

The Actress as Model Tippi Hedren in Hitchcock

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Hitchcock's female stars—particularly his blondes—are all about forehead. Usually coifed with styles swept back or up off the brow, the women's faces, not their smartly dressed bodies, are the focus of attention. Given little adornment in the way of jewellery and accessories, and made-up with a clean artfulness (in which sophisticated polish and naturalness blend on the countenance), the face emerges as pristine, the forehead a vista of unfussy feminine beauty. In *Rear Window*, Grace Kelly's visage is elevated to the cinematic equivalent of an epiphany when she leans into soft-focus close-up for a kiss from James Stewart. Eve Marie Saint's frosted white eyeshadow made her an ivory vision from cheekbone to hair-tip in *North By Northwest*. And Kim Novak never looked so sublime as in *Vertigo's* Madeleine moments, her somewhat porcine face dramatically attenuated by sleek styling. Most prominent, however, is the Tippi Hedren forehead, with a hairline so high as to be directly above the hinge of the jaw, her teased bangs curving up high before billowing back. Clearly, Hedren is meant to encourage a cerebral response, not animal lust; appreciation of her is best rarefied and spiritualised—her grand forehead should deflect any baser drive. Her hairdo reaches for the clouds, invites an airiness and clarity of manner. She is diminutive, with a very slender neck and a piquant tilt to her head; in *The Birds*, her chartreuse suit amongst the mellow colour scheme of grays, blues and homey yellows marks her as exotic, elegant but strange—the bird of paradise amongst the seagulls and swallows of Bodega Bay.

Yet she doesn't strut or preen. Hedren has a sensible carriage; she wears her well-tailored suits as if she had

been paid nicely to model them, and she's pragmatic about the expectations she must fulfill while working in this capacity. She makes her way through the world with an economy of movement. Her bearing suggests that she knows just what's appropriate, and can be relied upon not to give more or less. As the black-haired mystery woman in the opening of *Marnie*, Hedren clutches her vivid yellow purse to her side; the purse is puckered suggestively and bulging with lubricious promise, yet, as the camera pulls out, Hedren's backside isn't seen to comply with such possibilities. It barely wiggles: this lady is no-nonsense: she travels with measured and determined steps down the platform.

The Birds casts Hedren as a scandalous society girl. We see her go to great lengths to one-up a trivial prank—even if she is developing a torch for Mitch, the gesture *is* frivolous. Has she nothing better to do than to tease potential beaux with extravagant indirection? Certainly Mitch's mother makes pointed remarks—might Melanie be irresponsible, or worse, loose? Yet even before Melanie explains away her past scandals as products of media sensationalism, and as part of a disaffected lifestyle that now wearies her, we know that she simply can't be reckless or shockingly uninhibited. Not because Hedren exudes the fundamental integrity that makes Ingrid Bergman so obviously trustworthy in *Notorious*. It's just that Hedren really seems like a practical girl. Sure, she can be playful, even mischievous, but she's not arch, nor faux-demure, nor complicated enough to be leading an extravagant life. Grace Kelly could be: she's pure Park Avenue; she could jump naked in fountains and be very Brett Ashley about it, charming and breezy and suitably jaded—we know she

could run off and marry princes. Hedren feels like the working woman that she was: a single mother doing commercials on TV and anxious for financial stability until Hitchcock swept in with offers of stardom. The anxiety of her position we don't see, the eager desire to make good and keep everything together despite the impossible pressures of being Hitchcock's new Galatea. These anxieties *could* show. They could be culled for the challenge of playing hysterical women. But Hedren is no method actor; she's a professional. She understands the professional impetus for a woman to present herself in a seemly manner, without excess. With a grace that should appear neither studied, nor so natural as to cast into question the woman's sense of her place ^[1].

Marnie, too, knows how to affect this stance. Though without references she apparently manages to convince her employers that she's the very model of competency. Certainly, her looks have something to do with it. The policemen smirk at Mr. Strutt because within his righteous outrage is a suspiciously clear picture of the perpetrator. They probably think he's sweet on her, but his attraction has been reformulated now that such a sweet thing has transgressed her role as eye candy. Now, Strutt's anger hinges upon Marnie's habit of "pulling her skirt down over her knees as if they were a national treasure." Though Marnie has to do her fair share of manoeuvring simply as a woman in the work force—we think of Hedren's management of Hitchcock's outrageous expectations and untoward advances—she cannot be said to exploit her allure. She dresses conservatively. She behaves with modesty, civility and businesslike poise. She keeps to herself. If Mark Rutland (Sean Connery) wants to take her to horse races and kiss her in the stables, she'll comply, because it's a new development of her job and she might, in fact, find it pleasant enough. After all, she's got a bigger job that all this is working towards. She is consummately professional.

For a woman, such professionalism, *Marnie* tells us, is indivisible from mendacity. Marnie and the other Rutland "office girl" have a perfectly good rapport. They both understand the terms on which they relate, the chipper vague pleasantness they're meant to maintain, the indulgences that must be made toward their superiors. You can bet that whatever else her response, Marnie's co-worker wouldn't seethe with righteous indignation if the theft were to be discovered. Because, though Marnie's robberies may be an extreme response to the humiliations suffered in the work force, in a sense robbery is the logical outcome: an understandable lashing-out, a grab for agency. These

women are underappreciated, patronized and petted, made to feign agreeableness no matter what, trusted with trade secrets under the implicit belief that girls wouldn't mess with men's business, wouldn't dare or wouldn't know how. Both *Psycho* and *Marnie* suggest an inevitability of transgression within this paradigm—Janet Leigh's Marion Crane must put up with similar frustrations. Of course neither Marnie nor Marion turn criminal from work pressures alone, but these indignities trigger a broader frustration, a core disenfranchisement. Greed isn't the motive, here, but revenge. Avenging the circumscribed mobility, the meanness of possibility: running with the money is seizing access. The difference between Marion and Marnie is that the former wants this one opportunity to make her life work, the latter is a career criminal.

Lying as vocation (and without love as a motive) is what sets Marnie apart from other Hitchcock women—not surprisingly, her thieving and identity-shifting come to be explicitly linked with sexual pathology. Marnie takes her duplicity to an extreme such that it defines her life, but prevarication itself is nothing new to the Hitchcock heroine. Most of them make a point of it. As Melanie, Hedren is part of a long line of society women who have the luxury of lying. Grace Kelly is always dissimulating in her films with Hitchcock, and she does it with aplomb. For women of breeding, then, lying constitutes a form of play, of flirtation, of indulgence and self-preservation. Melanie lies (or withholds information) so that she needn't give too much away, to better control circumstances as they develop. Melanie lies to amuse herself. We may believe that Melanie will get her comeuppance for so liberally embracing deception, but her little stunts *do* work to charm the man she's making a play for. And they serve a facilitative function. Her flirtations are coy enough to preserve pride in the midst of a rather outlandish seduction ploy. Her ruses won't force either player to reveal themselves unduly. Melanie is not upfront with Annie Hayworth or Mitch's mother because she is aware of the tensions she arouses. Melanie's ease of evasion signals an adeptness—the ability to bridge social awkwardness.

Marnie's falsehoods are also serviceable. She lies to smooth the fraught relationship with her mother; she lies with an earnestness that reads as parodic to anyone who's been put through an interview like Marnie's at Rutland's (and Mark Rutland is plenty amused, himself); at the horse races she lies with an icy insistence in order to deflect a creepy character's suspicious advances. Though Marnie's untruths form a web of deceit

that, the film will tell us, traps Marnie in the center, it's undeniable that she smoothly executes handy fabrications that many of us would be proud to master. We want her to keep lying because she does it so well.

Hitchcock's films suggest that subterfuge is a necessary component of the feminine position. A woman simply has to be cagey to get by in the world. This condition is made literal when our identification and sympathies are with female criminals and spies (*Marnie*, *Psycho*, and *Notorious*, *North By Northwest*, respectively, to give just a few examples). We value their shrewdness, and we're made to see that it's absolutely necessary. In *Psycho*, Marion Crane frustrates us because she's a very bad liar. She can't properly give herself over to the needed acceptance of her deception. Furtive meetings with her lover have not prepared Marion for the rigours of criminality; she is already tiring of her double life before she goes on the lam. She attracts suspicion wherever she goes, she puts herself in danger, and she gets caught—but for the wrong reasons, by the wrong guy. Marion's fate—her punishment—is hysterically dire and in no way warranted, especially considering her resolve to confess and finally rid herself of this cumbersome duplicity. In a sense, Marion is doomed because she can neither find fulfillment in the straight and narrow, nor fully give herself over to her transgressions.

Judy's plight in *Vertigo* follows a similar logic. She is too emotional, too sincere, too desperate. If only she could realize that being loved for yourself doesn't work in Hitchcock's oeuvre: the men love you because of the mystifying allure you concoct. Madeleine is the exemplary case, but almost any Hitchcock heroine shows us that men fall for a construction, for the right combination of timing, locale, mystery and glamour. Mark loves Marnie not despite but *for* her web of lies—otherwise how could he embark upon his perverse project of rehabilitating her? Judy's tragedy is perhaps that her only hope is actually to become Madeleine, not for Scottie's sake, but in order to better control her impact on the world, and its on her. As Judy she will only be used, but she cannot reconcile her desires for authentic love with the posturing that would protect her. Judy succumbs to the makeover that Scottie is obsessively engineering, but she can't find any pleasure in it. She wants to maintain her un-Madeleine self; she longs for Scottie to love her *for who she really is*. Her fall off the tower is the ironic culmination of this fear of her own annihilation.

The capacity for shrewdness in Hitchcock films is assigned to a particular kind of woman. The kind of

woman that Hitchcock admires—not the demure homemaker, but the assured, self-contained, girl-on-the-go. This woman, like Hedren, is cool, sophisticated, collected: she belongs to the public sphere, not the private. Hitchcock's predilections, however, are hardly about celebrating an emancipated woman. His attachment to remote femininity is concomitant with a fear of sensuality, of intimacy. His capable public woman is the *mind*; the less steely, more emotionally or morally driven woman, the *body*. Hitchcock, one guesses, is like Scottie when he notices the Carlotta pendant around Judy's neck: of course, in terms of narrative, Scottie only now realizes her involvement in the scheme against him, but it's as though the necklace draws attention to Judy/Madeleine's bosom and reminds Scottie that she'll never just be his sublime construction—he's made aware of her body and he panics. Both Kim Novak and Janet Leigh are sensual types. Is this why their characters pay for their crimes in death? Because we're introduced to Leigh in her lingerie at an erotic "extended lunch"? Because, without Madeleine's severe suits, Novak's flesh strains voluptuously against her garments? These women are an affront because they too obviously bring their sensuality into the public arena. Their domesticity (i.e. sexuality, emotional needs) is predominant, instead of held in check by self-mastery. Hitchcock, it seems, appreciated mind games.

But what appealed to Hitchcock was also subject to his ambivalence. We know that Tippi Hedren was the one who Hitchcock really went crazy about, the one he courted and ruthlessly controlled, the one he menaced. Tellingly, he cast her as the most intractable female within his films, the one who most flagrantly turns the rules of the public (male) sphere to her advantage, who most needs to be brought into line. Hitchcock described *Marnie* as a film about a "cock-teaser." Now, Hitchcock was known to make cute, disingenuous comments, but this statement has an undeniable force. It's easy to imagine that the evident aggression here was targeted at Ms. Hedren herself. Curious to note, though, is how *Marnie* plays out, indeed, as the product of a frustrated sexuality, but not an eager one, for even though the narrative is all about sexual pathology vs. healthy, "normal" sexuality, the film seems to be on the side of frigidity. Female sexuality is at issue, but, curiously, it isn't played out with or upon Hedren's body. Her clothes are far from revealing—her evening gown a glacial tint and cut sharp above the collarbone, her nightgowns downright sturdy. Hedren's manner is crisp, and the treatment of her person in *Marnie* emphasizes this brittle quality, avoids sensualising her. Even when Mark, deciding finally to take what he believes is owed

to him, rips off her nightdress, we see only her shocked face, and her naked legs not much above the knee. After all this modesty, even her feet look truly vulnerable, exposed: it would be a gross violation to see more. Strangely, though Mark continues to force himself upon Marnie he does not proceed until he's covered her up again—significantly in *his* robe: his gesture of protection is really an act of claiming. He changes his tactics, now gently kissing and caressing her face and neck, all of which is shot in close-up, effectively cutting off Hedren's body. Thus, even for a sex scene (granted, a particularly loaded sex scene: for Mark it's tenderness, for Marnie it's rape), Hedren is maintained as a cerebral force, as a woman whose body doesn't even come into the picture, as it were. Her sexual problems are “in her head,” and it would seem— directorial intentions aside—that Hitchcock could only bear to represent them as such.

Without wanting to be so flippant as to ignore the stylistic/practical considerations of this sublimated portrayal, I *am* inclined to believe that such elisions of the female body *are* due to Hitchcock's sexual squeamishness^[2]. Nevertheless, the chaste treatment actually serves *Marnie*, and Hedren, well. It's humorous, and sad, to think that Hitchcock's conception of a cock-tease might be a woman who scrupulously avoids encouraging desire. But if he had been better able to frankly depict a sexualized body, *Marnie* might have been a demoralizing film; it would have been smut rather than a pristine investigation of twisted psychological motivation; it would have been a Brian DePalma movie. For Marnie patently is not a cock-tease. She has good reason to stay away from men (including the repressed knowledge of her mother's past abjection), and good reason to object to sexual congress with a man who happens to be her husband only because he's blackmailing her. What Mark wants from her is prostitution. His self-congratulatory efforts to help her always manifest in his domination of her. Thus the “happy” ending is especially hard to reconcile, since the proof of Marnie's recovery would be her finally giving in sexually to Mark. The systems of surveillance and administration that convert woman into commodity—and that Marnie, with her criminality, actively subverted—have caught up to her. Marriage, *Marnie* tells us, inscribes her fully inside these institutions.

Even allowing that Mark might be a sympathetic character, true-hearted in his own misguided way, his macho insistence that Marnie is a “wild animal” that he has the right to “tame” is disturbing, partially because if Hedren is any animal it's a bird, and a delicate one

at that. If, say, Ingrid Bergman had played Marnie (admittedly hard to imagine), her earthy strength would have given Mark something to fight against. One would recognize that she's holding back in wilful defiance; the film would have had sexual punch, and less social critique. Crucially, Hedren as Marnie really is frozen through, her dread of intimacy systemic. Much of why neither *Marnie* nor *The Birds* feels exploitive, though both narratives depend on an increasing violation of the heroine, is that Hedren, an untrained actor, doesn't transcend her commercial-model background. She is in no way inadequate: her adequacy is crystallized in the moment when Melanie—in heels and long dove-grey mink, lovebird cage in hand—steps with precision and assurance into a shaky little boat. Hedren does just what she needs to do, and she does it just right. She comports herself appropriately in any given moment, even if the moment is counterintuitive—much as Hitchcock can be counted on to skilfully execute any given scene. What this later-Hitchcock style (most pronounced in *Marnie*) eschews is a sense of organic connection between such arguably counterintuitive moments and scenes; there is no interstitial fluid, no emotional bleed over. Therefore, it is fitting that Hedren's performances do not invite us to contemplate her interiority. In both *The Birds* and *Marnie*, Hedren is attacked out of nowhere, without the natural build-up of tension. The assaults on her are unmotivated, traumatic episodes as knee-jerk responses triggered by random signifiers, the connections tenuous, the referents unknown or unknowable. Thus, the breakdowns of Melanie and Marnie aren't progressive, but instrumental. The emotional duress is stylized, never raw, never naked. This is spectacle as spectacle. Authenticity, here, doesn't get in the way.

Sometimes it can: Grace Kelly is utterly convincing as an appealingly manipulative aristocrat in *Dial M For Murder*, but the film falters when we're to believe that she has been locked away on Death Row—she carries with her such an essence of unassailable quality that her predicament, on an affective level, must be dismissed (even if the narrative still carries us along). Hedren doesn't create such complications. She acts as if she were modeling emotions; she's opaque. When she is meant to be vulnerable and troubled, Hedren doesn't give us modulated responses, but immediate regression. She simply projects “child”: her husky-adenoidal voice climbing to a shrill register, her placid face, already with the finely etched and evenly assembled features of a doll, turning wide-eyed and gap-mouthed. Or she becomes helpless, listless, shocked and still. Hedren's semblances of distress simultaneously evoke sympathy *and* deconstruct the whole cliché of a woman coming apart

under the guiding hand of the male genius. Kim Novak as Marnie would just be morbid—she'd be brooding and wounded, her corporeality tragically at odds with her frigid stance: the film would be lugubrious rather than clinical. But Hedren refuses to be utterly broken down that she may be built back up. She doesn't offer a heart that might ultimately be touched, a soul ultimately restored. She only offers a bright shiny coating, the better to reflect Hitchcock's projections, or ours.

*Jodi Ramer wrote about **Marnie** in Synoptique 6.*

NOTES

1 To witness an uncomfortable instance of this grace under pressure, see the footage of Tippi Hedren's screen test, included as an extra feature on Universal's collector's edition DVD of *The Birds*. Hedren, acquitting herself nicely though obviously strained, is made to endure—with a smile and determined poise, all the while modeling potential wardrobe—the paternalistic direction of Hitch (as an off-camera voice) and the self-satisfied, patronizing presence of actor Martin Balsam. Not to mention the occasional sleazy joke. These interactions, while undoubtedly not the worst examples of what actresses have been made to undergo, are undeniably creepy. Improvising on a scene, Hedren at one point complains, in response to Balsam's insistence that he should be able to determine her look since he pays for her upkeep: "You are trying to just *completely* run my life." It is difficult to resist reading this remark as a foreshadowing of Hedren's deflections, polite but necessarily growing in insistence, of Hitchcock's advances. With this in mind, the tone of the screen test, and what is to come (Hitch's increasingly inappropriate, controlling behaviour), is particularly chilling: Hedren has little choice but to contain her evident unease and act like a pro.

2 One might cite *Frenzy* to argue that Hitchcock could get dirty when the material demanded it. Certainly *Frenzy* is a complicated case (in terms of the debates it invites over violent sexual representation), but it does not feature any "Hitchcock women" proper. None of them are treated affectionately or as icons of feminine allure, and therefore they do not represent the same libidinal structure at work.