David Sterritt

The Destruction That Wasteth at Noonday: Hitchcock's Atheology

While it is hardly news that the world according to Alfred Hitchcock contains much evil, it is striking to observe what a vast diversity of forms the evil takes: violent crimes, crimes against property, crimes against the state, crimes *of* the state, and an array of miscellaneous misdeeds ranging from unabashed voyeurism to veiled necrophilia. The pervasive presence of so much iniquity, some of it minor but much of it sweepingly malevolent, suggests that Hitchcock sees human beings as habitually prone to what Immanuel Kant terms "radical evil"—the kind of evil that "corrupts the ground" of all subjective moral principles, and which, as a "natural propensity" of humankind, is both inevitable and "*inextirpable* by human powers."[1] Seeing the embrace of radical evil as a form of moral surrender, philosopher Alenka Zupančič defines it as the state of renouncing "the possibility of ever acting [upon] principle" and thus abandoning the very possibility of selfless or disinterested behavior.[2] Along somewhat different lines, legal philosopher Paul W. Kahn observes that Kant's term can designate not only acts and impulses that contravene the law but also evils that are not strictly criminal, such as hatred and jealousy, and those that overwhelm criminal law, such as genocide.[3] Hitchcock's complex view of human nature contained enough skepticism about the notion of innate decency to make him an intuitive researcher into this Kantian version of original sin, and his films abound in both varieties of evil—actions that are illegal in the courtroom sense, such as murder, blackmail, and

kidnaping, and actions or attitudes that are iniquitous because of the immorality or injustice they project, such as betrayal, treachery, and deceit. In addition to probing these phenomena through personal and small-group interactions, Hitchcock explored evils that operate beyond the level of individual subjectivity—evils that are embedded in dysfunctional social systems, as in *The Wrong Man* (1956), and in the nature of the fallen world itself, as in *The Birds* (1963).

Far from viewing humankind's capacities for evil from a detached or neutral perspective, moreover, Hitchcock approaches them in ways not dictated but certainly inflected by the Roman Catholic moral teachings that he learned from his religious parents and Jesuit teachers and never fully relinquished. No commentators have seen this more clearly than the pioneering French critics Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol, who find Catholic ideas and symbols throughout Hitchcock's work—interpreting the allegorical matrix of *The Wrong Man*, for example, as a denunciation of precisely the moral surrender that Zupančič equates with Kant's radical evil, since the protagonist capitulates during the story to the "theological sins of presumption and despair" and falls prey to "the temptation of diabolical machination," another fundamental Hitchcock theme.[4] Sin, and its close cousin evil, transfixed the director. Arthur Laurents, the screenwriter of *Rope* (1948), commented after Hitchcock's death that it was "obvious to anyone who worked with him that he had a strong sense of sin, and that . . . his Victorian Catholic background . . . affected him deeply."[5] Although his guarded demeanor and ironic temperament precluded much public talk about religion, Hitchcock often contributed money to church-related projects,[6] and in his final days he made a telling remark about his impending death: "One never knows the ending . . . although Catholics have their hopes."[7]

Despite the significance of these themes—the pull of religion and the fascination of incarnate evil—in Hitchcock's work and life, little attention has been given to his films from the standpoint of *theodicy*, the area of philosophy and theology that grapples with the seeming contradiction

between the evident presence of evil *in* the world and the putative existence of a benign deity *beyond* the world, drawing conclusions via systematic reasoning (*à la* Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and David Hume) rather than the affirmations of tradition and revelation. A theodicy is an effort to "justify the ways of God to men," writes philosopher Alvin Plantinga by way of poet John Milton; more specifically, it is an attempt "to show that God is just in permitting evil," as when (for example) the Free Will Theodicy of St. Augustine calls it a measure of God's goodness

> that He has not refrained from creating even that creature which He foreknew would not only sin, but remain in the will to sin. As a runaway horse is better than a stone which does not run away because it lacks self-movement and sense perception, so the creature is more excellent which sins by free will than that which does not sin only because it has no free will.[8]

My claim in this essay is that Hitchcock's films reveal him as a lay *atheodicist* who uses the expressive-romantic powers of cinema to convey his intuitive sense that by the best evidence of our earthly senses and imaginative minds, belief in a just God whose righteousness nonetheless allows the existence of evil is, to borrow Plantinga's words, "demonstrably irrational or unreasonable."[9]

Engulfing Horror

The horrors of life take many forms, deriving in some instances from indifferent nature and in others from human malefaction, but as philosopher Nick Trakakis points out, "the word 'evil' is reserved in common usage for events and people that have an especially horrific moral quality or character."[10] Theodicy takes on particular interest when the evils at hand are not ordinary or banal but are instead *horrendous*, a term used by philosophers to denote evils so pernicious that participation therein seems, as Marilyn

McCord Adams writes, "prima facie . . . to engulf [or defeat] the positive value of a participant's life," with "participation" meaning that of perpetrator(s) and victim(s) alike.[11] Cultural scholar Philip Tallon takes an intriguing look at this drastic variety of evil in relation to film in his essay "*Psycho*: Horror, Hitchcock, and the Problem of Evil," which posits the central events of the 1960 picture as loci of horrendous evil and asks, among other things, what the justifications might be for Hitchcock's employment of them in a mass-audience movie, or "a *fun* picture," as Hitchcock described it.[12]

I agree with Tallon that *Psycho* is a film "constructed around the horrendous," and that its horrors are not simply a matter of pain and loss but of a grotesque annihilation of existential meaning, wrought by what Augustinian discourse would call the incongruity and disorder that afflict Norman Bates and Marion Crane, albeit in very different ways and to very different degrees.[13] At the same time, though, I agree with Hitchcock that *Psycho* is a fun picture—fun in the gallows-humor sense, not the family-picnic sense—and since I'm not a completely amoral person (or so I like to think), the film's evils and perversities must be significantly less unconscionable than, say, the examples of prototypical horror put forth by Adams, which include cannibalizing one's offspring, slow death by starvation, parental incest, and other such atrocities.[14] *Psycho* would not be a fun picture (by my standards) if it dwelt on loathsome visuals or real profilmic suffering.[15] But it doesn't, and as Hitchcock told me in 1972, he considered this film a comedy; if he'd meant it to be taken as a probing case study, he explained, he would have filmed it straightforwardly (like *The Wrong Man*, perhaps) without ironic or "mysterioso" touches.[16] While calling this chilling film a comedy may overstate the case—when first released it was considered quite disturbing in the sex and violence departments, and many still find it so—its imagery and plot are certainly less horrific than they might have been; the famous shower-murder scene, for instance, hits the audience with so *much* in its split-second montage that very *little* of the mayhem is actually depicted, as Hitchcock never tired of

telling interviewers. Then too, in this and other Hitchcock films that depict the horrendous—*Saboteur* (1942) with its murderous fire, *Rope* with its sadistic dinner party, *Torn Curtain* (1966) with the protracted slaying of Gromek, *The Birds* with its chaotic attacks on children—the appalling scenes are woven into narrative frameworks that invite audiences to rationalize, compartmentalize, and thus exorcise the evils on display.

In my view, the Hitchcock scene that most closely approaches the horrendous, if still in a synecdochic and transitory way, occurs in the 1972 thriller *Frenzy*, when the necktie strangler rapes and murders a dating-bureau proprietor who was once married to the film's protagonist. This scene begins when the psychopathic villain patronizes the dating agency and grows wrathful when the broker won't cater to his taste for sadistic sex; although he surely would have killed her whatever she did, it is harshly ironic that by falling under his violent domination she gives him, utterly and tragically against her will, exactly what he demanded. In addition to its visual ferocity, heightened by unsparing closeups, the rape-and-murder sequence takes on great interest in relation to theodicy because its depiction of horrendous evil is counterpointed by words and gestures associated with the ritual of intercessory prayer. Before considering this scene I'll say a bit more about the problem of evil, discuss it briefly in relation to *Psycho*, and consider moments in two earlier Hitchcock films, *The Wrong Man* and *The Birds*, that offer their own insights into the philosophical implications of extreme evil as Hitchcock sees it. Numerous other Hitchcock movies would also serve my purpose, since films from all stages of his career take notice of religion in one way or another—top candidates include *The Lodger* (1927), with its Christological imagery, and *I Confess* (1953), with its morally tormented priest. I might also have chosen the 1934 version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* for its Tabernacle of the Sun episode; *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) for its Scripture-quoting killer and vampire-myth allusions; *The Trouble with Harry* (1955) for its fanciful resurrections; *Vertigo* (1958) for its

allegorical concern with death and revivification, its pivotal scenes in a church's bell tower, its nuanced references to humanity's fallen state, and other reasons; or *Family Plot* (1976) for its multiple Christian allusions, which gain in resonance by appearing in Hitchcock's only completed film after *Frenzy*, made when his physical and psychological health were in evident decline.[17] But the three films I'll primarily address tap into theodicy-related issues more directly than most of the alternatives, confronting the problem of evil in different ways yet drawing markedly similar conclusions. Their likenesses suggest that the master of suspense was also a master of thematic consistency where this philosophically fraught topos was concerned.

Old, Unanswered Questions

A classic précis of the philosophical problem of evil comes from Hume in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, a book-length discussion about the existence of God conducted by three philosophical friends, including one Philo, whose skeptical stances appear to reflect Hume's own outlook. However infinite God's power and wisdom may be, Philo observes, "neither man nor any other animal is happy," and since "the course of Nature tends not to . . . felicity," we must take nature as being "not established for that purpose." These reflections bring to his mind the old, unanswered questions of Epicurus:

> Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?[18]

A good deal of discussion follows, but this formulation sets forth the crux of the issue so straightforwardly that any number of thinkers, up to and including Plantinga and Tallon, have found it a useful reference point for their own arguments on such matters. While it's unlikely that Hitchcock ever read

Hume, it's reasonable to speculate that the filmmaker would have felt some kinship with this philosopher, who was likewise born into a religious environment but "ended his life a refined skeptic who had questioned not only the nature of the world but also the nature of selfhood and, without ever being an atheist, the nature of any belief in God," as film scholar John Orr writes. Hume saw all these things as "human fictions of the most creative sort, but still fictions beyond the complete evidence of the senses," adds Orr, who describes Hume as Hitchcock's "philosophical shadow."[19]

The nature of evil receives one of its most incisive literary discussions in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, where Ivan Karamazov wages great struggles with the problems of pain and suffering. These torment him with particular force in cases where misery afflicts those who are patently innocent of crimes or sins, such as the very young, and the idea that such cases are ultimately justified on some obscure transcendent level does not persuade him. Ivan asks, "If everyone must suffer, in order to buy eternal harmony with their suffering, pray tell me what have children got to do with it? It is quite incomprehensible why they should have to suffer, and why they should buy harmony with their suffering. Why do they get thrown on the pile, to manure someone's future harmony with themselves?" And again, "I absolutely renounce all higher harmony. It is not worth one little tear of even that one tormented child who beat her chest with her little fist and prayed to 'dear God' in a stinking outhouse. . . . I'd rather remain with my unrequited suffering and my unquenched indignation, *even if I am wrong*."[20] Here the skeptical Karamazov brother refuses to accept theodicies that offer the time-tested theological promise of future returns on present agonies; as Michael L. Peterson writes, Ivan believes that "the magnitude of the horrific evils that some tragic human lives include cannot be even approximately estimated without recognizing that they are incommensurate with any collection of goods."[21] This is the kind of evil—of horrendous evil—that Hitchcock examines

in the films I look at here, and in so doing he rejects the consolations of theodicy as decisively as Ivan Karamazov did before him.

Although the evils shown in *Psycho* are a shade less darksome than those in some other Hitchcock movies, not to mention those in Ivan's moving lamentation, this film's unflinching gaze at the human capacity for destructive action makes it a good proving ground for the contention that Hitchcock, whose outlook was partially shaped by an orthodox Christian education, came to refute the notion that the horrors of the world are somehow mitigated by greater goods in the last analysis. Not everyone shares my view of Hitchcock as an atheodicist, of course, and Larry E. Grimes takes an opposite tack, arguing that *Psycho* is inscribed in its very first moments (when its Phoenix location and December time period are stated) as an allegory of the phoenix, which is to say rebirth, and of Advent, the season in the Roman Catholic calendar marking Christ's imminent coming. Grimes acknowledges that Marion's murder "heightens the terror of life in the flesh," but he adds that the film ultimately tells us to resist the twin temptations held out by its story—to despair of the human condition, on one hand, or try to resolve the unresolvable, on the other—and instead "live in [our] flesh, know its guilt, its debt, and its death, and watch and wait," because to wait "is to have hope, to adopt a discourse that keeps the life story open." Grimes caps his argument by interpreting the image of Marion's car reemerging from its watery grave as an avowal of the hope for resurrection that is coiled within the "incarnational discourse" of *Psycho* and crystallized in its final image, "which (re)members the body of the film for all who watch and wait without averting their eyes."[22]

Tallon's study of *Psycho* comes to less optimistic conclusions. Contending that horrendous evils are determined less by moral criteria than by aesthetic ones—i.e., their rejection of such classical concepts as proportion and unity in favor of opposite (non)values—he draws on Adams's scholarship to contend that such evils gain their appalling force partly from their capacity for inflicting loss and pain;

partly from their ability to ruin the lives of victims and perpetrators alike; and most of all from the *nature* of the devastation they cause, the physical and *epistemological* destruction brought about by "the disproportion between the amount of moral evil involved and the horrifying results."[23] Tallon then uses *Psycho* to weigh some philosophical responses to the problem of evil. According to the Free Will Defense derived from Augustine, the source of all evil is free will, which is granted by the divine because, as noted earlier, the possibility of making bad choices is a necessary condition for the great benison of authentic relationships with God, angels, and people; in *Psycho*, however, Marion's theft (a moral evil) has little to do with what happens to her once she hits the road out of Phoenix, and the motivations for Norman's murders—to the extent that his motives are explicable at all, and for Hitchcock perhaps they are not—must be rooted less in faulty ethical decisions than in the soul-murdering circumstances of his early life. Verdict: the blessings of free will are far outweighed by the evils depicted in the film. Tallon next cites the argument derived by John Hick from Irenaeus in the early Christian era, averring that evil gives forth suffering that is beneficial for strengthening our characters and our moral intelligence; in *Psycho*, however, lives and minds are flat-out destroyed, not fortified or enriched. Verdict: visiting the Bates Motel is a poor way of building up one's moral fiber.

A third proposition is the Principle of Honesty set forth by Richard Swinburne, who contends that God allows ordinary evils because of their free-will and character-building properties, and also allows gratuitous evils (so called because they could be eliminated with no loss of a corresponding good) since to abolish them would be a sort of divine deceit, foreclosing the benefits we derive from knowing that evil choices have abhorrent consequences. Tallon finds some value here; if theorist Noël Carroll is correct when he hypothesizes that the revulsion we feel toward horrors in cinema is "part of the price to be paid for the pleasure of their disclosure," then perhaps their existence in the world is "part of 'the price to be

Figure 1. Back from the grave in a place of the living dead—Final shot, *Psycho* (1960)

paid' for knowing the truth about evil." Tallon finally concludes, however, that the Principle of Honesty and the price-paid hypothesis provide "at best . . . an incomplete beginning" to rationalizing the problems of evil that *Psycho* so dauntingly poses.[24]

My own view of *Psycho* is closer to that of William Rothman than to that of Tallon and especially to that of Grimes, who cites Rothman's assessment in order to criticize it. "Every film image is a death mask of the world," Rothman writes:

> The world of every film is past. The camera fixes its living subjects, possesses their life. They are reborn on the screen . . . . But life is not fully breathed back into them. They are immortal, but they are always already dead . . . . At the heart of every film is a truth we already know: we have been born into the world and we are fated to die.[25]

Grimes calls this analysis incomplete because it focuses on existential facts without recognizing transcendent possibilities. I find no such incompleteness because Rothman's words, one of the most eloquent threnodies ever composed on a Hitchcock film, accord with my own opinion that while *Psycho* indeed makes its valediction with an image of rebirth (fig. 1), the event is not a hope-full resurrection *à la*

Grimes but rather a stillbirth in a land of the living dead.[26] I see no room here, or in the final obliteration of Norman's selfhood by that of his hallucinated mother, for an Adventitious affirmation of life (re)membered via Christian discourse. *Psycho* may well be "the first film [Hitchcock] made in clear view of his own death," as Rothman has speculated, and there is not a trace of spiritual optimism in its blood-soaked black-and-white frames.[27]

Divine Sarcasm

While the horrendous actions depicted in suspense thrillers like *Psycho* and *Frenzy* are inflicted by individual subjects on individual subjects, *The Wrong Man* approaches the problem of evil from a different, far less personalized perspective. Based on real events, the story centers on Manny Balestrero, a hardworking musician and honest citizen who is arrested, interrogated, and tried for a string of robberies he didn't commit. After humiliation by the police, futile efforts to obtain exculpatory evidence, and a trial almost worthy of Franz Kafka, he is vindicated by the law when a look-alike thief is caught in another crime; but the ordeal has devastated his family, driven his wife Rose literally insane, and taken an undetermined toll on his own mental well-being. Hitchcock follows Hollywood convention (and the real-life story that the film was based on) by adding a final shot of the Balestrero family starting a new life in Florida and a printed text saying that Rose has been "completely cured," but the image is too (deliberately) distant and perfunctory to be persuasive. An unsettling ambiguity also marks the story's key religious moment, which comes when (Every-)Manny prays for strength to get through his tribulations; at this moment the film dissolves from a closeup of his face to that of the "right" man—his name is Daniell, and we haven't seen or heard of him before—on his way to the robbery that gets him arrested and thus resolves the narrative.[28]

This pivotal plot twist can easily be criticized as a sentimental *deus ex machina* device, suggested by the facts of

the real-life Balestrero case but clearly dispensable if Hitchcock had wanted a more plausible suspense-picture climax.[29] Close analysis of the prayer scene, however, reveals a serious philosophical skepticism on Hitchcock's part toward Manny's entreaty to the divine.[30] At the beginning of the sequence we see Manny looking at a religious picture—showing Jesus and a star-filled sky—hung on his bedroom wall. Hitchcock cuts to a view of the portrait with Manny's shadow cast alongside it, and then to a closeup of Manny's face, which becomes transparent as Hitchcock superimposes a shot of Daniell walking toward the camera, his face growing to the size of Manny's as he moves into the foreground. This special-effects shot transforms Manny's head into a transparent vessel that the camera methodically fills with another person's form and face, then smoothly obliterates as the superimposition fades and Manny's *doppelgänger* takes over the screen (figs. 2, 3, and 4). What pours into Manny after his prayer is not a transcendent essence of goodness, therefore, but a fearsome specter of the badness that has been tormenting him throughout the film. Manny has prayed for strength, and if the subsequent events are indeed God's response to his supplication, it is a truly sarcastic response: what he receives isn't strength but an external event that gets him off the hook, and what's breathed into him is the vision of a criminal whose antisocial acts have the intensity and potency that his own quest for exoneration, conducted along the pusillanimous lines of his tepid bourgeois life, has disastrously lacked.[31]

Nor can we be absolutely sure that the "right" man is indeed the right man; he is definitely an outlaw who confesses to numerous hold-ups after his arrest, but he might conceivably be just another crook off the street, not the particular bandit for whom Manny has been mistaken by so many people. If we accept this interpretation, at least for the sake of argument, Daniell is another wrong man, another modern Job, another living argument against theodicy. While the injustices that Manny suffers don't approach the ones on Adams's list of horrors, their effects on him, his wife, and his innocent children have the horrific moral quality of which

Figure 2. The *doppelgänger* materializes after Manny's prayer—Henry Fonda and Richard Robbins, *The Wrong Man* (1956)

Figure 3. The hero and the specter merge

Figure 4. A palimpsest of wrong and right

Trakakis writes, and the agonies they entail are all the more evil because they are born from, cultivated within, and perpetuated by the social system (i.e., the Symbolic Order or Big Other, in the terminology of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek) that claims to serve and protect, not plague and persecute, its subjects. Trapped beneath that system's crushing amoral weight, neither the wrong man nor the right man has a prayer.

Acts of God

Since the evils inflicted on Manny operate through institutions that hold themselves forth as shields and safeguards *against* evil, and since those evils are facilitated and exacerbated by Manny's own character flaws of submissiveness and diffidence, it is clear that evil requires a definition more expansive than those set down in statutory codes. I've already noted that the category of evil needn't be limited to specifically unlawful acts; as Kahn observes, "there remains an incommensurability, a misunderstanding of the dimensions of the phenomenon, if we are satisfied with the identification of evil as crime."[32] Extending the definition of evil another step, although the word is commonly applied to events and actions with a horrific moral quality rather than to natural processes (earthquakes, floods, fires) that bring about ill consequences, some philosophers find a moral dimension in the latter class as well, arguing that the God who putatively causes or allows cataclysmic "acts of God" may legitimately be judged in moral terms. To support his evidential case for atheism, for instance, William L. Rowe cites the prevalence of intense human and animal suffering that is both inherently abhorrent and self-evidently pointless or gratuitous in the sense discussed above.[33]

The Birds deals directly with God, evil, and the natural world. All three subjects arise in the Tides restaurant and bar after the bird attack at a nearby school.[34] A semi-comical drunk named Jason, described by the screenplay as having "the weary wisdom of booze in him," announces the

Figure 5. Melanie seeks sanctuary amid death and destruction—Tippi Hedren, *The Birds* (1963)

apocalypse in an amusingly chipper tone—"It's the end of the world!"—and then waxes more serious with an apposite passage from the Book of Ezekiel: "'Thus saith the Lord God to the mountains, and to the hills, to the rivers and to the valleys; Behold, I, even I, will bring a sword upon you, and I will destroy your high places.' " Helen, the waitress, laconically tells him that "the Lord's not destroying anything," but Jason persists: " 'In all your dwelling places the cities shall be laid waste, and the high places shall be laid waste.' Ezekiel, Chapter 6." The waitress one-ups him without missing a beat: "'Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning that they may follow strong drink,'" but Jason is unfazed, cheerfully identifying her source, "Isaiah, Chapter 5," and repeating his slogan, "It's the end of the world."[35]

This biblical badinage functions largely as comic relief, but the undertones of Old Testament eschatology are far from incidental, and they make a suitably grim prologue for the subsequent scene, in which a bird attack causes a fatal explosion at a gas station and a terrifying interlude for heroine Melanie Daniels as she takes shelter in a telephone booth outside (fig. 5). After this ghastly episode we reenter the Tides, where a group of people aim mournful and accusatory expressions at Melanie and at Hitchcock's camera, as if they were to blame for the story's accumulating catastrophes. Then a young mother in the bar articulates the group's unspoken thoughts.[36] "Who are you?

Figure 6. Mitch and Melanie flee from archetypal disaster—Rod Taylor, Tippi Hedren, *The Birds* (1963)

What are you? Where did you come from?" she ontologically demands, as if Melanie were a devil or a monster instead of merely a newcomer in town. Finally she shrieks the word "evil" in Melanie's face, and Melanie slaps her. The scene ends when Melanie reconnects with Mitch, the movie's hero, and the pair run down a country road toward the recently devastated school, framed amid ground, building, and sky as if they were fleeing an archetypal disaster in some ancient, mythical time (fig. 6).[37]

The Birds takes place in a nihilistic realm where Creation has lost whatever sense it ever had. Evil blossoms from nowhere and from everywhere; incongruity and disproportion reign supreme. It is an elemental film, less concerned with individual human destinies—the characters' fates are unknown at the story's end—than with the rudiments of air, earth, fire, and water as represented by birds, civilization, combustible feelings, and the gulf that separates Bodega Bay from the world at large. It is also a mystical film, punctuated by biblical warnings, besotted jeremiads, and apocalyptic horrors that coincide with the diminishing force of rationality as Mitch's words grow ever more irrelevant and Melanie loses the ability to speak at all. Hitchcock never proffered a more caustic commentary on humanity's helplessness in the face of evils that God either will not or cannot mitigate, if there is a God at all, and the final scene underscores his skepticism in one of the

boldest strokes of his career. The protagonists are in severe distress, their antagonists are stronger and more organized than ever, the God of Jason's Bible is nowhere to be found, and now the god of the movie itself abjures his world-making powers in a gesture that Prospero would applaud. The film doesn't resolve, it glides to a conclusion in a breathtaking moment of visual and narrative stasis as the characters creep toward unlikely salvation in some safer, saner place that probably no longer exists. Trying to leave Bodega Bay is the only option they have left, and while their departure may seem to signal faith in a better tomorrow, the near-paralysis imposed by their surroundings is Hitchcock's way of saying that on a planet so terminally out of balance, belief and trust—even trust in his own storytelling powers—are strictly for the birds. If the calamities wrought by the film's eponymous aggressors are acts of God in the insurance-contract sense, metonymic instances of nature's multi-faceted destructiveness, they come from a God that theodicy would find extremely hard to handle. The drunk was wrong: The end of *The Birds* isn't the end of the world, it's the end of *a* world that was human and humane. What the next overlords might make of it we're left to speculate, but judging from the mayhem we've been witnessing, horrendous evil may be entering its golden age.

The Cross and the Psalm

Frenzy, released nine years after *The Birds*, expresses a similarly despairing attitude on a more intimate and realistic scale—no mass attacks, panicked crowds, or ubiquitous and inexplicable villains—that compresses its violence into more concentrated and frightening forms. This film has something of a happy ending, to be sure, as the unwitting alliance of a police inspector and a wrong man gets the right man arrested at the last minute; but this doesn't prevent Hitchcock's atheology from making its most powerful statement of all.

The murders in *Frenzy*, like those in *Psycho*, are organized in a binary structure: Number One is abrupt and explicit, while Number Two replaces graphic representation with muted reference

Figure 7. The cross that Brenda wears against her vulnerable skin—Barbara Leigh-Hunt, *Frenzy* (1972)

to the earlier scene, knowing the viewer's sense memory will fill in the horrendous blanks. The first homicide is the on-screen rape and murder of Brenda Blaney, the entrepreneur of a "marriage and friendship" service; the second is the offscreen rape and murder of Babs Milligan, enacted behind closed doors while the camera retreats downstairs and into a bustling street, indicating that no power or person, including God and the film's godlike director, will intercede on the hapless victim's behalf. As disturbing as Babs's killing is, however, the violation and murder of Brenda is the moment in *Frenzy*, and in Hitchcock's entire *oeuvre*, that most vividly suggests the tension in his mind between a lingering desire for the consolations of traditional religious belief and an intellectual awareness that the world contains unambiguous evils much too prevalent and powerful to be ameliorated, regulated, or even dissimulated by the claims of conventional faith.

In this scene the gods and devils are, as usual, in the details, most notably the cross that Brenda wears around her neck and under her clothing, against her secret and vulnerable skin. The cross is hidden from view as Robert Rusk, the psychotic necktie strangler, commences his attack; we see it for the first time when he tears down the front of her dress, in the same shot where her breasts are first exposed. The visual field then changes, placing the cross outside the frame until a subsequent close-up shows Brenda's hand pulling her brassiere back into place (fig. 7) Then the cross goes invisible

Figure 8. Brenda's last grimace at a horrifying world—Barbara Leigh-Hunt, *Frenzy* (1972)

again and remains so as the rape concludes, Rusk's psychosis reaches a frenzied peak, and he strangles Brenda to death in a series of shots as appalling as any Hitchcock ever crafted. The next time we see the cross is in the culminating shot of Brenda lifeless against the casket-like upholstery of her office chair, vanquished in body and obliterated in spirit; the image's bilateral symmetry is complete except for the twisted angle of her speechless tongue, protruding from her mouth in a last contemptuous grimace at a horrific and horrifying world (fig. 8). The cross lies at the center of her chest, its position in the frame—dead center on the left-right axis—underscoring the insensate equilibrium of what was a vital, vigorous being a few moments before. Gazing at her, we may remember the biblical passage she spoke while being raped, three verses of Psalm 91:

> Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day; Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday; . . . For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.[38]

After reciting these words she is still until she sees Blaney start to remove his tie, whereupon she cries, "My God!" followed seconds later by "Oh Jesus, help me!" These are the

last syllables she is able to gasp before the necktie's stranglehold finishes its work.

Brenda's last words are common ones, of course, and even a committed atheist might utter them in a moment of such traumatizing fear. Still, their presence in this scene is as vital to its meaning as the cross is vital to Brenda's image in death; each of these elements, the psalm and the cross, reinforces the presence and—simultaneously—the utter impotence of the other. The cross gains added retroactive significance, moreover, in a later conversation between Chief Inspector Oxford and his wife, who's questioning him at dinnertime about the big case he's investigating. Told that the killer disposed of the corpse of his latest victim (Babs) by heaving it into the back of a potato truck, and that he returned later to retrieve some damning piece of evidence from the corpse's dead fingers, Mrs. Oxford asks what the crucial object might have been: "a locket? a brooch? a cross?" No, replies the inspector, it would have been something more incriminating—a monogrammed handkerchief, perhaps. Pressed once more about the cross, however, he backpedals: "I don't see why not. Religious and sexual mania are closely linked." Indeed they are, in Hitchcock's dangerous world—but here the linkage is between *Rusk's* sexual mania and *Brenda's* religious hopes, and the bond that connects them is as perilous as it is perverse.

The Grimmest Reaper

Manny Balestrero's prayer in *The Wrong Man*, immediately followed by the revelation and apprehension of the "right" man, is easily taken as a sign of Hitchcock's willingness to accept the idea of a caring, protective God, at least hypothetically or provisionally. Yet the contiguity of these events doesn't affirm a cause-and-effect relationship between them, and as I've suggested, it's not impossible that the stranger who's arrested is another wrong man, the next victim in a cosmic practical joke—offscreen and onscreen, Hitchcock loved practical jokes—perpetrated by the mischievous-malevolent forces of accident, contingency, and chance.[39] *The Birds* is more openly unmoved by spiritual possibilities, picturing an anarchic, entropic world

approaching doomsday in a godless, merciless universe. *Frenzy* enacts a more controlled and deliberate argument whose parameters and outcome are never in doubt. Through no fault of her own, the broker of marriage and friendship falls under the shadow of the pestilence which walketh in darkness, embodied by a Covent Garden grocer who slaughters her during lunch hour, munching an apple and croaking the "lovely, lovely" of a mealtime guest presented with a toothsome repast. The man who traffics in English harvests is among the grimmest reapers in all of Hitchcock's cinema.

Hitchcock biographer Donald Spoto has written that from the middle 1940s on, the director's work "became a more acute spiritual autobiography with every film."[40] By this measure *Frenzy*, his penultimate movie, can be considered a privileged index to his philosophy of life (and death) in its most mature and seasoned stage. It is the work that most unambiguously identifies Hitchcock as an atheologian, a thinker whose quarrel with religious systems is based on reasoned acceptance of the premise that a world in which the prayers of a Brenda Blaney go unheard and unheeded is a world in which horrendous evil—the evil that doesn't fortify, convert, or enlighten but merely annihilates, extinguishes, and destroys—is a world in which no benevolent deity can rationally be imagined to exist.

To draw this conclusion about Hitchcock is not to suggest that his atheology was the overriding principle, much less the sum total, of his personal or creative worldview; nor does it mean that he slogged through his days in spiritual despair. Biographies show that he found life well worth living, and many of his films indicate the possibility of contentment, virtue, and moral balance. Yet the biographies also show that Hitchcock suffered from recurring fears and deeply rooted insecurities throughout his life, and a large body of scholarly research and critical interpretation has demonstrated how inextricably his chronic anxieties and existential dreads are woven into the fabric of his art. I conclude, therefore, by returning to the point I made at the beginning of this essay. For all the wit, excitement, and beauty to be found in Hitchcock's cinematic world, it is ultimately a strange and dangerous environment in which evil is

pervasively present, multifariously formed, and horrendously unyielding in its defiance of the human values we wishfully call decent, desirable, and right. Hitchcock may have clung to a watered-down Christianity in his personal life—"Catholics have their hopes"—but the unveiling of religion's impotence in his late film *Frenzy* points away from theodicy toward a vision of human experience as ultimately chaotic, unredeemed, and godforsaken.

Notes

Thanks to Sid Gottlieb and Richard Allen for their suggestions and for many great Hitchcock conversations over the years.

1. Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: HarperCollins, 1960), 32. Emphasis in original.

2. Christoph Cox, "On Evil: An Interview with Alenka Zupančič," *Cabinet* 5 (winter 2001/02). <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/ issues/ 5/alainbadiou. php> accessed 15 February 2008.

3. Paul W. Kahn, *Out of Eden: Adam and Eve and the Problem of Evil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 11. Kahn cites Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1964) and Carlos Santiago Nino, *Radical Evil on Trial* (1996).

4. Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol, *Hitchcock: The First Forty-Four Films*, trans. Stanley Hochman (New York: Continuum, 1988), 149. French edition, *Hitchcock*, published in 1957.

5. Quoted in Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983), 304.

6. Patrick McGilligan, *Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light* (New York: ReganBooks, 2003), 440.

7. Spoto, *Dark Side of Genius*, 554-55.

8. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 27. The passage by St. Augustine comes from *The Problem of Free Choice*, vol. 22 of *Ancient Christian Writers* (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1955), Bk. 2, 15; Milton's words come from *Paradise Lost*, second ed. (London: S. Simmons, 1674), 4:26. A theodicy is different from a "defense," because while a theodicist tries to decide what God's reason *is* for permitting evil, a defender tries to set forth, as Plantinga puts it, "at most what God's reason *might possibly be*" (28, emphasis in original).

9. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 3.

10. Nick Trakakis, "The Evidential Problem of Evil," in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/evil-evi.htm> accessed 1 March 2008.

11. Marilyn McCord Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," in Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, eds., *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 209-21, cited at 211. See also Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians," in William L. Rowe, ed., *God and the Problem of Evil* (Malden: Blackwell, 2001), 282-309, especially 285.

12. Philip Tallon, "*Psycho*: Horror, Hitchcock, and the Problem of Evil," in David Baggett and William A. Drumin, eds., *Hitchcock and Philosophy: Dial M for Metaphysics* (Chicago: Open Court, 2007), 49-61. Hitchcock's words are from Ian Cameron and V.F. Perkins, "Hitchcock," *Movie* 6 (January 1963): 4-6; reprinted in Sidney Gottlieb, ed., *Alfred Hitchcock: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 44-54, cited at 47; quoted in Tallon, "*Psycho*," 49.

13. Tallon, "*Psycho*," 51, 61.

14. Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," 211-12.

15. Movies like *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980) and the *Faces of Death* pictures (John Alan Schwartz, 1978-90) are as far removed from Hitchcock's aesthetics as films can be.

16. Quoted in David Sterritt, *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 113.

17. For more on this aspect of *Family Plot*, see David Sterritt, "Alfred Hitchcock: Registrar of Births and Deaths," *Hitchcock Annual*, 1997-98; reprinted in Sidney Gottlieb and Christopher Brookhouse, eds., *Framing Hitchcock: Selected Essays from the* Hitchcock Annual (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 310-22.

18. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Stilwell: Digireads.com, 2006), 42. A bit later Philo asks why there should be "any misery at all in the world" and continues, "Is it from the intention of the Deity? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to his intention? But he is almighty" (43-44). To be fair to Philo, in these passages he is making a case against anthropomorphic notions of deity, asking whether God's "benevolence and mercy [may be taken to] resemble the benevolence and mercy of men" in light of the fact that the "curious artifice and machinery" bestowed on living things have no object other than the "preservation alone of individuals, and propagation of the species . . . without any care or concern for the happiness" thereof; whether mystical conceptions of God may be valid gives rise to different questions.

19. John Orr, *Hitchcock and Twentieth-Century Cinema* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 27, 134.

20. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 244-45 (emphasis in original). Adams, in "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," places "child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov" on her list of paradigmatic horrendous evils.

21. Michael L. Peterson, *God and Evil: An Introduction to the Issues* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 124.

22. Larry E. Grimes, "Shall These Bones Live? The Problem of Bodies in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Joel Coen's *Blood Simple*," in Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr., eds., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 19-29, cited at 23-24, 25

23. Tallon, "*Psycho*: Horror, Hitchcock, and the Problem of Evil," 57.

24. Tallon, "*Psycho*: Horror, Hitchcock, and the Problem of Evil," 61. The quoted words appear in Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 184.

25. William Rothman, *Hitchcock—The Murderous Gaze* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 1; quoted in Grimes, "Shall These Bones Live?," 28. This passage is strongly influenced by André Bazin's writing on the ontology of the photographic image.

26. Norman's zombie-like state in the penultimate scene, I've written, "is universalized in the final shot of the film, when the toilet-swamp becomes a birth site, delivering up Marion's corpse . . . umbilically connected to Hitchcock's camera and the world beyond" (Sterritt, *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock*, 117).

27. Rothman, *Hitchcock—The Murderous Gaze*, 341.

28. Marshall Deutelbaum claims that "the real thief is often visible in the film as he and Balestrero cross paths," but Bill Krohn rebuts this, stating that according to production records, the actor who plays Daniell wasn't on the set when the shots Deutelbaum adduces were filmed. See Marshall Deutelbaum, "Finding the Right Man in *The Wrong Man*," in Marshall Deutelbaum and Leland Poague, eds., *A Hitchcock Reader* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1986, 207-18, cited at 216; and Bill Krohn, *Hitchcock at Work* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 180.

29. Deutelbaum reports that although the real Balestrero was a "religious man" who prayed during his trial, he was "not praying, but playing in the Stork Club band" when police made the arrest that cleared his name ("Finding the Right Man in *The Wrong Man*," 210).

30. For more on this, see David Sterritt, "*The Wrong Man*," in Mary Lea Bandy and Antonio Monda, eds., *The Hidden God: Film and Faith* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 94-99.

31. For discussion of Manny as guilty, see Sterritt, *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock*, 65-81.

32. Kahn, *Out of Eden*, 11.

33. That is to say, "an omnipotent, omniscient being [i.e., the God of orthodox theism] could have prevented [it] without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse." William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," in Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, eds., *The Problem of Evil*, 126-37, cited at 127.

34. Screenplay quotations are taken from the version identified as "Final Draft/2nd Revision/March 2, 1962" and posted on *Drew's Script-O-Rama* www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/b/the-birds-script-screenplay.html.

35. Jason is quoting Ezekiel 6:3, 6 (not quite accurately; most translations give "high places shall be desolate" rather than "laid waste") and Helen is quoting Isaiah 5:11.

36. She is played by Doreen Lang, who had made her feature-film debut as one of Manny's accusers in *The Wrong Man*.

37. For further discussion of this moment, see Sterritt, *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock*, 119-43, especially 134-37.

38. Psalms 91:5, 6, 11 in the King James translation.

39. I'm not asserting that Daniell is *probably* another "wrong" man and I'm not arguing that Hitchcock purposely made this issue ambiguous; what I do suggest is that Hitchcock had a strong affinity for ambiguities of many kinds, and that this predilection might explain why the *possibility* that Daniell is another "wrong" man is not entirely foreclosed. On the general point that the conclusion of *The Wrong Man* is "obviously ambiguous," see Rohmer and Chabrol, who state that "a certain freedom of judgment is left us" *vis-à-vis* the apparent miracle of Daniell's arrest; that "we are permitted to *believe in the possibility* of [another] miracle" *vis-à-vis* Rose's chances for recovery (my italics); and that the ambiguous ending "is no hedge: the ambiguity is in things themselves. It is characteristic of Hitchcock to show us both sides of the coin" (*Hitchcock*, 148-49). I refer precisely to the two sides of that ontological coin. For more on Hitchcockian ambiguity, see Sterritt, "Alfred Hitchcock: Registrar of Births and Deaths," 310-11.

40. Spoto, *Dark Side of Genius*, 274.