
Hitchcock

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SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

translated by RICHARD MILLER

The Trouble with Harry:
The Corpse that Wouldn't Die

Hitchcock called *The Trouble with Harry* an exercise in the art of understatement. In Hitchcock's oeuvre that fundamental component of English humor is present in his ironic subversion of the basic process of his films: far from a diversion of a peaceful, everyday, situation into the *Unheimlich*, far from functioning as the eruption of some actuality disturbing the tranquil flow of life, the "blot," Harry's body—which serves in this film as Hitchcock's famous "McGuffin"—susceptible of corrupting the Vermont idyll, is only a minor, marginal problem, not really all that important, indeed, almost petty. The social life of the village goes on, people continue to exchange pleasantries, they arrange to meet at the corpse, and the child in the film continues to pursue his interest in rabbits and tree toads.

Nevertheless, the film's lesson cannot be summed up in an easy maxim—"let's not take life too seriously; death and sexuality are, in the final analysis, frivolous and futile things,"—nor does it reflect a tolerant hedonistic attitude. Just as in the case of the obsessive personality Freud describes toward the end of his analysis of the "Rat Man," the "official ego" of the characters in *The Trouble with Harry*, open, tolerant, conceals a network of rules and inhibitions that blocks any pleasure; their ironic detachment vis-à-vis Harry's body reveals a similar neutralization of an underlying traumatic complex. Indeed, just as obsessional rules and inhibitions arise out of a symbolic indebtedness contracted by the disjunction between the real and symbolic death of the father (the father, Freud writes, died "without having settled his accounts"), so "the trouble with

* The following analyses by Slavoj Žižek are taken from a book he edited with Mladen Dolar, *Hitchcock* (Ljubljana, DDU Univerzum, collection Analecta, 1984). The French translation from the Slovene will be published in Paris this fall by Navarin under the title *Lacan avec Hitchcock*.

Harry” consists in the fact that his body is present without being dead on the symbolic level. The film’s subtitle could be “The Corpse that Wouldn’t Die”: since the tiny community of villagers, each of whose fate is in various ways linked to Harry, does not know what to do with his corpse, the only denouement the story can have is Harry’s symbolic death. When it is arranged so that the boy will happen upon the body a second time, all the accounts are settled and the rite of burial can finally take place.

Here, we should remind ourselves that Harry’s problem is the same as Hamlet’s (need we stress that Hamlet furnishes a case of obsession par excellence?): in the end, Hamlet is the drama of real death unaccompanied by a symbolic “settling of accounts.” Polonius and Ophelia are surreptitiously buried, without the prescribed rituals, and there is, above all, Hamlet’s father, killed at an inopportune moment, in a state of sin, left to face his Maker unshriven — it is for that reason, and not because of his murder as such, that his ghost returns and orders his son to avenge him. Or we can go back a step further and recall that the same problem also arises in *Antigone* (which could almost be called *The Trouble with Polineikos*): the action is set in motion by the fact that Creon forbids Antigone to bury her brother and perform the burial rites. In this way we can measure the whole extent of the path traveled by “Western civilization” in the light of the settlement of the symbolic debt: from Antigone’s sublime features radiant with beauty and inner calm, for whom the act is an unquestioned, accepted thing, through the hesitation and obsessive doubt of Hamlet — who, of course, finally acts, but only after it is too late, when his action fails of its symbolic aim, to the “difficulty with Harry,” in which the entire affair is some kind of quibble, an unimportant inconvenience, a welcome pretext for wider social contacts, for an *understatement* that nevertheless betrays the existence of an utter inhibition for which we would look in vain in either *Hamlet* or *Antigone*.

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The gap between the two deaths, the real death and symbolic death, the “settling of accounts,” the working out of a symbolic destiny, the real-traumatic site of the *Ding*, can thus be filled in various ways; it can contain either sublime beauty or fearsome monsters: in Antigone’s case, her symbolic death, her exclusion from the symbolic community of the city, precedes her actual death and imbues her character with sublime beauty, whereas the ghost of Hamlet’s father presents the opposite case — actual death unaccompanied by symbolic death, without a settling of accounts — which is why he returns as a frightful apparition until his debt has been repaid.

Between Antigone and Hamlet, on the one hand, and Harry on the other, what do we have? Sade, and the Sadian schism. That is, the Sadian notion of a radical, absolute crime that liberates Nature’s creative force, as elaborated in the long speech of the pope in the fifth volume of *Juliette*, implies a distinction

between the two deaths: natural death, which is a part of the natural cycle of generation and corruption, of Nature's continual transformation, and absolute death, i.e., the destruction, the eradication, of the cycle itself, which then liberates Nature from its own laws and opens the way for the creation of new forms of life *ex nihilo*. This difference between the two deaths can be linked with the Sadian fantasy revealed by the fact that in his work his victim is, in a certain sense, indestructible, she can be endlessly tortured and can suffer it, she can endure any torment and still retain her beauty — as though, above and beyond her natural body, a part of the cycle of generation and corruption, and thus above and beyond her natural death, she possessed another body, a body composed of some other substance, one excepted from the vital cycle — a sublime body.

Today, we can find this same fantasy at work in various products of “mass culture,” for example in animated cartoons. Consider Tom and Jerry, cat and mouse. They are each subjected to frightful misadventures; the cat is stabbed, dynamite goes off in his pocket, he is run over by a steamroller and his body flattened into a ribbon, and so forth, but in the next scene he appears with his normal body and the game can begin again — it is as though he possessed another indestructible body. Or take the example of video games, in which we deal, literally, with the difference between the two deaths: the usual rule of such games is that the player (or, more precisely, the figure representing him in the game) possesses several lives, usually three; he is threatened by some danger — a monster who can eat him, for example — and if the monster catches him he loses a life, but if he reaches his goal very swiftly he earns one or several supplementary lives. The whole logic of such games is therefore based on the difference between the two deaths: between the death in which I lose one of my lives and the ultimate death in which I lose the game itself.

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To come back to humor in *The Trouble with Harry*: understatement is thus created by a specific way of taking note of the “blot,” created by the real of the paternal body: isolate the “blot,” act as though it were not serious, keep cool: Dad's dead, so okay, it's cool, no cause for excitement.

The economy of such an isolation of the “blot,” such a blockage of its symbolic effectiveness, is given perfect expression in the familiar paradox “situation catastrophic but not yet really serious” — in what in Freud's day was called “Viennese philosophy.” The key to the understatement would seem to reside in the split between knowledge (real) and belief (symbolic): “I am quite aware (that the situation is catastrophic), but . . . (I don't believe it and will go on acting as though it weren't serious).” The current attitude toward the ecological crisis is a perfect illustration of this split: we are quite aware that it may already be too late, that we are already on the brink of catastrophe (of which the death throes

of the German forests are the harbinger), but nevertheless we do not believe it; we act as though it were only an exaggerated concern over a few trees, a few birds, and not literally a question of our survival. The same code enables us to understand the slogan — “Let us be realistic and demand the impossible!” — that was scrawled on the walls of Paris in 1968 as a call to be equal to the real of the catastrophe that had befallen by demanding what, in the framework of our symbolic belief, might appear to be “impossible.”

Another reading of “understatement” can be effected on the basis of Winston Churchill’s well-known paradox. Responding to those detractors of democracy who saw it as a system that paved the way for corruption, demagoguery, and a weakening of authority, Churchill said: “It is true that democracy is the worst of all possible systems; the problem is that no other system would be better.” That sentence is based on the logic of “everything possible and then some”: its first premise gives us the over-all grouping of “all possible systems,” and within that context the questioned element (democracy) would appear to be the worst; then, the second premise states that the grouping “all possible systems” is not all-inclusive, and that compared to additional elements the element in question turns out to be quite bearable. The process plays on the fact that such additional elements are *the same* as those included in the over-all “all possible systems,” the only difference being that they no longer function as elements of a closed totality: in relation to the *totality* of systems of government, democracy is the worst; but, within the *nontotalized series* of political systems, none would be better. Thus, from the fact that “no system would be better,” we cannot therefore conclude that democracy is “the best” — its advantage is strictly limited to the comparative: as soon as we attempt to formulate the proposition in the superlative, the qualification of democracy is inverted into “the worst.”

In the afterword to *Psychoanalysis and Medicine*, Freud reproduces the same “not-all” paradox with regard to women when he recalls a snatch of dialogue in *Simplicissimus*, the satiric Viennese newspaper: one of the speakers states that woman is an unbearable creature, impossible to live with, and so on, to which the other calmly replies: “Yes, but there’s nothing along the same lines that’s better.” Thus the logic of woman as symptom of man: unbearable — thus, nothing is more agreeable; impossible to live with — thus, to live without her is even more difficult. The “trouble” with Harry is thus catastrophic from the over-all point of view, but if we take into account the dimension of the “not-all,” it isn’t even a serious difficulty. The secret of “understatement” resides in investigating just that dimension of “not-all”: it is an appropriately English-language way of evoking the “not-all.”

It is for this reason that Lacan invites us to back the worst: within the over-all framework there can be nothing better than what seems to be “the worst,” as soon as it is transposed to the “not-all” and its elements compared one by one.

The Birds: *The Maternal Superego*

Why do they attack? Robin Wood¹ suggests three possible readings of this inexplicable, “irrational” act by which the idyllic daily life of a small northern California town is derailed: “cosmological,” “ecological,” “familial.”

According to the first, “cosmological,” reading, the attack of the birds can be viewed as embodying Hitchcock’s vision of the universe, of the (human) cosmos as system — peaceful on the surface, ordinary in its course — that can be upset at any time, that can be thrown into chaos by the intervention of pure chance: its order is always deceiving; at any moment some ineffable terror can emerge, some traumatic real erupt to perturb the symbolic circuit. Such a reading can be supported by references to many other Hitchcock films, including the most sombre of them, *The Wrong Man*, in which the mistaken identification of the hero as a thief, which happens purely by chance, turns his daily life into a hell of humiliation and costs his wife her sanity — the entering into play of the theological dimension in Hitchcock’s work, the vision of a cruel, arbitrary, and impenetrable God, who can bring down catastrophe at any moment.

As for the second, “ecological,” reading, the film’s title could have been “Birds of the World, Unite!”: in this reading, the birds function as a condensation of exploited nature that finally rises up against man’s heedless exploitation; in support of this interpretation we can cite the fact that Hitchcock selected his attacking birds almost exclusively from species known for their gentle, non-aggressive nature: sparrows, seagulls, a few crows.

The third reading sees the key to the film in the intersubjective relations between the main characters (Melanie, Mitch, and his mother), which are far from being merely an insignificant sideline to the “true” plot, the attack of the birds: the attacking birds only “embody” a fundamental discord, a disturbance, a derailment in those relations. The pertinence of this interpretation emerges if we consider *The Birds* within the context of Hitchcock’s earlier (and later) films, in other words, to play on one of Lacan’s homophonies, if we are to take the films seriously, we can only do so if we take them serially.²

In writing of Poe’s *Purloined Letter*, Lacan makes reference to a game of logic: we take a random series of 0s and 1s — 100101100, for example — and as soon as the series is articulated into triads (100, 001, 101, etc.), rules of succession will emerge. The same is true of Hitchcock’s films: if we consider them as a whole we have an accidental, random series, but as soon as we separate them into linked triads (and exclude those films that are not part of the “Hitchcockian universe,” the “exceptions,” the results of various compromises), each triad can

1. Cf. Robin Wood, *Hitchcock’s Films*, New York, Barnes and Co., 1977, p. 116.

2. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XX: Encore*, Paris, Seuil, 1975, p. 23.

then be seen to be linked by some theme, some common principle. For example, take the following five films: *The Wrong Man*, *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*, and *The Birds*: no single theme can be found to link all the films in such a series, yet such themes can be found if we consider them in groups of three. The first triad concerns “false identity”: in *The Wrong Man*, the hero is wrongly identified as the burglar by witnesses; in *Vertigo* the hero is mistaken about the identity of the false Madeleine; in *North by Northwest* Soviet spies mistakenly identify the film’s hero as the mysterious CIA agent “George Kaplan.” As for the great trilogy *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, and *Psycho*, it is very tempting to regard these three key Hitchcock films as the articulation of three different versions of filling the gap in the Other: their formal problem is the same — the relationship between a lack and a factor (a person) that tries to compensate for it. In *Vertigo*, the hero attempts to compensate for the absence of the woman he loves, an apparent suicide, on a level that is literally *imaginary*: he tries, by means of dress, hair style, and so forth, to recreate the image of the lost woman. In *North by Northwest*, we are on the *symbolic* level: we are dealing with an empty name, the name of a nonexistent person (“Kaplan”), a signifier without a bearer, which becomes attached to the hero out of sheer chance. In *Psycho*, finally, we reach the level of the *real*: Norman Bates, who dresses in his mother’s clothes, speaks with her voice, etc., wants neither to resuscitate her image nor act in her name; he wants to take her place in the real — evidence of a psychotic state.

If the middle triad, therefore, is that of the “empty place,” the final one is in its turn united around the motif of the *maternal superego*: the heroes of these three films are fatherless, they have a mother who is “strong,” who is “possessive,” who perturbs the “normal” sexual relationship. At the very beginning of *North by Northwest* the film’s hero, Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant), is shown with his scornful, mocking mother, and it is not difficult to guess why he has been four times divorced; in *Psycho*, Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) is directly controlled by the voice of his dead mother, which instructs him to kill any woman to whom he is sexually attracted; in the case of the mother of Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor), hero of *The Birds*, mocking disdain is replaced by a zealous concern for her son’s fate, a concern that is perhaps even more effective in blocking any lasting relationship he might have with a woman.

There is another trait common to these three films without any apparent link to the first three: from one film to the next, the figure of a threat to the superego in the shape of a bird assumes greater prominence: in *North by Northwest* we have what is perhaps the most famous Hitchcockian scene, the attack by the plane — a steel bird — that pursues the hero across a flat, sun-baked landscape; in *Psycho*, Norman’s room is filled with stuffed mounted birds, and even the body of his mummified mother reminds us of a stuffed bird; in *The Birds*, after the (metaphorical) steel bird and the (metonymic) dead birds, we finally have actual live birds attacking the town.

The decisive thing is to perceive the link between the two traits: the terrifying figure of the birds is actually the “naturalization,” the real embodiment of a discord, an unresolved tension in intersubjective relations. In the film, the birds are like the plague in Oedipus’ Thebes: they are the incarnation of a fundamental disorder in family relationships—the father is absent, the paternal function (the function of pacifying law, the Name-of-the-Father) is suspended and that vacuum is filled by the “irrational” maternal superego, arbitrary, wicked, blocking “normal” sexual relationships (only possible under the sign of the paternal metaphor). The dead-end *The Birds* is really about is, of course, that of the modern American family: the deficient paternal Ego-Ideal makes the law “regress” toward a ferocious maternal superego, affecting sexual pleasure—the decisive trait of the libidinal structure of “pathological narcissism”: “Their unconscious impressions of the mother are so overblown and so heavily influenced by aggressive impulses, and the quality of her care is so little attuned to the child’s needs, that in the child’s fantasies the mother appears as a devouring bird.”³

Here, the essential thing is nevertheless *not* to seize upon the link between the two traits we have noted—the appearance of the ferocious assailant birds and the blockage of “normal” sexual relations by the intervention of the maternal superego—as a relationship of signs, as a correlative between a “symbol” and its “signification”: the birds do not “signify,” they do not “symbolize” blocked sexual relations, the “possessive” mother, and so on; they are, rather, the making present in the real, the objectivization, the incarnation of the fact that, on the symbolizing level, something “has not worked out,” in short, the objectivization-positivization of a *failed* symbolization. At first glance, this distinction may appear factitious, vague; that is why we shall try to explicate it by means of a fairly elementary test question: In *The Birds*, how might the film have been constructed if the birds were to function *in fact* as the “symbol” of blocked sexual relations?

The answer is simple: first, we must imagine *The Birds* as a film *without birds*. We would then have a typically American drama about a family in which the son goes from one woman to another because he is unable to free himself from the pressure exerted by a possessive mother, a drama similar to dozens of others that have appeared on American stages and screens, particularly in the 1950s: the tragedy of a son paying with the chaos of his sexual life for what was in those days referred to as the mother’s inability to “live her own life,” to “expend her vital energy,” and the mother’s emotional breakdown when some woman finally manages to take away her son, etc., all seasoned with a touch of “psycho-analytic” salt à la Eugene O’Neill or Tennessee Williams and acted, if possible,

3. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York, Norton, 1979, p. 176.

in a psychologistic, Actors' Studio style — the common ground of the American theater at the half century.

Next, in such a drama we must imagine the appearance from time to time, particularly at crucial moments of emotional intrigue (the son's first encounter with his future wife, the mother's breakdown, etc.), of birds — in the background, as part of the ambience: the opening scene (the meeting of Mitch and Melanie in the pet shop, the purchase of the lovebirds) could perhaps remain as it is; and, after the emotion-charged scene of conflict between mother and son, when the sorrowing mother withdraws to the seacoast, we might hear the cawing of birds, etc. In such a film, the birds, even though or, rather, *because* they do not play a direct role in the development of the story, would be "symbols," they would "symbolize" the tragic necessity of the mother's renunciation, her helplessness, or whatever — and everyone would know what the birds signified, everyone would clearly recognize that the film was depicting an emotional drama of a son facing up to a possessive mother who is trying to transfer onto him the price of her own failure, and the "symbolic" role of the birds would be indicated by the title, which would remain unchanged: *The Birds*.

Now, what did Hitchcock do? In his film, the birds are not "symbols" at all, they play a direct part in the story as something inexplicable, as something outside the rational chain of events, as a *lawless* impossible real. The "effective" action of the film is so influenced by the birds that their massive presence completely overshadows the domestic drama: that drama — literally — *loses its significance*, the "spontaneous" spectator does not perceive *The Birds* as a domestic family drama in which the role of the birds is "symbolic" of intersubjective relationships and tensions; the accent is put totally on the traumatic attacks by the birds, and, within that framework, the emotional intrigue is like a mere pretext, part of the undifferentiated tissue of everyday incidents of which the first half of the film is made up, so that, against that background, the weird, inexplicable fury of the birds can be made to stand out even more strongly. Thus the birds, far from functioning as a "symbol" whose "signification" can be detected, on the contrary *block, mask*, by their massive presence, the film's "signification," their function being to make us *forget*, during their vertiginous and dazzling attacks, with what, in the end, we are dealing: the triangle of the mother, her son, and the woman he loves. If the "spontaneous" spectator had been supposed to perceive the film's "signification" easily, then one should have quite simply *left out* the birds.

There is a key detail that supports our reading: at the very end of the film, Mitch's mother "accepts" Melanie as her son's wife, gives her consent and abandons her superego role (as indicated by the fleeting smile she and Melanie exchange in the car) — and that is why, at that moment, they are all able to leave the property that is being threatened by the birds: the birds are no longer needed, their role is finished. The end of the film — the last shot of the car driving away

surrounded by hordes of calm birds — is for that reason wholly coherent and not at all the result of some kind of “compromise”; it is worth nothing that Hitchcock himself spread the rumor that he would have preferred another ending (the car arriving at a Golden Gate Bridge totally blackened by the birds perched on it) and was forced to accede to studio pressure — another of the many myths fomented by the director, who was at pains to dissimulate what was really at stake in his work. In general, one should distinguish between Hitchcock’s real compromises and that which is, while giving the impression of a “compromise,” the most subversive portion of his work: true, in the majority of his films Hitchcock “does not go all the way,” but merely hints at the sordid underside of his idyllic surfaces; that is because he is only too well aware of the imposture of “radical unveiling” — in which what is lost is a necessary part of, the structural role of, the mask as such. The frightful content “behind the mask” is frightful only insofar as the mask conceals it, it is, in fact, the retroactive effect of the mask itself; the “demystifying” unveiling does not take into account the manner in which “one is only naked in one’s clothes,” and we refer to the anecdote Lacan uses to illustrate the analytic process by which the sublimated is recovered:

If I say that *the king is naked*, it is not quite like the child who is supposed to be destroying a universal illusion, but rather like Alphonse Allais, who used to attract a crowd of people by announcing in a loud voice: “Scandal! Look at that woman! Beneath her dress, she’s naked!”⁴

And, in the end, this is what Hitchcock is doing too: he does not repudiate surface disguise (for example, the whole collection of rules we call “Hollywood”), he accepts it — there are those who find him the exemplary case of “commercial Hollywood,” of manipulative entertainment created by playing upon the audience’s emotions — but at the same time, and in what is sometimes a nearly imperceptible way, he dilutes disguise, displaces it radically, so that suddenly we perceive that we are *naked beneath our clothes*.

It is clear, therefore, why *The Birds* — according to François Regnault — is the film that closes the Hitchcockian system: the birds, the ultimate incarnation in Hitchcock of the bad Object, are the counterpart of the reign of maternal Law, and it is precisely this linking of the bad object of fascination and the maternal Law that defines the kernel of Hitchcockian fantasy. Although the birds embody the blocking of “normal” sexual relations, which are possible only under the reign of paternal Law, the Name-of-the-Father, it is essential not to fall into what Jacques-Alain Miller has called an “error of perspective”: the birds, the object inert, real, do not hinder the emergence of full, genital, “nor-

4. Lacan, “L’Ethique de la psychanalyse” (unpublished seminar), November 18, 1959.

mal” sexual relations; “on the contrary, that which does not exist is anything that can hinder the relationship,”⁵ and thus the lack of the impossible sexual relationship is emphasized. This is why the denouement of *The Birds* is not merely the realization of the sexual relationship once it has triumphed over the object-blot hindering its development, but is actually the collapse of that object by which we are allowed to perceive the emptiness, the impossible its massive presence has been concealing: the so-called “normal” sexual relationship cannot be achieved other than through the integration of that impossibility, and indeed the initiatory voyage of so many of Hitchcock’s heroes follows the path of that integration of loss, of emptiness, which can enable them to accede to their desire.

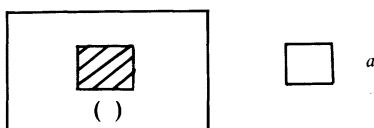
Of course, in any such general analysis we are forced to ignore many brilliant details — one would mention only the scene in which the hero’s mother, peering into a room that has been ravaged by the birds, sees the pajama-clad body with its eyes torn out. The camera first shows us the entire body, and we expect it to make a typically Hitchcockian slow, forward tracking shot to the fascinating detail, the bloody sockets of the missing eyes — but what Hitchcock actually gives us is an *inversion* of the process we expect: instead of slowing down, he *speeds up* drastically; in two montage cuts, each bringing us closer to the subject, he quickly shows us the corpse’s head. The subversive effect of these quickly advancing shots is created by the way in which they frustrate us even as they indulge our desire to view the terrifying object more closely: we approach it too quickly, skipping over the “time for understanding,” the pause needed to “digest,” to integrate the brute perception of the object.

Unlike the usual tracking shot that endows the object-blot with a particular weight by *slowing down* the “normal” speed and by *deferring* the approach, here the object is “missed” precisely insofar as we approach it precipitously, too quickly. Thus, if the usual tracking shot is obsessional, forcing us to fix on a detail that is made to function as a blot because of the slow motion of the tracking, the precipitous approach to the object makes us see its hysterical bases: we “miss” the object because of the speed, because this object is already empty in itself, hollow — it cannot be evoked other than “too slowly” or “too swiftly,” because in its “proper time” it is nothing. So delay and precipitation are two modes of capturing the object-cause of desire, object small *a*, the “nothingness” of pure seeming — and we thereby touch upon the *objectal* dimension of the Hitchcockian “blot” or “stain”: the signifying dimension of the blot, its effect of doubling meaning, of conferring on every element of the picture a supplementary meaning that makes the interpretative movement work — none of this should blind us to its other aspect, that of an inert, nontransparent object which must drop out or sink before any symbolic reality can emerge. Put another way, the Hitchcockian tracking shot that produces the blot in an idyllic picture is

5. Jacques-Alain Miller, “D’un autre Lacan,” *Ornicar?*, vol. 28, p. 52.

achieved as though to illustrate the Lacanian thesis: “The field of reality rests upon the extraction of the object *a*, which nevertheless frames it.”⁶ Or, to quote Jacques-Alain Miller’s precise commentary:

We understand that the covert setting aside of the object as real conditions the stabilization of reality, as “a bit of reality.” But if the object *a* is absent, how can it still frame reality? . . .



It is precisely *because* the object *a* is removed from the field of reality that it frames it. If I withdraw from the surface of this picture this piece I represent by a shaded square, I get what we might call a frame: a frame for a hole, but also a frame of the rest of the surface. Such a frame could be created by any window. So object *a* is such a surface fragment, and it is its subtraction from reality that frames it. The subject, as barred subject—as want-of-being—is this hole. As being, it is nothing but the subtracted bit. Whence the equivalency of the subject and object *a*.⁷

We can read Miller’s schema as the schema of the Hitchcock tracking shot: from an over-all view of reality we advance toward the blot that provides it with its frame (the hatched square). The advance of the Hitchcockian tracking shot is reminiscent of the structure of a Möbius strip: by moving away from the aspect of reality, we find ourselves suddenly alongside the real whose extraction constitutes reality. Here the process inverts the dialectic of montage: there it was a matter of producing, through the discontinuity of the cuts, the continuity of a new signification linking the disconnected fragments, whereas, here, the continual advance itself produces an effect of banking, of radical discontinuity, by showing us the heterogenous element that must remain an inert, insensate “blot” if the rest of the picture is to acquire the consistency of a symbolic reality.

Whence we could articulate the succession of “anal” and “phallic” stages in the organization of filmic material: if montage is the “anal” process par excellence, the Hitchcockian tracking shot represents the point at which “anal” economy becomes “phallic” economy. Montage thus entails the production of a supplementary, metaphorical signification that emerges from the juxtaposition of connected fragments, and, as Lacan emphasized in *The Four Fundamental Con-*

6. Lacan, *Ecrits*, Paris, Seuil, 1966, p. 554.

7. Miller, “Montré à prémontré,” in *Analytica* 37, 1984, pp. 28–29.

cepts of Psycho-Analysis, metaphor is, in its libidinal economy, an eminently anal process: we give something (shit) to fill out the nothing, that is, to make up for what we do not have. In addition to montage within the framework of traditional narration, typified by “parallel montage,” we have a whole series of excessive strategies that are designed to subvert the linear movement of traditional narration (Eisenstein’s “intellectual montage,” Welles’s “inner montage,” and the antimontage of Rossellini, who tried to forgo any manipulation of the material and allow for the emergence of the signification of the “miracle” of fortuitous encounters)—and all such processes are only variations and reversals within the same field of the montage, whereas Hitchcock, with his tracking shots, changes the field itself: in place of montage—the creation of a new metaphoric continuity by the combination of discontinuous fragments—he introduces a radical discontinuity, the shifting from reality to the real produced by the continuous movement of the tracking shot. That is, the tracking movement can be described as a moving from an over-all view of reality to its point of anamorphosis—to go back to Holbein’s *Ambassadors*: the Hitchcockian tracking shot would advance from the total area of the picture toward the erected, “phallic” element in the background that must fall, that must remain, for the onlooker, a demented blot—the skull, the fantasmatic, inert object as the “impossible” equivalent of the subject ($\$ \diamond a$), and it is no accident that we find this same object on several instances in Hitchcock’s own work (*Under Capricorn*, *Psycho*). In Hitchcock this real object, the blot, the terminal point of the tracking shot, can have two principal forms: either the look of the other insofar as the point of our position as spectator is already inscribed in the picture, the point from where the picture itself views us (the eye sockets in the skull, not to mention the most celebrated of Hitchcock’s tracking shots, the shot into the drummer’s blinking eyes in *The Young and the Innocent*), or the Hitchcockian object par excellence, *the object of nonspecularizable exchange*, the “piece of the real” that circulates from one subject to another, embodying the structural network of symbolic exchanges between them (the most famous example: the long tracking shot in *Notorious* from the over-all view of the entrance hall down to the key in Ingrid Bergman’s hand).

We can categorize Hitchcock’s tracking shots, however, without reference to the nature of their term-object, that is, based on variations in the process itself—in other words, in addition to the zero-degree of tracking (which goes from the over-all view of reality down to its real point of anamorphosis), in Hitchcock we have at least three other variants:

—The precipitous, “hystericalized” tracking shot: the example from *The Birds* analyzed above, in which the camera draws into the blot too quickly, in jump shots;

—The reverse tracking shot, which begins at the *unheimlich* detail and pulls back to the over-all view of reality: the long shot in *Shadow of a Doubt* that

starts with the hand of Theresa Wright holding the ring given her by her murdering uncle and pulls back and up to the over-all view of the library reading room in which she is nothing but a small dot in the center of the frame – (not to mention the famous reverse tracking shot in *Frenzy*).

– Lastly, the paradox of the “immobile tracking shot” in which the camera does not move: the shift from reality to the real is accomplished by the intrusion into the frame of a heterogenous object – for an example, we can return to *The Birds*, in which such a shift of subjectivization is achieved during one long, fixed shot. A fire breaks out in the small town threatened by the birds, a fire caused by a cigarette butt someone drops into some spilled gasoline. After a series of short and “dynamic” close-up and medium shots, the camera pulls back and up and we are given an over-all shot of the entire town taken from high above. In the first instant we read this over-all shot as an “objective,” “epic” panorama shot separating us from the immediate drama going on down below and enabling us to disengage ourselves from the action; this distancing at first produces a certain “pacifying” effect, it allows us to view the action from what might be called a “metalinguistic” distance. Then, suddenly, a bird enters the frame from the right, as if coming from behind the camera and thus from behind our own backs, and then three birds, and finally the entire flock . . . and the same shot takes on a totally different content, it undergoes a radical subjectivization: the camera’s elevated eye ceases to be that of a neutral, “objective” onlooker gazing down upon a panoramic landscape and suddenly becomes the subjective and threatening eye of the birds as they zero in on their prey.⁸

8. This scene, creating as it does a fantasmatic effect, also illustrates the thesis that the subject is not necessarily inscribed in the fantasmatic scene as observer, but can also be one of the objects observed. The birds’ subjective view of the town creates a menacing effect, even though our view – the camera’s view – is that of the birds and not that of their prey, because we are inscribed in the scene as inhabitants of the town.