in the moment at which it tends towards rupture. Essential to this is the constant falling away of the text's own sexuality from the constraints of the code, its effect of dispersion of the system itself (the attack of the gull is generated by *and* breaks the dialectic of the look). I have already mentioned the shattered glass of the pick-up truck which opens into the field of vision following the discovery of Dan Fawcett, and the absence in it of any coordinating link with the narrative other than the dispersion or contagion of the horror. In the narrative sequence prior to the attack in the attic, at the end of the attack of the birds on the outside of the house, there is another moment which seems to be suspended in the same space.

When Mitch has blocked off the door through which the birds are breaking, a brief shot holds Melanie in the doorway watching Mitch off-screen; in the next shot Melanie and Mitch are seen together and move into the living-room, the camera trucking right to follow them. At the point where Cathy and Lydia, seated in a background chair, move into the shot, the lights go out in the house and there is a scream (discernible as such on the soundtrack and recorded on the continuity). Immediately after this, the pitch of the sound of the birds is raised, blurring partly into the scream which it echoes and sustains. It is clear from the faces and expressions of the four characters in the shot that none of the people in the house is the source of the scream. The scream is disembodied, marking along with the extinction of the lights (to which it also seems to come as response) the impossibility of holding the four characters in the shot, the clash of the couple man and woman with that of the mother and child. The scream also cuts across the film space into the response which it elicits from the spectator. It is also a woman's scream, the displaced sound of the woman victim of the birds who are to attack her from the bed in the attic, in an assault characterised only by the flapping of wings and the absence of the cry.⁶

6. I realised after working on the film that a detailed breakdown of

Melanie Daniels therefore moves from one position outside the law to another in which her ex-centricity is juxtaposed to the assumption of the situation by the speaking voice of America (the radio). In *North by Northwest*, the symbolic resolution hung on a moment of 'narrative waste' in which Eve revealed the true nature of her sexuality and secured the trajectory for ideology. The episode stalled the action in a film characterised above all by the speed of its movements, and was objected to for that reason in production. In *The Birds*, the woman's sexuality is also redefined as she moves from practical joker to infans. Through a euphemism this regressive trajectory conceals its own transgression and is assimilated to the legitimised family unit ('Someone ought to tell her she'd be gaining a daughter'). But the position of the woman is not only located in this movement of Melanie, but also in the generalised dispersion of the feminine throughout the film, whether stressed (the image of the women in the café) or as an aside (the names of the boats on the quay – Maria, Maria 2, Donna, Frolic). The woman is not only the point of an identification, the place of a recognisable and silent image, but also the site of this constant dispersion which challenges the text's own reading of its libidinal space. The woman in this sense is not only the cause but also the effect of the horror, silenced, the rupture of her own category which can only be represented as one side of a bound (maternal) relation at the same time as it is dispersed across the film space. It is precisely that dispersion, the other face of the woman as infans, which reveals the splitting points of the re-absorption of the family unit into the (paternal) voice of America.

Comment

The article raises a number of problems. These concern chiefly the position of women in relation to paranoia taken both as a structure latent to the film system and also as a mechanism of neurosis (cf below) vehiculed by the narrative of the film in question. Taken in the first sense, paranoia is a pre-Oedipal structure of aggressivity which threatens the stabilisation of symbolic positions in so far as they constitute the social overdetermination of the subject's self-cohesion in the imaginary. It refers therefore to a structure

the soundtrack is called for; most striking is the way in which the birds tend to enjoin silence on their object.

(imaginary) and an energy attendant on that structure (aggressivity), and the relationship between them could be said to preempt the inherent tendency to fissure of any symbolic system. Taken in the second sense, paranoia refers to a clinical phenomenon which veers constantly between neurosis and psychosis, and whose structure can only be posed theoretically through a concept of post-Oedipal sexuality in relation to that of regression and fixation. In the remarks that follow I will try to indicate how these two aspects of paranoia can be related to the position of woman inside symbolic systems, and how this position should be privileged in the discussion of contradictions within a specific ideological form. I should stress that these remarks are tentative; they represent an attempt to deal with difficulties that emerge from the article and which I hope can be developed through further discussion and comment.

1. The reading of paranoia offered in the article is based first on Lacan's concept of the imaginary dialectic. The predominance of the visual register in the Lacanian formulation has made it possible to read that formulation into certain specific codes of the filmic substance of expression. I suggest in the article that this has been done at the expense of those aspects of the phenomenon which cannot be retrieved for a concept of full specularity but which are no less essential to the phenomenon in that they indicate the points of its own rupture. This refers to the aggressivity of the imaginary dialectic, and in the reading of shot/reverse-shot I am using paranoia in this sense. It is clear that, taken in this sense, the structure of paranoia is not sexually differentiated but refers to the reversibility of an ego-structure which is restricted to two terms. In its effective form this is the relation of infant to image and of the mother to infant in so far as the latter is the object of her desire (her intervention introduces a third term but assigns it a place as image). The terms of the Oedipal configuration are present in the imaginary relation, but they are *unassumed* (in both senses of the word). When referring the concept of paranoia to a specific code of the filmic substance of expression, I am using it as a reference to the fundamental reversibility of the imaginary dyad and not to the effective positions of the relation (mother and child). Any number of sexual positions can be charted over that basic dialectic. It is my argument that in *The Birds* there is a tension at work between the recognisable narrative content of the code (man and woman – seduction etc) and this intrinsic property of the code (its imaginary structuration) which in fact refers on two counts to a relation held elsewhere in the narrative between mother and child (Mitch and Lydia, Melanie and her mother (Lydia)). This can obviously only be understood as a process of *over-determination*; I am not positing a general coincidence between narrative relations of the type presented in *The Birds* and

2. The relationship of the woman to the imaginary does not only hold at this level. The imaginary also contains the realm of pre-Oedipality to which the sexuality of the woman is bound; this not only because of her negative relation to the privileged signifier of difference in the patriarchy but also because the Oedipal normalisation which is expressive of that relation demands of her the relinquishment of the primordial object which necessarily persists. This is true of both sexes, but for the boy the substitution can follow the lines of a sexual equivalence. The sliding off of feminine sexuality from its socially determined genital and reproductive position is not just a function of the component nature of sexuality but also contains a repressed reference to the pre-Oedipal relation between the mother and the girl-child. The imaginary dialectic is one of the sites of that reference.

This has two implications for the relation of woman to paranoia. First, in that the woman has a privileged relation to the imaginary dyad, she is bound to the principle of reversibility which it contains (this is simply the other side of my earlier point on the effective form of the imaginary relation). Second, in so far as the woman's relation to the symbolic order is determined negatively, so her relationship to signification is dystonic. It does seem that the emphasis on the imaginary in the discussion of film as a specific ideological form must address itself to the relation of woman to that register, since that relation is in itself a comment on the impossibility of stabilising positions in the symbolic. It is therefore crucial when talking of the film's constant replay of loss and retrieval and the possibility of articulating that loss to transform the position of the spectator in film, to remember that the negativity in question is now only accessible through the sexual differentiation which has overlaid the primary severance.

3. The woman is centred in the clinical manifestation of paranoia as position. Paranoia is characterised by a passive homosexual current, and hence a 'feminine' position in both man and woman. In the case of Schreber, the attack actually transforms his body into that of a woman; this is necessary because the 'state of voluptuousness', which in his delusion is demanded of Schreber by God, is not restricted for the woman to the genitals but is dispersed over the whole body ('dispersed over it from head to foot', Freud: *Standard Edition*, op cit, Vol XII, p 33), and is constant (extension in time and space as a reference to woman's relation to a non-genital, ie un-normalised sexuality). The attack itself is sexually ambivalent – apparition of the foreclosed phallus in the real (Schreber is to be inseminated by God) but also the penetration of the body by feminine tissue; God is also identified by Schreber with the sun which causes difficulties in the German

precisely because it is a feminine noun. More important, the mechanism of paranoia involves a regression from 'sublimated homosexuality to narcissism' . . . 'a fixation at the stage of narcissism' (p 72), that is, the delusion of persecution stems from the subject's narcissistic relation to his or her body when the components of sexuality have cohered but have taken the subject's own body as their object. The implications of the mechanism of paranoia for narcissism lead straight into Freud's paper on Narcissism (1914) on which Lacan bases his concept of the imaginary.

For the woman it is the infantile image of the mother which lies behind the delusion of persecution even where the persecutor is apparently a male. In the case which I mention in the article ('A Case of Paranoia Running Counter to the Psycho-Analytic Theory of that Disease') the woman regressively identifies with the mother in order to free herself from the primary homosexual attachment; the mother is then released as voyeur and persecutor into the place where the child once was at the moment of the primal scene. Narcissism is referred here not only to the choice of object but also to the process of identification itself; it then reappears, as in the case of Schreber, in the symptom of the delusion.

4. Freud states in this case study that the neurotic manifestation is determined not by the patient's present-day relation to the mother but by the infantile relation to the earliest image of the mother. The tension between relation and image can be located in the narrative content of *The Birds* in the gradual overlapping of Mitch's relation to his mother and Melanie to hers, whose culmination is represented by the shots of the final sequence which I mention in the article. Furthermore, the nature of the resolution – containment by the mother signals obliquely the possibility of Melanie's relationship to Mitch, but silences her and reiterates the delusion – seems to me articulate of the conceptual relation here posited by Freud: 'These then are phenomena of an attempted advance from the new ground which has as a rule been regressively acquired; and we may set alongside them the efforts made in some neuroses to regain a position of the libido which was once held and subsequently lost. Indeed we can hardly draw any conceptual distinction between these two classes of phenomena' (ibid, p 271). It is important that for the girl Oedipal normativisation is always achieved on the basis of such a regressive identification. We can say that what *The Birds* produces in the narrative is this advance (resolution) as regression; and the latter pushed to its most extreme form. In my article I suggest that the state of Melanie and this reiteration of the delusion slides into the space of a psychosis which is the undercurrent to the film's system, and cannot be held to the narrative relations through which it is simultaneously placed. Within that conventional narrative space,

104 the dislocation which I have assigned to this place of the woman can necessarily only take the path of a regression. To say this in relation to film is to assign the possibility of fixation to the film-system which acts out on the level of narrative in the film I have discussed the regressive paradigm of its own substance; on another level, this is nothing other than one of the components of its own history.

5. Finally, and more simply, I ask the question, why is the woman attacked? If it seems that I am repeating a question which I have been asking throughout this Comment, it is simply that I am bound to acknowledge that the aggression on the woman's body cannot invariably be read, even in the Hitchcock canon, in the way I have described. For the act of aggression can also be an act of disavowal by the man, the inscribing on the woman's body of the signifier of difference (literally in *Frenzy* – cf the shot after the first strangulation) which the violation in itself represents. The attack on the woman in this sense is the inverse expression of the resistance which I have described from her place in the above remarks. To say that there are also other films in which the resolution of a male identity charts the disintegration of that of the woman (*The Wrong Man*) is merely to point to another version of the same difference.