

Alfred Hitchcock at the National Press Club, March 14, 1963



Alfred Hitchcock with Bryson Rash of NBC (left) and Eric Johnston, head of the Motion Picture Association of America (right), March 14, 1963. Photo by Walter Gold. National Press Club Archives

Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) drew the largest National Press Club audience in three years—since French President Charles de Gaulle had spoken there in 1960—when he lectured at a luncheon two weeks prior to the premiere of his 48th feature film, *The Birds*. Renowned worldwide as cinema’s supreme “master of suspense,” Hitchcock clearly was enjoying the spotlight of fame as he arrived in Washington on a publicity tour for the new film. The British-born director had come to Hollywood in the late 1930s already acknowledged as the world’s “master of melodrama and specialist in the shriek,” in the words of an admiring critic. By the time of his Press Club appearance, Hitchcock had achieved top celebrity status due in large part to his droll appearances on his popular television series and the enormous worldwide success of his most recent thriller, *Psycho*. By simply placing the words “Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds*” next to an image of a woman screaming in terror as a flock of birds attacked, advertisers conveyed to the public all they needed to know to evoke interest in the upcoming film.

Hitchcock understood the motion picture as an art form distinguished, as he remarked, for “its ability to communicate with the mass audiences of the world.” *Psycho*, a low-budget excursion into the horror genre, had broken attendance records in many countries. “Its subject matter, fear, is common to everyone,” Hitchcock commented in a newspaper interview. “People like to be scared.” Using intricately planned filmic techniques orchestrated to tell riveting stories that placed “the average man in an

extraordinary situation,” Hitchcock played on anxieties in audiences with the intent of “making them sweat” as they accompanied protagonists into situations of menacing peril. He compared himself to a builder of roller coasters: “I say to myself: ‘I’ll make this dip a little deeper. That will make them scream.’” Hitchcock took pride in his ability to induce intense emotional effects in masses of viewers through the artful manipulation of his medium. As he told an interviewer: “I feel it’s tremendously satisfying for us to be able to use the cinematic art to achieve something of a mass emotion. And with *Psycho* we most definitely achieved this. It wasn’t a message that stirred the audiences, nor was it a great performance or their enjoyment of the novel. They were aroused by pure film.” In contrast, he characterized most other films as “photographs of people talking.”

During a time when foreign films were attracting a growing American audience more through the appeal of directorial style and vision than the allure of stars, Hitchcock, like many American filmmakers, had yet to be taken seriously by the American critical establishment. While they compared filmmakers such as Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, Akira Kurosawa, and Michelangelo Antonioni with masters of literature and art, American critics usually scoffed at any artistic pretensions pertaining to Hitchcock’s work. In contrast, Truffaut and other French critics since the early 1950s had championed Hitchcock as an important film author, or *auteur*, in the pages of the seminal film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. When he came to New York in 1962 to promote his new film, *Jules and Jim*, Truffaut found the lack of critical respect for Hitchcock disturbing: “I noticed that every journalist asked me the same question: ‘Why do the critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma* take Hitchcock so seriously? He’s rich and successful, but his movies have no substance.’” In response Truffaut recorded fifty hours of in-depth interviews with Hitchcock in August 1962 on the making of each of his films. In the much-respected book that resulted, Truffaut concluded, “Hitchcock belongs—and why classify him at all?—among such artists of anxiety as Kafka, Dostoyevsky, and Poe.”

By the time of the National Press Club luncheon, American critical regard for Hitchcock’s artistic achievements had begun to emerge. To coincide with the release of *The Birds*, the Museum of Modern Art inaugurated a six-month retrospective of Hitchcock’s films and published a monograph on his body of work by critic and soon-to-be filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich. That month, *The Birds* was chosen to open the prestigious Cannes Film Festival. As *auteur* criticism spread to the U.S., writers investigated a deeply personal expressiveness in Hitchcock’s films especially in matters of male-female relations, innocence and guilt, voyeurism, fetishism, and religious themes. Biographers debated the existence of a “dark side” to Hitchcock’s personality and its supposed effects on his career. Scholars employed social, structuralist, formalist, feminist, psychoanalytic, and deconstructionist theories and techniques to unpack the workings of Hitchcock’s films. Noting the newfound respect, the trade press journal *Motion Picture Exhibitor* reported in 1969, “Now a Hitchcock film is considered a work of art (which, of course, it was all along) on the rarified plane of a Stravinsky symphony or a Picasso painting.”

Hitchcock himself expressed ambivalence with regard to the seriousness of his films. Talking about *Psycho*, he told Bogdanovich, “If I had wanted to make the film seriously, I would have had to go inside it, and show the *inner* workings of the character. But, you see, I showed it from the outside.” With *The Birds*, however, a film depicting terrifying assaults by masses of birds on human victims, he deliberately aimed for a loftier target. Screenwriter Evan Hunter reported that Hitchcock “felt he was entering the Golden Age of his creativity. He told me *The Birds* would be his crowning achievement.” For the first time, Hitchcock improvised extensively during filming—a practice he previously had been loathe to try—as he became emotionally involved in working out tensions inherent in the script. Hunter believed that Hitchcock purposefully filmed an unresolved ending because, “He was going for high art.” As with the work of foreign directors whose films Hitchcock admired, *The Birds*, provoked a search for meaning in viewers seeking to interpret the unexplained attacks.

In public, Hitchcock assumed the convivial mask of a portly practical joker and connoisseur of the offbeat, a persona he had made famous in the introductions and conclusions to his television show as he commented on the episodes and commercials with sarcastic bite. In his tongue-in-cheek lecture at the National Press Club—called a “screamingly funny speech” by one attending journalist—Hitchcock maintained this pose as he lamented the decline of murder in the home, treating the subject in the same amoral aesthetic manner that the 19th-century English essayist Thomas de Quincey had adopted in an essay Hitchcock quoted, entitled “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts.”

Near the end of the talk, Hitchcock repeated a phrase that the director of the Federal Communications Commission, Newton Minow, had invoked two years earlier when he attacked the vapidness of television programming. Addressing the assembled journalists, Hitchcock observed, “We both labor in a vast wasteland and we both earn our livelihood by terrifying the public.” Hitchcock’s gentle mockery hinted at a serious concern that modern communications made it difficult for him to maintain the vital connection he had strived to build with his audience. As he noted in a 1961 interview, “Since World War II, we have been fighting newspaper headlines. It is difficult to compete with Khrushchev’s taking off his shoe and beating the bench at the United Nations.” Television, because of its pervasiveness, had forced him to abandon subjects and genres due to their overexposure in that medium. “It has become very difficult,” he confessed, “to avoid clichés.” Following *The Birds* and his next film, *Marnie*, Hitchcock struggled to find new material suitable to his talent and art.

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