FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT. I'm curious to find out whether you discovered Daphne du Maurier's *The Birds* before or after publication.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK. Afterward. Actually, it was in one of those 'Alfred Hitchcock Presents' books. I found out that there had been attempts to do *The Birds* on radio and television, but they weren't successful.

F.T. Did you investigate before taking on the project to make sure that the technical problems with the birds could be handled?

A.H. Absolutely not! I didn't even give it a thought. I said, 'This is the job. Let's get on with it.' But I think that if the story had involved vultures, or birds of prey, I might not have wanted it. The basic appeal to me is that it had to do with ordinary, everyday birds. Do you see what I mean?

F.T. Well, it was a chance to apply your old rule of going from the smallest to the biggest, in the intellectual as well as in the plastic sense. What will you do for an encore to the gentle little sparrows that gouge men's eyes out? How about a picture about flowers with a deadly scent?

A.H. We might do better thar that with man-eating flowers.

F.T. Since 1945, it's the atom bomb that has represented the ultimate threat to mankind, so it's rather disconcerting to suggest that the end of the world might be brought about by thousands of birds . . .

A.H. That's reflected in the skeptical attitude of the ornithologist. The old lady is a reactionary, or at any rate she's too conservative to admit that the birds might be responsible for such a catastrophe.

F.T. I'm glad you didn't give a specific reason for the attacks. It is clearly a speculation, a fantasy.*

A.H. That's the way I saw it.

F.T. I understand that Daphne du Maurier's inspiration for a massive attack by the birds was inspired by a real-life incident.

A.H. Yes, these things do happen from time to time and they're generally due to a bird disease, a form of rabies. But it would have been too horrible to put that in a picture, don't you think?

F.T. I don't know about that, but I'm sure it wouldn't have been anywhere near as fascinating to look at.

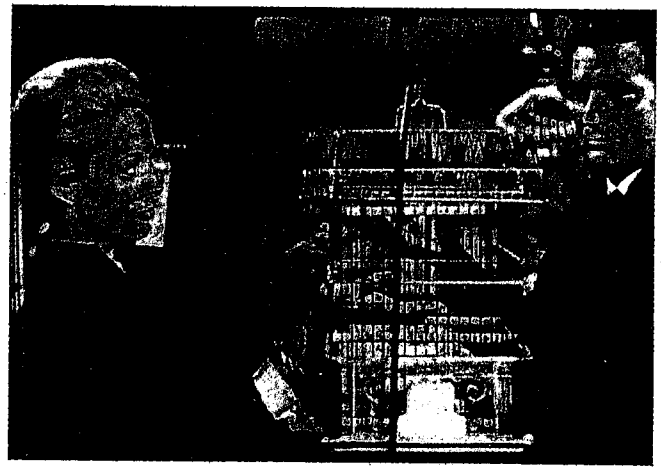
* Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren), a wealthy, snobbish playgirl, meets Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor), a young lawyer, in a San Francisco bird shop. Despite his sarcastic attitude, she is attracted to him and travels to Bodega Bay to take two small lovebirds as a birthday present to his little sister, Cathy.

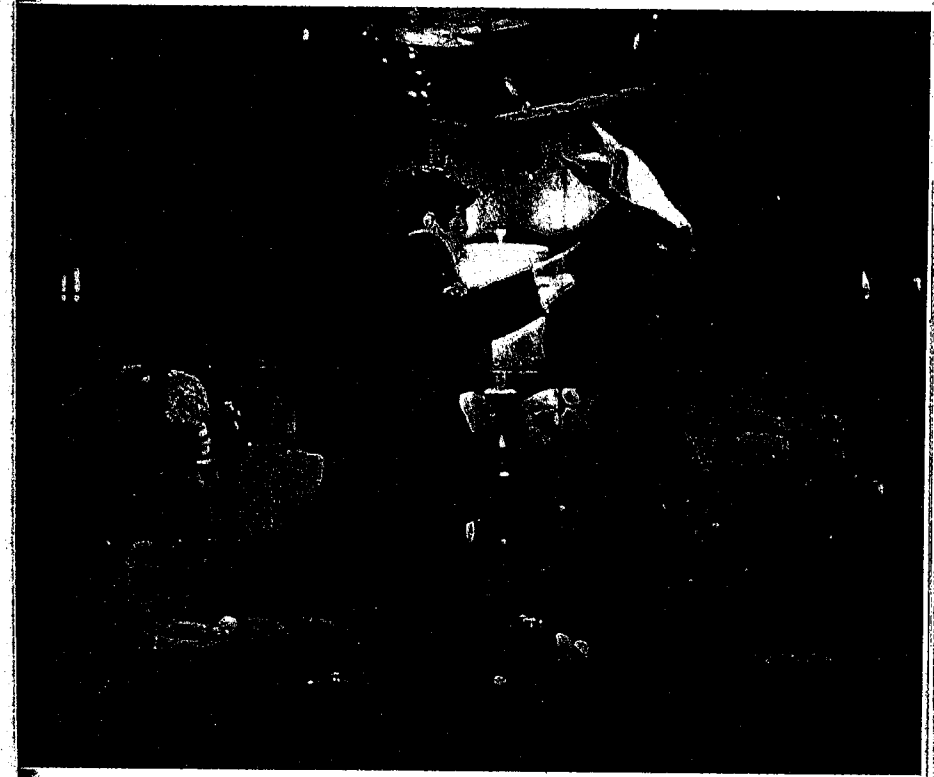
As she nears the dock in a rented motorboat, a sea gull swoops down at her, gashing her forehead. Melanie decides to stay, spending the night with Annie Hayworth (Suzanne Pleshette), the local schoolteacher. Annie warns Melanie that Mitch's mother, Mrs Brenner, is jealous and possessive with her son.

The next day, at Cathy's outdoor birthday party, the gulls swoop down on the picnicking children and that evening hundreds of sparrows come swooping down the chimney, flying all around the house and causing considerable damage. The following morning Mrs Brenner goes to visit a farmer nearby and finds him dead, with his eyes gouged out. That afternoon, when Melanie discovers an alarming assembly of crows gathering outside the schoolhouse, she and Annie organize the children's escape. As Melanie escorts them down the road, Annie is trapped behind and sacrifices her life in order to save Cathy. Meanwhile, Melanie and the children take refuge in a restaurant as the birds attack the town's business section, causing a fire in the gasoline station.

Melanie's courage during these trials inspires Mitch's love and his mother's approval of their romance.

That evening Melanie and the Brenners board up the windows of their home just in time to protect themselves from the enraged birds which dive suicidally against the house, tear at the shingles and gnaw at the doors to get at the people inside. After peace returns, Melanie, hearing a sound upstairs, goes up to the attic to investigate. There she finds herself in a room full of birds which attack her savagely. Finally rescued by Mitch, the girl is in a state of shock. Taking advantage of a momentary lull, Mitch decides to flee. Between the house and the garage and as far as the eye can see, thousands of birds wait in ominous array as the little group emerges from the battered house and moves slowly toward the car.





A.H. While I was shooting in Bodega Bay, there was an item in a San Francisco paper about crows attacking some young lambs, and, of all places, right in the same locality where we were working. I met a farmer who told me how the crows swooped down to kill his young lambs. That's where I got the idea for the gouged-out eyes of the dead man.

The picture opens with our two principal characters in San Francisco, and then I take them to Bodega Bay. The house and farm we built ourselves. We made an exact copy of the existing houses. There was an old Russian farm built around 1849. There were many Russians living on the coast at the time, and there's even a town called Sebastopol some twelve miles northeast of Bodega Bay. When the Russians owned Alaska, they used to come down the coast to hunt seals.

F.T. One distinct disadvantage in your kind of films is that however much people enjoy them, they hate to admit that they've been taken in. Their admiration is often mitigated by a tinge of resentment. It's as if they begrudged you the pleasure you give them.

A.H. Of course. They come to the theater and they sit down and say, 'All right. Now, show me!' And they want to be one jump ahead of the action: 'I know what's going to happen.' So, I have to take up the challenge: 'Oh, you know what's going to happen. Well, we'll just see about that!' With *The Birds* I made sure that the public would not be able to anticipate from one scene to another.

F.T. This happens to be one picture, I think, in which the public doesn't try to anticipate. They merely suspect that the attacks by the birds are going to become increasingly serious. The first part is an entirely normal picture with psychological overtones, and it is only at the end of each scene that some clue hints at the potential menace of the birds.

A.H. I had to do it that way because the public's curiosity was bound to be aroused by the articles in the press and the reviews, as well as by the word-of-mouth talk about the picture. I didn't want the public to become too impatient about the

birds, because that would distract them from the personal story of the two central characters. Those references at the end of each scene were my way of saying, 'Just be patient. They're coming soon.'

You know, there's a lot of detail in this movie; it's absolutely essential because these little nuances enrich the overall impact and strengthen the picture.

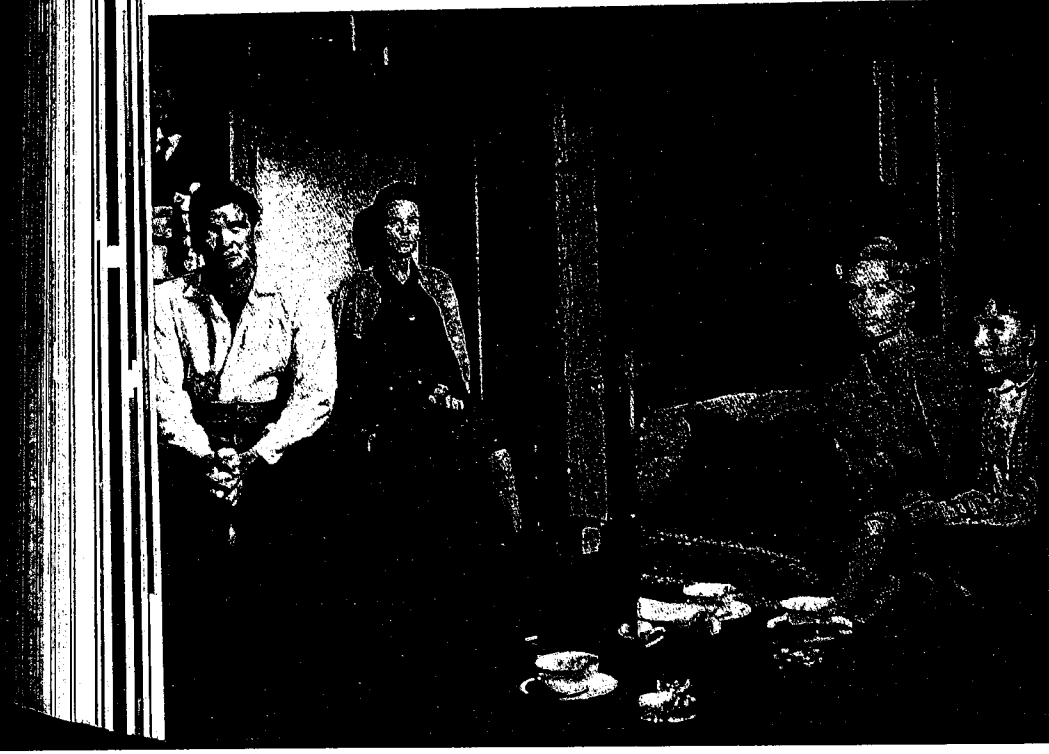
At the beginning of the film we show Rod Taylor in the bird shop. He catches the canary that has escaped from its cage, and after putting it back, he says to Tippi Hedren, 'I'm putting you back in your gilded cage, Melanie Daniels.' I added that sentence during the shooting because I felt it added to her characterization as a wealthy, shallow playgirl. And later on, when the gulls attack the village, Melanie Daniels takes refuge in a glass telephone booth and I show her as a bird in a cage. This time it isn't a gilded cage, but a cage of misery, and it's also the beginning of her ordeal by fire, so to speak. It's a reversal of the age-old conflict between men and birds. Here the human beings are in cages and the birds are on the outside. When I shoot something like that, I hardly think the public is likely to notice it.

F.T. Even though that metaphor wasn't obvious – to me, at any rate – this is truly a remarkably powerful scene. It was very ingenious to have that dialogue in the opening scene in the bird shop about the lovebirds because later on the whole film revolves around hate-filled birds. Throughout the picture the lovebirds were used in various ways to punctuate the irony of the content.

A.H. Aside from the touches of irony, that was necessary because love is going to survive the whole ordeal. At the end of the picture the little girl asks, 'Can I take my lovebirds along?' That little couple of lovebirds lends an optimistic note to the theme.

F.T. They convey a double meaning to several scenes, including one with the mother and another with the schoolteacher.

A.H. It all goes to show that with a little effort even the word 'love' can be made to sound ominous.



F.T. The story construction follows the three basic rules of classic tragedy: unity of place, of time, and of action. All of the action takes place within two days' time in Bodega Bay. The birds are seen in ever growing numbers and they become increasingly dangerous as the action progresses. It must have been a difficult script, but the story really works.

A.H. I can tell you the emotions I went through. I've always boasted that I never look at a script while I'm shooting. I know the whole film by heart. I've always been afraid of improvising on the set because, although one might have the time to get a new idea, there isn't sufficient time in the studio to examine the value of such an idea. There are too many crew people around. That's overhead, and I'm very conscientious about not wasting production money. I could never work like those directors who have the whole crew stand by while they sit down to think things out. I could never do that. But I was quite tense and this is unusual for me because as a rule I have a lot of fun during the shooting. When I went home to my wife at night, I was still tense and upset.

Something happened that was altogether new in my experience: I began to study the scenario as we went along, and I saw that there were weaknesses in it. This emotional siege I went through served to bring out an additional creative sense in me.

I began to improvise. For instance, the whole scene of the outside attack on the house by birds that are not seen was done spontaneously, right on the set. I'd almost never done anything like that before, but I made up my mind and quickly designed the movements of the people inside the room. I decided that the mother and the little girl would dart around to search for shelter. There was no place to run for cover, so I made them move about in contradictory directions, a little like rats scurrying into corners.

I deliberately shot Melanie Daniels from a distance because I wanted to make it clear that she was recoiling from nothing at all. What could she be drawing back from? She cringes back into the sofa and she doesn't even know what she's recoiling from.

Because I was so keyed up all of this came very easily and very quickly. Then I began to have doubts about other passages

of the movie. After the initial attack on the room, when the sparrows came down through the chimney, the sheriff came to the house to talk it over with Mitch. He's a skeptical man who doesn't believe the evidence of his own eyes: 'The sparrows came down through this chimney? Well, what makes you think they were out to attack you?' I studied the scene and found that the treatment was too old-fashioned, so I changed the whole thing. I decided to show the mother through Melanie's eyes. The scene begins with the whole group of characters, the sheriff, Mitch, the mother, and Melanie, in the background, and the whole scene that follows is a transfer from the objective viewpoint to a subjective viewpoint. The sheriff says, 'It's a sparrow all right!' And from the group of static figures the mother's figure detaches itself and her moving figure bends down. That downward movement now generates interest in the girl and the scene is now going to become her point of view. Melanie looks at the mother and the camera now photographs Jessica Tandy going around the room, in different positions, to pick up the broken teacups, to straighten the picture and to jump back when the bird falls out of its frame. The reverse cuts of Melanie, as she looks at the mother going back and forth, subtly indicate what she's thinking. Her eyes and gestures indicate an increasing concern over the mother's strange behavior and for the mother herself. The vision of the reality belongs to the girl, even when she crosses the room to say to Mitch, 'I think I'd better stay the night.' To go up to Mitch she has to walk across the room, but even as she's walking, I keep a big close-up on her because her concern and her interest demand that we retain the same size of image on the screen. If I were to cut and drop back to a looser figure, her concern would be diminished as well.

The size of the image is very important to the emotion, particularly when you're using that image to have the audience identify with it. In this scene, which is intended to suggest that Mitch's mother is cracking up, Melanie represents the public.

Another improvisation is the mother driving up to the farm, going into the house and calling the farmer before noticing the wrecked room and discovering the farmer's body. While we were shooting that, I said to myself, 'This doesn't make sense.' She calls the farmer and he doesn't answer. Well, a woman in

that position wouldn't push it any farther; she'd walk out of the house. So that's how I got the idea to keep her there by having her notice the five broken teacups hanging from the hooks.

F.T. And the viewer, who has just seen the broken china after the birds' attack on Brenner's home, guesses what has happened at the same time that she does. It's purely visual and immensely effective.

You've mentioned some last-minute improvisations in *The Birds*. Did you shoot any scenes that were eliminated subsequently in the editing stage?

A.H. Only one or two things after the discovery of the farmer's body. First, there was a love scene between the girl and the man that was eliminated. It took place after the mother went off to take the little girl to school. Melanie goes down, puts on her fur coat and sees the man burning the birds in the distance. She wanders off in his direction; she obviously wants

to be with him. When he is through with his job of burning the birds, I showed him coming toward her and you can read on her face her desire to receive him. Then, suddenly, he turns around and goes into the house. What's wrong? She's disappointed and I put that in to stress that Melanie's really keen on Mitch. A few minutes later he emerges from the house again and says, 'I've put a clean shirt on because the other one smelled of birds.'

Then we continued that scene in a light comedy note, with their speculations as to why the birds were behaving in that way. They joked about the fact that the birds have a leader, that he's a sparrow perched on a platform addressing all the birds and saying to them, 'Birds of the world, unite. You've nothing to lose but your feathers.'

F.T. Birds of a feather . . .

A.H. The scene became more serious, winding up with a kiss. Then we went on to show the mother driving back from the farm, terribly agitated. She rolls up just as the couple is exchanging another kiss, and I put a slight wince in her expression. One doesn't, at the time, know for sure whether that's because she's seen them in that embrace, but subsequent developments will indicate that was the reason.

Now, since that love scene was suppressed, the dialogue in the following scene between the mother and Melanie is slightly different from what it was originally.

The point I was trying to make is that this woman, though she was so terribly distressed about having seen the farmer with his eyes gouged out, was still a possessive mother. Her love for her son still dominated all of her other emotions.

F.T. Well then, why did you drop the scene?

A.H. Because I felt that the love interlude slowed down the story. Right along I was concerned about the fact that the word-of-mouth rumors would make the public impatient. I was worried about the audience sitting through this part of the picture and thinking to itself, 'Come on. Where are the birds? Let's get on with it.'

This is why we have an isolated attack on Melanie by a sea gull, why I was careful to put a dead bird outside the schoolteacher's house at night, and also why we put the birds on the wires when the girl drives away from the house in the evening. All of this was my way of saying to the audience, 'Don't worry, they're coming. The birds are on their way!' Anyway, I felt that a prolonged love scene at that point might have irritated the public.

F.T. By the way, the first time I saw the picture I had some reservations about the scene in the village café. It seemed too long, maybe because it wasn't exactly essential to the story.

A.H. That scene doesn't necessarily add anything, but I felt that after the attack of the birds on the children at the birthday party, the small birds coming down the chimney, and the attack of the crows outside the school, we should give the audience a rest before going back to horror. That scene in the restaurant is a breather that allows for a few laughs. The character of the drunk is straight out of an O'Casey play, and the elderly lady ornithologist is pretty interesting. In truth, you are right. The scene is a little on the long side, but I feel that if the audience is absorbed in it, it is automatically shortened. I've always measured the length or brevity of a scene by the degree of interest it holds for the public. If they're completely absorbed, it's a short scene; if they're bored, the scene is bound to be too long.

F.T. The scene in which Melanie Daniels is waiting for the children outside the school illustrates your secret formula for suspense. There's a long, silent wait, during which you build up the mood with great authority, almost imperiously. It's all in the style of cutting: never obvious, always tremendously effective and completely unique.

A.H. Well, let's examine that scene where the girl sits and waits while the crows are gathering behind her. Inside the schoolroom the teacher is saying to the children, 'Now, you're going to walk out and when I tell you to run, you'll run!' I carry that scene as far as the door and then I cut back to the

birds alone, all of them, and I stay with them, without cutting, for probably half a minute. And you begin to wonder: 'What's happening to the children? Where are they?' Eventually, you hear the feet of the children running, while all the birds rise and you see them going over the top of the schoolhouse roof before coming down at the children. Now, the old technique for getting suspense into that scene would have been a cross-cutting of the children down the steps and then back to the waiting crows. Then backward and forward again. But that's an old-fashioned method.

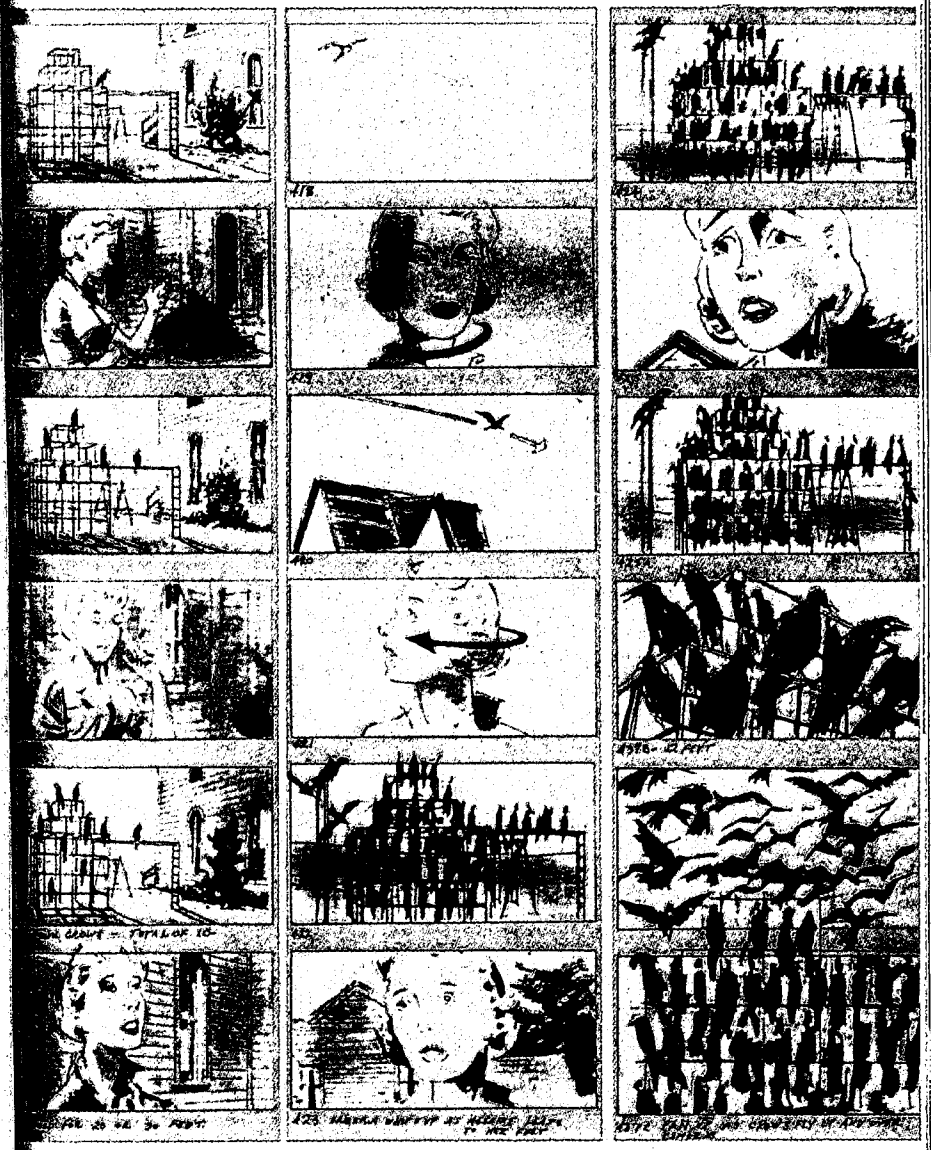
That's why, when the girl is waiting outside, smoking a cigarette, I stayed with her for fifty feet of film. And when she turns around to look, she sees all the crows at once.

F.T. The scene of the fire in the gasoline station is really thrilling. That unexpected high shot gives the impression the whole thing's being shown from the viewpoint of the gulls.

A.H. I did that high shot for three reasons. The first was intended to show the beginning of the gulls' descent on the town. The second was to show the exact topography of Bodega Bay, with the town, the sea, the coast, and the gas station on fire, in one single image. The third reason is that I didn't want to waste a lot of footage on showing the elaborate operation of the firemen extinguishing the fire. You can do a lot of things very quickly by getting away from something.

That's a rule that applies whenever you have to deal with something that's confusing or just plain dull and you want to avoid going into all those details. For instance, when the attendant is hurt by one of the gulls and everyone rushes over to help him, we watch that from a distance, from inside the restaurant, through the eyes of Melanie Daniels. In fact, the people who ran over to help the attendant should have picked him up much faster, but I needed more time to create some suspense in connection with the trail of gasoline that's spreading all over the street. In another case I might have done the opposite, and we might have kept away from a slow action to cut down the length of time.

F.T. In other words, you solve the problem of time by manipulating the space.



Reproduction of a storyboard (a sequence of sketches designed before shooting).
Melanie became aware of the gathering crows behind her.

A.H. That's right. We've already talked about the fact that film can be used either to contract time or to extend it at will, in accordance with our needs.

F.T. I'm curious about that gull that flies across the screen to swoop down upon the garage attendant. How was it possible to direct a bird with such accuracy?

A.H. That was a live gull thrown from a very high platform off screen. It was trained to go from one place to another by flying just above the man's head. He's an expert on movements and he overplayed his reactions to give the impression that he'd been hit by the gull.

F.T. Like those fake blows they use in fight scenes?

A.H. Exactly. Do you think I was right to have the teacher killed off?

F.T. The killing isn't shown on the screen; the viewer doesn't see her until she's dead. As a matter of fact, I was curious about your reason for doing away with her.

A.H. I felt that in the light of what the birds were doing to the town, she was doomed. Besides, she sacrificed herself to protect the sister of the man she loves. It's her final gesture.

In the original script she was in Mitch's home until the end of the picture, and she was the one who went up to the attic and was the victim of that last attack. I decided against that because since Tippi Hedren was the chief character, it was she who had to go through the final ordeal.

F.T. We certainly would be doing an injustice to *The Birds* if we failed to mention the sound track. There's no music, of course, but the bird sounds are worked out like a real musical score. I have in mind, for instance, the scene of the bird attack on the house, which is carried solely by sound.

A.H. We had a problem when we were shooting that scene to get the actors inside the besieged house to respond properly because we didn't yet have the sounds of the wings and the noises made by the birds. I had a drummer put on the set, with a small side drum and a mike with a loudspeaker. Whenever the actors played their scene, there was a loud drum roll to help them react.

Then I asked Bernard Herrmann to supervise the whole sound track.* When musicians compose a score, or orchestrate, they make sounds rather than music. We used only sounds for the whole of the picture. There was no music.

F.T. When Jessica Tandy discovers the farmer's body, she opens her mouth as if to scream, but we hear nothing. Wasn't that done to emphasize the sound track at this point?

A.H. The sound track was vital just there; we had the sound of her footsteps running down the passage, with almost an echo. The interesting thing in the sound is the difference between the footsteps inside the house and on the outside. Did you notice that I had her run from the distance and then went to a close-up when she's paralyzed with fear and inarticulate? There's silence at that point. Then, as she goes off again, the sound of the steps will match the size of the image. It grows louder right up to the moment she gets into the truck, and then the screech of the truck engine starting off conveys her anguish. We were really experimenting there by taking real sounds and then stylizing them so that we derived more drama from them than we normally would.

For the arrival of the truck, I had the road watered down so that no dust would rise because I wanted that dust to have a dramatic function when she drives away.

F.T. I remember that very clearly. In addition to the dust you even had the smoke from the exhaust pipe.

* Bernard Herrmann created and directed the musical score for all the Hitchcock pictures since *The Trouble with Harry* in 1955. Prior to that he created the score for Orson Welles's first two films, *Citizen Kane* in 1940 and *The Magnificent Ambersons* in 1942.

A.H. The reason we went to all that trouble is that the truck, seen from a distance like that, moving at a tremendous speed, expresses the frantic nature of the mother's moves. In the previous scene we had shown that the woman was going through a violent emotion, and when she gets into the truck, we showed that this was an emotional truck. Not only by the image, but also through the sound that sustains the emotion. It's not only the sound of the engine you hear, but something that's like a cry. It's as though the truck were shrieking.

F.T. As a matter of fact, the sound in all your pictures is very elaborate and always dramatic. Quite often the sound does not correspond to the image on the screen, but may extend and intensify a previous scene. There are several instances of this technique.

A.H. After a picture is cut, I dictate what amounts to a real sound script to a secretary. We run every reel off and I indicate all the places where sounds should be heard. Until now we've worked with natural sounds, but now, thanks to electronic sound, I'm not only going to indicate the sound we want but also the style and the nature of each sound.

For instance, when Melanie is locked up in the attic with the murderous birds, we inserted the natural sounds of wings, but we stylized them so as to create greater intensity. We wanted to get a menacing wave of vibration rather than a single level. There was a variation of the noise, an assimilation of the unequal noise of the wings. Of course, I took the dramatic license of not having the birds scream at all.

To describe a sound accurately, one has to imagine its equivalent in dialogue. What I wanted to get in that attack is as if the birds were telling Melanie, 'Now, we've got you where we want you. Here we come. We don't have to scream in triumph or in anger. This is going to be a silent murder.' That's what the birds were saying, and we got the technicians to achieve that effect through electronic sound.

For the final scene, in which Rod Taylor opens the door of the house for the first time and finds the birds assembled there, as far as the eye can see, I asked for a silence, but not just any kind of silence. I wanted an electronic silence, a sort of monotonous low hum that might suggest the sound of the sea in the distance. It was a strange, artificial sound, which in the language of the birds might be saying, 'We're not ready to attack you yet, but we're getting ready. We're like an engine that's purring and we may start off at any moment.' All of this was suggested by a sound that's so low that you can't be sure whether you're actually hearing it or only imagining it.

F.T. According to a newspaper story I read, Peter Lorre once played a joke on you by sending you some fifty canaries when you were sailing on a boat and you got even with him by sending him daily wires, giving him news of the birds, one by one. *The Birds* reminded me of that story, and I'd like to know whether it is true or whether it's just another press canard.

A.H. No, it isn't true. They credit me with many jokes that have no basis in fact, but I do have a weakness for practical jokes and have played quite a few in my time. Once, we were at a party in a restaurant with some twelve guests to celebrate my wife's birthday. I hired an aristocratic-looking elderly dowager and we put her at the place of honor. Then, I ignored her completely. The guests came in, and when they saw the nice old lady sitting alone at the big table, each one asked me, 'Who's the old lady?' and I answered, 'I don't know.' The waiters were in on the gag, and when anyone asked them, 'But what did she say? Didn't anyone speak to her?' the waiters said, 'The lady told us that she was a guest of Mr Hitchcock's.' And whenever I was asked about it, I maintained that I hadn't the slightest idea who she was. People were becoming increasingly curious. That's all they could think about. Then, when we were in the middle of our dinner, one writer suddenly banged his fist on the table and said, 'It's a gag!' And while all the guests were looking at the old lady to see whether it was true, the writer turned to a young man who'd been brought along by one of the guests and said, 'I bet you're a gag, too!'

I've always wanted to carry that joke a little further. I'd like to hire a woman of that type for a dinner and introduce her to the guests as an elderly aunt of mine. The so-called aunt would say, 'Can I have a drink?' And in front of everyone, I would say, 'Absolutely not. You know how you are when you drink. No drinks for you.' So the old lady would wander off into a corner, looking very pathetic. All the guests would be quite uncomfortable. Later on Auntie would come over again, with soulful eyes, and I would say very sharply, 'It's no good looking at me like that. Besides, you're embarrassing everybody.' And the old lady would simply whimper and then begin to cry softly, while the guests wouldn't know where to look and really would feel they were in the way. Then I'd say, 'Look here, you're ruining our whole party. That's enough. You'd better go back to your room.'

The only reason I never pulled that joke is that I'm afraid someone might hit me.