

SIGNS IS FOR THE BIRDS

We rarely find out why things go wrong. Let's suppose that a plane crashes. We may learn that there was too much ice on the wings and the plane couldn't stay aloft. Why was there too much ice? Because it was exceptionally cold and the ground crew didn't apply the de-icer solution correctly. Why was it so cold and why were they derelict? Because the jet stream shifted and they were distracted by financial and marital problems. Why did the jet stream shift and why did they have financial and marital problems?

The questions don't stop. For every layer uncovered there's another just beneath. In our collective ignorance, there comes a point where we have to accept the whatever and trudge on.

In *The Birds*, Alfred Hitchcock's long-awaited follow-up to *Psycho*, we're confronted with a world gone bezerk, where science is no aid, and there is nothing left but fear, struggle, and a residue of hope (symbolized, ironically, by lovebirds).

In M. Night Shyamalan's *Signs*, released thirty-nine years later, this time the unstoppable menace isn't birds, but aliens. But here's the twist—unlike in *The Birds*, the question of God's role is thoroughly examined and there is a way to win (and it's nothing of our own doing).

Signs is the true successor to *The Birds*. *Signs* manages to pay homage to its esteemed predecessor without sacrificing its own identity, style, and message. Both films stage their climax at a rural house boarded up to repel invasion. Both movies rely on sound to convey the terror of a hidden threat, such that we can construct the horror in our minds.

But *Signs* allows closure, and completes the tale of terror in ignorance and impotence that *The Birds* left unresolved. And though *Signs* is dismissed as a slick entertainer, it is in most respects superior to *The Birds*.

One of the biggest problems with *The Birds* is that it asks us to believe that the main characters (who unlike the birds, should display purpose and reason) decide to stay in the Brenner house after the town is crushed. Why not just leave? After all, they have no understanding that the attacks are occurring elsewhere. In *Signs* the family members fight about this momentous choice of staying or going. And if they were to go, they'd still be at risk, since the whole world is under attack (Mel Gibson's Graham Hess can't take his adopted they-don't-like-water theory to the bank at this point in the story. [Just as he abandoned God, he's willing to abandon home; the past means nothing to him anymore.]) Thus, we can accept the final assault because we still sympathize with the characters. We would have chosen as they chose, so we're in the house with them.

The Birds gives us a pittance of a scene in which Lydia and Mitch talk of leaving. Mitch has already boarded up the house and thinks another attack is imminent. So basically the film is cheating us by not having the characters discuss this while there's still time, *before* Mitch starts barricading the house.

Another problem with *The Birds* is poor characterization. Jessica Tandy's Lydia Brenner is the only major character who is allowed to let the attacks get to her. What happens to Annie Hayworth is accomplished off-screen, Mitch Brenner is macho-stoic, and Tippi Hedren's Melanie Daniels just flails her arms. The characters are mere ciphers, and while the actors inhabit such limited roles efficiently, and everybody has some good moments, it's hardly enlightening or engrossing. We start rooting for the birds!

In *Signs* we never root for the aliens. They are malevolent and the human characters are nuanced, funny, and endearing. Indeed, Mel Gibson is a powerhouse in his role as a burned-out skeptic. He plays rage, compassion, and fear in unpredictable ways. His character anchors the film and is the ideal protagonist for the audience to latch onto.

Melanie Daniels is facing troubles of her own. She's motherless and adrift. But her arch-coyness gets old, fast. And her goal is just to win Mitch Brenner without dying in the process. Graham is trying to save his family and have a showdown with God. Now, that's a goal.

The big questions in *The Birds* are given voice in the Tides Restaurant. Everyone wants to know why this happened. Is it a Commie plot? Is it God's revenge? Perhaps it's all a big misunderstanding. Or, better yet, Melanie Daniels is an agent of Satan!

No one has a decent idea. And that's good. Some bad things happen for no (apparent) good reason. Thus, there's no answer, and with the film ending as our characters drive off into oblivion, there's no resolution. The movie ends, but the story doesn't. The feel is very European for an American film. And while there doesn't have to be answers if the questions are good (and the questions posed by *The Birds* are excellent), when we're saddled with bad characters and nonsensical plotting, the whole enterprise still suffers.

Admittedly, *Signs* is not wholly original. It lifts from more films besides *The Birds*. But what sets *Signs* apart from *The Birds* more than anything is its music. *The Birds* has no score. And it doesn't matter how elegantly synthesized are the supposed bird sounds that provide accompaniment for the attacks. *The Birds* needs the insight and boost that only a score can provide.

Signs, on the other hand, boasts one of the best scores ever written. It may not be much to listen to on its own, but it echoes and amplifies the spiritual turmoil of the characters. Composer James Newton Howard relies on a three-note motif that is thunderously stated in the solitary opening titles. (An aggressively malevolent musical opening paired with a solitary title sequence is a very rare occurrence, and immediately sets the film apart.) The music provides a tease of later action, as a good overture should, and it introduces the material that will be developed throughout the score.

While *The Birds* generates some excitement through cutting (most notably in the crows-amassing-on-the-jungle-gym scene), the film does nothing half as audacious as what *Signs* gives us. *Signs* may be the first movie to cut away to a flashback in the middle of its climactic sequence. Recall that once the Hesses emerge from the cellar it seems the crisis has passed. Merrill goes for the asthma medicine and Graham wheels out the television. Then we see, reflected in the screen, the creature holding Morgan hostage. As Graham tries to summon the strength and wisdom to make a final stand, we're transported back to his wife's death, which we've never seen before. Now, if this flashback didn't give us (and Graham) important information, it would just be an editorial indulgence to be scorned. But we are given important

information, and it makes sense that Graham would recall this tragedy now, for he's once again preparing to lose a loved one. Morgan seems doomed. The tension is stretched to the absolute max because we're denied a real-time resolution to the crisis. We're forced to wait. This sort of thing would normally be accomplished through cross-cutting. But there's no other story to follow. We can't be shown Merrill getting the medicine; there's nothing to that. Another possibility is slow-motion, but that would be hackneyed, clichéd, and insulting.

Therefore, this very bold editing choice was Shyamalan's master stroke. Because of Graham's recollection via the flashback, the meaning of "swing away" finally becomes clear. It's not like Merrill is the only one who can hit the alien hard enough. "Swing away" is more a reminder that there's a weapon just hanging there on the wall. It's a weapon that wouldn't be there if Merrill had not been a great home-run hitter in the minors. And it's a weapon that would not have been there had Colleen not died. The bat is Merrill's, and it's only there because he moved in, and he only moved in because Colleen died. So she had to die to save the rest of the family. And on top of that, if Merrill had not been the strike-out king, he'd be in the majors. Thus, he never would have moved in (and neither would the bat).

It all adds up, and the bat plus the water glasses plus the asthma (the three signs?) are not the contrivance naysayers would have us believe.

The Birds also boasts a climactic scene occurring after it appears the threat has passed. But this one really makes no sense. Melanie Daniels hears rustling upstairs. Everyone else is asleep and, felling guilty, she doesn't want to bother waking up Mitch. So she grabs a flashlight and goes up to check. There's no indication of what she thinks she can accomplish. If the birds are in the house, what is she going to do about it? She opens the door and is stunned to find a huge hole in the ceiling. By this point she has stupidly stepped into the room. And when the birds attack she manages to close the door behind her instead of falling back through the doorway and then shutting the door. Melanie is then 'raped' by the birds. It's harrowing and stomach-churning. BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN? Like most of the movie, it means nothing. Or, to be more generous, it's all symbols, overtones, and impressions that can generate meaning for an audience adept at proactive interpretation.

It's been said that the movie's about complacency, it's about isolation, it's about the necessity of being genuine. But what's the story? Where are the character arcs? Where's the conflict? There's some between the characters, but the enemy is the birds. Does the enemy win? If they want to kill Melanie, then no. If they want to drive Melanie away, then yes. There's a fine line between admirable ambiguity and lazy ambiguity. *The Birds* falls on the side of lazy ambiguity. This isn't nuanced storytelling that promotes wonder and imagination. This is a cop-out that generates resentment and frustration. A first-time viewer of *The Birds* will easily feel cheated.

The aliens in *Signs* are similarly ill-defined. We don't know what their goals are, either. However, by the end of *Signs* it is clear that (to borrow Hitchcock's famous term) the aliens were a McGuffin, a device, a mechanism to set a plot into motion that would, in this instance, see the lead character's reconciliation with God. So even though the enemy is ill-defined, the purpose was served. What's the purpose of the bird attacks? Let's not ask why they attack, but let's ask why *Hitchcock* has them attack. In the end, Mitch and Melanie are closer than they would have been, Melanie has become a big sister to Cathy, and Lydia has, perhaps, replaced

Melanie's long-lost mother. So maybe the main characters are doing better, in terms of having meaningful relationships. But they can't be happy seeing Bodega Bay destroyed and the Brenner house in shambles. Did Hitchcock create these characters just to brutalize them?

The Birds, for all its amazing technique and extraordinary practical and optical effects, is a hollow, noisy tale that doesn't enlighten or encourage; it's intriguing, but only fitfully entertaining. *Signs* is funny, thrilling, engrossing, unnerving, and uplifting. We can admire Hitchcock for all he overcame to produce *The Birds*, but that admiration cannot extend to the film, itself (which is a gross disappointment that never leaves the nest). Coming on the heels of the brilliant *Psycho*, it may be the biggest disappointment of Hitchcock's career.

Signs will stand as M. Night Shyamalan's greatest film. It doesn't rely on the trick endings of *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable* which discourage repeat viewing. And Shyamalan's been in a rut ever since *Signs* came out, so it's unlikely he'll ever be better. But with a solid oeuvre, topped by *Signs*, Shyamalan deserves a place in the top rank of contemporary filmmakers. And the many great films that Alfred Hitchcock's works have inspired just go to show that the legacy of the Master of Suspense transcends his own 53 films. The relevancy of his work will be apparent in all the films that copy him in the years to come.