Purchasing Fear:
Analyzing Cold War Ideologies in Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds*

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Abstract

During the Cold War Americans were inundated with talk of atomic weapons, attacks, communist spies, and alleged “contamination.” It is a commonplace that films offered an escape from this repetitive flood of fear and indoctrination. However, upon examination, Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963) appears to have intensified Cold War fears and anxieties, rather than pacifying them. This thesis focuses on depictions of Cold War imagery represented in *The Birds*. The film’s imagery will be dissected and examined through semiotic analysis, in an attempt to expose the film’s Cold War imagery that threatened Americans and American ideals.

While Hitchcock sought favorable reviews and a generous paycheck, his motion picture, like other directors’ films of the period, aided and abetted Cold War anxiety and fear outside of the cinema, thereby endorsing Cold War trepidation as a norm amongst Americans in the 1960s. This thesis will review the Cold War period leading up to the film’s debut, it will examine the film’s scholarly literature and reviews, and it will analyze the Cold War imagery found in *The Birds* and its potential meaning. The aim of this thesis is to explore the pervasive theme of Cold War fear and anxiety in *The Birds* and to suggest that Cold War imagery possibly intensified audiences’ previously established Cold War fears.

Key Words: *The Birds*, Communism, Atomic Warfare, Cold War, Film, Hitchcock, Horror Genre, Semiotics, Unconscious Mind, Fear, Paranoia, Anxiety.
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Introduction

We all want to escape from something at one time or another. Perhaps we want to evade trivial matters, like the annual ritual of going to the dentist; or, we attempt to avoid potentially fatal situations, like developing cancerous cells. We may even dream of bypassing our monotonous daily lives that consist of buying groceries, folding laundry, and juggling work with late night television. Regardless of the source that triggers our anxiety, each and every person has a task, a routine, or a condition from which they would like to escape, or avoid, if only for a moment. Many people use distractions as a fleeting escape. However, according to communications scholar Arthur Berger diversions are often unsuccessful. Berger writes:

Ironically, to assuage our bad feelings, to rid ourselves of these anxieties about ourselves and our situations, we turn to the mass media—movies, soap operas, music, even all-news radio stations—which reinforce the very problems we hope they will help us solve. Thus we become caught in a vicious cycle from which there is no escape.¹

The quintessence of such a cycle is horror films. Whether viewers realize it or not, horror films deliver “audiences a visual manifestation of their deepest fears.”² Numerous examples of this can be found in the 1950s and 1960s horror genre. While some dramas were blatantly anti-communist, like The Red Menace (1949) and I Was a Communist for the FBI (1951),³ horror films such as Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956), The Tingler (1959), and House of Usher (1960) frequently masked and

² Cyndy Hendershot, I Was a Cold War Monster: Horror Films, Eroticism, and the Cold War Imagination (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2001), 130.
propagated Cold War fears of atomic warfare and the spread of communism.\textsuperscript{4} Ergo, instead of escaping Cold War anxieties, Americans unknowingly paid to intensify them.

In part, viewers are at fault for this phenomenon. People may purchase a movie ticket to shirk from their daily lives, but they seldom want to feel perplexed or confused. For this reason, viewers must still relate to what they visually consume. Theorist Gene Youngblood reifies this notion, stating that the commercial entertainer, who is driven by the profit motive, “seeks only to gratify preconditioned needs for formula stimulus. He offers nothing we have [not] already conceived, nothing we do [not] already expect.”\textsuperscript{5}

Simply put, familiarity sells. If a film mirrors what is known, or popular, it is more marketable and more likely to be profitable. Thus, several horror films produced during the Cold War echoed the atomic anxieties and insidious fears that haunted many Americans during this period. One such film is Alfred Hitchcock’s \textit{The Birds}.

In 1963 Universal Pictures released \textit{The Birds}. Hitchcock, who was still riding a wave of popularity from the success of \textit{Psycho} (1960), eagerly anticipated the public’s reaction to his most difficult film production yet. Captivated by the title of Daphne du Maurier’s short story “The Birds,” Hitchcock purchased the rights to the prose in 1961 largely to harvest the title. Hitchcock then employed writer Evan Hunter to write a thrilling screenplay to match the newly purchased name.\textsuperscript{6} Following Harold Michelson’s storyboards, Hitchcock engaged animal trainer Ray Berwick to capture 25,000 birds—3,000 of which were to be trained—to create a realistic and believable horror film that

\textsuperscript{4} Hendershot, \textit{I Was a Cold War Monster}, 95, 98.
narrated the story of birds viciously attacking a defenceless and unsuspecting all-American town from the sky.⁷

This thesis focuses on depictions of Cold War imagery represented in *The Birds*. The film’s imagery will be dissected and examined through semiotics—the study of signs. Semiotician Umberto Eco proposes that a sign is “*everything* that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as *something standing for something else*.”⁸ Eco goes on to suggest that “Every time there is a correlation… recognized by a human society, there is a sign.”⁹ Therefore, according to Eco, everything and anything may be a sign.

Berger argues that interpreting signs becomes increasingly difficult as “we are not [always] aware of everything that is going on in our minds.”¹⁰ The unconscious will sometimes absorb signs without the viewer’s knowledge.¹¹ When watching *The Birds*, numerous viewers likely never realized that Cold War imagery had passed by their internal censors and amplified their Cold War fears. Taking into consideration viewers’ contemporary concerns about the Cold War in the early 1960s, this thesis will attempt to decode Cold War visuals in *The Birds*. Unpacking these signs will explore a new and rewarding reading of a film that has been considered in a variety of ways.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One, “Cold War America, 1945 to 1963,” provides an overview and summary of Cold War escalation and fears, and the media that engendered them. This historical overview offers a Cold War context into

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⁷ Ibid., 104.
⁹ Ibid., 48.
¹⁰ Berger, *Media Analysis Techniques*, 76.
¹¹ Ibid.
which the film must be placed in order to fully understand its reflection of the period and its role in contributing to contemporary apprehensions. Chapter Two, “Film and the Cold War,” explores how Hollywood profited from Cold War anxieties since the debut of the atomic bomb. The latter half of the chapter consists of a literature review on *The Birds*. Chapter Three, “Semiotic Analysis of *The Birds,*” examines the patriotic undertones found within the film and deconstructs the film’s Cold War imagery. Chapter Four, “Marketing Cold War Fear,” investigates Hitchcock’s advertising and promotions for *The Birds* and audits the film’s reviews and public response. The final chapter also assesses the weight of Hitchcock’s hand in controlling the film’s production, taking into consideration the director’s motives and intentions in creating this contentious “creature-feature.”

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Chapter One: Cold War America, 1945 to 1963

On 2 September, 1945 a ravaged and stunned Japan surrendered. After experiencing firsthand the devastating effects of atomic warfare—“an event completely without precedent”\textsuperscript{13}—and receiving confirmation that the Soviet Union had joined the Allies on the Pacific front, Japan was forced to choose probable annihilation or complete surrender. Following this bleak ultimatum the war came to a close. For a fleeting moment the Allies erupted in jubilation. However, euphoria quickly morphed into societal angst as the world was forced to confront the atomic bomb. Editor Tom Engelhardt, who was a child when the war came to a close, recalls: “For all of us in a sense, the Earth was knocked off its axis on August 6, 1945. In that one moment, my father’s war ended and my war—the Cold War—began.”\textsuperscript{14}

In the aftermath of the Second World War Americans turned their radar toward their Soviet counterparts as many Americans believed that the Soviet Union was determined to extend its control through eastern Europe and indeed throughout the world. The effects ran deep as the nation shortly became consumed with rooting-out subversives and avoiding communist contamination at all costs. Divisions deepened between the Soviet Union and the United States in the summer of 1949 when, much to the surprise of the United States, the Soviet Union detonated an atomic bomb.\textsuperscript{15} Subsequently, this stoked fears of annihilation for many Americans. In 1950, Republican Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, infamously played a leading role in painting

the era red. Stating he had a list of 205 communists working in the State Department, McCarthy quickly captivated America’s attention, contributing to the growth of “a culture of secrecy and recriminations.”

The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) also contributed to strengthening the Red Scare. HUAC was originally created in the 1930s to combat Nazism and American fascism. After the Second World War the committee adjusted its attention to target Americans with alleged communist ties. Concerned that members of the public might be swayed by communist images or perceptions in film, HUAC attacked Hollywood. The committee accused prominent actors, directors, and screenwriters of holding dissident views—the most prominent suspects became known as the “Hollywood Ten.” Historian John Haynes notes:

Initially a number of major stars and some studio executives did attack the committee and make a free-speech defense of the Hollywood Ten. But this did not last long. The general public was becoming increasingly aroused by the Soviet threat, and evidence that the unfriendly witnesses were enthusiastic supporters of Stalin did not go over well.

As a result of the hearings a blacklist was imposed, which forever altered and damaged many filmmakers’ careers.

Increasingly transfixed with the thought of subversive spies many Americans became immersed in concerns over civil defense. American diplomat William Bullitt exemplifies such concerns in a 1950 issue of Reader’s Digest. Bullitt laments:

[W]hat is the real state of our own defenses against Soviet expansionism? Our military strength is falling behind the growing military strength of

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17 Haynes, 64.
18 Ibid., 71.
19 Ibid., 73.
20 Ibid., 74.
Stalin. The Soviet atomic-bomb threat to our homes is increasing each day. We have only a fraction of the number of pursuit planes needed to make effective use of a warning net… The Communists are advancing, we are retreating.21

In response to increasing public anxiety, in 1950 the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) was created.22 Aimed at quelling the public’s panic, the FCDA sought to prepare the nation for the possibility of a nuclear attack.23 In addition, Democratic Senator from Nevada Patrick McCarren sponsored the McCarren International Security Act. The act marked members of the Communist Party as subversives, limiting their potential job opportunities in defense companies and in some cases denying passports.24 This act was vetoed by President Truman because he thought it threatened civil liberties. However, his objection fell on deaf ears due to “anticommunist sentiment aroused by the advent of the Korean War.”25 For this reason Congress chose to override the veto.26

To further uphold national security, in 1953 President Dwight Eisenhower issued Executive Order 10450. The Executive Order threatened immediate termination of employment if an individual was thought to be capable of treason.27 Matters escalated in 1954, when America witnessed the execution of convicted spies, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.28 In the same year, membership in the Communist Party became a federal offence.29

22 Evans, Celluloid Mushroom Clouds, 4.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 55.
26 Ibid.
27 Evans, Celluloid Mushroom Clouds, 55.
28 Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted of espionage during the Second World War; specifically for transferring information on the Manhattan Project to the Soviet Union.
29 Evans, Celluloid Mushroom Clouds, 54.
Cold War tensions heightened when Fidel Castro’s Cuban revolution erupted in 1959. Initially, Americans celebrated Castro for liberating Cuba from Dictator Fulgencio Batista’s repressive grip. But when Castro held public revolutionary trials and had hundreds of “batistiano” secret police executed, views began to change. Scholar Van Gosse states that trials “inevitably inspired comparisons with the French and Russian terrors.” As a result, many Americans began to view Castro in a darker and more menacing light. The communist threat suddenly crept closer to American soil and American-Cuban relations quickly deteriorated.

Faced with a growing communist threat, President Eisenhower met First Secretary of the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev at a Paris peace summit in the spring of 1960 in an attempt to mitigate growing hostilities. These peace talks were short lived when the USSR shot down an American U-2 spy plane. The incident sharpened the already prominent fissure between the two countries. Meanwhile, Castro solidified his relations with the Soviet Union and cemented his control of Cuba, particularly after his victory over the United States’ failed Bay of Pigs Operation in 1961.

In America, anxieties reached a new high on 22 October, 1962 when President John F. Kennedy delivered a televised address to the nation. Kennedy confirmed that Soviet nuclear-armed missile facilities had been spotted in Cuba by an American spy plane. This breaking news confirmed the rumors Americans had been dreading.

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31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Margot A. Henriksen, Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 195.
34 Evans, Celluloid Mushroom Clouds, 166.
35 Ibid.
Historian Margot Henriksen reflects on this period, stating: “Fifteen years into the atomic age, the apocalyptic imagination merged with reality, the past collided with the present, and time seemed to be running out.”\textsuperscript{36} For the first time, Americans had finally came “face-to-face with their Soviet foes” shaking them out of “a long sleep of avoidance.”\textsuperscript{37}

Kennedy informed the nation that if missiles were fired on the United States, the country would respond with an immediate nuclear attack on the Soviet Union. In an effort to prevent such drastic measures, Kennedy positioned a naval quarantine around Cuba to prohibit any further Soviet deliveries of nuclear arsenal and demanded that the Soviet Union dismantle and remove all existing missiles. Through private deliberations, tensions between the two superpowers dissipated and an arrangement was agreed upon. The Soviets would remove all nuclear armaments in Cuba and America would withdraw missiles from Turkey. In addition, America would refrain from invading Cuba.\textsuperscript{38} This truce successfully concluded the October crisis. However, the event itself was not easily forgotten. The Cuban Missile Crisis reminded America of its defenseless fragility. America may have dodged the bomb, but in many Americans’ minds the threat of a nuclear attack was far from absent.

1.1 Distribution of Fear

When the Second World War ended, the media assisted the country in developing a new distaste for the Soviet Union. As the Cold War emerged, it “thrived on images of

\textsuperscript{36} Henriksen, Dr. Strangelove’s America, 186.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 187.
impending global disaster.”⁵³⁹ One of “the most powerful visual symbols of the atomic age” was labelled the “Doomsday Clock.”⁴⁰ The clock first appeared in 1947, and was managed by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. As global tensions over nuclear weaponry increased, the clock’s hands would move closer to midnight, signifying the end of the world.⁴¹

Popular culture also became saturated by themes of communist contamination. News outlets, films, cartoons, and even comic books proliferated Cold War fears in an attempt to educate the young about the potential dangers for the future—while simultaneously making a profit. For example, in 1947, the Catechetical Guild Educational Society published four million copies of a comic book entitled, Is This Tomorrow: America Under Communism. It featured a front cover depicting an America ravaged by flames, while communist enemies attacked defenceless Americans who managed to escape the fire.⁴² Other established comics integrated Cold War ideologies into storylines, creating villains and conflicts that better reflected the tumultuous Cold War period.⁴³ In his book Secret Identity Crisis Matthew Costello draws particular attention to Captain America, whom he claims “best exemplifies Cold War American consensus identity.”⁴⁴ Likewise, popular culture also targeted adults’ Cold War fears.

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⁴⁰ Robert Jacobs, Filling the Hole in the Nuclear Future, 1.
⁴¹ Ibid.
⁴² James L. Roark et al., Understanding the American Promise: A Brief History (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011), 722.
⁴⁴ Ibid.
Mass circulated magazines such as *Time*, *Life*, and *Reader’s Digest*, influenced perceptions and fears of the new and foreboding nuclear menace. Joanne Sharp argues that *Reader’s Digest* maintained “popular anticommunism throughout the Cold War years.” By providing disconcerting headlines—such as, “Red Spymasters in America” and “Can We Still Save America?”—*Reader’s Digest* created and fueled anxieties of espionage and America’s possible destruction. An article from 1961 went as far as to suggest, “WORLD WAR III HAS ALREADY STARTED!” In 1947, *Reader’s Digest* published an article on the aftermath of an atomic bomb and the “mist of death” that could contaminate Americans with radiation poisoning. Joyce Evans argues that such articles spread “rampant speculation,” which then led “to widespread paranoia concerning radiation contamination.” In 1953, these “irrepressible rumors” concerning fallout began to circulate widely. Rumors blamed fallout for birth defects, health problems and contaminated food, particularly fish. Fallout was even thought to effect natural phenomena, such as increased thawing in the arctic region, or a potential “chain reaction that would engulf the world in flames.”

The government wanted the nation to be aware of the possible hostilities, but mass hysteria was not the objective. To combat popular culture President Harry Truman

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45 Joanne P. Sharp, *Condensing the Cold War: Reader’s Digest and American Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 85.
47 Bullitt, “Can We Still Save America?,” 143.
50 Evans, *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds*, 67.
51 Ibid., 104.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
approved propaganda based around defensive measures to help suppress public concerns. The FCDA orchestrated these actions by building community bomb shelters and distributing air-raid drills. With the assistance of “Bert the Turtle” school children were taught “duck and cover” exercises. The FCDA—“with the aid of the Strategic Air Command (SAC)”—also circulated instructional films to organizations and schools. Films such as Atomic Survival (1951) and Survival City (1955) were produced to promote self-defence against nuclear attack. In reality, there was little the government could do to physically defend Americans from an atomic blast.

On 25 July, 1961 President Kennedy delivered an alarming address to the nation. He warned of the deteriorating relations with the Soviet Union over Berlin, and proposed “a multi-billion dollar defense program” as well as a domestic civil defense program “that stressed the immense gravity of a potential superpower confrontation.” After Kennedy’s address, the FCDA “was deluged with 6,000 letters a day, more than it used to receive in a month.” Letters contained desperate pleas for information “concerning ways to protect life and property from the seemingly inevitable nuclear confrontation.” For Americans who feared a nuclear attack, many responded by turning to bomb shelters, “a fad verging on hysteria.”

Opportunists quickly exploited the growing bomb shelter market. It appeared that “overnight, swimming pool contractors became experts on bomb shelters, manufacturers

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54 Paul Boyer, By Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Bomb (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 353; Evans, 64.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., 150.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
marketed their products as ‘survival equipment,’ and banks offered loans for building the
shelters.”61 Millions of paperbacks containing literature on defence were also distributed
by the government including *The Family Fallout Shelter* (1959) and Mel Mawrence’s
*You Can Survive the Bomb* (1961).62 Henriksen describes this societal shift as “a kind of
radical survivalist attitude” accompanying “a psychological and physical gearing up for
war.”63

Some Americans channeled their fear into aggression.64 Growing hatred for
communism and fear of nuclear attack led some bomb shelter owners to equip their
shelters with guns.65 Others became militant. Radical anti-communist groups, like the
“Minute Man” vigilante organization, went as far as to train men as guerrilla fighters.
According to a 1961 issue of *Time*, the group’s aim was “to survive, and to fight the
Russians if they should attempt to land in the U.S. after a nuclear attack.”66 The
antithesis to such action became anti-bomb activism. By the 1960s, voices increasingly
objected to the bomb, questioning the morality of the atomic age.67 Conscientious
objectors to the Cold War instead promoted “a revolution in human values designed to
counter the nation’s slide toward amorality.”68 The bomb mentality had created a chasm
between those who supported the bomb and those who objected; however, undeniably
the majority of Americans simply feared the gravity of the stark situation.69

61 Ibid., 150-151.
62 Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove’s America*, 203. Evans, 151.
63 Henriksen, 203.
64 Ibid., 187.
65 Ibid., 203.
67 Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove’s America*, 188.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 187.
Public tension came to a climax during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Initiating on 14 October, 1962 the crisis lasted for approximately two weeks and caused food hoarding and bomb shelter production to reach an all-time high. For many Americans, the end of the world was nigh. Author Gail Seneca, who experienced the crisis as a child, provides a survivor’s point-of-view in her short story “Waiting for the Bomb.” Seneca writes:

For me, the nuns [at school] supplied the context, an archetypal battle between good and evil, in which John F. Kennedy, our handsome, Catholic president faced the bearded, cigar-smoking revolutionary, Fidel Castro, and his patron, Khrushchev…To prepare, we leapt under our school desks, ‘duking and covering.’

On the eve of Kennedy’s ultimatum to the USSR, Seneca listened to WINS—an all-news radio station in New York City—on her transistor radio. Sitting up until midnight listening to “Last minute negotiations, cables flying back and forth, [and] telephone lines buzzing with frantic diplomacy,” Seneca describes how the radio announcer reported “how long it was to the end of the world.”

Like Seneca, in “Nuclear Culture” Judy Hiramoto recalls how similar apocalyptic fears she experienced during her childhood remained a constant into her adult life. Hiramoto notes that she had nightmares revolving around nuclear war that would sometimes cause her to lay awake wondering “when the attack would come.” To help placate her fears she attempted to persuade her parents to build a backyard fallout shelter. When Hiramoto’s father learned of her fears, he told her not to worry because if a bomb did hit them, they would all simply die. Hiramoto states that as a child, she

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70 Evans, *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds*, 166.
72 Ibid., 128.
73 Ibid.
74 Hiramoto, “Nuclear Culture,” 207.
75 Ibid.
knew “there was something very absurd and frightening about his response.” Due to the impact the Cold War had on her, Hiramoto avoided a career and a fixed residence for many years, since, in her view “there may be no future.” The end of the world never came, but Seneca’s short story and Hiramoto’s reflection of her Cold War childhood illustrate how even the average American child was affected by the bomb’s looming presence.

Fears of nuclear destruction subsided as the Cuban Missile Crisis was resolved diplomatically; although, it would not be until the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was signed in August, 1963 that the country would experience a sense of substantial relief. The treaty put an end to atmospheric nuclear testing, which in turn pacified public concerns about nuclear destruction and radiation poisoning for the first time in nearly twenty years. After an extended period of Cold War indoctrination, the treaty offered Americans a bit of respite. However, it is in the lull between the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty that The Birds debuted. Tension, worry, and fear still heavily permeated the country before the treaty was signed. The Cuban Missile Crisis had passed, but the memory of the turbulent event deeply scarred America.

76 Ibid.
77 Evans, Celluloid Mushroom Clouds, 166; Boyer, By Bomb’s Early Light, 355.
78 Evans, 166.
Chapter Two: Film and the Cold War

The American film industry repeatedly exploited what *Life* magazine called the “biggest event since the birth of Christ,” the atomic bomb.\(^79\) Quickly cashing in on the public’s curiosity and fear of atomic weaponry, *The House on 92nd Street* (1945) was the first film to incorporate elements of nuclear bombs and the secrecy behind their formula.\(^80\) However, *The House on 92nd Street* was but the first of many film productions to profit from the nuclear age. Hollywood generated a legion of films that revolved around mushroom cloud explosions and their probable lasting effects.\(^81\) State funded propaganda also played a role. Between 1947 and 1965 government-funded commercial films were produced to expose the espied dangers of communism.\(^82\) Just as the film industry exploited contemporary fears, the U.S. government was quick to exploit the medium’s popularity with the public.

Advertised as a form of entertainment, Evans stresses that film can simultaneously “create, reflect, and reinforce the central system of practices, meanings, and values operating within a society during a particular period.”\(^83\) As a result, film historian Peter Rollins has pointed out, “Without intending to act the role of historian, Hollywood has often been an unwitting recorder of national moods.”\(^84\) Therefore, acting as “historical agents,” writers and directors invariably document the national temperament of any given period.\(^85\) Marc Ferro argues film can thus be seen as a

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\(^79\) *Life*, March 17, 1947, 74, quoted in Evans, *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds*, 23.
\(^80\) Evans, 5.
\(^81\) Ibid., 24.
\(^83\) Evans, *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds*, 2.
“source” of history. Predominantly from 1945 to 1963, this “source” revealed the period’s fixation with spies and communist contamination, and the period’s paranoia of nuclear attack, survival, and potential side effects from radiation poisoning. Average filmmakers likely did not see themselves as “historical agents,” but they did perceive themselves as agents of revenue. In order to make a profit filmmakers sold what other media outlets were already exploiting: atomic fear. Hollywood was repeatedly able to package and sell Cold War fears as it often disguised “popular anxieties through the use of metaphor and the selection of specific genres.” The science fiction genre was a prominent distributor of such allegories.

Saturating the 1950s, science fiction films focused on Cold War concerns about “the political morality and apocalyptic potential of atomic and hydrogen bombs.” Fallout and its residual “transmutational effects” also became a prominent motif. If average Americans did not physically grow, shrink, or mutate into a monstrous form in cinema—like in The Incredible Shrinking Man (1957)—sci-fi films implemented aliens as an attractive alternative. Serving as “deliberate stand-ins for Communists” aliens frequently appeared on the big screen to warn Americans of foreign invaders. This can be found in such cult classics as The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951) and It Came From Outer Space (1953).

86 Ibid., 12.
87 Evans, Celluloid Mushroom Clouds, 171.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Henriksen, Dr. Strangelove’s America, 50.
91 Evans, Celluloid Mushroom Clouds, 1.
93 Evans, Celluloid Mushroom Clouds, 16-17.
But science fiction was not the only genre to profit from the atomic age. The horror genre emerged as a close competitor. Horror films offered a greater breadth of communist villains. Films such as *The Bad Seed* (1956), *Monster on the Campus* (1958), and *Village of the Damned* (1960) quickly became popular substitutes for the recycled science fiction characters with which the public had grown familiar.  

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the horror genre offered little originality. Masked typically as vampires, werewolves, or—reminiscent of the science fiction genre—alien children, monstrous protagonists continued to prey on innocent American families, schools, and communities. In some cases, the entire planet was threatened, mimicking the “apocalyptic fears of the age.” Evil mothers or juvenile delinquents who had fallen victim to communist ideologies also served as dangerous villains or mindless drones. Horror and science fiction were divided by genre conventions, but they both frequently dealt in similar Cold War currency.

Youngblood explains that recycled narratives in film are a normal phenomenon. In order to make a profit, Youngblood observes, “the commercial entertainer must give the audience what it expects, which is conditional on what it has been getting, which is conditional on what it previously received, ad infinitum.” To strike a balance, the filmmaker is thus forced to furnish viewers what they expect—a reflection of society—while still providing a modified story that appears new and entertaining, and compels viewers to once again purchase a ticket. As society changes, so too does its reflection.

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94 Hendershot, *I Was a Cold War Monster*, 129.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 2.
98 Mast, *Film Theory and Criticism*, 609-610.
Ironically, viewers then continue to pay for what they already believe, and what they have already likely seen.

2.1 Literature Review: *The Birds*

The complexity of Hitchcock’s work has given rise to a wide variety of scholarly interpretation. Such differing interpretations have led to rival opinions and scholarly debate. According to film critic David Sterritt, Hitchcock’s *The Birds* “is perhaps the most loudly debated of them all.”

*The Birds* consists of five main characters: Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren), Mitch (Rod Taylor), Lydia (Jessica Tandy) and Cathy Brenner (Veronica Cartwright), and Annie Hayworth (Suzanne Pleshette). Melanie is a young socialite from San Francisco who is actively pursuing lawyer Mitch Brenner. Mitch visits his widowed mother Lydia and eleven year old sister Cathy every weekend in the small all-American town of Bodega Bay, where they live. Melanie first meets Mitch in San Francisco in a bird shop where he is seeking to purchase two lovebirds for his sister’s birthday gift. When the store does not have any, Melanie orders a pair of lovebirds and travels to Bodega Bay to impress Mitch with her gracious gift for his sister. When Melanie arrives she meets Annie Hayworth, the local school teacher, who also followed Mitch to Bodega Bay, four years earlier, to pursue a romantic relationship. When the relationship failed to come to fruition, Annie stayed on in Bodega Bay. Shortly after Melanie arrives, the birds in the community begin to act strangely, growing in numbers and then, suddenly, attacking in increasing ferocity. After the final bird attack on the Brenner’s house, Mitch, Lydia, Cathy, and Melanie pile into a vehicle and drive through a landscape overshadowed by birds. The film concludes with an open ending.

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The film’s plot appears generic enough, however, as Camille Paglia has noted, “The more microscopically the film is studied, the more it reveals.” For over fifty years, scholars have dedicated countless pages to analyzing the possible causality behind the bird attacks and the birds’ possible meaning. Thus, several theories have surfaced. Film critic Robin Wood, who initiated the debate, proposes that the birds represent:

[A] concrete embodiment of the arbitrary and unpredictable, of whatever makes human life and human relationships precarious, a reminder of fragility and instability that cannot be ignored or evaded and, beyond that, of the possibility that life is meaningless and absurd.

Rather than providing a specific representation, Wood concludes that the birds do not mean anything, they just are.

For Hitchcock biographer Donald Spoto the meaning of the birds is far more complex. Spoto argues that Hitchcock employed birds to create chaos, a theme Hitchcock introduced into his work as early as Blackmail (1929). In The Art of Alfred Hitchcock, Spoto proposes that the birds operate as emblematic markers of “original sin.” Spurred by “shallow human relations,” Spoto notes that attacks occur following dialogues about loneliness or fear of abandonment. As “human forces of deception and abuse,” the birds in Spoto’s opinion represent “the unacknowledged frailties and imperceptions with which, however unwillingly, we hurt each other.” Because the film lacks a definitive conclusion, Spoto further argues that The Birds is a “tragic poem

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100 Camille Paglia, Alfred Hitchcock’s “The Birds” (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 8.
104 Ibid., 336.
105 Ibid., 334-335.
106 Ibid., 336.
whose episodes are like stanzas emotionally reinforcing a single theme” of a community rattled by human selfishness and weakness. Director Federico Fellini expands on this interpretation calling the film an “apocalyptic poem.”

Sterritt undertakes a broad analysis of *The Birds* in “The Films of Alfred Hitchcock.” Analyzing Hitchcock’s penchant for disturbing the ordinary, Sterritt views *The Birds* as a “vision of chaos versus order.” To better understand the meaning behind the chaos, Sterritt dissects characters and character relationships, point-of-view camera angles, and Hitchcock’s use of paralysis. Sterritt concludes that the characters and their maker—Hitchcock himself—are very much alike. Comparing Hitchcock to the leading male role, Mitch Brenner, Sterritt contends that Hitchcock vicariously wished to be the lead himself. Therefore, “Mitch” can be seen as an idealized “Hitch.” Meanwhile, Sterritt also viewed Melanie Daniels and Annie Hayworth—the film’s two love interests—as foils for the birds themselves.

Like Sterritt, Paglia also compares the birds in the film to their female co-stars, Melanie and Annie. In Alfred Hitchcock’s “*The Birds*” Paglia asserts that the young women can be seen as “birds” (British slang for attractive women), being increasingly trapped by their environment and circumstance. However, Paglia’s text diverges from Sterritt’s as it focuses on themes of captivity and domestication. Examining female power struggles, sexual hierarchies, and the mother-son relationship—between Mitch and his mother Lydia—Paglia effectively dissects sexual and gender based relationships. Paglia’s analysis also takes on a shotgun effect. Every visual in the film is interpreted as

107 Ibid., 330, 336.
108 Ibid., 330.
110 Ibid., 147.
a specific symbol that does not always fit into the larger theme of her argument. One such divergent theme is Paglia’s interpretation of Mitch when he barricades his home. Paglia remarks that he is preparing for an “avian missile crisis.”111 By deducing several possible interpretations, Paglia’s broad analysis of the film distracts the reader from what appears to be her main point, that mothers in the film were either too absent, or too present, in their children’s lives.

Christopher Morris departs from themes of domestication and captivity to instead examine The Birds’ title, credits, and ultimate distraction: the birds. In “Reading the Birds and ‘The Birds’,” Morris analyzes the birds as a MacGuffin—“An arbitrary detail that is experienced by the characters as necessary but by viewers with a detached bemusement”112—a theme Morris believes permeates the entire plot. Morris also examines identity, or lack thereof, and how each character plays a performative role within their already designated character descriptions. Touching on the film’s obsession with explaining why the birds are attacking, a theme that also dominates its criticism, Morris concludes that all reviews and critiques revolve around causality, rather than seeing the birds for what they really are, a MacGuffin.

For Robert Yanal, The Birds “initiated the genre of natural-animals-run-amok.”113 In doing so, monsters from outer space, or folklore, morphed into more natural threats, such as “streams of rats in Willard (1971), the predatory shark of Jaws (1975), the killer bees of The Swarm (1978), and the highly venomous and aggressive spiders of Arachnophobia (1990).”114 In his text, Hitchcock as Philosopher, Yanal additionally

111 Paglia, Alfred Hitchcock’s The Birds, ” 78.
113 Yanal, Hitchcock as Philosopher, 175.
114 Ibid.
aims to debunk several *Birds* theories, paying particular attention to shredding Spoto’s findings. Yanal argues that Spoto’s theory of shallow human relationships unleashing chaos is preposterous because human weakness is not present in each attack.

Furthermore, Yanal discerns that the characters’ relationships appear to assist their survival, not fuel their demise.\textsuperscript{115} Instead, Yanal proposes that *The Birds* is a film about unknowability and incomprehension.\textsuperscript{116} By lacking knowledge, the characters are propelled to search for an answer, which in turn drives the plot forward.\textsuperscript{117} Yanal sees this search for knowledge as “a kind of solution to the philosophical problem of knowing a mind, one’s own or another’s.”\textsuperscript{118} Therefore, Yanal argues, *The Birds* is not a tale about the unknown, but rather “fear of the unknowable.”\textsuperscript{119}

Documentary filmmaker and writer Tony Lee Moral attempts to play the role of unbiased outsider, simply providing the details of the film’s production and making mention of background information that may have influenced the film’s composition and storyline. However, many components of his research tend to support that the birds were spurred by nature or a disaster of some kind. Many of his findings support a particular Cold War interpretation of the film. Moral expands on du Maurier’s original plot, describing it as “an unrelenting portrait of terror and a compelling analogy of the atmosphere of fear generated in America and Europe during the Cold War.”\textsuperscript{120} Moral also stresses that Hitchcock himself “likened the attack on the Brenner House to the London air raids” of World War Two.\textsuperscript{121}

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 180.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 146.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 189.
\textsuperscript{120} Moral, *The Making of Hitchcock’s The Birds*, 23.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 50.
Margot Henriksen’s text, *Dr. Strangelove’s America*, takes the Cold War analysis a step further, connecting the dots to what Paglia’s and Moral’s text only allude to: birds as bombs. Henriksen’s text is one of few works that connotes the atomic age with *The Birds*. Describing Hitchcock’s message of, “don’t mess about or tamper with nature” as “a vague connection between *The Birds* and the bomb” Henriksen illuminates what many scholars have appeared to miss.122 Viewing the birds beyond their agitated states, Henriksen writes:

> Whether Armageddon would be brought about by atomic bombs or birds was less important in these cultural rumblings about the corruption of man and nature than was the central, accepted fact: that human life was coming to an end or was at least changing so drastically that it was no longer recognizably ‘normal’ or ‘human’.123

For Henriksen, the film then sends a warning about tampering with nature and love. With the end of the world looming in the minds of many Americans, arguably *The Birds* represented a metaphorical projection of the period’s innate fears. Henriksen’s text only devotes a mere two pages to *The Birds*, regrettably only scratching the surface of a film brimming with Cold War imagery ripe for analysis.

In sum, scholarly analysis has engendered several theories as to what the birds potentially signify. The birds have been interpreted as emblematic markers of original sin, visions of chaos versus order, fear of the unknowable, a warning about interfering with nature, or simply as a McGuffin. However, it appears that many scholars have ignored, or simply overlooked the film’s blatant Cold War messages.

This thesis aims to comprehensively unpack the film’s Cold War imagery. As “cinema reaches people’s minds through symbols,” this thesis will decipher visual signs

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122 Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove’s America*, 302.
123 Ibid.
found in the film as probable Cold War metaphors and messages. By examining the “nonverbal cues” that give Hitchcock’s “great films such psychological power” this thesis will demonstrate how *The Birds* may also be read as a Cold War film.

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Chapter Three: Semiotic Analysis of *The Birds*

Even as the Cold War tainted American life, Alfred Hitchcock believed some men and women still went about their daily lives not fully aware that “catastrophe may be imminent.” Hitchcock wanted audiences to sit up in their chairs as a reminder of the danger all around them. For this reason, Hitchcock created the rich socialite Melanie Daniels. Hitchcock said, “Such people are unaware that catastrophe surrounds us all. But I believe that, when catastrophe does come, when people rise to the occasion, they are all right.” In the case of 1963, the closest form of catastrophe was nuclear war.

Called a “dream factory,” Hollywood has a tendency to implement condensation in films. Popularized by Freud, condensation may take several ideas and/or emotions and condense them into one, or more, form(s). In the case of *The Birds*, for example, America is visually condensed into Bodega Bay, an ideal American cornucopia that consists of families, local businesses, and private properties. Praised for his ability to “carve, trim and slice” space as if it were “a side of beef,” it is not surprising that Hitchcock was able to recreate such an ideal, patriotic American community.

The first character seen in the film is Melanie. Within the first fifteen minutes, Melanie travels in her Aston Martin from San Francisco to this “Little America.” Metaphorically, the road—a longstanding symbol for American freedom—allows

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127 Ibid.
128 Ibid., 125.
129 Berger, *Media Analysis Techniques*, 94.
Melanie to travel across her country, unwatched and carefree. Her convertible top is also down; a luxury robbed from her by the end of the film.

The affluent Melanie—who is adorned in a fur coat and stilettos—then enters Bodega Bay, a spacious, quiet, and plain community located sixty miles north of San Francisco. The colours red, white, and blue quickly identify themselves as staples in this setting. As colours convey feeling, mood, and atmosphere in visual texts, each of these colours can be seen as “a sign that has culture-specific connotations.” In *The Birds* colour is largely used to connote the patriotic colours of the American flag. Most houses are white, with blue trim. Shops are branded with red signs, while red barns accompany blue and white farm houses. Characters in the town, especially the school children, are also dressed in patriotic colours. In some cases, characters are found wearing a fleshy tan colour, perhaps symbolically reiterating what—in the racially conscious and biased 1960s—was deemed a true American’s skin colour: white. In fact, every character shown in the community appears to be of European descent. There are no visible minorities in the town whatsoever.

The zenith of this colour scheme can be found in the Bodega Bay School, where sweaters hanging on racks, posters tacked to walls, and the school children’s clothing, can all be seen in mainly red, white, blue, and tan. In case viewers did not notice the not-so-subtle colour scheme, a portrait of the first American president, George Washington, is mounted on the school’s wall, ten feet away from the American flag. Aside from identifying Bodega Bay’s location on American soil, and infusing patriotism into the setting, Sterritt notes that the portrait signifies traditional authority that is subsequently

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inactive or dead, as it is “present in appearance but not power.” In other words, when the birds attack the community is left to fend for itself.

3.1 Birds as Bombs

In previous films, Hitchcock implemented birds as symbols of chaos. This can especially be found in Blackmail (1929) and Psycho (1960). In Blackmail, “shrill chirping” comes from above the heroine’s bed where a bird cage is suspended. Paglia argues the birds get louder in volume to express the character’s sense of entrapment. Psycho, which was based on Robert Bloch’s novel of the same name, diverges from its original text to incorporate several images of birds. The most prolific example being stuffed birds, as Norman Bates—the film’s murderer—is a taxidermist.

According to Sterritt, because birds are often kept in cages they “represent physical and emotional chaos waiting to assault the tenuous order of the world.” This theme of chaos appears to be taken to an extreme in The Birds. The birds are portrayed as vicious when attacking, and frightening by their large groupings, but symbolically the birds imitate bombs, which is far more haunting. Attacking from the sky, these feathered-blasts are dropped in increasing numbers on Bodega Bay, attacking women, children, and ultimately, Hitchcock’s Little America.

An aerial shot of Bodega Bay in the film exposes the birds and their view of the town. In an interview with filmmaker François Truffaut, Hitchcock explained that he provided a birds-eye-view of Bodega Bay to illustrate the town’s exact topography.
From a Cold War perspective, however, it was the view from a plane about to drop a bomb, literally a bird’s-eye view. Like bombs, birds in the film fall from the sky, destroy property, and attack residents in the community, in some cases injuring or killing them. And, just as a war may increase in severity, the birds also increase in volume over time. The birds’ chirps and screeches are also extremely artificial, reminiscent of rockets taking off.\textsuperscript{140} How the community reacts to the attacks, further supports these findings.

Hitchcock, who wanted the attacks to reflect the London air raids of the Second World War, had characters “duck and cover” and take refuge in their barricaded homes.\textsuperscript{141} As tensions escalate, people in the community avoid travelling on the roads and regular work—aside from in the Tides Restaurant—seems to halt. When a potential attack is suspected near the schoolhouse, the school teacher Annie Hayworth appears to follow the FCDA’s defensive guidelines. Since Annie believes that there is a window of opportunity to vacate the children from the zone of attack, she prepares them to exit the building. Annie conceals the severity of the situation by informing the children that they are going to practice a fire drill. If the children live nearby they are told to run home, while the others are to run down the hill and find shelter at the local hotel. As the children are running, the attack begins and the children revert to defensive measures. Following Bert the Turtle’s advice,\textsuperscript{142} the children cradle their heads in the supposed safety of their arms. For all intents and purposes the community, and especially the children, prepare for war and practice their defensive measures.

\textsuperscript{140} Sterritt, \textit{The Films of Alfred Hitchcock}, 137.
\textsuperscript{141} Moral, \textit{The Making of Hitchcock’s The Birds}, 125.
\textsuperscript{142} Boyer, \textit{By Bomb’s Early Light}, 353; Evans, \textit{Celluloid Mushroom Clouds}, 64.
However, this is 1963. War is likely nuclear. This similarity to nuclear attack is not surprising as screenwriter Hunter continued to write *The Birds* well into 1962, amidst the Cuban Missile Crisis. Evans notes that “films are produced to attract audiences by responding to and exploiting perceived audience interests and tastes.” Accordingly, the film’s bird attacks may be seen as a reflection of the era’s infatuation with nuclear bombs. Although, instead of providing the mass spectacle of a large explosion, the film offers attacks that are sharply scaled back—perhaps, in an effort to create the illusion of potential survival.

Through metaphor the film depicts numerous traits reminiscent of nuclear catastrophe. John Canaday posits that “metaphorical representations of nuclear weapons have proliferated in popular culture” because those who have limited knowledge of the bomb will “naturally turn to metaphor” as it allows a person to imaginatively express what they have never experienced in reality. In *The Birds*, the feathered enemies metaphorically represent bombs that wreak havoc on Americans and American society. The larger the flock, the larger the blast. Two types of victims that result from these nuclear blasts are the dead and the living.

### 3.2 Victims and Survivors

It has been said that the Cold War era was haunted by a fascination with death. In the case of *The Birds*, Hitchcock does not starve this attraction. Instead, he feeds it. The first character to perish from an attack is neighbouring chicken farmer Dan Fawcett, followed by the school teacher, and secondary love interest, Annie Hayworth. Both Dan

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143 Moral, *The Making of Hitchcock’s The Birds*, 50
144 Evans, *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds*, 11.
146 Hendershot, *I Was a Cold War Monster*, 129.
and Annie are found bloodied and eyeless. Though it is assumed that their eyes have been pecked out by the birds, this detail may also signify a nuclear attack. For example, during a nuclear blast if a person looks up at the bomb as it explodes they can damage their eye-ground—the inside of the bottom portion of the eye—with third degree burns.\textsuperscript{147} In some cases, onlookers’ eyes completely melt from the extreme heat.\textsuperscript{148} In addition to the absence of eyes, windows are found shattered in Dan’s bedroom, where his body is found. By showing glass shattered from an impact, and an eyeless corpse facing the window where the attack occurred, it can be deduced that Dan witnessed the attack before falling victim to its wrath. This scene is therefore reminiscent of a nuclear attack because it signifies similar traits.

Survivors are affected in different ways. Lydia, who seems to return home “shell-shocked,” stumbles into her home in a catatonic state. She is next seen bed-ridden, emotionally unstable, and rattled with anxieties about the future. Near the end of the film, when Melanie is attacked by an onslaught of birds in the attic, she becomes similarly withdrawn and unresponsive. Melanie babbles at times, but she is predominantly left mentally vacant. As a result of their traumatic experiences, both Lydia and Melanie appear to have some form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).\textsuperscript{149}

Another survivor is little Cathy Brenner. Cathy, who has blue eyes surrounded by hundreds of freckles and long blonde hair, can be seen as the all-American girl.\textsuperscript{150} After experiencing the school house attack, Cathy shows signs of radiation poisoning. Pale, red

\textsuperscript{148} Davidson et al., \textit{U.S.: A Narrative History}, 566.
\textsuperscript{149} Paglia, \textit{Alfred Hitchcock’s “The Birds,”} 76.
\textsuperscript{150} Moral, \textit{The Making of Hitchcock’s The Birds}, 69.
eyed, sweating, and vomiting, Cathy exhibits the beginning of a long and potentially life threatening illness. As noted, radiation poisoning was a major fear when *The Birds* was released. In fact, by the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the majority of the population feared the after effects of fallout more than the initial devastation of a nuclear bomb.\textsuperscript{151} Death by nuclear bomb would be immediate, whereas fallout and the residual effects of the bomb on survivors would be an uphill battle of illness, pain, and in some cases agonizing death.\textsuperscript{152} Taking these perceptions of the period into consideration, the all-American Cathy appears to represent a victim of fallout.

3.3 Attacking the Homeland

While the birds may be interpreted as weapons of mass destruction, they should not be limited to this single analysis. In a Cold War context the birds also represent the enemy behind the attacks: communists. Cleverly, the film presents a diverse array of birds of varying species coming together to attack America; a phenomenon that confuses Mrs. Bundy—the local ornithologist. Mrs. Bundy says, “I have never heard of birds of different species flocking together, the very concept is unimaginable… if they did, we wouldn’t have a chance.”\textsuperscript{153}

This conglomeration of communists, presented as finches, gulls, and crows, is truly brilliant as it emulates America’s fear of communist contamination. This is exemplified when Annie looks up at the sky at a flock of birds and says with disdain, “Don’t they ever stop migrating?”\textsuperscript{154} The idea of communists migrating—more appropriately immigrating—to America and infiltrating democratic society with

\textsuperscript{151} Evans, *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds*, 151.
\textsuperscript{152} Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, 731.
\textsuperscript{153} *The Birds*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1963; United States: Universal Pictures, 2000), DVD.
\textsuperscript{154} Paglia, *Alfred Hitchcock’s “The Birds,”* 42.
communist ideologies was an intense fear promulgated by McCarthy, and was the premise of the majority of his allegations. Communist infiltration is thus a fear *The Birds* symbolically imitated.

When the Brenners and Melanie tune into a local radio station to learn if attacks are occurring in other areas of the country, the word “suspect” is the first word used to describe the birds.\textsuperscript{155} Like the subversive communists Americans’ feared, the birds can be seen as suspect, acting out clandestine operations and attacks for a larger purpose, perhaps world domination for communist expansion. Growing in numbers as the film progresses, Sterritt mentions that this collective force of birds appear “ever more organized and unified in the narrative.”\textsuperscript{156}

The viewer can increasingly see that diminutive, defenceless, innocent Bodega Bay is being taken over by the enemy. The film gives the impression that the birds have taken over the school playground, the roads, the gas station, and even telephone wires, as if they are taking over communication lines. Colour also plays a role in identifying the suspects. Though the patriotic red, white, and blue first identified Bodega Bay as an American community to the viewer, the sole use of red in isolated scenes alerts the viewers’ attention to a possible “red alert.” The effect is chilling. Hitchcock, who seldom used the colour red,\textsuperscript{157} employed the primary colour associated with communism, which thereby served to warn viewers that these bird attacks were caused by a red menace and should therefore be treated as a red, that is, communist scare. An example of this can be found on the Brenners’ yard. The Brenners’ red chicken coop houses birds congregating

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 142.
\textsuperscript{157} Moral, *The Making of Hitchcock’s The Birds*, 121.
behind closed doors that refuse to eat. Beginning with a hunger strike, the birds are no longer following their American employer’s rules. Revolution has begun.

The isolated use of red clothing also alerts the viewers’ attention to a possible subversive alert. Annie, who is said to have a sister from the “East,” wears some form of red clothing throughout the entire film. Yet Melanie, who has a mother that ditched her at the age of eleven and ran off with a hotel man from the east, is only found in black, white, or green. Does Melanie abstain from wearing red because she was able to divorce herself from her mother, and therefore communist indoctrination? Did Hitchcock choose to kill Annie because she kept in contact with her suspect relative? Was Annie’s death meant to make an example of what could happen to Americans who stay in contact with members of communist countries? The viewer can never know for sure. However, by draping Annie in a red wardrobe and giving her a sister from an enemy territory, the film signifies that Annie is different from the other characters in the plot. This notion is solidified when she is killed and the film swiftly moves on as if her death was meaningless and part of a larger natural order, a kind of survival of America’s fittest.

Birds as signs of communism also help to explain Melanie’s apparent PTSD. Emptied of all emotion she has transitioned into a drone-like state. Evans notes that “the inability of people living under communist ‘siege’ to impulsively display emotions was attributed to the effects of communism.”158 And this is precisely what happened to Melanie. After she was bombarded in the attic by hundreds of abrasive birds—or aggressive communists—for an extended period of time, she too lost her ability to display emotion.

158 Evans, Celluloid Mushroom Clouds, 119.
3.4 Tides Restaurant

Truffaut argues that “The art of creating suspense is also the art of involving the audience, so that the viewer is actually a participant in the film.” When considering the Tides Restaurant—where the characters congregate to discuss the severity of the situation—the scene can be seen as a manipulative tool for viewers to find their foil and vicariously take part in the film. A plethora of characters are available with whom to identify, including the socialite, the successful young professional, the wise elder, the concerned mother, the child, the average labourer, or even the town drunk. In this scene, filmgoers have a smorgasbord of characters with whom to relate. According to Youngblood, “The audience sees itself and its dreams reflected in the film and reacts according to memory.” Therefore, by watching a foil of them react to the chaos of the attacks, American viewers experience a strong connection to the film as if they too were involved in the plight of Bodega Bay.

The scene at the Tides also serves as a hypertext. A hypertext is “a text within a main text that is designed to explain it or to provide further information about some of its components.” In this respect, the discussion at the Tides can be seen as an opportunity to voice possible explanations for the bird attacks. The scene may also be understood as a natural process of forming in groups. When crisis strikes or an impromptu event occurs, Vedantam explains that people “are hardwired to turn to groups for help and guidance.” Therefore, in order to decipher some kind of consensus on what is causing the attacks, people flock to the Tides restaurant to discuss the attacks’ possible origin.

159 Truffaut, Hitchcock, 7.
160 Mast, Film Theory and Criticism, 607.
161 Danesi, The Quest for Meaning, 102.
Theories mentioned include mass bird migration, a storm at sea, or even the apocalyptic notion that it is the end of the world. In other words, the community is at a loss, which is apparently exactly what Hitchcock wanted. Hitchcock pressed Hunter to write such a scene. Hitchcock clearly wanted his characters, and his viewers, to feel confused and disoriented by the chaotic situation.

By segregating the community inside of the restaurant and placing the birds outside, Hitchcock additionally created an in-group, out-group mentality. Mlodinow says, “Scientists call any group that people feel part of an ‘in-group,’ and any group that excludes them an ‘out-group’.” In this way, the citizens of Bodega Bay flock together to create an in-group, in hopes of better understanding and finding a more effective way to oppose their communist out-group, signified by the birds. In-groups can influence behaviour, judgement, self-reflection, and even actions. This is likely why Mitch can so easily convince his male comrades to join him in the battle outside, while women in the restaurant hide in a hallway, huddled together “like survivors of a blitz.”

In addition to these performative roles played by the characters, individual ideas also display a tendency to spread like a virus. This occurs when the token mother character tries to convince the in-group that Melanie is likely the cause of Bodega Bay’s destruction. The mother claims that the birds only started to attack when Melanie entered the community. However, another possible theory is the lovebirds. Trouble commences directly after Melanie delivers the lovebirds to the Brenner’s ideal American home,

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165 Ibid., 170.
without their knowledge. An article in *Time* deduces, “The love birds, ostensibly family pets… seem to know something. Are they spies for the gulls?” Acting as quiet idle fixtures in the background of the film the lovebirds can be seen as spying scouts, sent into the Brenner’s home to survey the territory that will soon fall under attack. As internal subversion was thought to be the main tactic employed by communists to achieve world domination, the lovebirds appear to be as likely a cause as Melanie entering Bodega Bay. Trusting a possible enemy is also demonstrated at Cathy’s birthday party when the children are playing blind man’s buff, “the social game of love, in which friend and foe are often the same.” Through various elements of symbolism, Hitchcock visually shows the viewer the slippery slope that can occur in Cold War America when potential foes are allowed to fly under civilians’ conscious radar.

### 3.5 Mitch as Soldier

Reminiscent of a young, handsome President Kennedy, who escapes to the country on weekends and is admired by his community, Mitch plays the ideal hero for this chaotic tale. Just as President Kennedy won election at least in part due to his vibrant youthfulness, wealth, success, good looks, and charm, Mitch becomes the lead protector of family and community in *The Birds*. Moral expands on this thought further by observing, “Just like JFK, who was credited with protecting America during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Rod’s character Mitch is a criminal defence lawyer who can

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168 Evans, *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds*, 127.


handle San Francisco’s toughest ‘hoods’ and fights for justice.”

When Bodega Bay comes under attack, Mitch must rise to the occasion like President Kennedy and guide his symbolic America to safety. In order to combat the sudden threat, Mitch swaps his suit-pants for green cargo-pants, visually morphing himself into a self-proclaimed soldier. After organizing and leading local men into the streets to join the battle he gathers his family members and Melanie and places them into the presumably safe quarters of his family home that he has sufficiently barricaded. Tearing “apart a barn to turn the house into a blind bunker” Mitch has evidently turned the home into a makeshift bomb shelter.

Paglia reifies this notion as she describes Mitch as “a prudent householder,” as already noted, “preparing for an avian missile crisis.”

By taking a leadership role, fighting for his country, and protecting his family, Mitch provides a hero code for viewers to admire and emulate. Like any intriguing horror film, *The Birds* “encourages the viewer to participate vicariously in the heroic quest.” As viewers, we willingly reciprocate. According to Berger, this is natural. As dedicated media viewers, Berger says, “One thing we do, unconsciously, as we watch television programs, read comic books, go to movies, and otherwise consume our daily media diet… is find models to imitate.” Enter Mitch. He becomes our leader in the form of a teacher educating (or reminding) viewers how to act and behave in a time of crisis. In this sense, Hitchcock’s *The Birds* may be interpreted as an educational film, or how-to-manual, on how to react if America comes under nuclear attack.

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174 Ibid., 78.
176 Berger, *Media Analysis Techniques*, 123.
3.6 Attacking the American Dream

In 1960s America homes and property represented a key part of the “American Dream.” Thus, when the birds forcefully attack the home, they ultimately attack America and everything it stands for, including democracy and capitalism. Evans emphasizes that it was Marxist ideology that posed the greatest threat to American ideals—a system of free-enterprise and private ownership.\footnote{Evans, \textit{Celluloid Mushroom Clouds}, 54.} When the birds attack the Brenner’s private property, the birds are not so subtly threatening the American way of life.

The birds also endanger individual American lives. The final attack on the Brenner house presents a ferocious round of violence in which the birds successfully penetrate the home. Mitch protects his family by fighting off blasts of birds with his bare hands, but the viewers’ realize that “the distinction between indoors and outdoors” has now become meaningless.\footnote{Morris, “Reading the Birds and \textit{The Birds},” 256.} If the Brenners are to escape with their lives intact they must flee from their home that appears to have morphed into a cage the birds now control.\footnote{Ibid.} Mitch loads his vulnerable passengers—Lydia, Cathy, and Melanie—from one stereotypical American unit (the home) into another (an automobile).\footnote{Raymond Durgnat, \textit{The Strange Case of Alfred Hitchcock} (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1974), 338.} The myth of the hero then gives way to the most recycled nuclear war theme, the “myth of the heroic survivors.”\footnote{Evans, \textit{Celluloid Mushroom Clouds}, 136.} Driving through the darkened landscape that is now impregnated by birds, the vehicle drives through what appears to represent nuclear fallout.

3.7 An Ambiguous Ending

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\footnote{Evans, \textit{Celluloid Mushroom Clouds}, 54.} \footnote{Morris, “Reading the Birds and \textit{The Birds},” 256.} \footnote{Ibid.} \footnote{Raymond Durgnat, \textit{The Strange Case of Alfred Hitchcock} (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1974), 338.} \footnote{Evans, \textit{Celluloid Mushroom Clouds}, 136.}
In true Hitchcockian form *The Birds* does not unmask the villain’s full wrath until the end of the film. Moral explains, “To reveal the monster too early would be cheating the audience and depriving them of the pleasure of seeing it in all its glory later on.” The finale appears to present a defeated Bodega Bay, compromised and taken over by birds. To compound the horror, in the end “there is no safe place.” As the Brenner family and Melanie wade through the sea of birds that have flooded the road, the film abruptly ends. The conclusion “shocked, confused, and even outraged many of Hitchcock’s most devoted fans.” Hunter, who viewed the film in theatre, remarked, “people turned to each other and mumbled, ‘Is it over?’ ‘Is that it?’ ‘Huh?’ and words to that effect.” For the first time in his long career Hitchcock denied his viewers a sense of closure. This cessation drastically differed from any Hitchcock film that came before or after. Hitchcock’s previous oeuvre consisted of narratives revolving around crime and murder, but each film would then typically conclude with an explanation of the mysterious chain of events that occurred. The films’ conclusions also tended to champion law and order, as the weak characters that turned to the vice of crime were commonly caught and supposedly punished. *The Birds* strides boldly from this habitual process.

Moral notes that “While filming had started on location in March 1962, Hitchcock and [screenwriter Hunter] still had not decided on an ending that satisfied

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183 Ibid.
184 Ibid., 256.
them both.”¹¹⁸⁷ By mid-March, Hitchcock told Hunter to make the ending “more poetic and meaningful.” Despite Hunter’s alterations Hitchcock ultimately chose to improvise.¹¹⁸⁸ The final result was an open ending. Appropriately, Hitchcock declined to place the words “The End” in the final frame.¹¹⁸⁹ Thus, the avian horror continued to loom in the minds of cinemagoers after they left the theatre. In Sterritt’s opinion this open ending disturbed and disoriented audiences and subsequently made The Birds Hitchcock’s most radical piece of work.¹¹⁹⁰

¹¹⁸⁹ Spoto, The Art of Alfred Hitchcock, 332.
¹¹⁹⁰ Sterritt, The Films of Alfred Hitchcock, 121.
Chapter Four: Marketing Cold War Fear

Before *The Birds* was released in the United States on 30 April, 1963 Hitchcock sought to ensure Americans were ready to purchase a movie ticket.\(^{191}\) He took the lead, gripping the reins of his marketing campaign like never before.\(^{192}\) A number of events were planned, including a coast-to-coast pigeon race, as well as visits from bird trainer Ray Berwick who travelled “with several of his trained crows to theatres” for the debut of the film.\(^{193}\) Hitchcock also had the marketing team release theatrical “trailers, short, punchy radio commercials and lobby spots aimed at cinemagoers.”\(^{194}\) One such lobby spot, spoken by Hitchcock himself, announced:

Dear friends, The Birds are here! They are out there… massing, millions of them swarming into an army of feathered terror. To understand why they have united and who their target is, you will have to see this unusual motion picture from the very beginning.\(^{195}\)

To accompany these advertisements Hitchcock created the effective and memorable—not to mention ungrammatical—slogan: “The Birds is Coming.”\(^{196}\) For the film’s debut, marketing climaxed at the Palace Theatre on Broadway where “Hitchcock and Tippi Hedren released 1,000 homing pigeons into Times Square.”\(^{197}\) This spectacle “together with a clever marketing campaign, all fuelled the public’s interest.”\(^{198}\)

People were also drawn to the film because it was a Hitchcock production. By 1963 Hitchcock had reached worldwide familiarity. As a brand in his own right, positive

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194 Ibid., 213.
196 Ibid., 10.
198 Ibid., 213.
exposure of Hitchcock meant positive advertising for *The Birds*. Hitchcock believed that self-promotion was one of the main reasons for his success and he was likely right as repeat publicity made his name “synonymous with the thriller genre.” This time, however, Hitchcock wanted *The Birds* to be different. Following *Psycho* (1960), Robert Kapsis says that Hitchcock created *The Birds* to reshape his reputation, especially among highbrow critics who had critiqued his talent and ability in the past. Despite Hitchcock’s best intentions *The Birds* received mixed reviews.

4.1 Reviews and Residual Feelings

When audiences first watched *The Birds* in theatres many filmgoers felt they had been misled. The marketing hype had generated a frenzy of fans that thought they had been oversold by the mass advertising campaigns. Viewers were primed to expect a stereotypical thriller featuring menacing music; instead, *The Birds*’ musicless soundtrack provided a natural and realistic ambiance. Surprised by the film’s score, or lack thereof, and robbed of answers, audiences left theatres confused and pondering what *The Birds* really meant. This led viewers and critics alike “to share the characters’ obsession with causality.” An article in *Newsweek* concluded, “As has always been the case, Hitchcock uses the vehicle of the thriller as a conveyance for more serious social and psychological material.” Other reviews focused on the film’s awkward division

201 Kapsis, 6.
204 Morris, “Reading the Birds and *The Birds*,” 255.
between the love story and the attacks.\footnote{Kapsis, 6, 13.} The film was also criticized for its espied niche art-house pretensions.\footnote{Ibid.}


Since the film’s debut in 1963 opinions have changed. Now, \textit{The Birds} “often ranks as one of the publics’ favourite Hitchcock films and... one of the most memorable.”\footnote{McGilligan, \textit{Alfred Hitchcock}, 639.} Rollins writes, “films register the feelings and attitudes of the periods in which they are made.”\footnote{Moral, \textit{The Making of Hitchcock’s ‘The Birds’}, 18.} This change in reaction may then be seen as a direct result of the temporal setting in which the film was viewed. In the twenty-first century, the Cold War “is no longer a fact of everyday life but instead a remote historical curiosity.”\footnote{Rollins, \textit{Hollywood as Historian}, 249. Sheldon M. Stern, \textit{The Week the World Stood Still: Inside the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 11.}
Due to this change, viewers can now watch *The Birds* unfettered by cold war preoccupations. This better allows present-day viewers to enjoy the film for its artistry and craft. Whereas in 1963, many viewers’ feared atomic warfare because their cultural diet was flooded with Cold War fear. Therefore, when the film was released, its Cold War imagery and open ended conclusion may have simply been too realistic and traumatic for some viewers, which in turn caused negative emotions toward the film. According to American author Stephen King “the great appeal of horror fiction through the ages is that it serves as a rehearsal for our own deaths.”217 In the case of *The Birds*, the rehearsal may have seemed a little too real.

4.2 Selling Fear

Compared to other films with Cold War imagery *The Birds*’ plot did not require such exaggerated suspension of disbelief. *The Birds* abstained from alien invaders and mythical creatures, and instead offered audiences a more plausible and thus more terrifying threat. The film also looked and sounded less theatrical. With its musicless soundtrack, *The Birds* appeared more lifelike, as if a camera had documented ordinary Americans who were unluckily struck by a foreign and devastating attack. This fashioned reality eerily mirrored the period’s Cold War fears and tensions. In addition, the film had an open ending, which coincided with the period’s uncertainty for the future. Thus, Hitchcock’s Cold War imagery likely intensified audiences previously established Cold War fears on conscious, and more often unconscious, levels.

According to J.A. White, “regions below the threshold of consciousness are those to which a good horror director makes a direct appeal.”218 If a horror film deeply

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218 White, “In the Dark of Your Own Psyche,” 203.
resonates with a viewer the “(un)conscious recognition of a threat leads to a motivation to confront or flee it, a processes known as the fight-or-flight response.”\textsuperscript{219} These fear appeals then “motivate attitude, intention, and behaviour changes especially when accompanied by a recommended action.”\textsuperscript{220} In the case of The Birds, both the fight and flight responses are recommended. The film motivates a kind of survivalist attitude, showing viewers that they should fight back if attacked, duck and cover, barricade homes, and flee from hostile zones as a last resort, just as they were instructed to do by government propaganda in the event of a Soviet nuclear attack. As the film literally or ironically incorporates these defensive measures—which emulate what the FCDA was concurrently promoting in the United States—The Birds also echoes unofficial propaganda because it “serves an informative function” telling “people what to think about and how to behave.”\textsuperscript{221} As a reflection of Cold War society, The Birds can then be seen as a contributing piece of Cold War media that assisted in engendering anxiety and fear.

\textsuperscript{219} Andrews, \textit{Hidden Persuasion}, 158.
\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 366.
Conclusion

Film is a powerful source of influence. Since the inception of the motion picture, film has entertained countless people, from varying demographics and geographical locations. However, film is also a reflection of reality that has the ability to educate its viewers. As a consequence, when people turn to mass media to escape the monotony and anxieties of daily life, they frequently receive the very same elements of life from which they may want to flee. Thus, “we become caught in a vicious cycle from which there is no escape.”\(^\text{222}\)

During the Cold War, numerous Americans were riddled with fear for nearly four decades because they simply could not avoid the images, perceptions, and ideologies American life maintained. Politics and foreign policy were fixated on rooting out subversives and avoiding communist contamination. Growing hostilities in Berlin complicated international affairs, while President Kennedy’s conflicts with Cuba brought the nuclear threat closer to American soil than ever before. Popular culture exploited the atomic bomb imbedding Cold War fears into magazines, comic strips, radio, television, and film. Americans were thus shaped by political and cultural forces that were guided and motivated by the Cold War.

In the midst of this hub of paranoia, *The Birds* emerged as a reflection of its times. Written before, during, and after the Cuban Missile Crisis,\(^\text{223}\) *The Birds* is a vessel that emulates Cold War perceptions and anxieties. *The Birds* promised a thrilling motion picture that would entertain the masses but, instead, the film contributed to the well-established culture of Cold War anxiety more than simple enjoyment. Haunting

\(^{222}\) Berger, *Media Analysis Techniques*, 184.

cinemagoers for years to come, Hitchcock created a creature-feature that generated criticism, praise, and most of all, Cold War fear.
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