

4. NO FUTURE

In an op-ed piece in the *Boston Globe* that was published to coincide with Mother's Day in 1998, Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West announced their campaign for what they called a "Parent's Bill of Rights," a series of proposals designed, in their words, to "strengthen marriage and give greater electoral clout to mothers and fathers." To achieve such an end—an end both self-serving (though never permitted to appear so) and redundant (what "greater electoral clout" could mothers and fathers *have?*)—the essay sounded a rallying cry that performed, in the process, and with a heartfelt sincerity untouched by ironic self-consciousness, the authors' mandatory profession of faith in the gospel of sentimental futurism:

It is time to join together and acknowledge that the work that parents do is indispensable—that by nourishing those small bodies and

growing those small souls, they create the store of social and human capital that is so essential to the health and wealth of our nation.

Simply put, by creating the conditions that allow parents to cherish their children, we will ensure our collective future.¹

Ignore for a moment what demands to be called the transparency of this appeal. Ignore, that is, how quickly the spiritualizing vision of parents “nourishing and growing . . . small bodies and . . . small souls” gives way to a rhetoric affirming instead the far more pragmatic (and politically imperative) investment in the “human capital . . . essential to the health and wealth of our nation.” Ignore, by so doing, how the passage renominates those human “souls” as “capital” without yielding the fillip of Dickensian pathos that prompts us to “cherish” these “capital”-ized humans (“small” but, like the economy in current usage, capable of being grown) precisely insofar as they come to embody this thereby humanized “capital.” Ignore all this and one’s eyes might still pop to discover that only political intervention will “allow,” and the verb is crucial here, “parents to cherish their children” so as to “ensure our collective future”—or ensure, which comes to the same in the faith that properly fathers us all, that our present will always be mortgaged to a fantasmatic future in the name of the political “capital” that those children will thus have become.

Near enough to the surface to challenge its status as merely implicit, but sufficiently buried to protect it from every attempt at explicitation, a globally destructive, child-hating force is posited in these lines—a force so strong as to disallow parents the occasion to cherish their children, so profound in its virulence to the species as to put into doubt “our collective future”—and posited the better to animate a familial unit so cheerfully mom-ified as to distract us from ever noticing how destructively it’s been mummified. No need to trick out that force in the flamboyant garments of the pedophile, whose fault, as “everyone” knows, defaults, *faute de mieux*, to a fear of grown women—and thus, whatever the sex of his object, condemns him for, and to, his failure to penetrate into the circle of

heterosexual desire. No need to call it names, with the vulgar bluntness of the homophobe, whose language all too often is not the bluntest object at hand. Unnamed, it still carries the signature, whatever Hewlett and West may intend, of the crime that was named as not to be named (“*inter christianos non nominandum*”) while maintaining the plausible deniability allowing disavowal of such a signature, should anyone try to decipher it, as having been forged by someone else. To be sure, the stigmatized other in general can endanger our idea of the future, conjuring the intolerable image of its spoliation or pollution, the specter of its being appropriated for unendurable ends; but one in particular is stigmatized as threatening an end to the future itself. That one remains always at hand to embody the force, which need never be specified, that prohibits America’s parents, for example, from being able to cherish their children, since that one, as we know, intrudes on the collective reproduction of familialism by stealing, seducing, proselytizing, in short, by adulterating those children and putting in doubt the structuring fantasy that ensures “our collective future.”

I’ve already defined this child-aversive, future-negating force, answering so well to the inspiriting needs of a moribund familialism, as *sinthomosexuality*, a term that links the *jouissance* to which we gain access through the *sinthome* with a homosexuality made to figure the lack in Symbolic meaning-production on account of which, as Lacan declares, “there is no sexual relation.” Designating a locus of enjoyment beyond the logic of interpretation, and thus beyond the correlative logic of the symptom and its cure, the *sinthome* refers to the mode of *jouissance* constitutive of the subject, which defines it no longer as subject of desire, but rather as subject of the drive. For the subject of desire now comes to be seen as a symptomatic misprision, within the language of the law, of the subject’s *sinthomatic* access to the force of a *jouissance* played out in the pulsions of the drive. Where the symptom sustains the subject’s relation to the reproduction of meaning, sustains, that is, the fantasy of meaning that futurism constantly weaves, the *sinthome* unravels

those fantasies by and within which the subject means. And because, as Bruce Fink puts it, “the drives always seek a form of satisfaction that, from a Freudian or traditional moralistic standpoint, is considered perverse,” the *sinthome* that drives the subject, that renders him subject of the drive, thus engages, on a figural level, a discourse of what, because incapable of assimilation to heterosexual genitality, gets read, as if by default, as a version of homosexuality, itself conceived as a mode of enjoyment at the social order’s expense. As Fink goes on to observe: “What the drives seek is not heterosexual genital reproductive sexuality, but a partial object that provides *jouissance*.”² *Sinthomosexuality*, then, only means by figuring a *threat* to meaning, which depends on the promise of coming, in a future continuously deferred, into the presence that reconciles meaning with being in a fantasy of completion—a fantasy on which every subject’s cathexis of the signifying system depends. As the shadow of death that would put out the light of heterosexual reproduction, however, *sinthomosexuality* provides familial ideology, and the futurity whose cause it serves, with a paradoxical life support system by providing the occasion for both family and future to solicit our compassionate intervention insofar as they seem, like Tiny Tim, to be always on their last legs.

The agent responsible for effecting their destruction has been given many names: by Baudrillard, a “global extermination of meaning”; by Hewlett and West, whatever refuses to “allow parents to cherish their children”; by François Abadie, “homosexuals” as “the gravediggers of society”; by psychoanalytic theory, the death drive and the Real of *jouissance*. Just as the Lacanian *sinthome* knots together the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, so *sinthomosexuality* knots together these threats to reproductive futurism. No political *catachresis*, such as Butler proposes, could forestall the need to constitute, then, such a category of *sinthomosexuals*. For even though, as Butler suggests, political *catachresis* may change over time the occupants of that category, the category itself, like Antigone’s tomb, continues to mark the place of whatever refuses intelligibility. *Catachresis*, moreover, cannot assure the progressive redistribution of meaning. To the extent that the rearticulation of the signifier, and

therefore the reach of a term like “human,” supplements *without* effacing the prior uses to which it was put, no historical category of abjection is ever simply obsolete. It abides, instead, in its latency, affecting subsequent significations, always available, always waiting, to be mobilized again. *Catachresis* can only *formalize* contestation over “the proper,” repeating the violence at the core of its own always willed impositions of meaning. *Sinthomosexuality* presents itself as the realization of that violence exactly to the extent that it insists on the derealization of those meanings, occupying the place of what, in sex, remains structurally unspeakable: the lack or loss that relates to the Real and survives in the pressure of the drive. Because the Child of the heteroreproductive Couple stands in, at least fantasmatically, for the redemption of that loss, the *sinthomosexual*, who affirms that loss, maintaining it as the empty space, the *vacuole*, at the heart of the Symbolic, effectively destroys that Child and, with it, the reality it means to sustain.³ Nor could any *sinthomosexual*, whatever the revisions of sociocultural norms *catachresis* may entail, escape the coils of the twisted fate that ropes him into embodying such a denial of futurity, such a death blow to meaning’s survival in the figure of the Child, simply by virtue of being, or having been, someone’s Child himself.

On October 12, 1998—the evening of the death of Matthew Shepard, a twenty-one-year-old gay man then enrolled at the University of Wyoming who was lured from a bar by two straight men and taken in the dark to a deserted spot where he was savagely beaten, pistol-whipped, and then tied to a wooden fence and abandoned to the brutal cold of the night (from which he would not be rescued until some eighteen hours later, when he was discovered, already comatose, by a bicyclist who thought the limp, bloody body lashed to a post was a scarecrow)—on that evening of Matthew Shepard’s death a hospital spokesman, “voice choked with emotion,” made the following statement to the national press: “Matthew’s mother said to me, ‘Please tell everybody who’s listening to go home and give your kids a hug and don’t let a day go by without telling them you love them.’”⁴ These words of a grieving mother, widely

reported on the news, produced a mimetic outpouring of grief from people across the country, just as they had from the spokesman whose own voice choked as he pronounced them. But these words, which even on the occasion of a gay man's murder defined the *proper* mourners as those who had children to go home to and hug, specified the mourning it encouraged as mourning for a threatened familial futurity—a threat that might, for many, take the form of Matthew Shepard's death, but a threat that must also, for others, take the opposite form: of Shepard's life.⁵

Thus, even as mourners gathered to pray at the bier of a mother's slain child, others arrived at his funeral to condemn a "lifestyle" that made Matthew Shepard, for them, a dangerous bird of prey. An article printed in the *New York Times* speculated that the symbolic significance, for the killers, of leaving his body strung up on a fence might be traced to "the Old West practice of nailing a dead coyote to a ranch fence as a warning to future intruders."⁶ The bicyclist who mistook him for a scarecrow, then, would not have been far from the mark; for his killers, by posing Shepard's body this way, could be understood to be crowing about the lengths to which they would go to scare away other birds of his feather: birds that may seem to be more or less tame—flighty, to be sure, and prone to a narcissistic preening of their plumage; amusing enough when confined to the space of a popular film like *The Birdcage* (1996) or when, outside the movies, caged in the ghettos that make them available for ethnographic display or the closets that enact a pervasive desire to make them all disappear—but birds that the cognoscenti perceive as never harmless at all.⁷ For whatever apparent difference in species may dupe the untrained eye, inveterate bird-watchers always discern the tell-tale mark that brands each one a chicken-hawk first and last.

In an atmosphere all atwitter with the cries that echo between those who merely watch and those who hunt such birds, what matter who killed Cock Robin? The logic of *sinthomosexuality* justifies that violent fate in advance by insisting that what such a cock had been robbing was always, in some sense, a cradle. And that cradle must endlessly rock, we've been told, even if the rhythm it rocks to beats out, with every blow of the beat-

ing delivered to Matthew Shepard's skull, a counterpoint to the melody's sacred hymn to the meaning of life. That meaning, continuously affirmed as it is both in and as cultural narrative, nonetheless never can rest secure and, in consequence, never can rest. The compulsive need for its repetition, for the drumbeat by which it pounds into our heads (and not always, though not infrequently, by pounding in a Matthew Shepard's) that the cradle bears always the meaning of futurity and the futurity of meaning, testifies to something exceeding the meaning it means thereby to assure: to a death drive that carries, on full-fledged wings, into the inner sanctum of meaning, into the reproductive mandate inherent in the logic of futurism itself, the burden of the radically negative force that *sinthomosexuality* names.

Only the dumbest of clucks would expect such a story about the stories by which familial ideology obsessively takes its own pulse to assume a conspicuous place among cultural narratives valued for parroting the regulatory fantasy of reproductive futurism. What would induce a social order that hawks that ideology to foul its own nest with texts that explore how the fact of this iterative parroting speaks, regardless of intention or will, to the structuring mechanism of a death drive within its life-affirming thematics? Yet such a text might just *feather* the nest it seems ordained to foul if the tensions of form and content it *describes* were projected, in turn, *onto* it: if, that is, its efforts to resist the imperative of futurism were reduced to the status of ill-conceived themes in a work viewed as worthy of attention on account of its technical achievement alone; or, better still, if the challenge it poses to dominant reproductive ideology could plausibly be made to serve the cause of naturalizing futurity. Though the survival of the stories in which they appear may demand that Silas Marner and Scrooge be converted by a Child, and that Leonard, for not converting, be, eventually, destroyed, a story resistant to Symbolic survival through reproductive futurism might still survive if its narrative thematics, like Leonard, could be discarded and its formal properties, like Scrooge or Marner, could conduce to Imaginary form. And where better to look for that *rara avis* among privileged cultural nar-

ratives—for the text that could help us confront the relentless reproduction of reproductive ideology—than to Hitchcock's tour de force, *The Birds* (1963).

Reviewing the film with enthusiasm in the pages of the *New York Times*, Bosley Crowther, establishing the terms by which the film would be praised and dismissed for years, distinguished between what the film had to say and the way in which it said it: "Whether or not it is intended that you should find significance in this film, it is sufficiently equipped with other elements to make the senses reel. Mr. Hitchcock, as is his fashion, has constructed it beautifully, so that the emotions are carefully worked up to the point where they can be slugged."⁸ This tension between the film's technique and its questionable "significance," found an echo in a letter that Hitchcock received on the film's initial release. It reads, as quoted by Robert Kapsis: "Sir, I'm quite unhappy to inform you of my disappointment with your latest production, *The Birds*. I had counted on your usual excellent direction and I was not let down, but your finish can only be described as useless."⁹ Recalling Baudrillard's complaint that sex, in the era of biotechnological reproduction, "becomes extraneous, a useless function," the writer interprets Hitchcock's film, despite its skillful direction, as refusing to embrace the reproduction of meaning and thereby becoming, like sex without procreation according to the narrator of *The Children of Men*, "almost meaninglessly acrobatic." In fact, in a phrase whose ambiguity the author of the letter may not have intended, he leaves undecidable to what he refers in describing the film's "finish" as "useless," suspending its meaning between the uselessness of the director's polished technique and the uselessness of the film's deliberately disorienting conclusion. In either case, the "finish" fails not simply, as many maintain to this day, because the film is open-ended (suggesting a dizzying array of possible futures beyond its frame), but, more significantly, because it declines to affirm as certain any future at all.

Hitchcock himself presented the film as a triumph of technique, immodestly declaring it, on just that ground, "probably the most prodigious job ever done."¹⁰ But even while remarking on the technical difficulties

that the film both posed and overcame, he defended it against critical objections that it seemed to lack "significance" or some clear thematic point, by pitching the film as a warning to those who might contemplate crimes against nature. "Basically, in *The Birds*, what you have is a kind of an overall sketchy theme of everyone taking nature for granted," he explained before summarizing his own interpretation: "Don't mess about or tamper with nature."¹¹ If something in this reading sticks in one's craw, it's not simply the simplification, but also, and more pressingly, the clear contradiction between this would-be embrace of the natural, on the one hand, and the significance attached to the technical manipulation of reality by the camera, on the other. Neither in theme nor in visual practice does *The Birds* sing Mother Nature's praise; nor do mothers and children receive from the film the extorted tribute that sentimentality would grant them as "their due." *The Birds*, to the contrary, comes to roost, with a skittish and volatile energy, on a perch from which it seems to brood—dispassionately, inhumanly—on the gap opened up within nature by something inherently *contra naturam*: the death drive that haunts the Symbolic with its excess of jouissance and finds its figural expression in *sinthomosexuality*.

Like swallows returning to Capistrano, critics of Hitchcock's film return to the question its various characters pose: What do the bird attacks mean? "What do you suppose made it do that?" wonders Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) after the first gull gashes her head. "What's the matter with all the birds?" asks Lydia Brenner (Jessica Tandy) following a full-scale assault on the children celebrating her daughter's eleventh birthday. "Why are they doing this, the birds?" young Cathy (Veronica Cartwright) inquires of her older brother, Mitch (Rod Taylor), echoing the question that an overwrought mother poses to Melanie in the wake of an attack on the center of Bodega Bay: "Why are they doing this? Why are they doing this?" But why, we might ask, need we still ask why? Some time ago Robin Wood observed that "the film itself is quite insistent that either the birds can't be explained or that the explanation is unknown." He then went on to argue, persuasively, that the birds "are a concrete

embodiment of the arbitrary and the unpredictable, of whatever makes human life and human relations precarious, a reminder of the fragility and instability that cannot be ignored or evaded and, beyond that, of the possibility that life is meaningless and absurd.”¹² This largely compelling account of the film, to which I will return, rightly resists the impulse to localize the meaning of the attacks, but in doing so it refuses as well to localize the contexts within which this very refusal of meaning takes place. The narrative that raises meaninglessness as a possibility, after all, necessarily bestows a particular meaning on such meaninglessness itself. By deploying, in other words, a given figure, such as, in this instance, the birds, as the signifier intended to materialize the general “possibility that life is meaningless,” the text necessarily gestures toward a specific threat to meaning and suggests particular strategies by which one might manage to ward it off.

Though Wood, then, astutely identifies the birds with “whatever makes human life and human relations precarious,” there is something else that he needs to observe: they come from San Francisco, or, at any rate, it’s in San Francisco that we first see them flit through the air. And another thing: they seem to display a strong predilection for children. When Mrs. Bundy (Ethel Griffies), the butchly tailored and tweedy bird-lover who knows the perfect time for *The Tides*—conveniently making her entrance as Melanie, talking to her father by phone, is providing an account of the schoolhouse attack—dismisses out of hand the notion that the birds could have mounted such a raid, she turns to Melanie and demands of her with unconcealed condescension: “What do you think they were after, Miss . . . ?” “Daniels,” Melanie informs her, before delivering her icily calm response: “I think they were after the children.” “For what purpose?” Mrs. Bundy presses, and Melanie, after a pause fully worthy of the governess in James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, accepts the challenge and rises to it, enunciating each syllable precisely: “To kill them.” To be sure, the objects of avian violence most gruesomely visualized in Hitchcock’s film—Dan Fawcett, Annie Hayworth, even Melanie Daniels herself—are not exactly spring chickens; but the threat of the

birds achieves its most vividly iconic representation in the two crucial scenes where they single out young children to attack.

Their first all-out assault, their first joint action, as it were, takes place at the party thrown in honor of Cathy Brenner’s eleventh birthday, the prospect of which gave Mitch—who subsequently passed it on to Melanie—the idea of presenting his sister with a pair of lovebirds as a gift.¹³ Though a single gull had already struck Melanie on the forehead the day before, the choice of the children’s party for this first fully choreographed attack suggests the extent to which the birds take aim at the social structures of meaning that observances like the birthday party serve to secure and enact: take aim, that is, not only at children and the sacralization of childhood, but also at the very organization of meaning around structures of subjectivity that celebrate, along with the day of one’s birth, the ideology of reproductive necessity.¹⁴ Like Bruno Anthony (Robert Walker) in *Strangers on a Train*, who punctures the balloon of cuteness that hangs like a halo above one annoying child (see figures 22–27) and has no compunction about casually tossing a second, and even more troublesome tot, to what might well have proven his death, the birds beset the children with an unconstrained aggression that reflects and displaces the aggression adults aggressively punish in children.

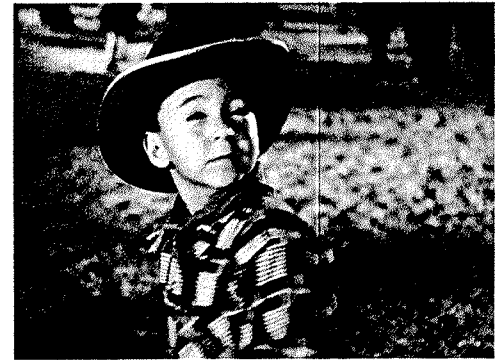
So when Cathy, blindfolded to play her part in the game of blindman’s buff, is stunned by the first glancing blow from a bird, she assumes without hesitation that she’s been struck by another child and calls to the others, more in pique than in pain, “Hey, no touching allowed!” (see figures 28–30). As dozens of birds then swoop down with hoarse cries, inducing a sort of echoing screech in the children, who panic and run, the film implies that the ravaging birds are too like the children to like them too much, or to like them as more than the objects of a murderous, and murderously derealizing, drive.

Hitchcock stresses this aggressive echoing (and this echoing aggression) as determining the relation between children and birds from the opening scene of the film. Though the camera, from the outset, frames Tippi Hedren, whom Hitchcock “discovered” and groomed for this film,

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the audience first gets to feast on her face when she turns toward the camera in response to what critics conventionally call a “wolf whistle.” But the source of that whistle, significantly, is less a sheep than a lamb in wolf’s clothing, a cheeky young boy whose age we might put, to hazard a guess, at eleven. Melanie, expecting some loutish lothario as she wheels about to confront him, flashes a smile of relief and surprise when she sees that this would-be cock of the walk is no more than a feather-weight bantam (see figures 31–35). Charmed by his boyish bravado, the crowing of a youngster sufficiently cocky at eleven to augur with absolute certainty a full-fledged prick by twenty-one, Melanie, failing to see the incipience of that straight male sense of entitlement for which she will want, in a matter of minutes, somehow to clip Mitch Brenner’s wings, responds to this sexually freighted call by hearing its amorous coo in the key of a prepubescent chirp. Her smile acquits the act of what she grasped as its aggression (about which, though prepared to squawk, she wasn’t really ruffled) when she thought it the sonorous panting of one more accustomed to wearing long pants.

No sooner has her face lit up—her anger defused, her defenses let down—at the vision of the Child, than Melanie hears the whistle return, multiplied a hundred times over, but coming from somewhere else.¹⁵ A cut to Melanie’s point of view now shows us the sky in long shot and in it a virtual cloud of gulls, whose calls seem to mock the boy’s whistle as these birds of a feather, neither sowing nor reaping, noisily cruise San Francisco. In reverse shot, that cloud crosses Melanie’s face, her joy in the boy eclipsed by the cries of the languidly circling gulls, their harsh and guttural echo stripping the whistle of its charm, as if their taunt were targeting both the woman and the boy. Or targeting, instead, what the film had allowed the two to perform together: a pantomime of erotic tension resolved in the figure of the Child (who gives such tension the meaning that relieves it of all taint), by reading the constitutive friction—the determining aggression—inherent in eros as the agency that generates meaning and the Child in a single blow, breeding thereby a happy heterosexual economy in which the Child means “meaning” for adults,

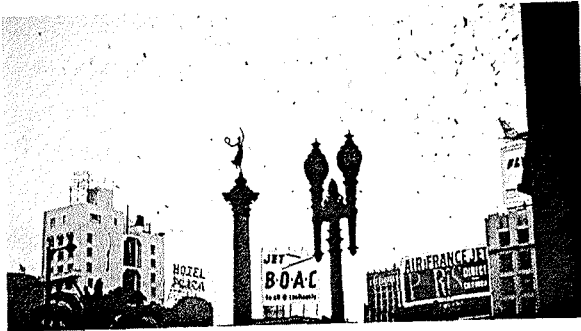
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who can only attain it by virtue of participating in the labor of giving (it) birth (see figures 36–38).¹⁶

This sequence, then, like an egg, contains the film in embryonic form, with Melanie caught between a libidinal energy redeemed through the figure of the Child, the heterosexualized version of eros traditionally served sunny-side up, and the disarticulation that scrambles it in the figure of the birds: the arbitrary, future-negating force of a brutal and mindless drive. It may be the boy in this scene who whistles, but through him, and through its investment in him, we can hear reproductive futurism trying to whistle past the graveyard. And just as the boy's sweet tweet is cheapened by the echoing cheep of the birds, so the reassuring meaning of heterosexuality as the assurance of meaning itself confronts in the birds a resistance, call it *sinthomosexuality*, that fully intends to wipe the satisfied smile off Melanie's face. By yoking her thus to the birds through the boy, this sequence might well be construed as the egg from which Melanie's story emerges, but this scene, however primal within the logic of the film, refers to a moment outside the film and marks, as would an umbilicus, a distinctly nonavian origin that Hitchcock's film reproduces so as to generate *The Birds*.

Donald Spoto has written an account of the moment to which this sequence harks back, the moment when Hitchcock first noticed the blonde he thereafter took under his wing: "One morning . . . Hitchcock and Alma [his wife] were watching the NBC network's *Today* show. He saw a commercial featuring an attractive, elegant blond who passed across the screen and smiled, turning amiably in response to a little boy's wolf-whistle. . . . That morning, he told his agents to find out who she was, and that afternoon an appointment was made for her."¹⁷ The commercial, for *Sego*, a diet drink meant to account for the numerous backward glances, signs of a different kind of hunger, bestowed on the blonde by the various men she passes on the street, resolves itself more pointedly than Spoto's account suggests. For Hedren, holding a bag of groceries as she stops to admire the fashions displayed in the window of a store, stands with her back to the camera when the sound of the wolf-whistle puts her on



notice that she's on display herself. She starts to turn, but before we're allowed a glimpse of her expression, the camera cuts to an insert shot of the whistle's unlikely source: a boy, to be sure, as Spoto notes, eleven years old, more or less, but crucially—and this Spoto doesn't report—the boy is portraying *her son*. Sitting in the car (like Melanie's, a convertible) where his mother had left him waiting while she went to take care of her chores, the child gets his mother's attention by offering the tribute of a man, then deflecting its erotic implications by flashing the guileless grin of a boy. Hedren's broad smile in response to the joke allows her, and the audience of the commercial as well, to bask in the innocent glow of the Child, ignoring the fact that the boy takes the place—one he'll soon enough fully assume—of the numerous men whose heads Hedren turned as she passed them just moments before (see figures 39–42).

And no head turned with more interest than Hitchcock's when Hedren came into view, enacting the narrative logic at work in the commercial's ideology: a logic wherein the permissibly “innocent” whistle of the Child resolves the explicitly sexual energies (understood as more threatening, more aggressive) that the commercial nonetheless, and at the same time, undertakes to promote and inflame.¹⁸ Hitchcock, a model spectator here—in more than one sense of the phrase—identifies with, and reproduces, the youngster's bird-like trill of desire; like the boy, he too responds to the vision of Hedren by sounding a call, summoning her to the meeting that ultimately led to her starring role in *The Birds*. In the film, though, when Hitchcock introduces her in a version of the scene that introduced her to him, he then proceeds to complete that scene by inserting a shot of the birds. Not that they haven't been heard from already: their cries thread their way through the audio track from before, one might say, its beginning. Though a visual fade-out separates the opening credits from the narrative proper, the clamor of the birds persists as a bridge of sound between the two. When the film fades in (through the blue-green filter that announces its dominant tones), the sights and sounds of San Francisco command our full attention. The birdcalls, though continuous, become mere background to the scene



until, as if they were prompted by Melanie's endorsement of the Child—her endorsement of the Child's dissimulation of heterosexuality as sexuality—the gulls parrot back the boy's whistle as materialized agents of sexual threat.

Bringing out, in the process, the relentless aggression and insistence of the libidinal drives—drives that the Child as embodiment of reproductive futurism serves to mask; bringing out the violent erotics at the heart of a Hitchcockian compulsion that repetitively rehearses, deprived of its grace, the Child's expectant grace note, the birds enact the process of bringing or coming out per se, shedding invisibility here and demanding, having been present before, to be recognized, to be seen. Like Marion the Librarian in *The Music Man*, Melanie Daniels might be moved to exclaim: "There were birds/ In the sky/ But I never saw them winging/ No, I never saw them at all/'Til there was you"¹⁹—words no less apt to be voiced at a second blonde Marion's moment of truth, when her highway to happiness abruptly dead-ends on her taking for the simple-minded innocence of a Child, and thus reading as redemptive, the wounded-sparrow twitchiness she encounters in Norman Bates. More hawk than sparrow, but birdlike himself, of course, Norman puts the lie to the avian analysis he offers while chatting with Marion: "I think only birds look well stuffed because, well, because they're kind of passive to begin with."²⁰ But *The Birds*, like *Psycho*, portrays the revenge (which thereby reinforces the fantasmatic threat) of those conceptualized as "passive" by depicting the activist militancy that attends their coming out—especially when that activism takes the form, as with Leonard in *North by Northwest*, of an "impossible, inhuman" act.²¹

One might, to be sure, object that Hitchcock's favored cinematic strategy, a distinguishing feature of his camera's unremitting epistemological investigations, consists in his bringing out this latency, some might call it a queerness, that inhabits things that otherwise tend to pass without remark: a pair of scissors, a household key, a dangling piece of rope.²² As enacted in *The Birds*, however, this coming out, the seed for countless interpretations of what it means, refuses the promise of mean-

ing condensed in the seed that is the Child; nor would it be flying too far afield to suggest that the birds, by coming out, give the bird to the fantasy of reproduction as the seedbed of futurity through its meaningful sublation of the otherwise meaningless machinery of the drive. What Butler calls the “heterosexual matrix” may tempt us, with Susan Lurie, to consider the birds as phallic part-objects, or, alternatively, with Slavoj Žižek, as the maternal superego in visible form. By resisting the appeal of such couplings, however, heterogeneity’s either/or, we might manage to kill those two birds with one stone and suggest that the birds in Hitchcock’s film, by virtue of fucking up—and with—the matrix of heterosexual mating, desublimates the reproductive rites of the movie’s human lovebirds, about which, as about the products of which, they don’t give a flying fuck.²³ They gesture, that is, toward the death drive that lives within reproductive futurism, scorning domestication in the form of romance, which is always the romance of the Child.

But one thing in this must be perfectly clear: my point is not to equate the birds with homosexuality nor to suggest that they be understood as “meaning” same-sex desire. Neither is Hitchcock’s film, as I read it, an allegory of gay coming-out. Insofar as the birds bear the burden of *sinthomosexuality*, which aims to dissociate heteronormativity from its own implication in the drive, it would, in fact, be more accurate to say that the meaning of homosexuality is determined by what the film represents in them: the violent undoing of meaning, the loss of identity and coherence, the unnatural access to jouissance, which find their perfect expression in the slogan devised by Hitchcock himself for the movie’s promotion, “The Birds is coming.”²⁴

Though participating in the narrative covenant of futurity through its promise of something, in Wordsworth’s phrase, “evermore about to be,” this slogan, at the same time, points to a radical coming without reserve that expends itself improvidently, holding nothing in trust for tomorrow and refusing therefore all faith in the sort of narrative intelligibility that Hamlet, for instance, defers to when he forbears from deferring his fate: “Not a whit, we defy augury. There is a special providence in the

fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all” (V. ii. 220–224). The falling sparrows of Hitchcock’s film—and the film will specify sparrows as the birds that fall from the Brenners’ chimney like a living stream of soot or waste, turning meaning, wherein we think we live, into chaos and filth and death—decline, in their present progressive coming, in the constancy of the jouissance as which they now come out, to “be not to come,” in Shakespeare’s words, since coming becomes their being.²⁵ Exposing the latent impropriety informing the structures of the proper, embedding grammatical violation in the very logic of grammar itself, “The Birds is coming” anticipates the film’s libidinal economy by confounding our anticipation of simple syntactic or narrative sense. The catchphrase fucks with the copula, meaning that meaning comes apart, thus advertising the threat of *The Birds* to the narrative teleology of the subject, always constituted at the expense of jouissance, at the cost of the violent involuntarity, the pulsive pressure of a coming, in the throes of which the subject of meaning could only come apart too.²⁶ Trenching as it does on this trench in the subject that jouissance hollows out, the slogan alludes to a fissure that sunders the syntax of social reality just as the slogan itself seems to sunder the agreement of subject and verb. “Coming” thus comes into conflict with the subject’s predication of a future to come, and *The Birds*, as the site of this conflict, no less than the birds that flesh it out, claws at our faith in the future, at the generative grammar of generation, by coming instead at the death drive, in the grip of which, insofar as we come, we thereby come to naught—or come, which may come to the same in the end, to a place like Bodega Bay.

What a perfect spot for a pair of lovebirds to build their little nest. Defined, as if allegorically, in opposition to San Francisco, the sophisticated urban center described by Cathy, quoting her brother, Mitch, as “an ant-hill at the foot of a bridge,” Bodega Bay might stand for the concept of natural beauty as such were it not for the fact that its natural settings have the peculiar habit of metamorphosing into clearly unnatural cinematic effects. Time and again, and at pivotal moments, its vistas get flattened

into obvious sets or derealized by filmic artifice, as, for example, when Melanie is crossing the lake to the Brenner farm, or when she and Mitch share their thoughts and a drink before the gulls interrupt Cathy's party, or when Melanie and Annie, having opened the door to discover a lifeless bird, gaze up toward the light of the moon that ought to have kept it from losing its way, or when Melanie, catching sight of a crow as it glides toward its perch near the school, follows its downward descent and discovers the playground now covered with birds. At the heart of each of these episodes lies an avian annunciation that brings with it no glad tidings, no miraculous conception. Instead, boding ill for Bodega Bay and for those whose abode it is, these birds expose the misconception on which its reality rests: the misconception that conception itself can assure the endurance, by enacting the truth, of the Symbolic order of meaning and preserve, in the form of the future, the prospect of someday redeeming the primal loss that makes sexual rapport impossible and precludes the signifying system from ever arriving at any closure.

For the politics of reproductive futurism, the only politics we're permitted to know, organizes and administers an apparently self-regulating economy of sentimentality in which futurity comes to signify access to the realization of meaning both promised and prohibited by the fact of our formation as subjects of the signifier. As a figure for the supplementarity, the logic of restitution or compensation, that sustains our investment in the deferrals demanded by the signifying chain, the future holds out the hope of a final undoing of the initiating fracture, the constitutive moment of division, by means of which the signifier is able to pronounce us into subjectivity. And it offers that hope by mobilizing a fantasy of temporal reversal, as if the future were pledged to make good the loss it can only ever repeat. Taking our cue from de Man's account of Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," we might note that the future can engage temporality only in the mode of figuration because futurity stands in the place of a linguistic, rather than a temporal, destiny: "The dimension of futurity," according to de Man, "is not temporal but is the correlative of the figural pattern and the disjunctive

power which Benjamin locates in the structure of language." That structure, as de Man interprets it, requires the perpetual motion of what he calls "a wandering, an *errance*," and "this motion, this errancy of language which never reaches the mark," is nothing else, for Benjamin, than history itself, generating, in the words of de Man, "this illusion of a life that is only an afterlife."²⁷ Confusing linguistic with phenomenal reality, that illusion, which calls forth history from the gap of the "disjunctive power" internal to the very "structure of language," names the fantasy of a social reality to which reproductive futurism pledges us all.

It is just such a violent reduction of reality to the status of an illusion, the result of approaching history, with de Man, as a rhetoric or poetics rather than as the ongoing dialectic of meaning's eventual realization through time, that is brought to bear on Bodega Bay in the figure of the birds. Not that I wish to define them as merely the sliding of the signifier, as if, become truly incapable now of distinguishing a hawk from a handsaw, Hamlet replied to Polonius, when asked what he's reading, "Birds, birds, birds." But I do want to argue that Hitchcock's birds, in the specificity of their embodiment, resist, both within and without the film, hermeneutic determination—and they do so by carrying, in the figural atmosphere through which they wing their way, the force of a poetics never fully contained by a hermeneutic claim, where "poetics," as the term is used by de Man, identifies a "formal procedure considered independently of its semantic function."²⁸ Expressing this surplus of "formal procedure" that inhabits and exceeds (and so threatens to confound) the imperative to generate meaning, the birds may persistently beat against, but are destined nonetheless to fly through and not from, the medium of meaning in which they come only to mean its degeneration. Though our faith in social reality makes that reality seem as natural as the very air we breathe, the radical excess that the birds connote, like the constant iteration and accumulation of heterosexualizing narratives—social and political narratives no less than literary or aesthetic ones—bespeaks a drive that eludes all efforts to formulate its meaning.²⁹ The formal insistence of the drive, in fact, has the effect of *deforming* meaning inso-

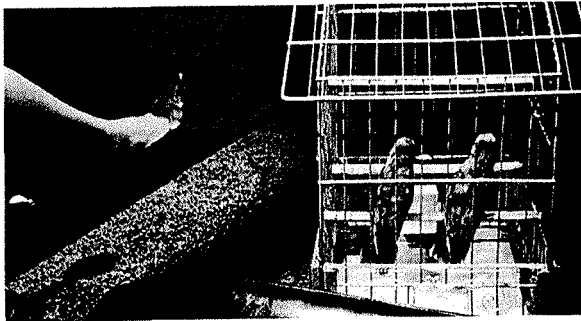
far as it shows how the absolute privilege accorded the “semantic function” serves as the privileged mechanism for maintaining the collective “illusion of a life.” Expressing the unintelligibility of this formal mechanism or drive, the birds usher in the collapse of an ideologically naturalized reality into the various artificial props that are jerry-rigged to maintain it.

If this appears to impose on *The Birds* a weight of linguistic implication beneath which the film itself must collapse, then perhaps we ought to bear in mind that Melanie, as she proudly announces to Mitch, is actually enrolled at Berkeley in a course on General Semantics. Still more to the point, the film begins as she’s heading toward Davidson’s Pet Shop, where she expects to find a mynah bird she has ordered as a gift for her aunt—a practical joke of a gift, we soon learn, since her aim is to shock her “straight-laced” aunt by teaching the bird a few “four-letter words” that Melanie has picked up at school. In narrative terms, the mynah bird will prove to be a red herring, but only because it undergoes a symbolic exchange with the lovebirds in the aftermath of the exchange of words between Melanie and Mitch. Like the mynah bird whose place they take, the lovebirds—a variety of parrot, though very few lovebirds are able to talk—are made to signify the signifying potential inherent in the “natural”; they reflect, that is, the human determination to make the world answer to, and in, the voice of the subjects addressing it. By doing so they confirm as natural the order of meaning itself, which coincides, though not coincidentally, with the heterosexualizing logic that renders the world and the subject intelligible through the promise of their mutual completion in the One of sexual rapport.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Melanie’s lovebirds most clearly perform the naturalization of human meaning at the moment when the film strategically seems to personify them as children. I refer to the sequence where Melanie is on her way to Bodega Bay, the wheels of her sportscar squealing as she takes each turn in the road too fast. The camera directs our attention to the lovebirds beside her in their cage, their bodies tilting left and right each time the car rounds a curve (see

figure 43). Always earning the laugh it solicits, this passage shows us the lovebirds in the connotative plumage of their smallness and dependency: it reads them, that is, much as Melanie reads the whistling boy: as “cute.” But the ideological labor of cuteness, though it falls most often to the smallest, imposes no insubstantial burden in a culture where cuteness enables a general misrecognition of sexuality (which always implicitly endangers ideals of sociality and communal enjoyment) as, at least in the dominant form of heterosexual reproduction, securing the collective reality it otherwise threatens to destroy.³⁰ Visually framed as children, then, and serving as figures for the romantic ideology that turns lovers into children themselves to explain (which is also to say, to elide) how children are produced (consider the fate of Cupid, who, despite his passionate involvement with Psyche, we image as prepubescent), the lovebirds, shadowed by the mynah bird whose narrative place they take, are thereby made to speak the truth of a General Semantics. They mean here as figures of meaning—of, more precisely, the domestication, the colonization, of the world by meaning—insofar as their cuteness both echoes and reinforces the meaningfulness of the Child about which even the dumbest animals are “naturally” able to speak.

But how could these lovebirds, whose very name weds them not just to each other but also, and in the process, to the naturalization of heterosexual love, anticipate the rapacious violence with which their fine feathered friends will divorce themselves—unexpectedly, out of the blue—from the nature they’re made ideologically, and so unnaturally, to mean? How else but with the eruption, or, as I’ve called it, the coming out, of something contra naturam always implicit in them from the start, something we might catch sight of, for instance, in the question that Cathy blurts out (one camouflaged only in part by its calculated alibi of cuteness), which demands that the lovebirds speak their compulsory meaning louder still: “Is there a man and a woman? I can’t tell which is which.”³¹ Melanie, to whom she directs this question, deflects it with an uncomfortable laugh and a dismissive, “Well, I suppose.” But what if her supposition were wrong? Or what if, more disturbing still, her



answer were literally true: what if the structuring principle, the world-making logic of heterosexual meaningfulness were merely a supposition, merely a positing, as de Man would say, and not, therefore, imbued with the referential necessity of a “meaning”? After all, as de Man reminds us, “language posits and language means . . . but language cannot posit meaning.”³²

Cathy’s question could only mean by casting a shadow of doubt on the subjectifying principle that collocates meaning itself with the structures of sexual difference—the principle, for example, first sounded in the whistle by which both the boy and the movie read sexual difference as self-evident. No birdbrain, Cathy must understand that the lovebirds, in their sameness, their apparent interchangeability, resist, or suggest a resistance to, this heterosexual dispensation by suggesting the unintelligibility inherent in sexual difference itself. We might even hear in her question an unintentional echo of Proust, whose narrator in *Sodom and Gomorrah* remarks, while watching Charlus and Jupien strike poses in an effort to maneuver their mutual cruise into a somewhat more intimate docking, “One might have thought of them as a pair of birds, the male and the female, the male seeking to advance, the female—Jupien—no longer giving any sign of response to this stratagem, but regarding her new friend without surprise . . . and contenting herself with preening her feathers.”³³ For Proust’s anatomically indistinguishable lovebirds, “male” and “female” are positional attributes deprived of any self-evidence for the reader from the start (occasioning the necessity of specifying Jupien by name as the “female” bird); yet the preening positional presence—partly peacock, partly vulture—introduced by the very possibility of imagining two lovebirds of the same sex hovers already in the atmosphere that Cathy’s question, despite its “innocence,” threatens to make heavy. For that question, simply cuckoo when asked of a heterosexual pairing, parrots what everyone wonders where same-sex couples are concerned, the meaning of all such couplings being coupled to the meaning that heterosexuality alone is permitted to determine and confirm.

If these lovebirds, as in the molting season (“a particularly dangerous time,” as Melanie says to a skeptical Mitch), were imagined, with Cathy’s query, to drop their beads and their feathers at once, as what could they possibly come out in the collective fantasy life of America circa 1963 but members of that reprehensible tribe of ever-lurking predators, looking like scavenging crows in the standard dark raincoats of their kind, who gather in public parks and school playgrounds waiting until the moment is ripe to pick up some innocent kid for the peck that everyone, even the pecker himself, perceives as the kiss of death? Birds of ill omen condemned to such fruitless matings on the wing, these raptors who famously feed on the young they’re unable themselves to produce may merit the title “degenerate” for such antipathy to generation and for their practice, instead, of a *jouissance* indifferent to social survival. Not that the scene at the schoolhouse, perhaps the most famous in the film, is meant to “mean” allegorically any scenario such as this. The crows, unlike the mynah bird, resist the demand that they speak to us; no stool pigeons, they won’t talk.³⁴ If they fly in the face of meaning, though, they do so on wings unable to shed the meanings with which they’re feathered, wings that beat to the steady, relentless rhythm of the drive (“Don’t they ever stop migrating?” a weary Annie Hayworth asks) and reduce the hope of futurity to nothing but empty repetition, the promise of reproduction to the constant coming of *jouissance*, as if to affirm the value, above all else, of a bird in the hand.

Whatever else we may learn by going to school at Hitchcock’s schoolhouse, then, we must surely be struck by the structure of this brilliantly realized scene of instruction—struck, that is, by the strictness with which, in a masterstroke, he constructs it by restricting the play of his camera to patterns of formal repetition. Throughout his career in film, of course, Hitchcock engendered anxiety by rhythmically cutting between images of people or things that were certain to cause an explosion, sometimes literally, when they converged. This sequence seems to allegorize such a rhythmic repetition by producing a rhyme or analogy between, on the one hand, the director’s formal control (increasing the level of

tension by cutting repeatedly from shots of Melanie, shown in increasingly tighter close-up, to shots of the birds as they gather on the jungle gym behind her) and, on the other, the thematization that such a formalism elicits (visualizing that notion of increase through the multiplication of the crows). As the cigarette, from which Melanie distractedly takes deep, occasional drags, burns down, like the lighted fuse of a bomb, time and hope for the future both going up, as we watch, in its smoke, more and more birds, indistinguishable, all as similar to each other as clones, alight as the visual antitypes to the reproductive future that the children, as figures of increase themselves, should signify and assure.

Heard but not seen in this sequence, though, the children, turned into songbirds now, triangulate Melanie’s relation to the crows, lending their voices to a score that serves, in no small part, to underscore the formal repetitions of the scene. The verses they sing perversely veer from sense to nonsense, back and forth, with no clear sense of direction, mixing narrative fragments that allude to a failure of heterosexual domesticity (“I married my wife in the month of June”; “She combed her hair but once a year”; “With every stroke she shed a tear”; “I asked my wife to wash the floor”; “She gave me my hat and showed me the door”) with incremental repetitions of insistent, suggestive, and ultimately meaningless sounds (“Ristle-tee, rostle-tee, now, now, now”; “Ristle-tee, rostle-tee, hey donny dossle-tee, rustical-quality, ristle-tee, rossle-tee, now, now, now”). The formula of the song (or its lack thereof) makes it, in principle, endless: verses repeat out of order, nonsense syllables expand and contract. For just that reason it has the effect of marking time in this scene: of measuring and prolonging the deferral of Melanie’s mission to the schoolhouse (she has come to pick up Cathy and so to put Lydia’s mind at ease) and to identify such deferral with temporality itself. The order of narrative futurity for which the children have come to stand thus stands, with this song, exposed as bound to a structure of repetition—a structure that, as the formal support of the meaning of social reality, is always necessarily inaccessible to the reach of any such meaning itself. Its formal excess, unaccounted for in meaning’s domestic economy, be-

trays—like the children’s song, or the crows—the intractable force of a drive that breaks, again and again, like the pulsating waves in which the bird attacks seem to come, against and within the reality that meaning attempts to erect against it.³⁵ Perhaps, then, we shouldn’t be too surprised that when Melanie turns and discovers the crows, massed as if striving to materialize the Kantian mathematical sublime, Hitchcock frames her reaction shot against a thoroughly derealized background, evoking with this the derealization effected by the birds as they bring out the repetition compulsion, the violence intrinsic to the drive, that Symbolic reality closets in itself while projecting it onto *sinthomosexuals*, who are thus made to figure *jouissance* (see figures 44–53).

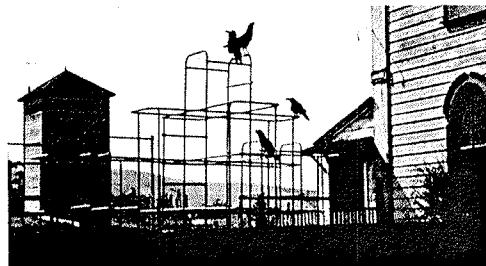
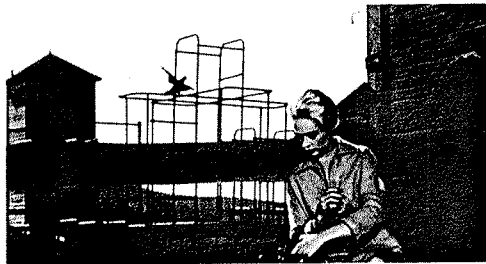
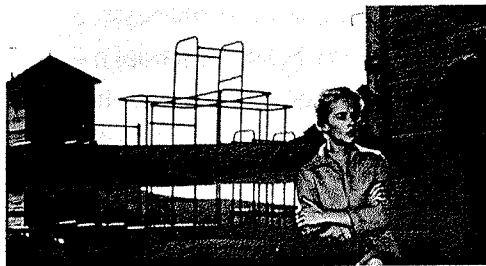
Out to get the children, then, by coming, and coming out, the birds, when they flock from their playground perch, seem to darken the sky like a stain. They emerge, as Hitchcock shoots the scene, as if from the school itself to suggest the unacknowledged ghosts that always haunt the social machinery and the unintelligibility against which no discourse of knowledge prevails (see figures 54 and 55). As horrified youngsters shriek and flail, racing to return to the shelter they still think their parents and home can provide, the birds bear down with talon and beak, pecking and scratching at eyes and skin, clearly out for blood (see figures 56 and 57). “Ristle-tee, rostle-tee, now, now, now” comes back with a vengeance here, unpacked, in these winged chariots not content to hover near, as the full-fledged force of the death drive that its repetition bespeaks. Rereading this scene at a pivotal moment in his career-long ambivalence about *The Birds*, Robin Wood described it as localizing the ostensible “weakness” of the film in “the perfunctory treatment of the children . . . Hitchcock’s notable failure to respond to the notion of renewed potential they and the school might have represented, his reduction of the concepts of education and childhood—the human future—to the automatic reiteration of an inane jingle.”³⁶ Though distorted by its blindness to the point of reducing the “human future” to “automatic reiteration,” a blindness inseparable from its own “automatic reiteration” of the logic that always tops our ideological charts (let us call that

logic “poptimism” and note that its locus classicus is Whitney Houston’s rendition of the secular hymn, “I believe that children are our future,” a hymn we might as well simply declare our national anthem and be done with it), Wood’s observation picks up, nonetheless, on what other readings ignore: Hitchcock’s reduction of childhood, education, reality, and the future itself to the status of mere machinery, of automatic reiterations—which is to say, their reduction to the meaningless pulsions of the drive.³⁷

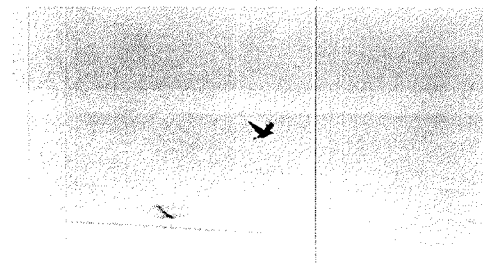
If the bird attacks, as many suggest, seem colored by desire, enacting as sexual aggression the experience of sexuality itself, then they mark the place where sexuality and the force of the death drive overlap, exposing what Jean Laplanche calls “a kind of antilife as sexuality, frenetic enjoyment [*jouissance*], the negative, the repetition compulsion.”³⁸ In this they bespeak what regimes of normativity, of sexual meaningfulness, disavow: the antisocial bent of sexuality as such, acknowledged, and then as pathology, only in those who are bent themselves. “Sexuality in the context of family and procreation has natural limits,” claims Alan Keyes, conservative radio talk show host and occasional candidate for the Republican presidential nomination. “It has built into it constraints, responsibility, discipline and so forth.” “Restraint,” by contrast, Keyes opines, “goes counter to the whole idea of sexuality that’s involved in homosexuality itself, which is to say sexuality freed from constraint, freed from convention, freed from the context and limitations of procreation.”³⁹ Dissociating reproductive pleasure from the frenzied shock of *jouissance*, the joys of procreation from the “violent liveness” of what, after Lauren Berlant, we should characterize as “live sex,” Keyes, defending the comic book version of heterosexuality (to be sure, the only version that has ever been given us to read), posits sexuality as hetero to normative heterosexual practice, linking access to “frenetic enjoyment,” the loss of control in *jouissance*, to a homosexuality that is made to appear as *sinthomosexuality*.⁴⁰ For sexuality itself now carries the *sinthome*’s intolerably de-meaning mark.

Thus the birds in their coming lay to waste the world condensed in

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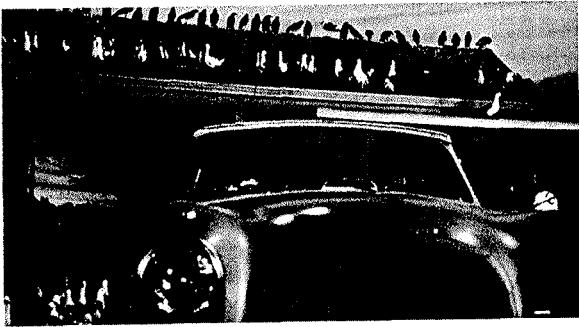


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Bodega Bay because they, like the “Homosexual Generation” Ken Worthy wrote of as “driven and driving” in a book from 1965, “so hate the world that will not accept them that they, in turn, will accept nothing but the destruction of that world.”⁴¹ “Driven and driving”: a perfect description of the family at the end of the film. In a landscape that pulses with volatile birds, they pack themselves into Melanie’s car, still clinging, albeit desperately, to hope, that thing with feathers, in the form of the lovebirds that Cathy cannot bear to leave behind: hope, that is, for the future—for the *reproductive* future—that Cathy and the lovebirds together would, in another context, affirm.⁴² It may be just such a future that the family, driven from domestic security by the birds, is driving toward at the end; but the film’s insistently “useless” finish will offer us only the image of driving, or even of drive itself, while the soundtrack supplies, in Hitchcock’s words, a “monotonous low hum . . . a strange artificial sound, which in the language of the birds might be saying, ‘We’re not ready to attack yet, but we’re getting ready. We’re like an engine that’s purring and we may start off at any moment’” (see figures 58–60).⁴³

Should we ask, with other critics, at what this Hitchcockian engine is driving, we might be torn between interpreting the birds, with Wood, as “a concrete embodiment of the arbitrary and unpredictable,” or, with Žižek, as “the incarnation of a fundamental disorder in family relations.” But such alternatives come together in the film as they come together in the logic of heterosexual familialism as well. For Hitchcock’s anatomy of “family relations,” especially as Žižek depicts it, should strike us as mechanically predictable in accounting for the mechanicity driving the birds: “The father is absent, the paternal function . . . is suspended and that vacuum is filled by the ‘irrational’ maternal superego, arbitrary, wicked, blocking ‘normal’ sexual relationship.”⁴⁴ Like the momism as which it will not come out, this reading, promoted by the film itself, blames the mother for the terror that descends with the birds insofar as it also blames her for “blocking [her son’s] ‘normal’ sexual relationship.” Though this has the merit of seeing the birds, like Leonard, Silas Marner, and Scrooge, as reified obstacles to the dominant fantasy of



(hetero)sexual rapport, we haven't, apparently, progressed very far from the pseudo-psychology popularly hawked at the time that the film was made, a psychology epitomized by the following instance of that era's received ideas: "Kinsey has given us a brutal picture of the homosexual's mother, listing, a. her overpossessive love of him during his infancy and early childhood, and b. her underlying hatred of his wife, no matter how wise, devoted, and long-suffering the latter may be."⁴⁵ This mass-market version of gay etiology might afford us some interpretive purchase on the film by allowing us at last to make sense of the ascot Mitch wears beneath his sweater and letting us catch the full force of her drift when Annie wistfully muses out loud, "Maybe there's never been anything between Mitch and any girl" (see figure 61). But the birds don't alight in Hitchcock's film because Mitch is light in the loafers.⁴⁶ They come because coming is what they do, arbitrarily and unpredictably, like the homosexuals Keyes condemns for promoting "a paradigm of human sexuality divorced from family and procreation, and engaged in solely for the sake of . . . sensual pleasure and gratification."⁴⁷ They come, that is, to trace a connection, as directly as the crow flies, between "disorder in the family" and the rupture, the radical loss of familiarity, unleashed by jouissance. It is not, therefore, that the birds themselves mean homosexuality, but that homosexuality infects how they figure the radical refusal of meaning. Whatever voids the promissory note, the guarantee, of futurity, precluding the hope of redeeming it, or of its redeeming us, must be tarred, and in this case, feathered, by the brush that will always color it queer in a culture that places on queerness the negativizing burden of sexuality—sexuality, that is, as *sinthome*, as always *sinthomosexuality*: sexuality as the force that threatens to leave futurity *foutu*.

Cathy, Eppie, Tiny Tim, the constantly multiplying children of Eve with the hopes that get put in their outstretched hands and the dreams that get read in their always wide eyes: dare we see, in the end that's forbidden to be one, this endless line of children—a genetic line, a narrative line, stretched out to the crack of doom—as itself the nightmare of history from which we're helpless to awake? For these "innocent" children,



who blind us to futurism's implication in the blindness of the drive, reproduce a collective fantasy—one that touches, in refusing the negativity it opposes to the nature these children affirm, the depths of that negativity in the violence that informs the refusal itself.

Doesn't Benjamin, in his "Conversations with Brecht," seem to recognize something similar when he recalls his response to Brecht's telling him

that life, despite Hitler, goes on, there will always be children. . . . But then, still as an argument for the inclusion of the "Children's Songs" in the *Poems from Exile*, something else asserted itself, which Brecht expressed as he stood before me in the grass, with a passion he seldom shows. "In the fight against them nothing must be omitted. Their intentions are not trivial. They are planning for the next thirty thousand years. Monstrous. Monstrous crimes. They stop at nothing. They hit out at everything. Every cell flinches under their blows. That is why not one of us can be forgotten. They deform the baby in the mother's womb. We must under no circumstances leave out the children." While he spoke I felt a force acting on me that was equal to that of fascism; I mean a power that has its source no less deep in history than fascism.⁴⁸

Its sources in history no less deep because not *different* from those of fascism, this "force" that acts on Benjamin, this unidentified "power," might well be seen as what I've called "the fascism of the baby's face," which subjects us to its sovereign authority as the figure of politics itself (of politics, that is, in its radical form as reproductive futurism), whatever the face a particular politics gives that baby to wear—Aryan or multicultural, that of the thirty-thousand-year Reich or of an ever expanding horizon of democratic inclusivity. Which is not to say that the difference of those political programs makes no difference, but rather that both, as *political programs*, are programmed to reify difference and thus to secure, in the form of the future, the order of the same. And this, as we saw

in *North by Northwest*, occasions the emergence of history through the dialectic of desire, producing a temporalization that generates, like the “structure of allegory” according to de Man, narrative as the constant movement of and toward intelligibility.⁴⁹

Such a history, though, as Lacan and de Man, in their quite different ways, understand, “pertains strictly to the order of language,” whose “permanent disjunction” or determining lack effects the “illusion of a life” in response to the interminable movement toward the closure of meaning in the Symbolic. If this is the history to the survival of which we must always, as humans, be pledged, or the history through which, catachrestically, we first hope to win recognition as human, then we might do well to recall de Man’s words on Benjamin’s concept of history: “It is this errancy of language, this illusion of a life that is only an afterlife, that Benjamin calls history. As such, history is not human, because it pertains strictly to the order of language; it is not natural, for the same reason; it is not phenomenal, in the sense that no cognition, no knowledge about man, can be derived from a history which as such is purely a linguistic complication; and it is not really temporal either, because the structure that animates it is not a temporal structure.”⁵⁰

Rather than expanding the reach of the human, as in Butler’s claim for *Antigone*, we might, with Leonard and the birds, insist on enlarging the inhuman instead—or enlarging what, in its excess, in its unintelligibility, exposes the human itself as always misrecognized catachresis, a positing blind to the willful violence that marks its imposition. “There is, in a very radical sense,” writes de Man in the essay on Benjamin, “no such thing as the human. If one speaks of the inhuman, the fundamental non-human character of language, one also speaks of the fundamental non-definition of the human as such.” This erasure of the human is implied, for de Man, in Benjamin’s notion of *reine Sprache*, which, though commonly interpreted in terms of the sacred or divine, designates for Benjamin, according to de Man, “a language completely devoid of any kind of meaning function, language which would be pure signifier, which

would be completely devoid of any semantic function whatsoever.”⁵¹ Putting a permanent end to Melanie’s hope of a General Semantics, such a *reine Sprache*, such an absolutely inhuman and meaningless language, could only sound to human ears like the permanent whine of white noise, like the random signals we monitor with radio telescopes trained on space, or perhaps like the electronically engineered sound with which Hitchcock ends *The Birds*.

In what he called a “monotonous low hum,” whose drone might recall the “monotonous response” of Silas Marner’s loom, in the “strange artificial” sound that brings Hitchcock’s film to its “useless” “finish,” we hear, if not the siren song, then the birdcall of futurity. The engine revs; the machine purrs on; the family drives through danger; and something implacable, life-negating, inimical to “our” children, works to reduce the empire of meaning to the static of an electric buzz. We, the *sinthomosexuals* who figure the death drive of the social, must accept that we will be vilified as the agents of that threat. But “they,” the defenders of futurity, buzzed by negating our negativity, are themselves, however unknowingly, its secret agents too, reacting, in the name of the future, in the name of humanity, in the name of life, to the threat of the death drive we figure with the violent rush of a *jouissance*, which only returns them, ironically, to the death drive in spite of themselves. Futurism makes *sinthomosexuals*, not humans, of us all.

We shouldn’t dismiss as coincidence, then, that the catchphrase best expressing our current captivity to futurism’s logic and serving as a bridge between left and right in the American political scene, is one that *sinthomosexuals*, like Hitchcock’s birds, could endorse as well: “Leave no child behind.” In repeating it, though, *sinthomosexuals* bring out what’s “impossible, inhuman” within it: a haunting, destructive excess bound up with its pious sentimentality, an overdetermination that betrays the place of the kernel of irony that futurism tries to allegorize as narrative, as history. The political regime of futurism, unable to escape what it abjects, negates it as the negation of meaning, of the Child, and of the

future the Child portends. Attempting to evade the insistent Real always surging in its blood, it lovingly rocks the cradle of life to the drumbeat of the endless blows it aims at *sinthomosexuals*. Somewhere, someone else will be savagely beaten and left to die—sacrificed to a future whose beat goes on, like a pulse or a heart—and another corpse will be left like a mangled scarecrow to frighten the birds who are gathering now, who are beating their wings, and who, like the drive, keep on coming.

NOTES

I. THE FUTURE IS KID STUFF

- 1 James Bennet, "Clinton, in Ad, Lifts Image of Parent," *New York Times*, 4 March 1997, A18, New England edition.
- 2 Donna Shalala, "Women's Movement," 150th Anniversary of the First Women's Rights Convention, Seneca Falls, New York, 17 July 1998, <http://www.hhs.gov/news/speeches/sene.html>. Note also the fundraising slogan of the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL): "For our daughters, our sisters, and our granddaughters."
- 3 Such a fantasy of substantialized and oppositional identities characterizes the Lacanian Imaginary stage, as distinct from the Symbolic order's wholly differential system of signifying relations.
- 4 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1994), 325.
- 5 He writes, for example, in Seminar 17: "Ce que la vérité, quand elle surgit, a de résolusif, ça peut être de temps en temps heureux—et puis, dans d'autres cas, désastreux. On ne voit pas pourquoi la vérité serait forcément toujours béné-

- train pulls to a stop. 'Look,' says the brother, 'we've arrived at Ladies!'; 'Idiot!' replies his sister, 'Can't you see we're at Gentlemen?' (Écrits, 152).
- 47 Suzanne Barnard, "The Tongues of Angels: Feminine Structure and Other Jouissance," in Barnard and Fink, *Reading Seminar XX*, 173.
- 48 That the train is the vehicle of temporal, and hence of narrative, dilation may be underscored by the fact that the train on which Thornhill encounters Eve is expressly identified as the *Twentieth-Century*, inscribing its function in the registers of time and space at once (see Lehman, *North by Northwest*, 48).
- 49 Bellour, "Symbolic Blockage," 81.
- 50 Cited in *ibid.*
- 51 The trope of the extended hand, or its refusal, figures in any number of representations of *sinthomosexuals*. Perhaps the most concise summation of its part in the logic of reproductive futurism can be found in Disney's *The Lion King* (directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, 1994). Viewers will recall the moment when Scar, the connotatively queer brother of the Lion King, Mustafa, finds his sibling clinging to a cliff while thousands of frenzied wildebeests are rampaging below. Holding his brother's paws in his own, Scar lays out his plan to take over the kingdom and then, releasing his grip, lets Mustafa fall to his death. The unwed Scar now assumes the throne and the consequences are dramatic: the fertile land becomes a landscape of death, ruled by the *sinthomosexual* Scar and his carrion-eating hyenas. This condition of morbidity persists until the eventual restoration of Simba, Mustafa's son and rightful heir, who returns to the kingdom with Nala, who is destined to be his queen. The film finds its apt conclusion, therefore, by affirming the continuity of the "Circle of Life." It repeats the opening sequence, which depicted the celebration of Simba's birth, but this virtually identical sequence celebrates the birth of Simba's son. With such an emphasis on repetition, we see once again the compulsion to sameness in reproductive futurism that old Mr. Lammeter remarked in *Silas Marner*. It is, of course, this sameness that futurism abjects in the *sinthomosexual*.
- 52 Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 23. All subsequent page references are from this edition and will appear parenthetically.
- 53 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 206, 207.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 207.
- 55 Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (New York: Verso, 2000), 95.
- 56 Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 196.

4. NO FUTURE

- 1 Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West, "For Mothers, It's No Paradise," *Boston Sunday Globe*, 10 May 1998, C7. My quarrel with this article, I want to make clear, is not with the particular suggestions it offers for improving the lives of underpaid working women and mothers; it is a quarrel, instead, with the ideology invoked to naturalize and promote those suggestions.
- 2 Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 211.
- 3 In *Seminar VII* Lacan tells his audience, "And one of you, in explaining to me what I am trying to show in *Das Ding*, referred to it neatly as the vacuole." He then goes on to observe: "Where, in effect, is the vacuole created for us? It is at the center of the signifiers—insofar as that final demand to be deprived of something real is essentially linked to the primary symbolization which is wholly contained in the signification of the gift of love." See Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, 150.
- 4 "Murder Charges Planned in Beating Death of Gay Student," 12 October 1998, CNN Interactive, <http://www/cnn.com/US/9810/12/wyoming.attack.03>.
- 5 It is worth noting, in this context, that less than two weeks after Shepard's murder, the *New York Times* reported on an effort in Fort Collins, Colorado (where the hospital in which Shepard died was located), to list sexual orientation as a protected category in its antidiscrimination ordinance. The article included the following sentence describing one of the responses provoked by the distribution of materials supporting that addition to the law: "I was handing out stickers on a parade route, and one boy held out his hand for one," recalled Bob Lenk, spokesman for the group promoting the ordinance change. "His mother said, 'You put that on him and I'll break your arm.'" James Brooke, "Anti-Bias Effort Roils City Where Gay Man Died," *New York Times*, 28 October 1998, A16.
- 6 James Brooke, "Gay Man Dies from Attack, Fanning Outrage and Debate," *New York Times*, 13 October 1998, late ed., A17.
- 7 Consider, for example, the following passage, which appeared in *i.e.*, an online Web magazine published by the Family Research Council the same month that Matthew Shepard was killed: "Homosexuality is not merely about a harmless personal preference. It is about a lifestyle that involves having sex with another person of the same gender. More often than anyone would like to admit, it's about promiscuity—and even violence. It is about unnatural, unsafe, and unhealthy behavior." Laurel L. Cornell,

"Coming Out of Homosexuality: What's This All About," October 1998, <http://www.frc.org/ie/ie98j.html>.

- 8 Bosley Crowther, "The Birds: Hitchcock's Feathered Friends Are Chilling," *New York Times*, 1 April 1963, 53.
- 9 Robert E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 65.
- 10 Alfred Hitchcock, "It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's . . . *The Birds*," originally published in *Take One* 1, no. 10 (1968): 6-7; reprinted in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock*, ed. Sidney Gottlieb (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 315.
- 11 Alfred Hitchcock, interviewed in "Just One Hitch," also cited in Camille Paglia, *The Birds* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 88.
- 12 Robin Wood, "The Birds," in *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 153, 154.
- 13 In his otherwise numbingly faithful adaptation of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001), Chris Columbus, the director, deviates from the letter of J. K. Rowling's text in an early scene that directly alludes to Hitchcock's film. Raised by his Aunt and Uncle Dursley, monsters of normativity (the novel's first sentence: "Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much" [1]), and led to believe that his parents were killed in a car crash during his infancy, when, in fact, they were wizards murdered by the evil Lord Voldemort (a sinthomosexual no matter what the future volumes in the series may reveal), young Harry, like Cathy Brenner, finds something left for him unexpectedly as his eleventh birthday draws near: in Harry's case, a letter, which the Dursleys manage to seize and burn before he is able to read it. This purloined letter, a copy of which, arriving at Privet Drive the next day, encounters a similar fate, turns into three more the following day and twelve more after that. The novel, unlike Columbus's film, says nothing about the agency by which these letters appear, though it does provide, by way of allusion, a basis for the filmmaker's decision about how that omission should be redressed:

"No post on Sundays," [Mr. Dursley] reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers. "No damn letters today—"

Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one. (41)

If the letters take the place of the invading sparrows that spill down the chimney of the Brenner house on the evening of Cathy's eleventh birthday, the movie cannily seizes on this to explain their arrival in the first place. For

the director, in a series of interpolated scenes, shows owls, atypically flying by day, that carry the letters to the Dursleys' home and then perch on nearby rooftops and cars as if waiting for a response. Before the chimney disgorges its multiple missives that fateful Sunday morning, Harry, catching a glimpse of something fluttering past the window, draws back the curtain to see what it is. At just that moment the director, instead of inserting the anticipated shot depicting Harry's point of view, cuts to a long shot of Harry seen at the window, but from its other side, and framed by the Dursleys' house, lawn, and car, all covered, like Hitchcock's jungle gym, by a plethora of birds. Quotations from J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York: Scholastic, 1998).

- 14 That birthday celebrations are determined by the ideology of reproductive necessity is underscored by a sentence that appeared, in an unrelated context, in the pages of the *New York Times*. Evoking the genocidal terror enforced by the Khmer Rouge, an article on Cambodian photography during the years of the Pol Pot regime begins by differentiating the photographic record left by that dictatorship and the uses to which photography is normally put in the Western World: "There are no wedding pictures here. No babies. No birthdays." Seth Mydans, "Khmer Rouge Photography: Smiles Were Rare," *New York Times*, 24 January 1999, section 4, p.5. The trajectory evoked by this sentence is that of the organizing (and heterosexually insistent) narrative that shapes the connection for us between meaning and subjectivity. While Cathy's eleventh birthday, then, might be read by some as marking the onset of sexual maturation (a possibility that would be reinforced by her desire for lovebirds as a gift), my point is not that this particular birthday asserts the link between subjectivity and the reproductive imperative, but rather that birthday rituals as such perform the indissociability of subjectivity from reproductive futurism. Put otherwise: birthdays should be understood as marking not only the date of our birth, but also the rite of birth itself, the celebration of reproduction.
- 15 The vision of the child here is heartening, of course, not only because it substitutes the "innocent" child for the "lecherous" adult, thus purging heterosexuality of the taint of sex through a form of metaleptic reversal in which cause is replaced by effect, but also because the child, by thus displacing the heterosexual male adult, is reassuringly heterosexualized even at the moment of this displacement.
- 16 In the so-called Final version of the script, Annie Hayworth, when she admits to Melanie her own unhappy history with Mitch, delivers a speech, not included in the film, that evokes her commitment to the children she teaches in Bodega Bay, describing them as the source of meaning in her life, indeed,

- as her *raison d'être*: "I'll go into that classroom on Monday morning, and I'll look out at twenty-five upturned little faces, and each of them will be saying, 'Yes, tell me. Yes, please give me what you have.' (pause) And I'll give them what I have. I haven't got very much, but I'll give them every ounce of it. To me, that's very important. It makes me want to stay alive for a long long time." *The Birds*, script by Evan Hunter, 26 January 1962, shot sequence 202.
- 17 Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), 474.
- 18 Like Melanie Daniels, the woman in the commercial is framed, of course, as complicit with these aggressive energies of eros; she has, after all, "provoked" them by using the diet drink the commercial is selling.
- 19 *The Music Man*, words and lyrics by Meredith Wilson, opened on Broadway in 1957 and was released as a film in 1962.
- 20 *Psycho* (1960), directed by Alfred Hitchcock; screenplay by Joseph Stefano.
- 21 Mrs. Bundy, echoing Norman Bates, says to Melanie in *The Tides*: "Birds are not aggressive creatures, Miss. They bring beauty to the world." This calls to mind a similar assessment of another airy creature: "Oh Mary, it takes a fairy to make something pretty," as Emory announces in Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), 102.
- 22 See under "bird" in the Random House Dictionary of the English Language (second edition, unabridged), definition 4: "Slang. a person, esp. one having some peculiarity: *He's a queer bird.*"
- 23 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 5, 35–78, 151 n.6; Susan Lurie, "The Construction of the 'Castrated' Woman in Psychoanalysis and Cinema," *Discourse*, no. 4 (winter 1981): 52–74; Slavoj Žižek, "Les Oiseaux: Le surmoi maternel," in *Tout ce que vous avez toujours voulu savoir sur Lacan sans jamais oser le demander à Hitchcock*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (Paris: Navarin Éditeur, 1988), 197–207. Both Lurie's and Žižek's articles are important interventions in the critical debate around *The Birds*. My point is not to diminish their value, but to locate the heterosexualizing binarism on which the effort to read the filmic text so frequently finds itself stuck.
- 24 Evan Hunter, the screenwriter for *The Birds*, recalls what happened when Hitchcock announced his promotional slogan to the advertising staff at Universal:

"Gentlemen," he said, "here's how we'll announce the movie. Are you ready?"

There was a moment of suspenseful silence, the master at work. Spreading his hands wide on the air, Hitch said, "*The Birds* is coming!"

It was pure genius. A seemingly ungrammatical catchphrase that combined humor and suspense.

One of Universal's young advertising Turks said, "Excuse me, Mr. Hitchcock, sir?"

Hitch turned to him.

"Don't you mean 'The birds are coming,' sir?" (Evan Hunter, *Me and Hitch* [Boston: Faber and Faber, 1997], 76–77).

- 25 Falling from the chimney like dirt or shit, like parodic reversals of Santa Claus, with his more successfully sublimated gifts, these birds enact Hitchcock's phobic fantasy about uncleanness and waste. The salesman in *The Tides* will excoriate birds in general as "messy" creatures and the metalepsis that reads the birds, the source of waste that drops from the sky, as a trope of waste themselves (dropping out of the sky and into visibility in the film), is central to Hitchcock's text. Spoofing *The Birds* in *High Anxiety* (1977), Mel Brooks understands this intuitively as he graphically depicts the plague of birds producing a plague of shit. For a fuller consideration of Hitchcock's relation to questions of waste and anality, see my essays "Piss Elegant: Freud, Hitchcock, and the Micturating Penis," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, nos. 1–2 (1995): 149–177 and "Rear Window's Glasshole," in *Out-Takes: Essays in Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 72–96.
- 26 That notion of coming as coming apart will be represented most clearly in Melanie's fate. She suffers her psychological breakdown, her dissociation from symbolic meaning, as a result of her decision to remain in Bodega Bay for Cathy's party. Perhaps, in this context, it is useful to recall the words with which Cathy begged Melanie to stay: "Oh, won't you come? Won't you please come?"
- 27 Paul de Man, "Conclusion: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 92.
- 28 De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 268.
- 29 By using the term "heterosexualizing" I do not mean to suggest that these narratives, in any simple, unmediated way, produce the heterosexual desire within which particular subjects locate their specific erotic investments; rather, I argue that these narratives produce heterosexuality as the dominant mode of ideological self-recognition for heterosexual and nonheterosexual subjects alike. They set forth the logic that enables the subject to imagine its own reality, affording a social trajectory that polices the possibilities of alternative experiences, by establishing a narrative template that articulates reality

- as the arena for a mandatory movement toward the subject's "realization," a movement that both presupposes and procures a fundamental allegiance to futurity.
- 30 For a superb and profoundly influential analysis of the anticomunalism of eros, see Leo Bersani's *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), esp. 151–181.
 - 31 The sex of a lovebird is so difficult to determine that some authorities suggest only DNA testing can settle the question with certainty.
 - 32 Paul de Man, "Shelley Disfigured," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 117.
 - 33 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1993), 4: 8.
 - 34 Whatever they might have to say would surely include something about the status of Jim Crow laws and the integration of American schools in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Such a racializing implication of the birds, however, is specific to this sequence, for the oddity that prompts Mrs. Bundy to reject the possibility of a "bird war" is that elsewhere birds of different feathers turn out to be flocking together (as we see at the end of the film).
 - 35 Making preparations to flee the house that has been under seige by the birds, Mitch turns on the car radio and hears a news report that ends by asserting: "It appears that the bird attacks come in waves, with long intervals between. The reason for this does not seem clear as yet."
 - 36 Robin Wood, "Retrospective," in *A Hitchcock Reader*, ed. Marshall Deutelbaum and Leland Poague (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1986), 39–40.
 - 37 It is surely not insignificant that this sequence ends after Melanie and Cathy, having rescued a girl knocked down by the ravaging crows, lead her to the shelter of an unlocked car. Cars and driving have been, and will be, a recurrent image in the film—the image of the constancy of drive itself.
 - 38 Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 124.
 - 39 Alan Keyes, *The Alan Keyes Show*, radio transcript from Friday, 10 July 1998, <http://alankeyes.com/071098.html>.
 - 40 Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 73.
 - 41 Ken Worthy, *The Homosexual Generation* (New York: L.S. Publications, 1965), 184.
 - 42 Fleeing her home at the end of *The Birds*, Cathy Brenner takes nothing that belonged to her past but the lovebirds that figured her future: the lovebirds she dreamed of in her canopied bed before Hitchcock laid bare the nightmarish ease with which even the sweetest, the most innocent pecks give way to the brutal aggressiveness of heartless little peckers. Conveying the lovebirds from house to car in the cage they must never leave, she bears

them across a threshold not, as we tend to think, between past and future but rather between the familiar, familial structures futurity rests on and the aversive avian uncertainties aimed at tearing those structures apart. This act of transporting or carrying across, evoking the etymology of "metaphor," suggests that futurity functions for us precisely as a metaphor: a transference aiming to master the fearful proximity of what we can't know by giving that hole in our knowledge an Imaginary form. But reproductive futurism, the temporal continuity promised through the pairing of the lovebirds, is itself, I've suggested, the lovebirds's cage: the radically circumscribed fantasy space of the always already known that makes the future the only thing we're ever permitted to see—makes it, in fact, the very site from which we see ourselves by filling up the void of the gaze where the Real, the Symbolic's hollow core, threatens to void us, too. Futurism thus casts its investment in repetition as reproduction, a value it then affirms against the pulsive iterations of the drive, the narcissistic returns of "sameness," the *sinthomosexual's* jouissance. Only in the shelter secured by this cage does reality seem to be seamless, its bars appearing to bar the trauma of an encounter with the Real. But the Real, as Hitchcock's film makes clear, insists nonetheless in the form of the birds that fly in nature's face, clawing and pecking at the order of forms with its constant promise of meaning: the birds that even within their cage still carry the tag of the Real.

Though struck by a gull herself when the children at her party come under attack, Cathy's love for the lovebirds—her longing to take them under her wing—preserves the hope of a future that she must embody no less than they. By contrast, recall Faulkner's portrait of the *sinthomosexual* as a young boy. Already, at five, under a physician's care ("undersized, weak, and with a stomach so delicate that the slightest deviation from a strict regimen fixed by the doctor would throw him into convulsions") and the object of an all-determining prognosis ("he will never be a man, properly speaking"), Pop-eye, in *Sanctuary*, runs off on the day that a "children's party," much like Cathy's perhaps, is given on his behalf. (William Faulkner, *Sanctuary: The Corrected Text* [New York: Vintage Books, 1993], 308).

He flees through a bathroom window but not without first, as Faulkner pauses to note, leaving something to remember him by: "On the floor lay a wicker cage in which two lovebirds lived; beside it lay the birds themselves, and the bloody scissors with which he had cut them up alive" (309). Rejecting the figural enactment of metaphor by which Cathy affirms futurity, Popeye puts in the place that he vacates, as a substitute or trope for himself, the visual image of contiguity, unmotivated by any necessity: the wicker cage and, "beside it," the bloody scissors and lifeless birds.

But even so radical an undoing of metaphor (the spiritualizing relation whose governing logic of matching, coupling, and generating meaning is condensed in the mated birds) can no more escape its destined recuperation as a metaphor for Popeye (or for the *sinthomosexual* as such) than his destruction of the lovebirds can prevent his being associated, metonymically, with birds himself. From the outset of the novel, when he crouches in the bushes as Horace Benbow drinks from the spring, Popeye's occulted presence encounters an echo in the scene: "Somewhere, hidden and secret yet nearby, a bird sang three notes and ceased" (4). And when Horace catches a glimpse of Popeye ("His face had a queer, bloodless color, as though seen by electric light . . . he had that vicious, depthless quality of stamped tin"), the echo sounds more insistently: "Behind him the bird sang again, three bars in a monotonous repetition: a sound meaningless and profound" (4). Like Silas Marner's "monotonous craving for [the] monotonous response" of his loom, the bird's "monotonous repetition" evokes the machine-like, desubjectivizing aspect of the *sinthomosexual's* jouissance—the antipathy to "natural" meaning intrinsic, like the bird, to nature itself—that casts a queer light on Popeye's face and marks it with the "vicious, depthless quality" associated with industrial manufacture and such commodities as cheap "stamped tin." Like the stupid or meaningless repetition of sound in the juxtaposition of "sound" and "profound," the song of the bird, and thus Popeye, too, confounds the social order of meaning by assimilating the value enshrined in "profound," the depth in which truth claims to make its home, with its obverse, with everything "depthless" or "meaningless," as if—with a nod to "De Profundis," Wilde's letter from Reading Gaol—we suddenly found the fundament at the foundation of the profound.

Sanctuary focuses on nothing so much as Popeye's profound implication in this machinery of de-meaning—unless it's the specification of sexuality as the field in which he performs that de-meaning most effectively, pulling around himself all the more tightly the noose of meaning that compels him to mean the impediment to meaning's reproduction. His repeated association with "viciousness" ("his hat jerked in a dull, vicious gleam in the twilight" [7]; "Popeye looked about with a sort of vicious cringing" [7]; "he performed it with a sort of vicious petulance" [137]) reminds us that "vicious" and "vice" both derive from *vitium*, Latin for fault, defect, flaw. But the most titillating flaw to which the novel alludes, the sexual defect made visible in the "corn-cob [that] appeared to have been dipped in dark brownish paint" (283), makes flesh the fatality, the mindless machinery, with which *sinthomosexuality* contaminates the heterogenital making of flesh. While Temple Drake, Popeye's victim ("You got a boy's name, ain't

you?" [147], Reba Rivers observes), may express her contempt for Popeye's failure to perform like a "man" in his assault ("Come on. Touch me. Touch me! You're a coward if you dont [sic]" [218]), his unnaturalness seems to enfold her as well when she imagines, even while Popeye's hand is "jerk-ing inside her knickers" (220), that she has become a man herself, endowed with what the corn-cob stands for: "Then I thought about being a man, and as soon as I thought it, it happened. It made a little plopping sound, like blowing a little rubber tube wrong-side outward. It felt cold, like the inside of your mouth when you hold it open. I could feel it, and I lay right still to keep from laughing about how surprised he was going to be" (220). But Popeye's surprise should not be ours insofar as this hallucinatory change of sex, while accentuating the defectiveness of Popeye's masculinity (even Temple is more of a man than he), also registers the homosexual inflection of *sinthomosexuality*, the indissociability of same-sex desire from its threat to reproductive futurism.

The morbidity that Popeye embodies (even alive he "might well have been dead" [308]), the Scrooge-like chill of his flesh ("Then it touched me, that nasty little cold hand, fiddling around inside the coat where I was naked. It was like alive ice" [218]), the absence of vital force to which the prosthetic corn-cob speaks, come together in the pathos-inducing image for which, at least metonymically, Popeye must pay in the end: not the shooting of Tommy, the desecration of Temple, or the mob violence against Lee Goodwin, but, beyond these, the deathliness of Ruby's infant ("never more than half alive" [117]) that signals most efficiently the danger he portends. Though Popeye, of course, has no literal responsibility for the illness of the child, he embodies the "evil" whose outcome the infant's cadaverous torpor conveys: "It lay in a sort of drugged immobility, like the children which beggars on Paris streets carry, its pinched face slick with faint moisture, its hair a damp whisper of shadow across its gaunt, veined skull, a thin crescent of white showing beneath its lead-colored eyelids" (116). And Faulkner reinforces the connection between the *sinthomosexual* and the destruction of the child when Benbow plumbs the depths of Popeye's "evil" in the void of a youngster's eyes, themselves as leaden in death as the "lead-colored" eyelids of Ruby's son: "Perhaps it is upon the instant that we realise [sic], admit, that there is a logical pattern to evil, that we die, he thought, thinking of the expression he had once seen in the eyes of a dead child, and of other dead: the cooling indignation, the shocked despair fading, leaving two empty globes in which the motionless world lurked profoundly in miniature" (221). To which it seems almost redundant to add: "profoundly," but also meaninglessly.

The *sinthomosexual* who stops the world, who exposes the Real in reality

and shatters the totalized significations, all the meanings that metaphor generates, into the shards of material signifiers only metonymically linked, destroys, by revealing the promiscuous conjunctions of signifiers without benefit of marriage, all faith in the redemptive possibility of their meaning-producing rapport. The thematic extension of the wound thus inflicted on the viability of any thematics is the *sinthomosexual's* insistence on the lack of a sexual rapport, on the absence of any natural or instinctive relation between the sexes, of any complementarity, any access to meaning between them. Incarnating the impediment to the fantasy of a futurism that's consecrated to and by the child conceived as its realization, the *sinthomosexual* blights both the child ("He's going to die" [62], Temple mutters, looking at Ruby's sickly son) and the heterosexual couple's integrity as the synthesis redeeming Symbolic difference by repressing jouissance. For the *sinthomosexual*, like jouissance, makes the sexual relation impossible, obtruding with the force of the Real on the fantasy of the reciprocal fulfillment of male and female in the One of the Symbolic couple. This explains why Reba Rivers, the madam who voices the naturalizing doxa of heterosexuality ("A young man spending his money like water on girls and not never going to bed with one. It's against nature" [255], she proclaims), rejects Popeye not for murder or rape, but rather for the sexual parasitism that binds him like a shadow (or the shadow of something worse) in too intimate a union with other men, thus casting the shadow of depthlessness, of a meaningless automatism, over them and, more disturbingly, over (hetero)sexual rapport.

The novel, with the aid of Miss Reba, graphically renders this perverse relation in the unnatural pairing of Popeye and Red (the prosthetic corncob come to life—or life reduced to the corncob), whom he brings, to her horror, into Reba's house to satisfy Temple's sexual needs and, in doing so, Popeye's as well. "The two of them," Reba announces to her friends with regard to Temple and Red, "would be nekkid as snakes, and Popeye hanging over the foot of the bed without even his hat took off, making a kind of whinnying sound" (258). Whinnying, jerking, losing himself in mechanical contortions, Popeye enacts the jouissance forbidden by, and impossible within, the order of reproduction. This third who intrudes on the privacy of the Couple, who lurks behind the straight man's back, usurps the place of the child to destroy what the latter is adduced to confirm: the privileged access of heterosexual coupling to the authenticity of nature itself. Not for nothing does Benbow's success in getting Reba to help him learn the truth about Popeye depend on his willingness to play the trump card of sentimental futurism: " 'Have you got children?' She looked at him. 'I don't mean to pry into your affairs,' he

said. 'I was just thinking about that woman. She'll be on the streets again, and God only knows what will become of that baby' " (211).

43 Quoted in Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 297.

44 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 99.

45 Worthy, *The Homosexual Generation*, 44.

46 Not only for his eagle eye where sartorial style is concerned, but also for his exemplary insights into Hitchcock's style more generally, I am delighted to express deep gratitude for my ongoing conversations with D. A. Miller.

47 Keyes, *The Alan Keyes Show*.

48 Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), 218.

49 De Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," 225.

50 De Man, "Conclusion: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" 92.

51 *Ibid.*, 96–97.