



The Birds

Camille Paglia

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Camille Paglia draws together in this text the aesthetic, technical and mythical qualities of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), and analyzes its depiction of gender and familial relations.

The Birds Details

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Terence Manleigh says

An absolutely brilliant, frame-by-frame deconstruction of the Hitchcock classic. The fire-breathing critical faculties that made "Sexual Personae" so unforgettable a work of art and literary criticism are used to phenomenal effect here, and the reader will never view "The Birds" the same way again. Essential reading for Hitchcock and Paglia fans.

Oscar says

Camille Paglia's devotes an entire book on Hitchcock's The Birds. One of the obvious challenges in dealing with a film that has been written about countless of times is to find something different here to say. Here, Paglia is concerned with discussing the history of the film, chronicling the entire plot and characters, all while providing and illuminating discussion and making the film experience her own. She does focus on the female aspects on the film, but with an obvious admiration of the film, which enables her dissect the film's gender implications and suggest food for thought regarding what the film attempts to say about the women in the film and their role within society and family. Reading this book, ultimately, resembled revisiting an old classic with a film watching companion whose discussion and thoughts make the watching experience better.

Mike says

Fascinating scene by scene exposition of this curious movie. I can't say it's ever been one of my favourites in the Hitchcock canon - the ending left me bewildered and dissatisfied when I first saw it, and after reading Paglia's book it seems to me that there's almost no plot. It's all smoke and mirrors and occasional horrors.

But Paglia makes a great case for it being one of Hitchcock's classics, and her careful dissection of each scene (sometimes she overdoes the sexual aspects, I think, but that's not surprising, given this author), shows that there is as much craft in this movie as in Hitchcock's best. She picks up detail after detail that could pass you by in a casual viewing of the movie.

It's also good to see Tippi Hedren so validated: she wasn't much loved by the critics, nor even the movie-going audiences as I recall, but Paglia shows how time and again she did extremely good work in this movie. And literally suffered in the making of it, because there was a lot of injury on the set.

Rod Taylor gets very little mention by name in the book (his character, Mitch, is discussed much more), yet Taylor brought some warmth to the film and some humanity. Hedren and Jessica Tandy's characters are both pretty cold (Hitchcock's intention rather than that of the actresses).

John says

Paglia's in-depth analysis of the Hitchcock classic is a real treat for fans of the movie. Rather than getting

bogged down in dull film theory, she examines every detail of the film in order to show how each element, from Tippi Hedren's wardrobe to the Modigliani print on Suzanne Pleshette's wall, contributes to the overall themes of the film. Her shot-by-shot commentary leads the reader through the film and reveals the richness of Hitchcock's vision. Paglia's trademark irreverent humor is also in evidence: she remarks that she usually "cheers" when the character Cathy is first attacked by a gull, and later notes that she would gladly sacrifice Cathy "for more Suzanne Pleshette scenes." By focusing on the visual/aesthetic elements of the film, Paglia produces a highly-accessible work that celebrates the art of cinema and the art of Hitchcock.

Phillip says

while i am not a fan of some of her writing, paglia might have been the best person to pen this essay - she's really paying attention, adds historical background (but very little there new for the deep hitchcock fans), connects the dots with earlier hitch films (and other works in multiple disciplines), adds a generous dash of humor and will do well to build on just about anyone's understanding of this film, which has vexed me for many years.

Jesse says

So credit where credit is due: by sadistically characterizing the terrorized schoolchildren as "little snacks" for the birds, Paglia has offhandedly offered one of the funniest things I've read in film writing in a long, long time (and I'm up to my ears in it these days).

I was fully expecting to just glance through this book, but once I started I couldn't put it down and read it in (nearly) one sitting, a rarity for me. Oh, certainly the merits of this book-length essay and Paglia's approach to the material can be debated, but I have to admit that I found this an immensely pleasurable read from start to finish. It's best to have a some kind of grasp of Paglia's aesthetic theories, as laid out in *Sexual Personae*, going into it, as statements like "...after the first flash of real horror, I generally settle down to laughing and applauding the crows, whom I regard as Coleridgean emissaries vandalizing sentimental Wordsworthian notions of childhood" are occasionally dropped but not explained in any real detail.

But thankfully Paglia actually keeps this kind of rather one-dimensional windiness in check and instead wholeheartedly indulges in what I think she does best: taking a small details like a chipped fingernail or a barely-glimpsed recording of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* and going into a kind of associative reverie, making really unexpected and often insightful connections not only between Hitchcock's own films (which she appears to be thoroughly familiar with) but between completely disparate works of art and artforms—she intriguingly finds a lot of Picasso and Cubist techniques in *The Birds*, for example. I thoroughly love this kind of associative writing, and with each passing page I became more and more eager to see what Paglia came up with next.

I also found Paglia's unabashed crush on Tippi Hedren, undoubtedly the least favored of all Hitchcock's famous blondes, terribly amusing, and eventually became quite charmed by Paglia's gushing over everything from Hedren's features to the way she elegantly holds a cigarette. This also means that the scenes between Hedren and Suzanne Pleshette get a lot of focus, which is probably my favorite dynamic in the film but also one that's rarely discussed in analyses of the film.

When it comes down to it, one's enjoyment for this little tome more or less comes down to one's tolerance for Paglia herself. I personally find her intriguing—almost because of what I find problematic in her work and her theories than despite it—and I have to say this makes me wish that Paglia had gone ahead with a second volume of *Sexual Personae*, which apparently was going to have a lot of focus on cinema.

Lauren Levitt says

I really hate Camille Paglia, but I grudgingly agreed with some points she made. However, I don't think a beautiful woman driving a convertible is the epitome of women's lib. Also, sorry but claiming you identify with gay men doesn't justify your internal misogyny.

Paul Haspel says

Camille Paglia writes in a perceptive and challenging manner on issues relating to gender. To her close reading of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1962), Paglia brings her truly impressive erudition, a comprehensive knowledge of how everything from art history to politics to sociology to biology can somehow be brought to bear on Hitchcock's classic suspense film about bird attacks in the northern California coastal town of Bodega Bay. Paglia's diligent research provides the reader with helpful tidbits of information that enhance and expand one's knowledge of the circumstances that prompted and influenced the making of *The Birds*, from a reproduction of a 1961 *Santa Cruz Sentinel* headline (a real-life bird incident that seems to have helped inspire the film) to an original interview with star Tippi Hedren that reveals much regarding the sometimes difficult circumstances of the film's production. Recommended for fans of Hitchcock's work generally, or of *The Birds* in particular.

Blake says

Paglia's little book of feminine wisdom and study ought to please a cursory or perusing reader equally. Her attention hits every detail of the background and fore; she places shapes on the screen into peculiarly fitting places and reads all small deeds as purposive. Sharp praise layers onto swift prose: the effect is an avocado verity.

Garry says

Kind of thin on the analysis. Trudges through the movie scene by scene. Some interesting observations, but some of the interesting ones fall in the category of: Oh, that's the interesting point I would EXPECT Paglia to make. Have not read others in this series so I do not know if the restrictions were those of the series or the limits of the author's imagination when it came to this project...which feels like an assignment. But it HAS made me hunt down and put on my To Read list, DuMaurier's short story The Birds, set in Scotland!

Ed says

As with all BFI books it's a little hard to critique something that's already a critique. But here goes. This was interesting but I wished the author would've gone into some of the technical aspects of the movie on top of the story and character. This is Hitchcock after all and there's precious little talk about how the movie was made. That said, this is an intelligent analysis of a great movie made more interesting in that it was written in 1998: pre-DVD and internet. This adds a layer that the author couldn't have predicted. What else is there to say? If you like the movie, you'll like the book.

Berry says

Insightful and fun. Paglia's myth-busting analyses delivered in her trademark un-P.C. style will trigger the callow but thrill the more sophisticated thinker.

I finally understand *The Birds*. The super glamazon of the world is put in her place on the pecking order by other lesser woman. Tippi is brilliant as the goddess cut to size by the women of Bodega Bay.

Matt Smith says

This was such a pleasure. Camille walks the reader through each significant scene of this film, which is so full of puzzling implications, where nothing adds up neatly (so much of it is open to interpretation, and Tippi Hedren's journey goes in such odd directions, that it's still startling that Hitchcock managed to turn it into a mainstream hit), mixing standard critical observations with more personal responses. These are especially interesting regarding the women in the film, and how they interact. The human drama is partly there to lead the audience down one path, so that they could be all the more shocked by the sudden bursts of violence from the sky, but Hitchcock paid great care to this aspect of the film, resulting in a combination of elements that can really get under your skin.

Camille is attracted to aspects of Tippi Hedren's stunning performance that often get overlooked. She notices everything, from the way she holds her cigarettes, to the glances between the female characters that tell a story beyond the dialogue. In a Hitchcock film, with his intense interest in aspects of production that other directors ignored, its perfectly possible to read meaning into a leading lady's hairdo or handbag. Everything on screen was there for a reason that Hitch deemed proper for the emotional responses he was aiming to get. Camille understands this, and is obviously immensely fond of the film and its leading lady. I've always loved this film, and throughout this whole book I felt gratitude that I was on the journey with Camille, and not your standard film critic.

Mitchell says

This is the first book I have read by Camille Paglia and I was expecting something much different. This is a wonderful critique (more like a guided tour) of Hitchcock's *The Birds*. *The Birds* is one of my most cherished movies and I was dreading a feminist diatribe against it. I was delighted with the humor,

incisiveness and respect that Paglia showed for the film. Every once in a while some strident comment slips out, but I forgave her mostly for her humor and love of the film - at one point she offers to sacrifice 'Iphiginia Brenner' in exchange for more scenes with the recently killed Annie Hayworth. Hilarious. She just hates Cathy and almost made me a partisan.

Her knowledge of the film is deep. She even interviewed Tippi Hedren in preparation. Her insights are fascinating and the parallels she draws within the film and to other Hitchcock films is never forced. I have seen *The Birds* at least thirty times and many of her observations made me see things for the first time.

I thoroughly enjoyed this volume and would be interested in reading more Paglia and also more in the BFI Film Classics series

Thomas Strömquist says

Fantastic analysis and background to "The Birds". I've read this a couple of times now (and watched the movie of course, it is probably impossible not to after this book). A lot of books offers insights and fun trivia to movies, others enhances the movies to a whole new level - Camille Paglia manages to do the latter, with a film that was a masterpiece to begin with!
