

Unfair Utilization in Horrific Films: Objectifying Female Characters in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*

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Abstract. In this essay, it examines the film *The Birds* and analyzes the scenes necessary to advance the men's desires in the film's presentation as a result of the director and screenwriter's unfair scripting and arrangement of female characters. These unequal arrangements were thought to satisfy the 1860s male moviegoer's desire for both power and beauty, and to have negatively impacted the feminism that was gradually manifesting itself in Hollywood films. Proven by Laura Mulvey's argument that the portrayal of women in Hollywood films has been maliciously distorted. While this essay will focus on Alfred Hitchcock's horror thrillers--*The Birds*.

Keywords: Feminism; Film Analysis; Objectification; Alfred Hitchcock.

1. Introduction

Men get to be autonomous, but women are to be selfless and "serve men's needs" (Gilligan and Snider, 2018). But women are also thinking and independent members of society, so in order to achieve complete selflessness; women are inevitably objectified unilaterally by men. Women's bodies are objectified, namely used as a commodity to serve men's needs and pleasure (MacKinnon, 1987), and women's sexual objectification means that they are represented and judged by the sexual parts or functions of their body alone (Bartky, 1990; Langton, 2009). To examine objections of women in films, we have to mention psychoanalytic film theory (i.e., A modern Western film theory that uses psychoanalytic principles to explain film phenomena, Christian Metz, 1975), which developed from psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud et al.), states that films can influence the psychology of the audience. Besides, increasingly, questions of pleasure, desire and identity became important (Roberta McGrath). Directors have therefore made much of these theories (e.g., horror films attract many curious viewers, uses and gratifications approach, E. Katz, 1974). When it is clear what the audience wants to see, the directors in the film design a lot of the audience can stimulate the desire for power and beauty of the plot and shot, so most of the 20th century and even modern thrillers are appealing not only because of the horror scenes, but also because they use women as props to move the plot forward and thus resonate with male viewers whose minds are influenced by the patriarchal system. There are also some classic Hollywood women's movies that show women as independent and brave heroes. The heroine in the movie suffers and finally succeeds, on the surface this is very different from Hitchcock in the movie set beauty and satisfy the desire of men voyeurism (scopophilic), but in fact the seemingly independent heroine image is also a typical male fantasy. The point of these action blockbuster Rambo-style heroines, says John Ellis, is that (the hero) must survive a series of physical injuries while other characters fall to the ground. It's almost liked the classic male heroes, the final girls, are made up of female actors who are intelligent, serious, skilled at operating machinery and other technical knowledge, and less willing to have sex. This Freudian "sexual monogamy" (one sex model) - where the male body is the standard and the female is the imperfect, incomplete male - is a characterization that apparently meets both the identity of the male audience and their fantasies and gaze. The "feminism" in these films does not offend men, but rather provides a voyeuristic delight. These films are "feminist" in appearance but actually cater to the needs of a patriarchal society. The use of women's physical characteristics or the deliberate degradation and elimination of their personal independence, thus contrasting with the male characters in the film. According to Laura's saying that "traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, 19), and the heroic same-gender characters allow the audience to better represent themselves. But this process is clearly disrespectful to women. To address the problem of

objectification of women in for-profit films, it is first necessary to identify the parts of the film where women are deliberately portrayed in a vilified manner. This paper will attempt to examine how *The Birds* suppresses and objectifies women in order to attract male audiences, based on feminist research in three areas: plotting, setting, and filming process.

2. How actresses were objectified in plot of *The Birds* through their lines and movements

2.1 Main female roles

The film's heroine, Melanie, is played by the lovely Tippi Hendren (1963). Hitchcock said that we should have complete freedom as long as the film is not monotonous (Hitchcock/Truffaut, 75, 2007). And by "total freedom," he meant the objectification of the lead actress, both on and off set. "Actors are cattle," Hitchcock said in an interview. That's how the objectification of women off set happened - he sexually harassed actresses in private. The actor Joseph Cotten recalled that "Hitch developed strong feelings for the female leads in his films," and that he was the male lead in two Hitchcock films. Tippi Hendren, who appeared as the leading lady in *The Birds* and *Marnie* disclosed: "He gradually became obsessed with me, which made me feel very uneasy because I couldn't control him. I had to be very careful, very vigilant. He sought to control everything - what I wore, what I ate and what I drank. Donald Spurt, author of *Hitchcock: The Genius Director and His Actresses*, revealed that Hitchcock began to observe and study her constantly, staring at her on set, eavesdropping on her conversations with others, or listening to her phone calls. Hitchcock's astute casting of such a luscious actress as the female lead caters to the male audience to the greatest extent possible, as Laura Mulvey puts it: "The camera of the film is the equivalent of men gazing at women and themselves" (13). Such a woman (Tippi Hendren) was born to seduce the world, especially in an era when luxury was becoming a consumer good, and a woman's beauty was certainly a more expensive consumer good than luxury. The beauty of actresses was exploited to the fullest extent by the directors or producers of the time, as a tool to attract the attention of male audiences. For the choice of actress, this article would like to discuss a little more. After browsing through Hitchcock's famous films, it's easy to see that he had a penchant for pretty blondes. But why is it that basically every film has a blonde actress in the lead role, an interview quoted in this article can tell us the answer.

In a series of marathon interviews in the 1960s, he asked French filmmaker François Truffaut: "Why do I prefer mature blondes in my films? To favor mature blondes in my films? We are after [.....] Real women who turn into prostitutes once they enter the bedroom [.....]. The bedroom [.....]. Sex shouldn't be promoted. A British girl who looks like a schoolteacher is likely to get into a cab with you and, to your surprise, she might pull a man's pants off. (182)

The contrast behind a mature and beautiful appearance became a stereotype for blondes, leaving Hitchcock and many male viewers wanting more (Tania Modleski). Through his films, for instance, Joan Fontaine in *Rebecca* (1939), *Suspicion* (1941); Ingrid Bergman in *Spellbound* (1944), *Notorious* (1946) and *Under Capricorn* (1949); Hitchcock exposes the male fascination and desire for femininity, seeing the beautiful actress as an instrument of spiritual desire.

In the film, Mitch, the main character, deliberately mistook Melanie for a bird shop clerk when he saw her for the second time, and made fun of her because the naughty Melanie smashed the window of Mitch's house with a stone when she was a child. The contrasting behavior of the hero and heroine, the fooled Melanie contrasts with Mitch's quick-witted character traits, satisfying the male audience's great pleasure in watching the film due to self-identification. "I just thought you might like to know what it's like to be the other end of a gag" (lines in *The Birds*, 00:07:22). But Mitch's pranks on Melanie have to some extent suppressed the heroine's independence of character. This phenomenon is proved by Jacques Lacan's theory of mirroring. Specifically, at first, infants between 6 and 18 months of age think that what is in the mirror is someone else, and only later do they realize that what is in the mirror is themselves, when they first become fully aware of themselves. Prior to this stage, the infant has not yet established a sense of "self. From the mirror stage, the infant establishes the

opposition between the "self" and the "other". In other words, the infant becomes aware of who he or she is only when he or she realizes who the other is through the mirror. The gaze of the "other" is also a mirror for the infant to recognize the "self", and the "other" constantly sends signals of restraint to the "self". The "others" constantly send signals of constraint to the "self. In the gaze of others, the infant internalizes the mirror image as the "self. When the infant gazes at the mirror image of himself, the gaze does not only occur when the infant gazes at the mirror image, but also when the mirror image gazes at the infant as the "other," and when the infant gazes at the mirror image, he has lost the sense of gaze. Lacan's mirror theory, as the precursor of gaze theory, provides a strong theoretical basis for the stimulation of female subjectivity in feminist cinema and the construction of female subjectivity. In subsequent plot, Melanie is portrayed as a resourceful, courageous, capable, polite but articulate young woman. Specifically, when Bodega Bay (Mitch's house in *The Birds*) was attacked by a flock of seagulls on previous occasions, Melanie would bravely stand up to protect the people around her and evacuate them to a safe place without fear. However, when the last flock of seagulls attacked Mitch's house, there was a huge difference between Melanie's behavior and her previous performance. She began to become slow and reckless, and when she was attacked by a flock of seagulls and lost her mind, Mitch appeared in time and bravely saved the unconscious Melanie. Mitch's heroic image is thus left in the hearts of the audience. Why is there such a big contrast in Melanie's character at this point? It is a common tactic of mainstream films to elevate the value of men in society by devaluing women's abilities, as directors have cleverly captured the desire for power and admiration from others in a patriarchal society. The plot of the last seagull attack contrasts Melanie's and Mitch's abilities, reflecting Mitch's unquestionable power and status, and at the same time, satisfying the audience's sense of identity in front of the screen.

The next character with more footage is Mitch's mother, named Lydia in the film. After the family loses the father, the mother's only spiritual support becomes Mitch. Fear of losing her spiritual support again, she does not want any woman to approach Mitch, and this excessive control causes Mitch's mother herself to be very sensitive and neurotic. At the same time, Mitch has an unusual attachment to his mother similar to the Oedipus complex. The original meaning of Oedipus complex refers to the compound emotion of pro-mother and anti-father in boys. Later, it refers to the compound emotions of attachment and closeness to the opposite sex parent and jealousy and hatred towards the same sex parent in young children. Freud used this to argue for the characteristics of children's sexual psychology. It is believed that during the sexual apparatus period (3-5 years old), boys develop the emotion of Oedipal jealousy of their fathers. Subconsciously, they want to replace their fathers to monopolize the love of their mothers, but because their fathers are stronger and more powerful than they are, they often psychologically take their fathers for themselves and try to imitate their fathers' behavior and attitudes. In adolescence, this impulse will appear again. It will not get resolved until there is a sexual object. Freud believed that boys fear their fathers' emasculation, and gradually eliminate the Oedipal complex. And in the movie, the Oedipus complex metaphorically represents a kind of upbringing of the male protagonist. However, the relationship between Mitch and Lydia is not traditional Oedipus complex or the Jocasta complex. This is reflected in the fact that Mitch calls his mother as close as a lover in the film and obeys most of her orders, while Lydia only is afraid of being abandoned. The objectification of women in this part of Hitchcock's film is reflected in the portrayal of a woman who cannot live a normal life without the moral and financial support provided by her father and Mitch, mainly through the depiction of her mother's inability to accept leaving the emotional support provided by her father. In the past, women were nominally dependent on men for their livelihood (e.g., Henry VIII's six wives are known to most descendants because of Henry VIII's status, not because of their own talents and values), but now, the film shows women as spiritually dependent on men. This is a way of suppressing and distorting the independence of women's personality and reflecting the dominant power of the male members of the patriarchal society.

Next is Mitch's ex-girlfriend Annie, who is an elementary school teacher with a straightforward, sincere, kind and warm-hearted personality. Mitch's mother has a lot of animosity towards Annie because she doesn't want Mitch to leave her. "she (Mitch's mother)'s only afraid of being abandoned"

(Annie's line in the movie, 00:44:19). So Mitch breaks up with Annie, but Annie was still in love with Mitch and lived with him in the remote Bodega Bay. During Annie's conversation with Melanie, it is easy to see that from falling in love to being stopped by her mother and finally breaking up, Mitch did not make any comeback, which confirmed Mitch's attachment and obedience to his mother in the previous paragraph. Finally, in the seagull attack on Bodega Bay, Annie died in front of her own door to protect Mitch's sister--Cathy. This kind and lovely primary school teacher is also a victim of Mitch's Oedipus-like relationship with his mother.

Throughout the film, Mitch's sister, Cathy, is also a character that cannot be ignored. Her actions in the film all play a role in driving the storyline (e.g., inviting Melanie to her birthday party and inviting her to stay at the house), laying the foundation for the further development of Melanie and Mitch's love. Cathy's role as a child also gives researchers a different perspective on how the film reflects the deeply rooted patriarchal society in the plot and the actors' performances. "The portrayal of children should be a major criticism of adult fantasies of guilt or innocence" (Fran Pheasant-Kelly, 2014), but Cathy in *The Birds* instead shows an understanding of Mitch's relationship with her mother and Mitch's connection to other female characters. In addition, the screams and fears of Cathy and the other children during the seagull attack not only set the mood for a thriller, children's disclosure of a fundamental childhood terror, but also reflect the fears of the adult characters and the audience.

2.2 Some supporting characters

Some of the seemingly insignificant actors in the film also play a role in stimulating a stronger sense of self-identification in the male audience. The "stares" and objectification of the female characters through their gestures and movements, thus arousing the voyeurism of the male audience off-screen. This series of actions revolves around the beautiful female protagonist, Melanie. When Melanie asks for information about Bodega Bay, Mitch's neighbors and the grocer both look up and down at Melanie, not out of polite concern. The actors use this behavior to communicate to the audience the results of their assessment of Melanie. Heflick states that focusing too much on women's appearances rather than their personalities can greatly diminish women's humanity (Heflick and Goldenberg, 2009). Men's tendency to focus on women's appearance rather than their personality increases the objective gaze on women, as evidenced by the fact that the eyes move from the chest to the hips more often than they do when staring at a woman's face (Gervais et al., 2013).

The attitude of the patrons of the tavern towards Melanie and the conversation between them when she enters the tavern with the news of the children's attack by the seagulls is also an interesting part to discuss. When Melanie walks into the tavern and wants to make a phone call, the town ornithologist is identifying brachyrhynchus (scientific name of the crow) and *Euphagus cyanocephalus* (scientific name of the blackbirds); the tavern owner is concerned about the safety of the school children; the crazy customer recites the Bible over and over again, "it's the end of the world"; the fisherman eating on the corner is only concerned about the number of birds that are harmful to his boat; the more radical customer says it would be better to kill all the seagulls; the mother with children is just worried that such rumors will scare the children. Only the ornithologist didn't think a flock of seagulls would cause much disruption. The disparate crowd, having been attacked by gulls once, invariably turned the tables on Melanie as the scourge of the bay. What now seems superstitious and ridiculous is a true reflection of Hitchcock's subtlety in objectifying women in order to appeal to a male audience.

Truffaut: The theme common to almost all your films is that of an innocent man accused of a crime he didn't commit. Hitchcock: It is the theme of a person unjustly accused that creates the strongest sense of crisis in the audience, because they are more likely to put themselves in that person's shoes than to imagine the situation of the criminal on the run. I always have the audience in mind. Truffaut: In other words, this theme satisfies the audience's desire to participate in the secret and also their desire to assimilate themselves with a character close to them (21)

The passage quoted in the previous article has well reconfirmed to us that the audience can indeed get self-satisfaction and the pleasure of being admired by others from the movie. The female protagonist becomes a target, thus inspiring the male protagonist and the male viewers who cannot

help but watch the movie from the male protagonist's point of view, thus enjoying the thrill of having power and saving others. Here, Melanie becomes a tool for male viewers to vent their machismo and fantasy of identity and power based on the film.

3. How to objectify women in the process of shooting

3.1 Lens

Truffaut had this to say about Hitchcock, "Filming murder as a love affair, filming love as a murder." Having the plot and setting of a thriller but with the beautiful appearance of the female characters and the depiction of the twists and turns of their love lives was Hitchcock's way of attracting audiences. Through mediums and eye-level shots, the film is kept as much as possible from the male protagonist's point of view as it progresses. She is presented in soft focus as an erotic object, as a subject to be viewed in her "physique". Throughout the film, Hitchcock does not give many close-ups of Melanie, or even almost none. But the camera position has been kept in line with the male point of view, and subjective camera predominates the whole film, you can usually see the bust of Melanie on the whole screen. But whether it's the upper body or lower body, the camera always tries its best to take out Melanie's beautiful face. When the female lead and other characters appear in a shot at the same time, the director also tried to place Melanie as close to the audience as possible, and intentionally increased her personal close-up shots. Regarding close-ups, Balazs has said that, regardless, cinema is visual art, and that close-up techniques force cinema to become close-up realism, a close up that relentlessly shows the face of reality...no matter what! Film is visual art, and its most distinctive tendency is to expose lies... it is still essentially art with its eyes open. Contemporary film scholars also agree that in presenting facial expressions and facial expressions, close-ups can effectively convey the emotional experience of a character and powerfully elicit a cognitive and emotional response from the audience. The director also tried to make the female lead more eye-catching and the focus of the male audience (e.g., scene at 00:41:43 in the film). Therefore, we are viewing the female leads in the film also through the eyes of a man, with this casting a haunting perspective when we take a step back and realizes what Hitchcock is trying to say about the sexes through his lens. In Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, *Vertigo*, none of these men are physically able to interact with the women they are interested in, so instead they watch them and fantasize about how these women would perform in their perfect world. However, when confronted with real-life women (like Lisa with Jeff or Marion with Norman in questioning his mother), they can't accept these women unless they fit their fantasies, so they either abuse them or murder them in extremis. This process, in addition to conveying to the audience the intimate relationship between Melanie and the actors in the film, also subtly allows the audience to pretend that they are the handsome and popular Mitch. Hitchcock achieves the impact of pleasure through the sexual assault in which we are involved as viewers. Using Lacan's mirror theory, the audience mistakes the male protagonist on the screen for themselves, thus triggering the pleasure of being "watched" by Melanie or other female characters. The pleasure of being "watched" by Melanie or other female characters. At the same time, it is accompanied by the thrill of actually "looking" at Melanie or other female characters from off-screen. Here it is necessary to mention the problem of identification, because newborn children do not know their own appearance and identity, so they will not recognize them as themselves when they are put in front of a mirror, Jacques Lacan made an analogy between this phenomenon and movie-goers, and concluded that movie-goers in a dark environment tend to mistake the popular and powerful heroes of the film for themselves, and that people are strong. In addition to the patriarchal society, in that era, the male desire for status, talent and beauty are very strong.

3.2 Backstage

Some critics have even argued that Hitchcock's work is prototypical of the extremely violent assaults on women that make up so much of our entertainment today (chapter1, page14). *The Birds* serves as example of this comment, and advances a gender dichotomy in imaginary. Behind-the-

scenes footage lets us know that Hitchcock was shooting *The Birds*, and in order to make the actors' performance more realistic and natural, he took the liberty of putting real seagulls on the set instead of the contracted prop birds without the consent of Melanie's character, Tippi Hendren. He treated his actors like animals that could show the emotions required by the script. This is yet another level of objectification of women. The objectification of women, as described earlier, is a way of satisfying the male viewer's desire for beauty and power through the details and psychological allusions in the film. The objectification we are talking about now is Hitchcock's attempt to satisfy his own vulgarity by having the actress actually attacked by a flock of birds, denigrating and degrading the actress's dignity and human worth. But this shot not only satisfies Hitchcock's own perverse psychological needs, but it also carries a powerful and aggressive stimulus, allowing the audience "fixed" in the cinema seats to feel the pleasure of watching others being abused. The violence of the gaze and the window is compensated for, showing a brilliant economy. Needless to say, this economy comes at a considerable cost, one of which is the maximization of the pressure on the heroine. After losing her erotic image, the disheveled Melanie continues to bear the burden of violence in the cultural and imaginary sphere of the male center. (90, Bill Nichols, Sun Jianqiu)

4. Conclusion

This project was undertaken to examine and prove whether objectification of actresses took place in Alfred Hitchcock's classical horrific film--*The Birds* or not, and how the film achieved the goal of attracting the audience through objectifying women. This work isolates Hitchcock's *The Birds* from the normal thriller by providing an analysis of different nuanced plot descriptions, dissecting the objectification of women behind *The Birds* and the pandering to patriarchy as the social mainstream. This study helps us to understand from various details in the film how Hitchcock objectified women in order to appeal to and satisfy the mental and intellectual needs of the male audience. The insights gained from this study may also help us to understand the deeper connotations of film analytics and feminism and this particular film. The study establishes that Hitchcock did indeed use the female protagonist as an erotic object for male viewers, devaluing the independent personhood of women in the film; it suggests that the relationship between the male protagonist and his mother is not a traditional Oedipus complex, the reason for which is initially thought to be the mother's fear of abandonment manifesting itself in her attachment to her son, while the male protagonist's attachment to his mother is due to his own ability to. It is also suggested that the hero's sister, ex-girlfriend, and other supporting characters are also objectified and serve as a foil to other characters in the film. From a feminist perspective, early American feminist theorist Nick Brown wrote that there was a category of feminist film theory that started from two assumptions: first, that most American films were made by and for men and that women became the landscape; and second, that from a narrative perspective, American films mostly showed men as the active agents and placed women in supporting roles. However, in the films of different eras, the female protagonists, whose appearance, personality, and life experiences differed greatly, were free from their "dependence" as objects and conveyed to the audience their efforts to achieve equality and emancipation. In conclusion, the study states that the film is not only very successful in creating a horrific atmosphere, but also very well suited to the needs of the male audience in a patriarchal system, which is of great value for the study of film analysis and objectification of women.

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