

— FOCALISATION IN ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S *THE BIRDS*

CELESTINO DELEYTO
UNIVERSIDAD DE ZARAGOZA

1. INTRODUCTION

THIS essay is intended as an analysis of focalisation in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) and, simultaneously, as an illustration of the workings of certain aspects of focalisation in film narratives. My aim is therefore not a theoretical discussion of the term.¹ However, a couple of theoretical points seem to be necessary at the outset. In spite of Mieke Bal's (1985: 100) extraordinary emphasis on perception and even on visual selection, the term focalisation as originally understood by Gérard Genette implies first and foremost selection of information effected by the narrative, whether perceptual or otherwise. Although visual pleasure, the look and other related terms have become central in film theory and criticism especially since the publication in 1975 of Christian Metz's "Le signifiant imaginaire" (1982) and Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure in the Narrative Cinema" (1989a), concentration on the look of characters, camera and spectators has tended to underplay the importance of other equally important aspects of film narrative.² In the present essay, I will consider focalisation as both perception, following Bal, and manipulation of information, following Genette and, especially, Meir Sternberg's threefold analysis of narratorial intervention in terms of knowledgeability, self-consciousness and communicativeness (1978). Bal seems to imply that all selection of information in a narrative text is performed perceptually or conceptually by an agent of

the story, although not necessarily an agent inside the story, but I shall be arguing that the gap between perception and selection of information is, at least in film narratives, not so easy to bridge as she seems to imply. This problem has already been perceived by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, who suggests the existence of different facets of focalisation, which she labels perceptual, psychological and ideological, the first two roughly corresponding, respectively, to Bal's concept of focalisation and to Sternberg's narratorial intervention (1983: 77-82).

Seymour Chatman has more recently proposed the terms *filter* and *slant* as a way of solving the main problem which, in his view, a term like "focalisation" still perpetuates, which is "the need to recognize *different* terms for the two different narrative agents, narrator and character" (1990: 139). "Slant," therefore, defines the narrator's attitude towards the reported material whereas "filter" refers to the characters' mental activity as far as it mediates the spectator's perception of the story. The obvious advantage of Chatman's terminology is that it foregrounds the ideological implications of narrative strategies. On the other hand, its realignment of narratological description along the axis narrator/character underplays the crucial similarities between the selection of information, perceptual or otherwise, carried out through a character or externally. That is, Chatman's model is based on a total separation between what Bal calls internal and external focalisation. As I have argued elsewhere, however, it is precisely the complex relationships between both modes as well as the theoretical differentiation between them that makes focalisation a particularly productive concept in the analysis of specific film narratives, especially those of the classical Hollywood cinema, whose narrative strategies are, to a great extent, based on the simultaneity of external and internal focalisation (see Deleyto 1991: 176, 1992: *passim*, and 1993: *passim*). The use of different terms for the two modes would obscure the relationship between them, most crucially in terms of the ideological manipulation of the text and the spectator's response.

I would, therefore, like to keep the terminology proposed by Bal but a further point seems necessary. For Rimmon-Kenan, external focalisation can occur through what Bal calls a "narrator-focaliser" or through a character in first person narratives, "either when the temporal and psychological distance between narrator and character is minimal . . . or when the perception through which the story is rendered is that of the narrating self rather than that of the experiencing self" (1983: 74). That is, for Rimmon-Kenan, a character in the story may become an external focaliser, especially, in films, in such cases as voice-over narration and flashbacks. I find this proposition

very problematic. On the one hand, it establishes a differentiation of narrative levels between narrating and narrated character, in cases in which both are the same person, a differentiation which is too drastic and difficult to hold in specific narratives. At what exact point does, for example, Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder 1944) stop being an external focaliser on the narrated events and become an internal focaliser? On the other hand, in terms of the relationship between text and viewer, the usefulness of the differentiation between external and internal focalisation resides precisely in the possibility that a film may present as objective what is really the subjective view of one specific character, or, conversely, may externally manipulate the spectator's relationship with specific characters. In this essay, then, I will stick to what I find a simpler and more productive distinction: internal focalisation, when the focaliser is a character from the diegetic world, and external focalisation, when perception and/or selection of material does not appear to be mediated by any of the characters.³

Finally, my analysis of *The Birds* is only a formal analysis to the extent that it uses a concept from a narrative theoretical model, but the study of focalisation is not considered as an end in itself but only as an instrument that will provide a rigorous basis for what must always ultimately be an ideological interpretation of the different ways in which the film positions the spectator. While this model cannot include what Tania Modleski has called "ethnographic criticism" (1991: 37), the consideration of ways in which "real" viewers may be able to challenge and resist the dominant ideology proposed by the text, it is compatible with other current prestigious theories and approaches, such as psychoanalytic criticism, feminism or Marxism. Focalisation is the theoretical embodiment of a series of narrative strategies and provides a privileged vantage point from which to analyse the specific ways in which those strategies produce meaning, or, in Althusser's formulation, interpellate the spectator.

2. *THE BIRDS* I: SUBJECTIVITY AND OMNISCIENCE

From the beginning of the film, the narration seems very keen to establish a very specific attitude in the viewer towards the heroine, Melanie Daniels. Most of the material selected for presentation in the first section of the film is

closely related to her, and seems to have the general function of shaping her personality in order to cue the spectator to construct a specific kind of relationship with the character. She is presented as a wealthy, spoilt girl, who likes to play apparently childish games, which generally get her into trouble with a representative of the Law, be it the police, the legal system or, more playfully, Mitch, himself a lawyer. Her relationship with the Law is one whose importance and seriousness Melanie does not seem to be fully aware of at the start. In a more general sense, thematically and narratively, she is presented from the beginning as the natural antagonist of a male-ordered universe. "Male sexual anxiety in the face of an actual or potential autonomous female sexuality" is, according to Robin Wood (1989: 231), together with the identification with the woman's position, one of the major themes of Hitchcock's American films. We will see, however, that in *The Birds* the presentation of male sexual anxiety is given a rather secondary position. Tania Modleski's introductory account of Hitchcock's films in general comes closer to my argument: "[Hitchcock's] films are always in danger of being subverted by females whose power is both fascinating and seemingly limitless" (1988: 1). In any case, Melanie's behaviour and role in the film's society has won her the antipathy of Mitch and, presumably, of many other people with whom she has related in the past, but does not preclude an ambiguous response from the audience, one from which a certain degree of fascination is not absent. Notice in this respect how the film's stylistic system ironically prompts this ambiguous response by means of the use of the kind of diffusion shots associated with the glamorous heroines of melodrama and adventure films of the thirties and forties, in the unusual context of her conversation with the assistant at the pet shop. This tension is also apparent in the physical aspect of the heroine: the extreme tidiness of her clothes and hair style, which contrasts with the "untidiness" of her behaviour, apparently more similar to that of a "naughty child" than to what would have been expected from a grown-up sophisticated young lady.⁴ This manipulated response on the part of the audience carefully changes in the course of the narrative: her personality also changes and becomes more complex through her relationship with Mitch and the birds and, simultaneously, we receive more information about her capacity for love and about the absence of a mother figure in her life... until Lydia appears.

The presentation of Lydia (relatively late in the film for such an important character) is significant in the way the text controls our response towards Melanie. Notice that the story of Melanie's traumatic relationship

with her mother is left in the dark for much of the film and is only introduced as a non-visual retroversion after she has met Lydia, has learned about her attitude towards Mitch's previous girlfriends and has experienced her open hostility towards herself. In other words, the presence of Lydia in the narrative provokes the revelation of a completely new dimension to Melanie's character.

The narration, therefore, appears to be generally limited in range of knowledge, since it restricts itself to Melanie's knowledge, and highly subjective, with frequent close-ups of the heroine, probing her state of mind, and point of view shots and eyeline matches showing what she sees, approximately how she sees it. There are brief exceptions, as, for example, when Mitch goes into the shop and we momentarily share his point of view, or, shortly after, when his neighbour in San Francisco thoroughly appraises her with his sexualised gaze. These examples provide, from different registers, a certain ironic detachment from the protagonist. Later on, in the lake scene, her subjective point of view is broken at a moment of maximum intensity when Mitch comes out of the house with a pair of binoculars and tries to find out who is in the boat. A shot as from the binoculars shows Melanie from his point of view, unsuccessfully trying to start the engine of the boat. The film has therefore set itself certain norms that it seems to adhere to: general proximity to Melanie and her range of knowledge and occasional disruptions of this strategy for specific effects.

A more important disruption takes place shortly after: in the morning after Cathy's birthday party, the film temporarily leaves Melanie and follows Lydia, a tactic that allows the spectator to discover the horribly mutilated corpse of Dan Fawcett at the same time as her. This disruption of the self-imposed norm is more noticeable than on previous occasions and coincides with the growing importance that Lydia is beginning to acquire in the story and, interestingly, also with the parallels that the film has started to establish between the two women. Lydia's range of knowledge will from now on be adhered to several times and a similar strategy of frequent close-ups and medium close-ups of her face will help the viewer to establish connections between the two female characters, connections which obviously start with the uncanny physical resemblance between them (fig. 1). The fight for Mitch appears to be the name of the game from the very beginning, a fight which is stylistically paralleled by a struggle for control of the gaze, which in the second half of the film Melanie has to share with Lydia.

As in the case of Melanie, the close-ups of Lydia attempt, apart from issues of narrative dominance, to explore the workings of the character's

mind. The problem, however, both in the case of Lydia and of Melanie, is that this probing into the characters' minds does not seem to be all that effective. The narration flaunts its power to express character subjectivity and, at the same time, refuses —or maybe shows its inability— to go beyond.⁵

A perhaps more important disruption of the film's narrative norm has not yet been mentioned: the frequent extreme, usually long, high angle shots that punctuate the narrative. The first three occur during the pet shop scene, which will be analysed below. Melanie first and then Mitch are framed from the first floor (where the birds are) coming into the shop and then climbing the stairs (figs. 2 and 3). The shot is functional in both cases, since the camera has been placed at the best vantage point for narrative clarity and for an apparent economy of style: the camera position allows us to successively see the characters coming into the shop, going up to the bird section and visually relating to the person who happens to be upstairs. This economy is, however, denied by the third such shot, which occurs when Mitch leaves the shop and Melanie, after a few seconds' hesitation, rushes downstairs after him (fig. 4). This shot is narratively unnecessary —in terms of economy of style, the camera should have been placed downstairs, anticipating the direction of the movement of the characters— but it does continue the stylistic pattern established by the other two.⁶ This stylistic strategy may be interpreted as a sign of omniscience: a narration which flaunts its power to detach itself from Melanie and the other characters, even against its own set norms of restriction of knowledge. Typically, these shots may be interpreted as suggesting the existence of a mysterious external force, the film's version of Fate, controlling the characters' actions and threateningly watching over them. Notice that the third occurrence of the high angle shot takes place when Melanie has apparently decided to play another one of her little games, this time in retaliation for Mitch's humiliation of her. The stylistic device would suggest the impression that her action is being watched and judged from above. On the other hand, these shots, regularly spread out all through the film, set a pattern of disruption which shows, at the same time, the arbitrariness of narrative conventions and the narration's tactics of plot manipulation in order to control audience response.

A more complicated tissue of gazes occurs in the scene of Cathy's birthday party, as Melanie and Mitch return from a brief walk on a hill that is situated next to Mitch's house. During this walk, their relationship has been strengthened and Melanie has disclosed very relevant information about her

past, especially about her mother. Now they are walking down the hill in order to join the children and the rest of the people. The sequence starts with one more high-angle shot, with the two characters closer to the camera at medium distance, and the rest of the people at the bottom of the hill, in the background (fig. 7). This shot remains external but the sequence also includes two interesting cases of internal focalisation: first Annie and then Lydia look up at the two protagonists, with worried expressions on their faces, obviously concerned, for different reasons, about the growing attachment between Melanie and Mitch. After the establishing shot, there is a cut to a closer shot of the two climbing down and then a tracking shot to a close-up of Annie, looking at them, then looking down, with an expression which seems to convey the inevitability of her defeat in the unequal struggle for Mitch's love (figs. 8, 9 and 10); she then turns to look towards Lydia, who is coming out of the house and who slightly turns her head towards the position offscreen where Melanie and Mitch must be (fig. 11). A cut to a closer framing of the mother emphasises her reaction, which is just as worried as Annie's but more aggressive (fig. 12). Then there is a new cut to the same shot as the previous one with Annie now turning her gaze towards the sky, when a child shouts "look, look!" offscreen. An eyeline match shows a gull violently diving down and then the second attack of the film starts.

What is remarkable in this sequence is the complex pattern of gazes established by the film, and that, with the exception of the first and last shots described here, the way people look is more important than what they are looking at. At this point the relationship between Mitch and Melanie seems to be important not so much in itself but because of its consequences for the other two women. Furthermore, there is a very disturbing feeling that they are being constantly controlled in their movements, as if their attachment could not develop in any way without it being noticed and judged by all around them. They are being, then, strongly focalised, both internally and externally, but even Annie and Lydia's gazes are not all that important: they look but their visual control is not firmly established, since there is no eyeline match back to Melanie and Mitch, as we would have expected, after their gazes. Immediately after Lydia looks at the couple, the birds attack, occupying the position previously filled by the camera in the establishing shot. First external focalisation and then the birds share control over the situation. In the first case, we are again facing a clear example of omniscience on the part of the narration. What is not so easy to explain is the connection between this omniscience and the bird attack.

This pattern of disruption of point of view, itself another norm of the film, is again surprisingly broken in perhaps the most flauntedly omniscient long high-angle shot: the one of Bodega Bay after the petrol pump explosion (fig. 13). The shot, which the spectator expects, because of the norm and because of transtextual hypotheses, to be clearly external, turns out to present the point of view... of the birds! (fig. 14). The external force is then identified, the former similar shots acquire a different sense now —notice that those in the first scene could now be interpreted as also representing the point of view of the birds in the shop— and the film seems ready to answer several unanswered questions, as to the nature of the birds' attacks and perhaps even their relationship with Melanie. However, the questions remain unanswered. The film refuses to communicate and to fill the most important gaps. The explanation of the reasons for the birds' attacks fails to materialise, at the same time as the deepest recesses of Melanie's mind, that area of her personality access to which might have explained the mysterious events of the film, are forever left in the dark. After flaunting its capacity for subjective presentation and omniscience, the narration openly suppresses the most important information. On the other hand, if we compare this shot with the one previously discussed here, we can conclude that what was hinted at then is now confirmed: the position of the birds is becoming disturbingly close to that of the narration; their god-like supremacy is very similar to that of the omniscient narrator. This conclusion seems again confirmed and developed by the stylistic presentation of the final bird attack.

In this scene, when Melanie goes into the upstairs room, we see her looking up and an eyeline match shows the big hole full of birds in the exaggeratedly high ceiling (figs. 15 and 16). Because of the pattern previously established, we half expect now a reverse shot from the point of view of the birds, but this shot never occurs. High-angle shots are used in the scene but they are close-ups of Melanie as she is being attacked: these are close-ups which mysteriously again probe into her mind (figs. 17 and 18). It is as if the distance between subjectivity and omniscience —or bird subjectivity— is about to disappear, and the separation between Melanie's mind and the birds collapses into identity. Subjectivity has proved compatible with and, in this case, inseparable from omniscience. This ritualistic scene, in which the heroine faces the dark powerful forces outside and inside her, is resolved in an identification of narrative strategies which would also explain the very disturbing final shot of the film: the car leaving Bodega Bay, against a very artificial looking sunset, surrounded by the birds, who seem to have completely taken over (fig. 19). The flaunted omniscience

and self-consciousness of the narration cannot be separated from the perceptual control that the birds have gained: the shot is also intensely subjective, and this subjectivity can only metaphorically be interpreted as a transference of Melanie's or, for that matter, Lydia's final control over the rarefied world of the film. Margaret M. Horwitz has argued that the birds' attacks are a displacement for Lydia's maternal possessiveness and an extension of her hysterical fear of losing her son (1986: 279). While her interpretation of the film in terms of the Oedipal scenario is attractive, it does not seem equipped to explain the fact that Melanie and not Lydia is the real protagonist of the film and, especially, the rather obvious, although unexplained, link between Melanie and the birds. If, on the other hand, we acknowledge the identification rather than the competitiveness between the two female characters, there remains no obstacle to a tentative interpretation of the birds' presence as the film's hysterical construction of a threatening female power that constitutes an assault on the patriarchal order of Bodega Bay. The uncontrollable forces of nature or, metaphorically, the powerful unconscious of the two female characters, has finally reached the most important objective in any fictional story: narrative control.

3. *THE BIRDS* II: THE STRUGGLE FOR PERCEPTUAL CONTROL

In this section, I will concentrate on focalisation as perception and explore more specific ways in which perceptual point of view works in a film, both narratively and stylistically. In order to do this, I will analyse the first scene of *The Birds* and a short selection of fragments from later scenes. As has already been discussed, perception is inseparable from more general strategies of plot construction, but this film proves that it may also be singled out as a privileged channel for the construction of meaning in film.⁷

Classical patterns of focalisation

The opening scene of *The Birds* starts in a usual way for a classical film, with an establishing shot: it establishes the film space —the city of San

Francisco— and immediately introduces us to the main character, Melanie Daniels. The narrative presents, therefore, an external focaliser and a main internal focalised, Melanie, although the city itself and the other characters and objects that appear in this first sequence (including the part played by Hitchcock, a character taking two dogs out of the pet shop) are also focalised, but obviously not so intensely as Melanie. The omniscient external focaliser picks her out from the crowd and then follows her as she crosses the road and goes into the pet shop. This establishing shot gives the viewer important expository information about the character, even if it is only about her physical appearance, but in film, much more frequently than in novels, physical appearance is often an index of psychological insight (fig. 20).

When the boy whistles at Melanie, she looks back and then her perception is activated: she becomes an active internal focaliser. However, the effect of the shot is a composite of both the fact that she looks at him with an expression of satisfaction and playfulness, showing that she enjoys being looked at and of the fact that the spectator, thanks to the position of the external focaliser, "catches" her looking at him (fig. 21). This gives us additional information about her character, which we will be able to confirm and use shortly, during her first conversation with Mitch. On this occasion, her gaze is not so important as our gaze.

Immediately afterwards, the birds appear, not externally presented but through her eyes—the spectator sees what she sees. She also sees the boy in the previous sequence, but this is not underlined stylistically, for example, by means of a cut to him from her point of view. With the birds, there is a cut and an eyeline match and then a cut back to a medium shot of her—closer than the previous one—which explores her reaction (figs. 22, 23 and 24). We shall see that, throughout the whole of this first scene, her potentiality as focaliser is not particularly intensified by the narration, but this is a significant exception for our understanding of the action: from the very beginning, by using her momentarily as focaliser, the narration binds Melanie and the birds together. For the spectator, as well as for the inhabitants of Bodega Bay, the birds appear in the story the moment she appears. Later on, almost every time the birds appear in the narrative, her look plays an important role, constantly teasing the spectator with the possibility of a mysterious relationship between them but never actually going beyond this uncanny suggestion.

To go back to the first scene, as soon as she turns round, her subjectivity is not particularly emphasised any more. The narration seems relatively autonomous with respect to her, framing her in long shot as she goes into the

pet shop. This is, however, as far as perceptual focalisation goes, because, in terms of knowledge and selection of information, she is the main focaliser throughout the scene, and throughout the film —the spectator is restricted approximately to her range of knowledge: we go into the shop at the same time as she does, we get the information about the bird she has ordered at the same time, we are introduced to Mitch approximately at the same time and learn about his trick also at the same time. Expository material concerning her personality and her past is also presented to us mostly through her. Therefore there are two levels of focalisation which appear simultaneously but do not always coincide: one on her, constantly intensified by stylistic devices, and another one by her, presented by means of other tactics of plot construction. The spectator's construction of the character is influenced by the persistence of this double focalisation, a device used by many films, especially those in which women are the main protagonists. In this case, double focalisation results in a mixture of identification with and detachment from her or, to put it in other words, she is simultaneously, but separately, our guide through the world of the film and the main focus of spectatorial interest, both principal subject and object of the narrative.⁸

The dialogue between Melanie and the shop assistant is presented through a classical stylistic device: the shot/reverse shot. In this case, the situation in terms of focalisation is as follows: the external focaliser focalises on the two characters while they are talking but also alternately approximates the optical point of view of one of them, focalising on the other one: the spectator is simultaneously placed in a relatively close position to one of the characters and concentrates her/his look on the other one. The shot/reverse shot technique generally focuses the spectator's attention more on the focalised than on the focaliser. That is the case here too, but not in the same way with both characters. When Melanie is focalised and the shop assistant is a potential focaliser, exploration of Melanie's personality is more important than the other character's gaze. When the situation is the reverse, it is only the information that the other lady is giving that interests Melanie and the spectator, but not herself. This reverse situation, in any case, occurs much less frequently: the shots of Melanie are much longer and the attitude of the external focaliser different —Melanie is generally presented throughout this first scene through filters which both emphasise her "mystery" and ironically bring her close to the heroines of classical melodrama and adventure films. This greater concentration on Melanie makes the spectator, in theory, perceptually identify with the shop assistant but this potentiality for

identification is never realised. Unlike in novels, subjectivity in film is not only presented by means of internal focalisation by the character but through an alternation or simultaneity of both external and internal focalisation. In order to identify with a character we need to know what she is like and, very crucially, what she looks like. A character cannot express herself through what she sees; she must be seen looking. Identification with Melanie can only be achieved through an alternation between shots of Melanie as focaliser and focalised. In any case, spectator identification with Melanie is probably not a central effect of the text yet. What is at stake here is the possibility of understanding Melanie's personality and motivations, which, in narrative terms, results in a general emphasis on external focalisation on her.

The male gaze

When Mitch arrives at the shop, the situation changes: focalisation on Melanie is just as intense as before but the gaze is more internal. In this sense, the first cut after he is first framed is representative: he is seen going upstairs from a high-angle shot and then there is an eyeline match from a medium shot of him to a long shot of Melanie, from almost exactly his point of view (figs. 25, 26 and 27). Subjective shots like this one are relatively rare in films, especially in classical films, because they generally reveal too much about the presence of the camera. Most eyeline matches and shot/reverse shot sequences give approximately the same visual information as the internal focaliser would receive, but from a slightly different angle. Or else, shots are used in which both focaliser and focalised are framed together, with the internal focaliser typically, although not necessarily, closer to the position of the camera. Films which, like *The Birds*, use a completely subjective shot, do so for very specific reasons, either as a general textual strategy, maybe in order to subvert classical film language or, more locally, as in many other Hitchcock films, in order to emphasise a certain aspect of the dramatic content of the frame.

In this case, the general situation underlined by the stylistic device is that, as Mulvey has argued, the woman is identified as the object of the male gaze (1989a: 19-21 and *passim*). Now the spectator's interest in her is shared with Mitch and, for textual and extratextual reasons, we identify with him —

especially but not only, the male viewer. This pattern will remain firmly in place throughout most of the film, although it becomes more complex when Lydia appears. Mitch looks at Melanie and the film prompts the spectator to share his perspective: this is inevitably a gendered and sexually loaded perspective —the viewer as sadistic *voyeur* and fetishist finds his (rather than her) position in the film without difficulty and his gaze inscribed in the diegesis.⁹ Thus an interesting double perspective develops —narrative and visual desire are not exactly equivalent in the film, at least at this stage: the spectator is the external subject of both but inside the diegesis the situation is more complex. Melanie is the main —although not the only one— subject of narrative desire.¹⁰ Simultaneously, she is also the —sexual— object of visual desire, with Mitch as the main diegetic subject, but not the only one (think of Mitch's neighbour, that Melanie meets in the lift, or the post office clerk in Bodega Bay, for example). This tension shapes our complex process of identification with and detachment from Melanie and paves the way for the open ending of the narrative.

The ensuing dialogue between Melanie and Mitch is presented by means of the usual shot/reverse shot technique, with over-the-shoulder shots of the character nearest to the camera. As in the previous dialogue, concentration is mostly on Melanie, but now the fact that he is internal focaliser is more relevant: she is performing for him, just as she is metaphorically performing for the viewer. Melanie's relationship with Mitch and with the spectator is, therefore, based on performance. As in the case of the boy whistling, not only is she the object of the gaze: she also enjoys it or, at least, flaunts her objectification.¹¹ Mitch, like us, enjoys the game, although, in both cases, there is the explicit awareness that it *is* a game. The nature of the exchange is reinforced by the theme of their conversation: lovebirds, and overt references to mating, sexually overdemonstrative birds, etc. Visually, the dialogue is realised in the same way as the first one with the shop assistant and yet the situation has completely changed because the narration has activated the role of the internal focaliser. This is a very basic example of how the narrative context and our previous experience of other films can be appropriated by the narration in order to "fill with meaning" an apparently ideologically neutral stylistic strategy. Focalisation, like narration in general, is partly shaped by style, but is often more than that. In order to interpret a look correctly, we must take into account other considerations apart from a purely formal analysis of the look.

Again, when Melanie identifies the canaries as lovebirds (therefore giving herself away), the scene is presented from Mitch's point of view (over-the-shoulder shot) and his question, "Doesn't this make you feel awful?" momentarily strengthens the spectator's identification with him. Mitch, however, is, like the film, also playful, and he is not referring to her impersonation of the shop assistant but to something apparently irrelevant (although it will prove relevant later on¹²). Subtly, however, and even though we share with him the pleasure of her chastisement, the film initiates a crucial ironic detachment from his position, which will be confirmed when he reveals his own "trick." If we, with him, disapprove of Melanie because of her frivolity and playfulness, we must also disapprove of Mitch for the same reason. Identification with him is curtailed here by analogy with her, although there has been, as yet, no important interruption of his perceptual point of view. In a way which is typical of the Hitchcockian narration, delayed and distributed exposition subverts textually and structurally implemented identification with certain characters: through the information provided and the strategies used in the first few scenes, Hitchcock often articulates certain patterns of identification, which are later destroyed and replaced by new ones. With Hitchcock's films, the viewer's relationship with the text is an unusually shifting one, a relationship that the experienced viewer is obviously aware of and constitutes one of the most pleasurable aspects of the texts. On the other hand, by gradually disclosing Mitch's shortcomings, or the dubiousness of his designs, both of which can be directly or indirectly related to his maleness, the film intensifies its irony on the viewer in so far as a certain kind of identification with Mitch has been promoted by the text. When the spectator realises that s/he has been made to identify with a character who is not totally likeable, it is too late, and considerations of the cultural and psychological reasons why we have found such an identification possible should ensue.

The pattern used for the shot/reverse shot presentation of their last dialogue in this scene —over-the-shoulder shots of him and isolated shots of her— confirms the general pattern focaliser/focalised that has been established in their relationship. This pattern is metaphorically equivalent to that of the relationship between the spectator and Melanie, a pattern which will be crucial in our response to the rest of the film: the spectator, like Mitch, will try to get to the bottom of her personality and of her relationship with the birds, but, in spite of its apparent interest in communicativeness, the narration will frustrate our expectations.

On the provisional evidence provided by this scene, then, the film both presents the woman as object of male desire and the male's incapability to fully understand women, paralleled by the text's incapability, or refusal, to control its own creations. Finally, the spectator's psychic investment in the film's presentation of gender relationships is turned on us: Mitch, who has provided an easy subject position for the spectator and subsequently voiced our hostility towards Melanie's "childish" behaviour, is almost immediately involved by the text in the same kind of game. As a consequence, our position of moral superiority with respect to Melanie is exposed as hypocritical and destroyed.

Battles for focalisation: external vs. internal, Melanie vs. Lydia

As I have suggested, the patterns of focalisation offered by the film significantly change with Lydia's appearance. We first see her when she comes into the Tides Restaurant, just after the sudden attack of a gull on Melanie. She is first framed from the point of view of Melanie, who is facing the door through which Lydia comes in. The framing is significant in itself: a subjective shot as from the heroine's position, with Mitch in the foreground and Lydia in the background moving towards him (fig. 28). The sentimental relationship between the two protagonists which had shown obvious signs of progress —after Melanie's unexpected visit and Mitch's concern about the bird attack— is now narratively and visually interrupted by Lydia. Where the frame had only included the two younger characters, Lydia appears now, bringing in complications. Typically, the three characters are later framed together, with Lydia in the centre, visually separating the other two (fig. 1). This pattern will reappear in later scenes, for example when Melanie goes to Lydia and Mitch's house, thus providing a visual parallel for the development of the relationships between the three of them, which could be generally described as Lydia coming between the other two, not only, predictably, through her motherly possessiveness towards Mitch but, more unexpectedly, also through her increasingly intimate relationship with Melanie (fig. 29). As can be seen, external focalisation is privileged here, manipulating the spectator's response to the events, and contributing to the establishment of spatial relationships between the characters.

The remainder of the scene at the Tides Restaurant is presented in close-ups of the three characters, with a special emphasis on Lydia. The narration is mostly concerned with the exploration of the reactions of each character, particularly the two women, to what is being said. In fact, most of the time, it is Mitch who speaks, but his words are largely heard offscreen. When he explains about the birds that Melanie has brought for Cathy, for example, we do not see him but Lydia's rather mysterious face reacting to this news. Immediately afterwards, Mitch says that Melanie is staying for the weekend and that he has invited her to go to their house for dinner. The moment he gives this information, which is new to the spectator and even to Melanie herself, since he is actually inviting her now, is emphasised by a cut to him, then to Melanie and finally back to Lydia. But even before the cut to Mitch, the external focaliser remains with Lydia for a split second, so that the spectator can catch her reaction and attribute it to the fact that Melanie is staying the weekend in Bodega Bay. The spectator is, therefore, very precisely directed by the narration, and more specifically in this case, by the external focaliser, in the construction of the story.

The ways in which internal focalisation influences the attitude of the external focaliser is, however, less clear in this scene. Although the importance of character gazes is as great here as elsewhere in Hitchcock, it seems that in this succession of close-ups, with the occasional medium shot of Melanie alone, and of Mitch and Lydia standing together, the gaze is more important for what it expresses than for how it directs changes in subsequent framings (figs. 30, 31 and 32). The spectator learns that Mitch is still approaching his relationship with Melanie as an erotic game, and that Melanie is still reacting to this approach in the same way, putting on the all-too-obvious mask of the annoyed lady but inviting Mitch to disregard the superficial meaning of her words and to play on. Lydia, on the other hand, seems very conscious that the relationship between them is no game and strongly resents it. In a way, then, we see through the characters' eyes, but, rather than the world and the people around, we see inside them: their gazes seem to be turned inwards, looking at themselves. This happens especially in the case of Lydia. While she is being framed in close-up, she turns her eyes twice towards Mitch's position offscreen (fig. 30). We might have expected here an eyeline match and a cut to Mitch, but on both occasions, the cut only occurs once Lydia has turned her eyes back towards Melanie. The connections between the characters, on the other hand, seem to be firmly established through their gazes, but the editing patterns of the sequence are to

a very great extent independent of them. The omniscience of the narration overpowers any attempt by the characters to gain narrative control.

There is, however, more to the presentation of Lydia's character in this scene. As was pointed out before, she is first seen subjectively from Melanie's position. This is, of course, an establishing shot, and it can be argued that focalisation through Melanie is used here simply as the best way to establish the film space. Conversely, we may choose to pursue the subjectivity suggested by the framing. It seems clear that the selection of space in this scene is only very slightly affected by Lydia's gaze, at least in the first half, but the case of Melanie is less clear, and this can be seen, paradoxically, in the way Lydia appears to us. From the moment Lydia is first seen, there is a mysterious aura surrounding her. This is partly caused by her uncanny resemblance to Melanie, but the fact that she is strongly focalised also seems to affect her reactions, making her act in a less conventional way. In other words, rather like Melanie in the previously discussed scene, Lydia's behaviour is, to a large extent, dictated by the way other people, specifically Melanie, looks at her. In the first half of the scene, Melanie is mostly framed in medium shot and, consequently, our concentration on her is much less intense than on Lydia. If we also take into account that, among all the characters and in spite of the male gaze, so far we have identified mostly with Melanie, and add the fact that the first establishing shot was from her point of view, we may conclude that identification with Melanie is still strong and that at this point she is sharing perceptual control with the external focaliser. Lydia is seen through Melanie's eyes and hence the aura of mystery around the older woman and the uneasy feeling of threat: we are being made to share Melanie's perception of her. It could be said that, in this scene, internal focalisation through Melanie is selective: the film is interested in presenting Lydia (like the birds!) from her point of view, but not the rest of the action. Rather than granting Melanie narrative control, internal focalisation is used as a specific strategy of presentation of the new character and as an — unexplained — link between her and the birds, through Melanie's consciousness.

The link between Lydia and the birds is first suggested by the fact that, just before she appears, Melanie has told Mitch that she hates the gulls in Bodega Bay. Then Lydia comes into the restaurant, an obvious potential object of Melanie's hatred. Their subsequent conversation is mostly, like Melanie and Mitch's first dialogue, about the lovebirds. When at the end of the scene Melanie explains to Lydia that she has been attacked by a gull, the expression on Lydia's face is as mysterious as before and as mysterious as the

events that have begun to take place in Bodega Bay. I have previously argued that the connection between Melanie and the birds is never explicitly confirmed by the text. The same happens now with Lydia, but the connection is even more mysterious, more difficult to account for through the diegetic information given by the film.

In any case, Lydia's relationship with the birds underscores her incipient claim to narrative control. The second half of the scene seems to invert the pattern discussed above, and as the camera gets closer to Melanie, it seems to separate itself from Lydia, framing her now in medium shot, but the overall impression is that, symmetrically to what happened previously, it is her vision that the spectator is now asked to share. Once she has taken hold of the situation and understood what Melanie's visit to Bodega Bay really means, Lydia changes from main focalised into focaliser. When we find out more details about her personality and her past, our identification with her will be further strengthened.

Summing up, without denying the flaunted presence of the omniscient external focaliser, and the manipulative way in which it selects parts of the film space for us, internal focalisation is also crucial in this scene, and symbolic of the relationship between the characters: the narrative and perceptual control held by Melanie so far, only shared by Mitch in a rather secondary way at the pet shop and in the scene of the boat ride, seems to be won over by Lydia. From now on, the struggle for control between the two women will constitute, together with the bird attacks, the main part of the action. Notice also that the gradual reversal of focalisation patterns between Melanie and the birds —with Melanie as focaliser at the beginning and the birds progressively identified with the vantage point from which the high-angle shots are framed later, that is, the birds as internal/external (?) focalisers— is mirrored in a much more compressed way by her relationship with Lydia in this scene, also in terms of focalisation. This seems to point to a strong connection between Lydia and the birds, as Horwitz argues in the article referred to above, but, in my view, this connection can be more satisfactorily explained as a relationship between conscious and unconscious drives in Melanie's traumatic sexuality, or even as an expression of the tension between conscious and unconscious forces in the film, than as a more or less explicit unleashing of the dark forces of evil on Melanie on the part of the castrating mother. In spite of the initial impression, Lydia does not rise to complete protagonism in the rest of the film, and her most interesting dimension will not be as antagonist of Melanie but as mirror image of the

psychological disorders presented by the text through the character of the heroine.

A battle lost: Annie's function in the narrative

Annie, Melanie's other rival for Mitch's affection, is not even allowed the same share of narrative control as Lydia. She is displaced to the margins of the text and, unlike the other main characters, even denied survival after the bird attacks. Her death is cruel and unexpected but, at the same time, without the melodramatic excess that characterises the deaths of important characters in Hollywood films. Both the fact that this event does not take place near the end of the narrative and the lack of stylistic emphasis in the scene in which Melanie and Mitch find her body, point to Annie's lack of centrality.¹³ At the same time, Annie is hardly presented as internal focaliser. Only in her first appearance, when Melanie is enquiring about the name of Mitch's sister, does her gaze exert some control over the narrative. The close-up that shows her reaction to the fact that the birds Melaine is carrying are lovebirds (a reaction which is exactly repeated by Lydia in the Tides restaurant scene) is more a case of her gaze being used to focalise inwards, towards herself, rather than presenting the action from her point of view (fig. 33). Even though, when Melanie leaves, her gaze, again in close-up, seems to be more directed outside, with an element of threat in it (fig. 34), later developments in the film will confirm that this is little more than a stylistic red herring, a mirage of impossible narrative control.

There is one scene in which her marginality in the text is intensified through patterns of focalisation. After dinner at Mitch's, Melanie returns to Annie's house. Annie is still awake and they start talking. During this conversation Annie reveals to Melanie what already seemed obvious: her past involvement with Mitch, which is the reason why, without any hope, she is still in Bodega Bay. The dialogue is stylistically presented through shot/reverse shots. Since it is Annie that is giving relevant information, Melanie is the most active internal focaliser, with lengthier shots of Annie, from Melanie's approximate point of view.

However, when Mitch telephones in order to invite Melanie to Cathy's birthday party, the situation changes abruptly and the style becomes less transparent, more self-conscious. Let us remember that this situation is parallel to the one at the Tides Restaurant discussed above, except that the

intruder is now Annie instead of Lydia, and Mitch is visually absent. The first part of the conversation is presented by means of a very self-conscious framing: Annie in close-up in the foreground, on the right of the frame, and Melanie on the left, in three-quarter shot (fig. 35). What is interesting here is that both realistic and stylistic expectations, brought to bear by the viewer through her/his experience of classical cinema, would have Annie, who is politely turned away from Melanie, look towards her and at some point and, consequently, be turned into internal focaliser. In a sense, of course, she is an active internal focaliser, since she is *listening* to the conversation and the way in which she reacts to it contributes to our construction of the story. Visually, however, she denies herself any narrative predominance by not looking. The film, in a sense, frustrates our expectations by framing her in a position which would privilege her as focaliser, and then emphasising her predicament when we realise that she has to relinquish that possibility of control.

The second part of the telephone conversation is presented by means of shot/reverse shots. This is the usual device to convey dialogues in classical films. In this case, there is a dialogue —on the telephone— but the text relates not the two people who are talking but the two who are felt to be the most important. In other words, the omniscient external focaliser subverts the fabula by attracting the spectator's attention away from its apparently most obvious centre of interest. In any case, we would expect the two female characters to be connected by their gazes. Melanie, as a matter of fact, does look at Annie, but once again, Annie chooses to look away, making us concentrate on her as overpowered by Melanie, rather than on her gaze. She is framed in complete isolation, in a state of solipsistic reflection, her gaze only directed internally at herself (fig. 36), powerless to forget Mitch or to do anything to regain his affection. When Melanie arrives in Bodega Bay, Annie can do nothing but look on from the outside, but she, unlike the external focaliser and unlike Lydia, is not even allowed to make us identify with her gaze, and it is understandable that it should not be so: the moment a character in a film holds visual control, her/his position in the narrative becomes more central, more powerful than Annie could ever be allowed.

Patterns reversed:

Melanie's strength vs. Lydia's displacement

In the previous section, I mentioned the structurally important scene in which our range of knowledge significantly transcends Melanie's: on Monday morning, Lydia leaves her house and the narration accompanies her, leaving Melanie behind. The structural change is important in itself, since it explicitly acknowledges Lydia's growing narrative centrality. This process, however, goes through different stages in the course of which the relationship between the two women is developed. One significant scene in this respect is the previous one, which takes place the night before in Lydia's house, just after the sparrow attack, when the sheriff has just arrived to find out what has happened.

The scene starts with a framing which reminds us of the telephone conversation just discussed: Mitch, Lydia and the sheriff are framed in three-quarter shot discussing the attack, in the centre of the frame, and Melanie is closest to the camera in medium shot, looking at them (fig. 37). Unlike the case of Annie, we are made to share our vision with Melanie. In spite of her separation from the others, we do not for a second doubt her centrality, whereas with Annie our impression was one of displacement and detachment from her. Melanie's internal focalisation is then further intensified by a cut to a reverse shot of her now concentrating on Lydia's nervous movements as she tries to tidy up, and a subsequent eyeline match to Lydia moving around the room (figs. 38 and 39).

The manipulation of space is again obvious here: although it is the two men who are talking, with occasional brief interventions from Lydia, the narration makes us concentrate on the character of the mother through Melanie's internal focalisation: as in the scene at the Tides Restaurant, we are made to look at Lydia through Melanie's eyes. However, there is a crucial difference: in the previous scene, we felt, with Melanie, the mysterious aura and the threatening attitude of the other character; now we realise her weaknesses, her sense of loss, of not being able to cope any more. Melanie's gaze loses part of its fear and becomes more sympathetic towards a character who, probably for the first time, is made to look like a "normal" human being. The impression of a direct connection between Lydia and the birds loses strength here, as she seems to be totally overpowered and helpless after the sparrow attack. The order that she represented has been shattered both by the bird attack, and in another sense, by Melanie's arrival. At one point, after an unusually long concentration on Lydia's movements with occasional close-ups of Melanie looking at her, Melanie decides to act: she states her intention to stay the night and leaves the room accompanied by Cathy, who seems closer to her than to her own mother. The framing is now parallel to the one

that opened the scene: if before Melanie was standing on the right of the frame in medium shot, Lydia is now standing closest to us, on the left hand side, looking at Melanie and Cathy as they disappear offscreen right (fig. 40). The pattern of internal focalisation has evolved in the same way as at the Tides Restaurant: Melanie starts off as the internal focaliser but Lydia gradually replaces her. It is her gaze turned towards the viewer that once again closes the scene (fig. 41). Here, however, the nature of the gaze is different: this is very clearly the face of a woman who is afraid of losing both her children at the hands of an intruder, a woman who looks remarkably like her but who is much younger, and, contrary to our expectations, much stronger than her. The culmination of this process will take place on the following morning when she is in bed and Melanie brings her tea and offers to go to the school and collect Cathy. Lydia tells Melanie about her dead husband and acknowledges the inevitability of her displacement from the centre of things, but our sympathy for the character has grown remarkably since the first time we saw her. The narration is now ready to follow Lydia and it is through her and not Melanie that we are going to experience the horror of violent death.¹⁴ While at the beginning the spectator might have considered Lydia's main function in the narrative to be that of obstacle and threat to Melanie and Mitch's relationship, the film contradicts our expectations by gradually revealing her humanity, her weaknesses and her fear of relegation. She appears, in this sense, close to Annie, but the difference is also clear: whereas Annie is denied focalisation or any sort of narrative prominence, Lydia grows more and more central, and her gaze becomes the only important rival for internal focalisation found by Melanie until the end of the film.

The triumph of the female gaze

The episode discussed above presents interesting contrasts with both the scene at the Tides Restaurant and that of the telephone call at Annie's house, in terms of the manipulation by the external focaliser and the thematic connotations of the patterns of internal focalisation. It also contrasts, in a different sense, with the opening scene, at the pet shop, in that it dramatises the complete disappearance of the male gaze.

The two men present in the room —Mitch and the sheriff— are denied any centrality by the text,¹⁵ and are consistently ignored except when Lydia

happens to be near them, the contents of their dialogue becoming practically irrelevant. After the bird attacks, the world of the film seems to be almost completely dominated by the women: Melanie is now joined by Lydia as protagonist of the action. Mitch's gaze had been used in the film's first scene, in a classical way, in order to present Melanie as willing and playful sexual object, but as the film grows in depth and Melanie's personality is developed and enriched by the events, Mitch's gaze is made to disappear and is replaced by both Melanie's and Lydia's. Laura Mulvey's contention that the gaze in narrative films is always male, based precisely, among others, on a study of Hitchcock's films (1989: 23), is disqualified by *The Birds*.¹⁶ After this scene, Mitch's position as the leader of the group becomes more and more precarious and, apart from being the one who saves Melanie from the final bird attack, his narrative relevance gradually dwindles into almost nothingness.¹⁷ It is clearly Melanie and Lydia who attract all of the spectator's attention from now on.

Moreover, in this scene there is another man present in the room: Mitch's dead father, whose portrait hangs on the wall above the piano. Under Melanie's scrutiny, Lydia tries to straighten the picture, bringing it back to its original position of dominance but a dead bird frightens her and the portrait remains askew (figs. 42 and 43). Later on, Lydia will confess her total dependence on her husband in the past and her inability to adapt to life without him. In the course of the scene, the father metaphorically loses his position of authority in the house and his male gaze is also brutally disavowed, both by the bird attacks and by Melanie's gaze. The father is not replaced by Mitch as the figure of authority in the family but, rather, by both Lydia and Melanie.

In a wider sense the birds have upset and subverted the patriarchal order in Bodega Bay, replacing it by a profound, mysterious, threatening and chaotic alternative, one which is related, although never logically explained, to the two female characters. In many senses, of course, the narration remains male, for example in its confessed impossibility to understand Melanie (and the nature of the bird attacks), but the male narration is also ultimately overpowered by the female world: not only is the visual control of the father and Mitch won over by Melanie and Lydia, but also the apparently totalising omniscience of the narration has been revealed to be the omniscience of bird subjectivity, which produces the final image of complete bird control over the society of Bodega Bay. By going against what Mulvey and others would see as the natural inclination of visual representation in Hollywood films and

substituting female for male both at the levels of internal and external focalisation, *The Birds* effectively overturns the patriarchal order, replacing it by an admittedly more threatening but also more interesting *Weltanschauung*. It is as if, while still refusing and proving incapable to understand female difference, still unprepared to reject the centrality of castration, the patriarchal text accepts defeat, just as Bodega Bay and the principal characters acknowledge their own defeat to the birds, and surrenders narrative control to the female characters, the victory of the birds being, in Julia Kristeva's terminology, the victory of the abject, of the phobic's substitute for sexual difference.

4. CONCLUSION

My study of focalisation in *The Birds* has disclosed a transference of power and narrative control from male to female in the course of the film. It can be argued that, even granting that the female vision acquires a certain predominance at the end, the text remains male (Hitchcock's?) in ultimately witnessing the final events from the outside, as the triumph of chaos and hysteria. The birds become an unconscious objective correlative of female hysteria, and, as a symbol, a little hysterical themselves. But this reading is based on the premise that the text is the product of a single consciousness (the author), which, even against textual evidence, must hold ultimate power over the narration, or, to put it in other terms, an agent who holds the final voice over all the rest. My theoretical discussion of focalisation in film narrative, however, rejects this approach and substitutes the existence of a poliphony, a multiplicity of "visions" in a filmic text, and therefore, also a multiplicity of subjects, often struggling for narrative or perceptual control, and, in many cases, with high degrees of independence from one another. In *The Birds*, I have suggested, narratorial male omniscience is gradually replaced by, or disclosed as, bird and female subjectivity.¹⁸ Two powerful narrative forces have fought for control of the universe of the film, even for control of the mechanisms of audience identification and the outcome, from the evidence of the final shot, seems clear enough, even though the ending itself is anything but clear. Different interpretations of this ending have tried

to make sense of its mystifying nature. From the evidence presented here, it seems that Horwitz's is least tenable:

it is clear that Lydia and Mitch are 'reunited'; now they have two 'children.' It is as if Mother is in the back seat with the younger child who is sick, while Father, in the front seat, drives with the older child next to him The last shot of the car driving away can be considered a point-of-view shot from the perspective of the birds, underlining the impression that they have (Lydia has) achieved dominance" (1986: 286).

One may agree that the birds' final focalising power represent Lydia's dominance, but not as opposed to Melanie, certainly not as an outcome of Lydia's struggle to keep the Mother position in her family. One only needs to look closely at the final shot, but also at what has happened immediately before, to see how little this interpretation clarifies the film. Cameron and Jeffery interpret the film ultimately as an allegory of Hitchcock's attack on the audience (1986: 268-70). The birds would not be a feminine symbol at all, but a symbol of Hitchcock himself, launching an assault on audience complacency and insincerity. The metafictional dimension, which these critics exploit, is present in many Hitchcockian texts, but to argue that this is the only possible reading of such an ambiguous and open ending is to deny the power of the film to signify at different narrative levels. Robin Wood, after perceptively interpreting the birds as representative of everything that is unpredictable, precarious and uncontrollable in our lives, summarises the effect of the final shot in the following line: "the birds are letting them through; the birds are massing for the next assault" (1989: 172). A similar conclusion is reached by Spoto, who argues that the birds do not stand for any "thing," but immediately adds, "rather they represent all the unacknowledged, invisible forces of destruction and disorder which inhabit every psyche and which subordinate human life to a capricious universe" (1976: 388).¹⁹ These last two readings attempt to preserve the ambiguity of the final scene, a scene which rejects interpretation, and seeks to signify randomness, non-meaning. Rosemary Jackson explains, referring to modern fantasy: "Without a cosmology of heaven and hell, the mind faces mere redundancy: the cosmos becomes a space full of menace, increasingly apprehended and internalized as an area of non-meaning" (1981: 18). By displacing my interpretation of the film to the fantastic I am not only acknowledging its obvious generic allegiance but also occupying the only

space of representation that our culture has allowed for female subjectivity and sexuality: the realm of fantasy. In this *mise en scène* of desire, Melanie is left, in Jackson's words, "disatisfied, endlessly desiring" (9). *The Birds* can be considered a modern fantastic text in that, without apparently abandoning the world of the real, it disavows a realistically explained patriarchal universe. Against the dominant male conscious of omniscience and the sadistic gaze, it posits a subjective female unconscious which, however mysterious, chaotic and hysterical in its representation, seems to finally take over the control of the paraxial space in which this fantasy takes place. a

NOTES

1. For a theoretical framework to the concept of focalisation in film see my "Focalisation in Film Narrative" (1991) and the other theoretical works referred to in this introduction.

2. Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis make a similar point in the course of their discussion of Seymour Chatman's concept of *filter*, to which I will return below: "The concept of filtration may disclose a different hierarchy, . . . wherein the optical point-of-view can be shown to be subordinate to the role of the psychological filter. The character functioning as the filter may not command a literal point-of-view shot, but can nevertheless serve as the delegate of the narrator, the principal screen or medium through whom events are channeled" (1992: 95). These authors, incidentally, argue, inaccurately in my opinion, that Genette's concept of focalisation is perceptual (1992: 88,94). Consider Genette's definition of focalisation: "une restriction de 'champ', c'est-à-dire en fait une sélection de l'information narrative par rapport à ce que la tradition nommait l'*omniscience*" (1982: 49).

3. This distinction between external and internal focaliser does not correspond to the one proposed by Edward Branigan in his recent cognitive theory of focalisation (1992: 100-07).

4. In this sense, Melanie is very similar to other Hitchcockian heroines, particularly the character played by Tippi Hedden in his next film, *Marnie* (1964), and those played by Grace Kelly in *Rear Window* (1954) and *To Catch a Thief* (1955) and by Eva Marie Saint in *North by Northwest* (1959). According to Wood, the two main human shortcomings that are attacked in the film are insincerity and complacency. About our first impression of Melanie, he says: "Melanie is imprisoned in a gilded cage of sophisticated triviality, an inability to be sincere which is an inability to live" (1989: 155). About Melanie's hair, Donald Spoto argues: "We first

see her . . . , her blond hair impeccably coiffed. That hair will become gradually more disheveled as the story progresses; at the end it is tightly wrapped in bandages, and provides a visual paradigm for the undoing of Melanie's unreflective self-confidence" (1976: 388).

5. We must remember that films, unlike novels, have obvious difficulties to enter characters' minds. In this sense, *The Birds* seems to be playing against the nature of film as a narrative language and, at the same time, expressing —and maybe parodying— the medium's limitations. Possible lack of communicativeness is therefore related here not to omniscience but to subjectivity.

6. Notice also that the following shot/reverse shot dialogue between Melanie and the shop assistant, who has remained upstairs, reinforces the idea that the high angle shot was not carrying out any specific narrative function: this dialogue presents low angle point of view shots of the assistant as from Melanie's position (fig. 5), but the reverse shots of Melanie, instead of being high angle, are straight angle shots (fig. 6) —the high angle strategy is used when it is not necessary and not used when it would have seemed more appropriate.

7. Identification is a central issue in the construction of meaning through focalisation. Therefore, mechanisms and processes of spectator identification or, to use the most widely accepted phrase in film theory, subject positioning, will be frequently mentioned. I generally agree with Robin Wood's contention that "the construction of identification in a film cannot be reduced to an analysis of 'the look'" (305). While early French structuralist and later feminist criticism privileges the centrality of the look in the cinematic apparatus and in the construction of gendered subjectivity, it is clearly not the only mechanism of subject positioning in film narratives. There are extratextual and pretextual considerations, as well as such strategies of film construction as have been analysed in the previous section, that influence matters of identification. Wood lists six factors that are relevant in the construction of identification: identification with the male gaze, identification with the threatened or victimised, degrees of sympathy, the sharing of a consciousness, the use of cinematic devices and identification with the star (305-10). I would like to suggest, on the other hand, that the concept of focalisation in the way it has been defined here, provides a rigorous formal starting point in the sense that it covers within the different strategies of plot and textual construction, all the narrative mechanisms through which subject positioning may occur in a film. Likewise the concept of focalisation is productive in that it allows scope for the occurrence of apparently contradictory patterns of identification within single scenes or even shots, through its positing of a gap between perceptual and conceptual or ideological focalisation and the possibility of a simultaneity of occurrence of external and internal focalisation in film narratives.

8. Stephen Heath has suggested, in a different context, that the relationship between the spectator and the events taking place on the screen can be defined through the phrase "separation in identification" (see Johnston 1985: 247).

9. While Mulvey's theory has been enormously influential in the whole of contemporary film theory and criticism, she has also been criticised on many fronts, for example, in her deterministic theorisation of the spectator as male or "masculinised." Recent theories such as those proposed by Cowie (1984), Studlar (1988), Rodowick (1991) and others take issue with Mulvey through different re-readings of Freud's writings on the subject's capacity for gender fluidity and transformation in fantasy. These theories, however, are compatible with the present

analysis of focalisation. Focalisation cannot say anything about the real spectator's psychic processes and affects: it can only analyse the way in which culturally formed patterns of "vision" have found their way into film language and into the construction of specific films and evaluate the ideological strategies at work in such appropriations or, to use the term proposed, in different contexts, by Stephen Greenblatt (1988) and Christine Gledhill (1988), negotiations. In this scene, an analysis of focalisation can conclude a change in the patterns of "looking" brought about by Mitch's appearance, but it can say very little about the spectator's psychic investment in the character's gaze.

10. Peter Brooks has defined this desire as the desire for solutions and endings (1984). The emphasis on the inevitability of endings and the containment of subversion through closure has been a "given" of Althusserian-based film theory and, more generally, of ideological criticism of narrative both in film and literature. However, Cowie, among others, has argued that spectatorial pleasure in narrative is not in the consummation but in the process of reaching that consummation (1984: 80). An interesting, alternative definition of narrativity is proposed by Teresa de Lauretis: "the inscription of the movement and positionalities of desire" (1984: 79).

11. Mary Ann Doane, following Luce Irigaray, has proposed the concept of "masquerade," or conscious intensification of female self-objectification as a possibility of subversion of the patriarchal construction of femininity (1991: 25-26 and *passim*). In a later work, she proposes a new term, "double mimesis," through which the female spectator of classical films renders the gestures and poses of traditional definitions of femininity "fantastic" and "literally incredible," in order to demonstrate "that these are poses, postures, tropes— in short, that we are being subjected to a discourse on femininity" (1987: 181).

12. He is now explicitly referring to the birds being caged. Later on in the same scene, when a bird escapes from the cage, and it is significantly Mitch that catches it and returns it to its confinement, he says, "Back to your gilded cage, Melanie Daniels," thus giving his own game away. The explicit connection made by him between Melanie and the birds reinforces the mysterious relationship which links her with them, but it is also interestingly reversed later on in the film, when, during a bird attack, Melanie goes into a telephone box in order to protect herself, and the framing suggests that *she* is caged, with the birds outside, savagely crashing into the glass windows. About the identification the film establishes between Melanie and the birds, Spoto remarks that the first three letters in Melanie's car's number plates are RUJ ("Are you jay?") (1976: 388).

13. The teacher's sacrificial death is described by Spoto as an "affecting scene" but even his description places more emphasis on the other characters than on Annie herself (1976: 393).

14. Notice that Annie's death was presented, to a certain extent, through Melanie's internal focalisation but whereas identification was played down in that scene, the farmer's death is presented to us very emphatically through Lydia's gaze and reaction.

15. Wood argues: "Officials of the law are always ineffectual in Hitchcock: as representative of a superficial, unnaturally imposed order they are unable, or refuse, to see the abysses" (1989: 163).

16. Laura Mulvey's later account of the position of the female spectator, in which she defends a kind of transvestism whereby women would adopt masculinised positions when seeing a film does not seem very useful to explain Melanie's and Lydia's narrative and visual control in *The Birds* (Mulvey 1989b: 37 and *passim*). On the other hand, Mary Ann Doane's analysis of the woman's film in the 1940s (Doane 1987) seems more appropriate. In this book, Doane argues that while it is true that women hold a great degree of control in these films, the nature of their look is different from that of male characters in other Hollywood genres: fetishism, voyeurism and Oedipal identification are replaced in the woman's film by masochism, narcissism and passivity. Although she tends to conclude that these psychic mechanisms are activated in these films with the ultimate purpose of denying female subjectivity (1987: 174), and this conclusion would probably not hold for a film like *The Birds*, the identity established in the film between Melanie, the birds and, later on, Lydia, the two women's highly ambiguous response to the bird attacks and Melanie's victimisation by the birds all point to the feasibility of an interpretation along the lines proposed by Doane.

17. I disagree with Slavoj Žižek, who elaborates a chronological classification of Hitchcock's films and places *The Birds* in a group "thematically centred on the perspective of the male hero to whom the maternal superego blocks access to a 'normal' sexual relation" (1992: 5). While this model may accurately explain Mitch's relationship with Melaine and Lydia, his perspective can in no way be considered the central point of interest in the film.

18. Tania Modleski argues something very similar when she says: "Not only is it possible to argue that feminist consciousness is the mirror of patriarchal consciousness, but one might argue as well that the patriarchal *unconscious* lies in femininity" (1988: 4).

19. Spoto also mentions that Hitchcock had considered alternative endings: the Brenners and Mitch arriving in San Francisco but finding the Golden Gate Bridge swarming with birds, or even a further journey through towns that had been attacked by the malevolent animals, but the mixture of menace and a glimmer of hope in the version finally used is found by the critic preferable to the others (1976: 394).

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