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Contesting the Wheel: Hitchcock's Female Drivers

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Abstract

This article considers the recurring motif of the female driver in a selection of films by Alfred Hitchcock. By placing these screen representations of female drivers within the context of prevailing attitudes found throughout twentieth-century American society, the discussion seeks to evaluate Hitchcock's creative deployment of potent cultural issues in his work. In this pursuit, the article identifies certain disparities in the portrayals of female drivers, resulting in both positive and negative depictions, which can be related to the director's broader ambivalence towards femininity throughout his oeuvre.

Keywords: Alfred Hitchcock; Motifs; Automobiles; Female Representation

In his comprehensive and methodical study of motifs in the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Michael Walker offers an introductory note on the ways in which the director's creative deployment of particular themes and elements derives from an understanding and appreciation of their relevance and potency within contemporary society. He suggests that:

The interaction of an artist with his or her culture can be a complex and difficult one; this is perhaps especially so with an artist as sophisticated as Hitchcock. Investigating Hitchcock's films through their motifs – particularly in cases where the motifs are widespread in other works – thus becomes in part an exploration of Hitchcock's relationship to his culture.¹

The notion that any director's work becomes entwined within a wider cultural context is unlikely to strike us as contentious and we might even relate it back to the more fundamental balance that all films maintain between capture and creation. V. F. Perkins expresses this duality by emphasising aesthetic choice, explaining that: 'few films confine themselves to either a purely reproductive or a purely imaginative technique. The cinema extends across the whole of the area between the two extremes.'² From this position, it is uncontroversial to note that filmmakers construct a fictional world by taking elements from the world that they not only see (the photographic reproduction of reality) but also experience (the evocation of cultural artefacts and ideas). However, Walker's reference to the potential complexity and difficulty of a director's interaction with her or his culture is useful, and worth pursuing in a little more detail, rather than allowing it to become an implicit or background acknowledgement in the critical assessment of Hitchcock's work.

Walker's interest in the widespread use of motifs that indicate Hitchcock's 'relationship to his culture' suggests that they might gain significance through accumulation: that value of motifs increases in correlation with their frequency of use within the wide span of the director's work. As a basis for intellectual inquiry this approach is certainly practical and, in Walker's study, gives rise to a robust mapping of motifs across many different films, building up a framework of patterns and correlations. Whilst acknowledging its merits, however, we might also note that this approach inherently establishes criteria for how motifs are to be discussed and, indeed, whether they are to be considered at all. For example, in a section of the book attending to modes of transport in Hitchcock films, the following rationale is given for the exclusion of automobiles from a group including trains, boats, planes and buses:

There are relatively few of his films in which cars are the dominant mode of transport, and these are mostly late in his career. Hitchcock's characters tend to travel quite a lot, but journeys of any length are more usually undertaken by public transport. As a consequence, there are many scenes in his films set on trains and boats in particular. Planes and buses feature less prominently, but they are still sufficiently popular to each constitute a motif.³

Walker's choice of language adds further layers of justification for certain modes of transport being favoured over others: 'relatively few' examples of cars being the 'dominant' form, 'journeys of any length' being undertaken by public transport, 'many scenes' set on trains and boats, and even that planes and buses are 'sufficiently popular to each constitute a motif.' The reasoning here appears to be that a type of vehicle should be used numerous times and at length by characters in order to secure its status not only as a point of interest but also, it seems, to qualify it for consideration as a motif at all. The logic of this approach has its place within Walker's wider project to systematically map out leading motifs across all of Hitchcock's films (a process requiring *some* sort of selection criteria) but it also carries with it the potential to overlook minor motifs, such as cars, whose presence within the films may be inscribed with great potency and significance despite their relatively subdued status on screen.

It is my intention in this article to stay with the motif of cars in Hitchcock's work, in part because Walker's study leaves extensive space for that inquiry through his almost complete omission of automobiles, and in part because thinking about cars in the films can help to define in greater detail Walker's own notion of a director's complex and difficult interaction with her or his culture. My contention is that focussing on certain aspects of automobile use provides opportunities for a more sustained consideration of the relationship

between Hitchcock's films and their wider cultural context. In the twentieth-century, cars gained ever-increasing prominence in society as innovations in assembly line mass production gave rise to widespread use and ownership. However, while the presence of cars in society increased dramatically throughout the century, it is also the case that access to and experience of automobiles was neither universal nor equal. Private car ownership was (and remains) necessarily dependent upon wealth, and we can easily identify financial status as a fundamental obstacle for many citizens, even with the greater affordability created through advances in industrial, assembly-line mass production. In addition, the history of the motor car is underpinned by a disparity between the ways in which male and female drivers are perceived and treated. It is telling, for example, that Henry Ford, the key pioneer of automobile mass production in the twentieth century, announced plans to direct all manufacturing efforts into the delivery of his revolutionary 1908 Model T vehicle in the following way:

I will build a motorcar for the great multitude. It will be large enough for the family but small enough for the individual to run and care for. It will be constructed of the best materials, by the best men to be hired, after the simplest designs that modern engineering can devise. But it will be so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one – and enjoy with his family the blessing of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces.⁴

The emphasis on male manufacturers and drivers in Ford's 1909 vision of car ownership is perhaps unlikely to register as controversial or even unusual, given the society to which he belonged and in which his words would be received.⁵ More striking, however, is the ways which Ford's early declaration (perhaps inadvertently) anticipated an inequality between

perceptions of male and female drivers that would persist in the years that followed. Virginia Scharff usefully describes the ways in which, to Ford and his contemporaries, the word ‘driver’ simply meant ‘male.’⁶ Yet, writing in 1991, she perceives a continuation of these attitudes that extends well beyond the early part of the century. As she explains:

For nearly a century, then, the auto has been identified with masculinity and male mobility, and women’s right and ability to use cars has been disputed. Although class status, age, geographical location, occupation, race, and ethnicity profoundly affected people’s access to and control over cars, sex always outdistanced these other social factors as a focus of public debate about who could and should use motorcars.⁷

The imbalance between perceptions of male and female drivers, maintained stubbornly throughout the twentieth-century, provides a useful means for focussing a discussion of the representation of cars in Hitchcock films. More specifically, against the backdrop that Scharff describes, the motif of the female driver gains potency through its resonance not only with the internal narrative concerns of the films in which it occurs but also with the external cultural contexts in which those films are produced and received. Here, we are moving away from an attempt to catalogue prevailing motifs across the whole of the director’s work and, instead, looking towards smaller, less ubiquitous examples that nevertheless possess weight, meaning and significance. By concentrating on a relatively limited number of examples, we can begin to ascertain in more precise terms how these films make creative use of ideas and attitudes within society. In this way, motifs do not simply function as abstract filmmaking devices, but are anchored within what Walker terms ‘the interaction of an artist with his or her culture.’

As a starting point, it is possible to narrow down the set of examples yet further to contrast specific motifs of female drivers across different films from Hitchcock's career. We might, for example, give attention to two films, *Notorious* (1946) and *To Catch a Thief* (1955), in which characters played by Cary Grant are passengers in cars driven by women: Ingrid Bergman as Alicia and Grace Kelly as Frances Stevens. In discussing two films separated by nine years, my intention is not necessarily to demonstrate a *progression* in the representation of female drivers in Hitchcock films, either positive or negative, but rather to illustrate some of the ways in which underlying attitudes within society might be reflected in these portrayals, and how they might be utilised for dramatic purpose. In *Notorious*, Cary Grant's character, Devlin, is passenger in the car of a drunken Alicia.⁸ The sequence follows a famous scene at a late-night party in Alicia's house, in which Devlin is framed for a significant period of time from the back and in silhouette, watching Alicia. John Gibbs has compared the character's positioning and lighting to that of an audience member, sitting in the front row of a cinema, which initiates pattern whereby 'Cary Grant's character remains an onlooker for most of the movie, and continues to view Alicia judgementally.'⁹ Taking his cue from Andrew Britton's reading of *Notorious*,¹⁰ Gibbs furthermore notes the emergence of Devlin's sadistic love for Alicia, concluding that, by 'associating our view with that of a character who turns out to be an extraordinarily unpleasant hero – and by doing so in a way that draws attention to our own status as members of an audience – the film opens the possibility of a critique of spectatorship'.¹¹

The move from Alicia's house to the car provides further opportunities for the kind of critique that Gibbs describes as it facilitates not only close-up shots of each character but also incorporates them in a repeating pattern of two-shots, allowing us to scrutinise in greater detail Devlin's observance of Alicia's behaviour. His readiness to be driven by her at all, when Alicia's abilities are so obviously afflicted by alcohol, is curious. We might understand

it as an especially high-stakes method of gaining Alicia's trust by indulging her desire to drive. In which case, traces of the unpleasantness that Gibbs identifies are already beginning to emerge in this form of professional abuse. And yet, as Alicia drives at increasing speed and more and more erratically, Devlin responds with detached bemusement by casually lighting a cigarette, speaking in a measured tone, maintaining a half-smile, and passive vigilance captured in his eyes flicking to the speedometer, and hand reaching towards the steering wheel. It is as though Devlin is happy to allow Alicia's demonstration of her poor judgement and aptitude to play out and, moreover, that he allows this ease to verge upon a kind of sadistic pleasure as he watches her push towards dangerous limits whilst all the time ready to take back control of the car.

Devlin's willingness to manipulate Alicia in this precarious situation provides an early foreshadowing to the film's wider plot, in which she will place herself at considerable risk to aid his professional interests (infiltrating an organisation of Nazis that Devlin's government agency is pursuing). As Tania Modleski points out, 'Devlin steadfastly maintains his air of command and continually allows Alicia to be placed in compromising or dangerous circumstances; often, of course, he actually *places* her in these circumstances.'¹² The scene in the car may itself be foreshadowed in an earlier moment when, before leaving the house, Devlin ties a scarf around Alicia's exposed midriff, explaining 'you might catch cold.' Robin Wood suggests that this gesture inaugurates a chain of objects in the film that denote male possession, but distinguishes it from the rented necklace that Devlin's boss (the 'supreme embodiment of patriarchal authority') later fastens around her neck for her date with Sebastian (Claude Rains), the Nazi she must seduce, and which 'carries connotations of exploitation and prostitution.'¹³ Wood is more permissive of Devlin's scarf gesture because 'it is at least associated with playfulness, humor, and affection: it is a piece of soft fabric, a mere handkerchief, loosely tied, that won't even keep her warm.'¹⁴ The scarf's potential as a

symbol of male possession is certainly inferior to the necklace's, precisely as Wood suggests, but it nevertheless carries with it some unsettling implications. Devlin's play of mock concern for Alicia's welfare (a scarf that 'won't even keep her warm') intensifies and becomes reality as he readily indulges her misguided intention to drive, and it turns her inebriation into a spectacle for his amusement, so maintaining his role as spectator and emphasising his authority over her in this moment. Upon reflection, we might even say that the gesture Devlin's boss performs with the necklace at least makes its exploitative intentions overt, whereas Devlin's ostensibly flirtatious act betrays a more fundamental lack of care and an imbalance of power and influence between the couple.

Devlin's 'playfulness' continues in the driving scene, where he continues to both maintain control over Alicia's behaviour and simultaneously make a spectacle of her own lack of control. The display of the erratic female driver possesses a significance beyond the film's fictional world, however, joining up with widespread societal perceptions. As Katherine J. Parkin explains, 'For almost one hundred years, the assertion that women were to blame for making driving dangerous and unpleasant fueled both serious criticism and ridicule of women drivers.'¹⁵ It is a perception that has endured despite the existence of numerous contradictory studies, such as that carried out by the American Automobile Association cited in *Literary Digest* in 1925, which found that women drivers have proved 'as competent, if not more so, as men.'¹⁶ Devlin's willingness for Alicia to demonstrate recklessness or ineptitude by taking the wheel therefore is in direct relationship then, however implicit, to wider prejudices surrounding women's supposed inability to drive competently, especially when compared with men. In this scene, notions of a disparity between sexes is dramatically realised: Alicia's alcohol consumption apparently intensifies her lack of proficiency, causing her to swerve dangerously on the road and mistake her windswept hair for fog as it obstructs her vision whereas, for Devlin, alcohol does not have

the same diminishing effect as he maintains a calm control by observing the road and preparing to grab the wheel. As Alicia struggles to see the road, we cut to a shot from her point of view: the strands of hair precariously obscuring her vision. And, here, the editing choice seems calculated to enhance our impression of this female driver's fallibility by aligning us with her near-comical lack of perception.¹⁷ As a result, the film replicates Devlin's view and treatment of Alicia: allowing us to share her perspective in order only to illustrate her dangerous behaviour and creating a display of her lack of awareness through the hair/fog confusion, just as Devlin made a show of her drunkenness by jokily fastening the scarf around her midriff. In this respect, we might say that the male character and film's compositional strategies work in sympathy with each other to undermine Alicia's power and agency. More broadly, the myth of the dangerous female driver is indulged and reinforced on screen, and it seems apt that Alicia should be additionally blighted by a markedly feminine aspect of her appearance – her hair – as it further impairs her sight and judgement.

This is not to say that Alicia's drunk driving should not be portrayed as dangerously irresponsible. However, given that Cary Grant plays the male passenger here, it is interesting to draw a brief comparison with a later Hitchcock film, *North by Northwest* (1959), in which his character Roger Thornhill also takes the wheel drunk. In this instance, Thornhill has been forced to drink a bottle of bourbon by spy operatives, and the perilous car journey becomes a process of his attempting to somehow compensate for his incapacity through residual driving skill. The spectacle of drunk driving is therefore markedly different, as Thornhill is made the unwilling victim of alcohol, thus exempt from moral judgement. When his journey finally ends with arrest, it completes his victorious avoidance of the death that the spies planned for him. Alicia, too, is stopped by the police but the encounter serves only to revisit the facts of her self-inflicted recklessness and, as she is consistently framed between Devlin in the passenger seat and the traffic cop outside the car, places her within a structure of overt

patriarchal control: two men taking responsibility for a hazardous woman.¹⁸ Their behaviour is distinctly stiff and formal, projecting their sense of authority, whereas her speech and movements are fluid and unguarded, signifying her exclusion from that authority. The cop gives up on her almost immediately, electing instead to address Devlin about her ('drunk, huh?') and, when Devlin passes him his government identification document, his manner shifts immediately to professional respect, rounded off with a stiff salute. Devlin is never asked whether he has been drinking and, instead, is automatically assigned responsibility for Alicia ('you think you can handle it?'). When the cop has departed, Devlin accepts this duty violently by wrestling Alicia away from the steering wheel and, finally, knocking her unconscious across the back seat. This moment of gender-based brutality is partially hidden from view, Devlin's turned back shielding the moment of impact, potentially diminishing its impact within the scene. Indeed, as this physical assault is not lingered upon, Devlin's role as a calm and rational male authority figure is preserved, allowing him to merely conclude the encounter with a brief, exhaled 'pew' as he prepares to drive Alicia's car away.

If we regard Alicia's punishment for her misdemeanour as obscenely harsh (and hypocritical on Devlin's part, given his earlier complicity in Alicia taking the wheel at all), we might also recognise that it bears a relationship to the ways in which women had been treated more generally when they committed motoring offences. Katherine J. Parkin recounts one example from 1925:

A young woman, fined for reckless driving, was told by the judge during her sentencing, "Women drivers are incompetent and unfit to operate automobiles...Since universal suffrage came into existence you have shown the men no consideration. In traffic you ride roughshod over everybody and expect to get away with it because you are the gentler sex." The assertion that women were simultaneously gentle and

careless brutes appeared in the courts and the court of public opinion and helped to shape the different ways women were understood to be engaged with the car.¹⁹

This judge's apparent desire to sanction *all* women for ever taking to the road finds traces in the harsh punishment Devlin administers to Alicia. Indeed, Devlin graphically enforces the judge's sentiments as he wrenches her from the wheel and forces her onto the back seat. Alicia does not take the wheel for the rest of the film, a fact that coincides with her acquiescence to Devlin's agency as she agrees to become a central part of their plan to ensnare Sebastian. In accepting, she places herself in considerable peril, leading eventually to her near-death through a poison administered by Sebastian and his mother. Devlin rescues her and, in a final scene, escorts the barely-conscious Alicia to his car, places her in the passenger seat and drives her away to safety. By concluding with an image of Alicia as Devlin's intoxicated passenger, the film returns to and recapitulates the thematic undertones of their first car journey together. As a result, *Notorious* equates the resolution of plot (Alicia completing Devlin's mission and being removed from fatal harm) with a reassertion of patriarchal control through the act of male driving (with the female a subjugated passenger). In this sense, the film's Todorovian re-establishment of narrative equilibrium²⁰ goes hand in hand with a depiction of the active male driver and the passive female passenger. Alicia is put back in her place. It is not difficult to see the ways in which this resolution reflects and reinforces a societal trend whereby 'Patriarchal attitudes and assumptions of male superiority continue to dominate our understanding of the car.'²¹

If *Notorious* can be seen to accommodate certain prejudicial assumptions about the rights and abilities of female drivers, Hitchcock's second Cary Grant-as-passenger film, *To Catch a Thief*, seeks to at least disrupt such notions from the outset. In an early scene, a string of robberies on the French Riviera lead the police to the home of infamous jewel thief John

Robie (played by Grant). They naïvely grant him the opportunity to change into something ‘more formal’ before accompanying them to the station for questioning and Robie disappears upstairs into a bedroom, locking the door behind him. When a gunshot is heard from the bedroom, the policemen are thrown into panic and break open the door. Meanwhile, we see Robie on the roof of his house, apparently attempting to escape following the misdirection of the gunshot. Inside the bedroom, as the police stare in puzzlement at an abandoned rifle, the roar of a car engine is heard outside the property. We cut to a shot of a car speeding away and the implication is clear: Robie has made his getaway. The policemen flee the house in pursuit and a high-speed car chase ensues across idyllic yet unforgiving landscapes, each framed in a series of elaborate aerial shots. Finally, the police catch up with their quarry (aided by an impromptu roadblock of crossing sheep), only to discover that the driver of the vehicle is, in fact, Robie’s maid Germaine (Georgette Anys). Police and audience share in the misconception that Robie has escaped in the car due to associations that the film makes available (his absence from the bedroom; his presence on the roof; Germaine’s absence). However, Germaine’s ability to *continue* fooling the police (and the audience) is reliant upon the fundamental fact that her skilful driving could be mistaken for his and, implicitly, that male and female drivers are equally competent behind the wheel – to the extent that their driving styles are indistinguishable. We can see an obvious reversal from the representation of Alicia’s driving in *Notorious* and, indeed, when the police finally catch up with Germaine, she is afforded power and authority over them (able to draw out their pursuit and lead them away from Robie by fooling them). It is also the case, however, that the notion of male and female driving skills being equally balanced runs against certain attitudes found even in expert professions. As Deborah Clarke explains: ‘Researchers for organizations and professors at universities historically considered female drivers distinct from male drivers. They frequently plucked out findings to make arguments both for and against women driving

automobiles.’²² In its early stages, *To Catch a Thief* dispenses with any such disparities, either positive or negative, and instead uses the assumptions of the policemen (and perhaps the film’s audience) to set up its twist in the plot.

The film returns to the figure of the empowered female driver when Frances Stevens (Grace Kelly) drives Robie in her sapphire Sunbeam Alpine. He has adopted the disguise of a wealthy American tourist visiting the French Riviera in order to investigate the real cat burglar and clear his name. When he mentions viewing houses in the area, she insists on driving him to one of the villas and then stopping for a picnic. On the drive to the property, it becomes clear that the police are pursuing the couple in a follow-car. Frances maintains a casual, relaxed manner while she drives, engaging Robie in flirtatious conversation, which suggests she is unaware of the pursuers. On the road again, having finished viewing the villa, Robie spots the chasing car in his side mirror and asks Frances why they are ‘dawdling.’ She replies ‘That’s exactly what was running through my mind’ and speeds up immediately. As the car races along, we are made aware of Robie’s discomfort as he looks anxiously at Frances, at the speedometer and the drop of the cliff edge that they travel dangerously close to, wiping the sweat from his palms on his trousers and even instinctively pressing down his feet to operate non-existent brake pedals. He looks back along the road behind them to check on their pursuers, and we are given the impression that Robie faces a binary threat: being caught by police, or escaping them, and being harmed by Frances’ driving.

This distress echoes the fears expressed in early twentieth-century American culture, described by Virginia Scharff, as ‘The well-to-do women who shrugged off feminine immobility and presumed to take the wheel, celebrated as daredevils or dismissed as dilettantes, burst on the road as a surprise to their contemporaries. The prospect of unleashing women on the American landscape deeply disturbed many observers, who worried that mobile women would be beyond control, socially, spatially, sexually.’²³ In his behaviour,

Robie appears to have inherited some of that unease, whilst Frances seems a descendent of those pioneering ‘unleashed’ women drivers.

The jeopardy of Frances’ driving is intensified as a shot resembling her and Robie’s view (the camera is positioned between them, replicating neither’s exact point-of-view) captures the front end of the vehicle as it veers perilously close to other vehicles, walls, pedestrians and the cliff-edge. These shots might appear to perform the same function as Alicia’s point of view shot in *Notorious*, aligning us with a character’s view in order to illustrate her lack of driving proficiency. Throughout the high-speed journey, which is punctuated by the squeal of tyres on road, Frances remains apparently oblivious to the presence of the police behind them and untroubled by the hazardous jeopardy of the drive. Indeed, Kelly maintains a performance of unflustered calm: steering with one hand, lips parted in casual enjoyment, a half-smile forming occasionally, and barely reacting when obstacles are met and avoided. This extraordinary poise, coupled with Robie’s highly anxious behaviour, at first suggests Frances’ profound lack of awareness: of the car in pursuit, of her passenger’s obvious discomfort, or of how hazardous her driving is. In this sense, we are seemingly returning to a portrait of the recklessly oblivious female driver, so revisiting some of *Notorious*’ themes. However, when the police are finally thwarted in their chase – crashing to avoid a crossing chicken that Frances smoothly swerved around – she reveals her precise knowledge of the scenario to Robie, and her knowledge of him:

Robie: Hey, slow down.

Frances: And let them catch us?

Robie: Let who catch us?

Frances: The police in the black car. [She tilts her head towards rear view mirror.] The ones who were following you.

Robie: I don't know what you're talking about. Police? Following me?

Frances: Yes, police following you, John Robie the Cat.

The ease with which she delivers this revelation matches the casualness in her negotiation of the car chase. The style of Frances' revelation is consistent with her representation elsewhere in the film. In the course of their famous interviews, Hitchcock encourages Francois Truffaut to 'Look at the opening of *To Catch a Thief*. I deliberately photographed Grace Kelly ice-cold and I kept cutting to her profile, looking classical, beautiful, and very distant. And then, when Cary Grant accompanies her to the door of her hotel room, what does she do? She thrusts her lips right up to his mouth'.²⁴

Hitchcock emphasises the extent to which Kelly's composed outward appearance mask her sexual passion but, in the car scene, it is equally the case that her poise successfully disguises her intelligence and skill. She makes herself unreadable to Robie just as Kelly's performance of Frances makes her challenging for an audience to read. Robie and the audience are vulnerable, therefore, to relying upon expectations of and prejudices about this female character and her driving skills. Her apparent 'distance' in fact provides evidence of her ability to handle this situation and manage her emotional responses to it (despite her male passenger's more melodramatic reactions), defining her as an exceptionally controlled and competent driver.²⁵ We might add to Hitchcock's description by noting that it is not possible to create a character's ice-cold distance only in the photography: it is achieved through collaboration with the actor. Kelly's performance in the chase scene skilfully withholds crucial details about her character from the audience but, at the same time, manages to convey Frances' confident enjoyment of her automobile.

The portrayal builds upon the earlier scene involving Germaine's staged getaway, challenging expectations by withholding information: here, a female driver's ostensive unawareness is revealed to be measured assurance whereas, earlier, an assumed male driver is revealed to be female. But the depiction also provides a counter to what Katherine J. Parkin has termed 'the modern American obsession with proclaiming women to be poor drivers...Although men lacked the patriarchal authority to ban women from driving [unlike Ancient Rome, which did, and to which Parkin refers] the popular culture was replete with humor, critiques, and fear that effectively served to deny women pride and freedom in their driving.'²⁶ The representation of Frances' driving in *To Catch a Thief* can be seen to encapsulate precisely those notions of pride and freedom that were suppressed elsewhere and, by thwarting Robie's anxious interpretation of her behaviour, reveal male fear of female drivers to be unfounded. The film ends with Robie exonerated and returning home, pursued again by a police car very similar to the one that chased his car at the beginning of the film, creating a kind of circularity in the film's narrative. We cross-fade to the patio of Robie's villa just as Frances enters. She is still wearing the elaborate, golden Louis XV period-inspired dress that was her costume for the film's climactic masquerade ball sequence. Robie asks who brought her up here and she replies: 'The police. And we would have caught you too, if my dress hadn't got caught all over the steering wheel and gear shift.' The line is superbly crafted: simultaneously both straightforward and inscrutable, suggesting a highly eventful, but enigmatic off-screen car journey. If Frances was brought to the house, we must assume that she was passenger to a police officer and, as it turns out, a bad passenger (how *did* her dress get caught all over the steering wheel of a car that she wasn't driving?). We might take this further to suggest that the act of delegating control in an automobile is unnatural and awkward for her (especially when combined with an antiquated style of female

attire unsuited to car travel). Indeed, the film has provided ample evidence already to secure the notion that Frances' rightful place is behind the wheel, rather than in the passenger seat.

We might propose that scenes from *Notorious* and *To Catch a Thief* resonate with oppositional views of female drivers – of both their ineptitude and their expertise behind the wheel – and that each integrates these perceptions within character representation and narrative structure. Given that both films are directed by Alfred Hitchcock, we are entitled to give at least some consideration to any insight such representations might offer when we consider his attitudes and achievements. Nicholas Haeffner has cautioned against reading Hitchcock's films as a direct embodiment of his personal beliefs without qualification, noting that 'It is all too easy to conflate Hitchcock the real-life person with the persona implied by his films.'²⁷ The risk is acute in Hitchcock's case, given that he devoted significant time and effort to elaborate self-promotion activities throughout his career, cultivating a persona that was then employed in the marketing of his films.²⁸ For this reason, treating Hitchcock's quotations from movie press kits, for example, as declarations of *personal* ideology would constitute a misguided endeavour given that the words may be self-consciously designed to be provocative for straightforward commercial reasons.²⁹ A further obstacle to locating Hitchcock's views within his onscreen work, however, is that the films often resist attempts to identify a single, unifying perspective. Tania Modleski responds to this issue when describing Robin Wood's work as 'an important corrective to studies that see Hitchcock in only the darkest misogynistic vision,' so opening out the possibilities for plurality in the films and, likewise, in critical responses to them.³⁰ Modleski outlines her own position on Hitchcock's alleged misogyny by explaining: 'what I want to argue is *neither* that Hitchcock is utterly misogynistic *nor* that he is largely sympathetic to women and their plight in patriarchy, but that his work is characterized by a thoroughgoing ambivalence about

femininity – which explains why it has been possible for critics to argue with some plausibility on either side of the issue’.³¹

Hitchcock’s representations of female drivers, which possess obvious links to misogyny and patriarchal oppression, have the potential to prove similarly unsatisfying because the evidence on screen does not consistently reveal a fixed attitude on the part of the director. Modleski’s notion of ‘ambivalence’ might then be understood against Hitchcock’s consistent deployment of cultural themes and issues as a means of servicing his creative intentions, to express plot points or reveal character detail, for example.

If we accept that Hitchcock’s position lacks consistency in a way that resembles Modleski’s description, it is nevertheless the case that the director understood the potency of the figure of the female driver in society and the relationship between driving and power. His onscreen depictions are therefore consistently associated with certain wider cultural debates. It is no surprise, then, that Hitchcock should return to the motif of the female driver in films made after *Notorious* and *To Catch a Thief*.

On this theme, I want to conclude my discussion of female drivers in these films by looking briefly at two of the director’s works that have received and continue to receive a great deal of critical attention, *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963), to outline some of the ways in which the motif is integrated and handled in these films. In *Psycho*, a large section of Marion Crane’s (Janet Leigh) story involves car travel as she escapes with the forty-thousand dollars she has stolen from her employer’s client. In the course of her journey, she repeatedly feels intimidated and exposed. First, when she has spent the night asleep in her car by the roadside, she is awoken by a police officer (Mort Mills) knocking on her window and subjecting her to a string of questions. Marion reacts with understandable alarm, given the crime she is concealing, but her vulnerability also has a wider cultural significance. As Katherine J. Parkin explains, while ‘newspaper and television reports recounted incidents of

men posing as police officers to prey upon unsuspecting female motorists, they also revealed a criminal pattern of police officers, including those on duty, abusing their power, sexually harassing and assaulting women across the country'.³²

As a result, Marion's behaviour has potential repercussions, evoking genuine societal fears reinforced by media reports. The same police officer reappears in a later scene when Marion seeks to cover her tracks by trading in her car at a garage. Here, he forms a trio of male professionals, along with the salesman (John Anderson) and mechanic (Don Ross). This scene also balances intra and extratextual meanings. Marion is of course anxious as she attempts to complete the transaction quickly and without attracting the further attentions of the officer. And yet, the setting of a used car lot also connects with a more general unease females experienced in an environment 'structured around male consumers. Salespeople believed women who walked through the doors to be naïve, misguided or looking for love.'³³ While the male characters don't display this level of prejudice, Marion is nevertheless reminded by the salesman of the fact that she will make decisions 'as a woman' and it is presumed that she wishes to change her car because she is 'sick of the sight of it' (rather than making a decision based on the vehicle's performance, for example). Marion's associations with this new car in fact become increasingly sinister as, during the next stage of her journey, aspects of the scene's composition foreshadow her eventual (and famous) shower-scene murder. As V.F. Perkins explains:

Immediately, we saw the car windscreen. The first drops of rain splashed across its surface, just as Marion's blood splashes on to the sides of the bath. The hiss of the ensuing downpour prefigured the noise of the shower-bath. The windscreen wipers swung back and forth across our vision in the rhythm of the knife. And Marion's eyes,

dazzled by the oncoming headlights, stared blindly into the blackness which finally revealed the Bates motel.³⁴

Marion's vulnerability in and around automobiles is thus intensified, as features such as the windscreen, wipers and headlights combine to portend her demise.³⁵

Marion's murderer, Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) places her body in the trunk of her car and sinks it in a swamp. Raymond Durgnat attends to the film's closing image of her vehicle being pulled from the swamp, describing it as a 'Memorial for Marion' and noting that 'the shot's brutality promises more horror (Marion's nude, multiply stabbed corpse jammed in the trunk, desecrating indignity), with the car's colour evoking her 'white body.'³⁶ The final shot of *Psycho* certainly provides a re-evocation to the horror of Marion's murder in the ways that Durgnat suggests, but it also revisits and completes a series of associations between this female and automobiles that culminates in her means of escape becoming her tomb.

In combination, these scenes from *Psycho* illustrate the extent to which Hitchcock finds opportunities to draw upon wider cultural experiences of female drivers, using them to enrich and push forward a specific narrative interest. The car becomes a symbol of liberation *and* entrapment for Marion, creating a central dramatic tension that builds through the accumulation of related sequences. The symbolic weight of the car in relation to a female character is picked up again in *The Birds*, a film that shares some tonal affinities with *Psycho*. Camille Paglia has noted that Melanie Daniels' (Tippi Hedren) drive to Bodega Bay in her Aston Martin DB2/4 recalls and extends Frances' 'flamboyant' style in *To Catch a Thief*: 'Melanie Daniels is free as a bird: she rides alone, amused by her own meddlesome thoughts and plans...What could be more representative of modern female liberation than an elegantly dressed woman gunning a roadster through the open countryside?'³⁷

As her story unfolds, however, Melanie's mischievous freedom ebbs away, a process that is marked by her differing relationship with automobiles. The liberated single driver becomes victim trapped behind the wheel of a motionless vehicle as birds swoop in from all angles after the school attack, then traumatised passenger-seat occupant once Annie's (Suzanne Pleshette) body has been discovered. Finally, after she is left catatonic following her climactic and brutal bird attack, Melanie is led to the back seat of her own Aston Martin as Mitch (Rod Taylor) navigates a cautious path through masses of assembled fowl. Paglia rightly notes that this scene recalls the ending of *Notorious*³⁸ and, given the shared emphasis on car travel, we might extend the comparison with Hitchcock's previous work to suggest that *The Birds* moves from an early replication of Frances' confident, joyful driving in *To Catch a Thief* to a final recreation of Alicia's near-unconscious passivity in *Notorious*. As *The Birds* builds to its final, traumatic ending, Melanie's physical and psychological decline correlates with her loss of driving prowess, completing a pattern that has been developing throughout the film.

The comparison with *Notorious*' final scene also provides a reminder that in both films the authority behind the wheel is ultimately handed back to male characters at the expense of their female counterparts, weaving notions of patriarchal control into their conclusions. Whilst *The Birds* does not present Mitch in the same negative light as Devlin, he nevertheless becomes inadvertently entwined with Melanie's loss of freedom and power. In this way, his words and actions come to possess a kind of unconscious weight. After Melanie has attended dinner at his family home, for example, Mitch engages in a brand of flirtation that takes the form of an intense cross-examination (he is a professional defence attorney). While this exchange takes place, Melanie is seated in her Aston Martin as he stands over her, probing her with accusations and counter-questions. Finally, flustered by his attacks, she drives away and he later calls her to apologise. It is a small moment but Mitch's interrogation

of Melanie undermines some of the power and freedom she had earlier exhibited in the same vehicle during her journey to Bodega Bay. As a result, her driving away from him does not convey the same sense of ‘modern female liberation’ that Paglia identifies earlier in the film but, rather, is representative of her fleeing a scene in which she has been out-manoeuvred by Mitch’s professionally-trained skills. The car’s meaning in relation to Melanie has therefore begun to shift. In this way, even Mitch’s innocuous line towards the beginning of the film – ‘Back in your gilded cage, Melanie Daniels’ – takes on an ironic and unfortunate significance when viewed in the context of the film’s conclusion. Mitch’s casual wish is granted when he physically places Melanie, frail and impassive, in the cramped back seat of her own luxury vehicle: a gilded cage that protects her from a malicious environment but offers none of its former freedoms.

These fluctuating portrayals of female drivers, culminating in *The Birds*’ employment of both positive and negative aspects from previous films to achieve its dramatic conclusion, illustrate precisely the kind of complex and difficult relationships a director can establish with her or his culture, as described by Michael Walker. Hitchcock demonstrates consistent awareness of the debates surrounding women and automobiles, but appears interested primarily in the creative deployment of those issues within his work: how they can gain weight and significance within a fictional world he wishes to construct on screen. For this reason, perhaps, his films do not express a firm or fixed attitude towards female drivers, thereby replicating the kind of ambivalence that Tania Modleski identifies in Hitchcock’s representations of femininity. Nevertheless, the motif of the female driver is significant for its potency both within the films and wider cultural contexts rather than, for example, its frequency of use. My account of female drivers in some of Hitchcock’s films is not designed to be exhaustive and, inevitably, leaves room for further discussion. If that is the case, it would complement the value of looking closely at motifs in film at all: to use them as a

means of opening up wider perspectives, debates and meanings. If we accept Walker's characterisation of Hitchcock as an especially sophisticated artist (and this description is hardly controversial in contemporary film studies), then we can reasonably expect this process to expand, deepen, and intensify over time.

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¹ Michael Walker, *Hitchcock's Motifs*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005, p. 18.

² V. F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1993, p. 61.

³ Walker, *Hitchcock's Motifs*, p. 374.

⁴ Henry Ford, *My Life and Work*, Fairfield: 1st World Library, 2003, p. 89.

⁵ Ford's declaration is also somewhat idealistic on the topic of ownership given that, as Deborah Clarke points out, 'Henry Ford didn't set up his production line until 1913, and it took several more years to get the prices down low enough for most working class whites, African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos and recent immigrants to buy cars in significant numbers.' Deborah Clarke, *Driving Women: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth-Century America*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007, p. 14.

⁶ Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age*, New York: The Free Press, 1991, p. 166.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Even before the US laws and penalties for drunk driving were enhanced greatly during the 1970s and 1990s, driving while intoxicated was nevertheless prohibited and, in certain states, punishable by a fine or a short prison term (hence the patrolman's attitude towards Alicia in this scene when he acknowledges her obvious intoxication).

⁹ John Gibbs, *Mise-en-scene: Film Style and Interpretation*, London: Wallflower, 2002, p. 6.

¹⁰ Andrew Britton, 'Cary Grant: The Comedy of Male Desire,' *CineAction!* 7 (1987), 8.

¹¹ Gibbs, *Mise-en-scene*, p. 6.

¹² Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*, 3rd rev. ed., London: Routledge, 2016, p. 66.

¹³ Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, 2nd rev. ed., New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 323.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Katherine J. Parkin, *Women at the Wheel: A Century of Buying, Driving and Fixing Cars*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017, p. 68.

¹⁶ Clarke, *Driving Women*, p. 14.

¹⁷ Tania Modleski relates this shot to a wider pattern in *Notorious* in order to illustrate a more fundamental tendency that she perceives in Hitchcock's work: 'Not only does the film disembody the sexual woman, it also continually impairs her vision (something that Hitchcock films do to women with alarming frequency) thus ensuring that man remains in sole control of the gaze – and hence of the knowledge and power with which vision is always associated in cinema.' Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, p. 59.

¹⁸ We might place this within *Notorious*' wider recurring motif of 'male groups and their oppressive relationship to Alicia,' which John Gibbs and Douglas Pye identify even within the film's opening scene as she is pursued by a group of male reporters after her father's trial concludes. John Gibbs and Douglas Pye, 'Opening Choices: *Notorious*,' *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* 7 (2017), 99,

https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/movie/contents/gibbs-pye._opening_choices-_notorious.pdf;

<https://vimeo.com/185350060> (accessed 12 February 2019).

¹⁹ Parkin, *Women at the Wheel*, p. 67.

²⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, 'The 2 Principles of Narrative,' *Diacritics* 1:1 (1971), 39.

²¹ Parkin, *Women at the Wheel*, p. xx.

²² Clarke, *Driving Women*, p. 71

²³ Scharff, *Taking the Wheel*, p. 166

²⁴ Francois Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 2nd rev. ed., New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985, pp. 225-6.

²⁵ Hitchcock's wife, Alma, was involved in the production of *To Catch a Thief*, as she was with many of the director's films. Their daughter, Pat Hitchcock O'Connell, describes how her mother outlined the car chase sequence: 'The way the scene was originally written involved too much lengthy dialogue, and it was Alma who suggested breaking it all into three different scenes – that way the audience was kept alert and interested.' (Pat Hitchcock O'Connell and Laurent Bouzerau, *Alma Hitchcock: The Woman Behind the Man*, New York: Berkley, 2003, p. 166.) It is tempting to speculate that Alma's involvement may have contributed to the

depiction of Frances as a confident and skilful woman but, at least according to her daughter's account, she was more concerned with the dramatic coherence the scenes would have for an audience. This would seem to fit with Alma's clinical pragmatism, which her daughter mentions in other recollections. After watching the shower scene in a pre-screening of *Psycho*, for example, Alma declared that it could not be shipped in its current form. She did not object to the spectacle of a naked female being butchered to death in a bathroom but, rather, that 'when Janet Leigh is lying dead on the bathroom floor after she has been stabbed, you can see her swallow!' (*Ibid.*, p. 184.)

²⁶ Parkin, *Women at the Wheel*, p. 104.

²⁷ Nicholas Haefner, *Alfred Hitchcock*, London: Routledge, 2005, p. 74.

²⁸ John Belton, 'Can Hitchcock be Saved from Hitchcock Studies?', *Cineaste* 28:4 (2003), 16.

²⁹ Joy C. Schaefer, 'Must We Burn Hitchcock? (Re)Viewing Trauma and Effecting Solidarity with *The Birds* (1963),' *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32:4 (2015), 8-9.

³⁰ Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, p. 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Parkin, *Women at the Wheel*, pp. 96-7.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 34.

³⁴ Perkins, *Film as Film*, pp. 112-13.

³⁵ This pattern of vulnerability begins from the very first moments we see Marion in a car. Early in the film, having stolen the forty-thousand dollars, she begins her drive out of town but is seen by her boss as he crosses the road in front of her. He smiles at her but then stops and looks back in puzzlement; Marion reacts with guilty discomfort as the interior of her car is penetrated by his gaze.

³⁶ Raymond Durgnat, *A Long Hard Look at 'Psycho'*, 2nd rev. ed., London: British Film Institute, 2012, p. 247.

³⁷ Camille Paglia, *The Birds*, London: British Film Institute, 1998, p. 29.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.