



Big Screen Classics

The Birds

The Birds

Directed by: Alfred Hitchcock
©: Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions
Presented by: Universal Pictures
Producer: Alfred Hitchcock *
Production Manager: Norman Deming
Assistant to Mr. Hitchcock: Peggy Robertson
Assistant Director: James H. Brown
Script Supervisor: Lois Thurman
Screenplay by: Evan Hunter
From the story by: Daphne du Maurier
Director of Photography: Robert Burks
Special Photographic Adviser: Ub Iwerks
Special Effects: Lawrence A. Hampton
Edited by: George Tomasini
Production Designed by: Robert Boyle
Set Decoration: George Milo
Pictorial Designs: Albert Whitlock
Miss Hedren's Costumes Designed by: Edith Head
Wardrobe Supervisor: Rita Riggs
Make-up: Howard Smit
Hairstylist: Virginia Darcy
Titles: James S. Pollak
Electronic Sound Production/Composition:
Remi Gassmann, Oskar Sala
Sound Consultant: Bernard Herrmann
Sound Recording: Waldon O. Watson,
William Russell
Trainer of the Birds: Ray Berwick
Cast:
Rod Taylor (*Mitch Brenner*)
Jessica Tandy (*Lydia Brenner*)
Suzanne Pleshette (*Annie Hayworth*)
Tippi Hedren (*Melanie Daniels*)
Veronica Cartwright (*Cathy Brenner*)
Ethel Griffies (*Mrs. Bundy*)
Charles McGraw (*Sebastian Sholes*)
Ruth McDevitt (*Mrs. MacGruder*)
Lonny Chapman (*Deke Carter*)
Joe Mantell (*Salesman*)
Doodles Weaver (*fisherman*)
Malcolm Atterbury (*Deputy Al Malone*)
John McGovern (*postal clerk*)
Karl Swenson (*drunk in bar*)
Richard Deacon (*Mitch's neighbour in elevator*)
Elizabeth Wilson (*Helen Carter*)
William Quinn (*man*)
Doreen Lang (*hysterical woman in restaurant*)
Alfred Hitchcock (*man with two terriers*) *
USA 1963
119 mins
Digital 4K
* Uncredited

The screening on Wed 11 Mar will be introduced by Professor Lucy Bolton, Queen Mary University of London

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In his technically most difficult film, *The Birds*, Alfred Hitchcock directly addresses the theme of destructive, rapacious nature that was always implicit in his fascination with crime. Federico Fellini called the film an 'apocalyptic poem'. I place *The Birds* in the main line of British Romanticism, descending from the raw nature-tableaux and sinister femmes fatales of Coleridge. Overwhelmed by the film when I first saw it as an impressionable teenager, I view it as a perverse ode to woman's sexual glamour, which Hitchcock shows in all its seductive phases, from brittle artifice to melting vulnerability.

Because of his suspense-anthology television show, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, which premiered in 1955 and ran for a decade, Hitchcock existed as a powerful personality apart from his films for my post-war generation in the United States. His lugubrious, British formality, mordant irony (daringly directed against the show's commercial sponsors), and ghoulish, self-satirising pranks were an oasis of originality amid the general banality of a culture whose ideal types were Doris Day and Debbie Reynolds. That *Psycho* (1960), which stunned and terrified us, mirrored the real-life Hitchcock's macabre genius was easy for us to imagine, since we felt we already knew him.

Aside from a grainy screening of *North by Northwest* (1959) at a school function, *Psycho* was my sole experience of Hitchcock the film director before I saw his subsequent release, *The Birds*, which premiered three years later. Reviews were sharply unkind to its leading lady, Tippi Hedren, a Hitchcock discovery who was making her debut. In retrospect, I see that older viewers were used to a galaxy of established Hitchcock stars like Ingrid Bergman and Grace Kelly, whose sensibility belonged to a slightly earlier era. Because of *The Birds* and its spellbinding successor, *Marnie* (1964), both of which I saw in brilliant colour in widescreen commercial theatres, Tippi Hedren was and remains for me the ultimate Hitchcock heroine.

As I watched *The Birds* again and again on late-night television over the decades, certain key themes emerged for me: captivity and domestication. In this film, as in so many others, Hitchcock finds woman captivating but dangerous. She allures by nature, but she is chief artificer in civilisation, a magic fabricator of persona whose very smile is an arc of deception. With profound feeling for architecture, Hitchcock sees the house in historical terms as both safe haven and female trap. Ten thousand years ago, when man the nomad took root in one place, he brought animals with him into human service. But domestication was to be his fate too, as he fell under architecturally reinforced female control. *The Birds* charts a return of the repressed, a release of primitive forces of sex and appetite that have been subdued but never fully tamed. Because of Hitchcock's personal engagement with these unsettling themes, the film is worked out in almost fanatical detail, to a degree perhaps unparalleled in his oeuvre. The more microscopically this film is studied, the more it reveals.

The original idea for *The Birds* came from Daphne du Maurier's 1952 story of the same name, which had been reprinted in an *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* anthology. Hitchcock had already based two screenplays on du Maurier novels: *Jamaica Inn* became a rather stodgy 1939 pirate film that confirmed Hitchcock's self-confessed lack of 'feeling' for period pieces, but he turned

Big Screen Classics

La Belle et la Bête

Sun 1 Feb 15:30; Wed 11 Feb 18:15 (+ intro);
Sun 22 Feb 12:15

Kes

Mon 2 Feb 15:00; Sat 7 Feb 11:50;
Tue 17 Mar 20:45

Candyman

Tue 3 Feb 20:40; Wed 18 Mar 18:15 (+ intro by Gabriel Leavay, film curator, presenter and BFI Studio Coordinator)

A Fish Called Wanda

Wed 4 Feb 18:15 (+ intro by Josh Glenn, BFI Production Coordinator); Wed 18 Feb 20:50;
Tue 10 Mar 20:50

Bringing Up Baby

Thu 5 Feb 14:30; Fri 6 Feb 20:50; Sat 14 Feb 12:00;
Sat 7 Mar 12:10

Grizzly Man

Sat 7 Feb 18:00; Mon 16 Mar 20:50

Harvey

Sat 7 Feb 20:50; Sun 15 Feb 12:15;
Sat 28 Feb 11:50; Fri 6 Mar 12:30

The Birds

Sun 8 Feb 18:30; Thu 26 Feb 20:40; Wed 11 Mar 17:50 (+ intro by Professor Lucy Bolton, Queen Mary University of London)

A Zed and Two Noughts

Mon 9 Feb 20:40; Wed 25 Feb 18:10 (+ intro by Justin Johnson, Head of Cinema Programme);
Sat 14 Mar 18:00

The Cow

Gaav
Tue 10 Feb 20:50; Sun 15 Mar 18:30

Planet of the Apes

Wed 11 Feb 18:10; Sat 21 Feb 14:50;
Sat 14 Mar 20:45

Cat People

Thu 12 Feb 21:00; Fri 27 Feb 18:10;
Thu 12 Mar 20:50

Jaws

Fri 13 Feb 20:30; Mon 16 Mar 18:15

Beauty and the Beast

Sat 14 Feb 12:20; Wed 18 Feb 18:15 (+ intro by Disniversity Podcast's hosts Ben Travis and Dr Sam Summers); Sat 7 Mar 12:00

Best in Show

Mon 16 Feb 18:10; Mon 23 Feb 21:00;
Wed 4 Mar 21:00

Killer of Sheep

Tue 17 Feb 21:00; Tue 3 Mar 18:10

Amores Perros

Thu 19 Feb 20:10; Sun 1 Mar 15:00;
Thu 5 Mar 14:30; Mon 9 Mar 18:00

Au hasard Balthazar

Fri 20 Feb 12:30; Tue 24 Feb 17:50;
Fri 13 Mar 17:55

Wendy and Lucy

Wed 4 Mar 18:10 (+ intro by writer and editor Laura Staab); Sun 8 Mar 12:10

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Rebecca into a haunting masterpiece, the 1940 melodrama that began his Hollywood period. Du Maurier's 'The Birds' takes place on the same cold, wind-swept, rocky Cornish coast as *Jamaica Inn*. Though there is no Gothic manor house, the story's bleak atmosphere and ferocious weather resemble those of the great Brontë novels, which are the literary ancestors of *Rebecca*.

By September 1961, Hitchcock, after some vexing false starts, had found a screenwriter, Evan Hunter (author of *The Blackboard Jungle*), with whom he discussed avoiding the lurid science-fiction formulas of 1950s movies. But Hitchcock still lacked a leading lady. One October morning a few weeks later, while watching television with his wife and creative consultant, the small, peppery Alma Riveille, he spotted a vivacious blonde strolling through a commercial for a diet drink. That afternoon, an appointment was discreetly scheduled with Tippi Hedren, a Minnesota-born model and divorcée who had recently moved from New York to Los Angeles, partly to give her four-year-old daughter, Melanie Griffith (the future actress), a more natural environment to grow up in.

Before she was even screen-tested, Hedren was sent to the Oscar-winning costume designer, Edith Head, whom Hitchcock asked to create a distinctive off-camera look for his new protégée, in much the same way as the moguls of the studio era had commandeered the private and public lives of their contract players. 'That part I found surprising,' Hedren told Donald Spoto. 'He spent as much money on an outright gift of a personal wardrobe as he did on my year's salary.' Hitchcock was actively involved in costuming Hedren for *The Birds*: for example, her expensive gold jewellery was personally chosen by him.

'Hitchcock had a fondness for simple and elegant things like scarves and mink coats,' said Edith Head, 'so these things also became part of her wardrobe.' Because the director sensed in Hedren what Kyle B. Counts calls 'a certain withdrawal, a chaste, cool quality', a suit of 'soft green' was designed for her for the film.

Tippi Hedren's lavish colour tests cost a then unprecedented \$25,000. Two days before they began, Hitchcock's Bellagio Road home in Bel-Air was threatened by the kind of gigantic, devastating brush fire that periodically sweeps through the hills and canyons of Southern California. Ordered to evacuate after 500 other houses were reduced to rubble, the Hitchcocks moved their valuables, including silver, fur coats, and art works, to the wine cellar. Luckily, the fire storm took another path, and after several days in a hotel, the Hitchcocks were permitted to return. For the sedentary director who loved his creature comforts and spoke of his 'passion for orderliness', *The Birds* was clearly born in existential crisis.

Camille Paglia, *The Birds* (BFI Film Classics, 1998)