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Fellow Creatures in War with Humans: Status Quo Struggle in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*

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Abstract

This article examines the intricate matrix of human and non-human relations to explore the symbolic essence of war of birds with the humanity in Alfred Hitchcock's movie 'The Birds'. This movie contains a plot in which nature strikes back to humanity. The everyday life is terrorized by the flocks of birds that attack people forcing them to think of their hostile relationship with other creatures. The study concentrates on exploring the reasons of havoc caused by the mute creatures, specially the birds that behave strangely. It analyses the film from an ecocritical insight envisioned by the theorists Arne Naess, Vandana Shiva, and Lawrence Buell. As it is a thematic interpretation of the movie, it reviews the scholarly comments of different critics and sets to explore the avian status quo struggle departing from the criticisms. Its finding suggests that anthropocentric hubris is the reason behind the dystopic state of the planet and the animals and birds are ultimately struggling for their own position on earth. It challenges the human claim that they are the most powerful creatures of this universe to keep everything under their control.

Keywords: Anthropocentric, harmony, hubris, species

Introduction

This paper aims to observe closely the intricate chain of relationship among the human beings and the birds to explore the causes of birds' war with the humanity in Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 film *The Birds* which was produced and directed by Hitchcock himself. It bases its plot on Daphne de Maurier's novella of the same name that first got published in 1952. Hitchcock slightly modifies the narrative in

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which he presents the birds as ferocious, violent and savage creatures hungry for humans. The movie was starred by Rod Taylor as Mitch Brenner, Jessica Tandy as Lydia Brenner, Veronica Cartwright as Cathy Brenner, Tippi Hedren as Melanie Daniels, Suzanne Pleshette as Annie Hayworth, a schoolteacher.

The film was a great success and the US Library of Congress deemed it as a significant work of art from cultural, historical and aesthetical perspectives. The main storyline of the film describes a troubled state of the seagulls and several other species of birds that fly here and there and attack human beings wherever they find them. The birds look angry and ferocious. They are hungry for humans and attempt to kill them.

The birds have often been used in the films to communicate varieties of themes. Here, in the movie, they have been used to punish the human beings as they are taking nature for granted (Paglia, 1998, p.87). The birds pounce upon anyone who comes out of their houses. The major character Melanie Daniels is first attacked by the seagulls at Bodega Bay, California, as she was returning from Mitch Brenner's house leaving a pair of lovebirds to Mitch's sister Cathy Brenner as a gift for her eleventh happy birthday. Then the birds assault school children, the teachers and anyone they find outside. The real cause of the violent behavior of the birds is kept unexplained in both the original story by Maurier and Hitchcock's adaptation. This makes the movie a suspense thriller. However, it certainly is a metaphor that hints that the birds are symbols of unbridled power of nature and they resent as the human beings threaten their survival. There is a status quo battle as the human beings are killing and eating different species of birds. This forces them to repeatedly swoop down violently to the town and village residences. Bellanca (2011) asserts:

The Birds' taps into a primal anxiety about animals that are equipped by nature with built-in tools- sharp beaks and tearing claws- against which individual humans have little defense, while it also expresses a very modern anxiety about destruction rained from the sky with powerful man-made weaponry. (p.27)

The birds are powerful because they are gifted with automatic weaponry especially their beaks and claws which are as powerful as the human- made weapons. Hitchcock's film depicts that the civilians are helpless in front of the threat posed by these birds and it also unfolds a fact that our social mechanisms are not capable enough to protect us from such vulnerability. Looking from an environmentalist perspective, the birds in the film represent the unconstrained power of nature and they force human beings to accept the reality that nature's unrestrained power remains somewhere very far beyond human imagination. Human beings therefore should not undervalue the power inherent in birds and animals that are not often violent unless a serious threat looms

over them. So, humans need to follow the spirit of Deep Ecology which stresses on realizing the complex network of relations that bind all life-forms, objects and the phenomena.

Literature Review

The Birds has got quite a lot of literary and critical attention. Paglia (1998) explains it as an ode to many facets of female sexuality and, by extension, nature itself (p.88). She notes that women play pivotal roles in it. Mitch is defined by his relationship with his mother, sister, and an ex-lover- a careful balance which is disrupted by his attraction to the beautiful Melanie. Paglia finds that the central issue of the movie moves round the female characters. Together she also makes a psychological reading of the movie. She remarks that *The Birds* unfolds a return of the repressed; a release of the primitive forces of sex and appetite that have been subdued but never fully tamed (p.8). She finds that the incestuous and the sexual tensions among the principal characters do not erupt in actual conflict between them but in the vicious and unprovoked attack of the birds. The birds, in other words, are the “return of the repressed” or in Lacanian terms ‘irruption’ of the Real into the Symbolic order (Humbert, 2010, p.89). The anthropocentric acts (‘symbols’ or the ‘signifiers’) of human beings turn into ‘real’ when the birds begin to attack humans.

Zizek (2006) also interprets the movie from a psychological lens. He asserts *The Birds* is an outbreak of “raw incestuous energy”(n.p.). He interprets the movie as a conflict or fear of relationship between son and mother who is afraid of her son’s potential beloved. Walter Raubicheck and Srebnic (2011) find that the movie shows the entrapment of civilians (p.140). They describe a miserable fate that the people are forced to meet.

Sarris (1998) makes typical remarks about the movie:

The theme of the film, after all, is complacency, as the director has stated on numerous occasions. When we first meet each of the major characters, their infinite capacity of the self-absorption is emphasized. Tippi Hedren’s bored socialite is addicted to elaborately time-consuming practical jokes. Rod Taylor’s self-righteous lawyer flaunts his arrogant sensuality, Suzanne Pleshette, his ex-fiancée, wallows in self- pity, and Jessica Tandy, his possessive mother, cringes from her fear of loneliness. With such complex, unsympathetic characters to contend with, the audience begins to identify with the point of view of birds, actually the inhuman point of view. (p.297)

Sarris interprets the movie from a sociological perspective. He notices individual typicality in each character and their personal concerns.

Crowther (1963) describes *The Birds* as a horror film (p. 53). He could not exactly confirm whether the birds in the movie were allegorical. He stresses on the need of evaluating the movie as a whole on the basis of its content. Cohen (1996) argues that the birds' attack on human beings dramatizes the post-traumatic nightmare reminiscent of German air-raids and envisions the nuclear threat newly pervading the whole world (p.12). He regards that as *The Birds* was produced during the Cold War period, the movie definitely contains the war sensibility in spite of the fact that it lacks any specific mention of the global tension between the nations. The birds' attack from an unexpected direction from the above reflects the Cold War threat and the entire doom of the townspeople which can be brought about by the nuclear warfare.

These critical opinions expressed above cover a range of concerns. However, they do not speak anything about the events from an environmental perspective. This article analyzes the events concentrating on the extreme behavior of humanity over the fellow creatures. It explores why the birds behave strangely over the humans forcing them to realize that all creatures have their own importance and no one of them has the right to exploit others taking nature for granted.

Methods and Procedures

This study is a qualitative study of the film. Different from quantitative study that focuses on numbers and facts for deriving conclusions, it uses the film as a source of primary concept rather than a numerical data. It makes a thematic analysis on the basis of characters' roles and symbols used in the film.

Results and Discussion

The Birds is set in a small northern coastal area of California. In spite its intricate plot, it sounds like a love story of Mitch Brenner and Melanie Denials who meet at a pet shop. Mitch has gone to the shop to buy lovebirds for his little Cathy's eleventh birthday. Their first encounter develops into a love relation. Melanie surprises Mitch by buying lovebirds for Cathy. But on her way back home across the bay on a boat, she is attacked by a seagull on her head. Mitch runs to help Melanie whose head was bleeding out of the bird's attack. Next day, he invites her to the birthday party of his sister, Cathy. But at dinner, it is found out that the Brenner's chickens do not eat. They are sick. The very night a seagull crashes into the door of Annie's house where Melanie was staying. The next day, children who had come to Cathy's birthday party are also attacked by the birds. The same night, a number of sparrows come down the chimney. They frighten Melanie and the Brenner family. The police officer comes to find out the cause of the attack but he cannot find it out. The things are normal next morning but Lydia finds that the chickens in her farm are

sick. Dan Fawcett's chickens also have the same problem like Lydia's. As she enters the house, she finds that Dan is dead in his bedroom with the windows broken, and there are also other dead birds scattered here and there. Surprisingly his eyes are pecked out. Later, Annie is also found dead in the same way.

As Melanie waits for Cathy to end her classes, a group of crows are there behind her. When the school children run home, they are attacked by the crows. Many of Cathy's friends fall on the ground and one of them breaks her eye glass. The birds ultimately force Mitch to leave his home for San Francisco. Even at the time he departs for San Francisco with his family, numbers of birds are watching him go.

The movie has variously been interpreted by different scholars and critics. However, this article ponders on why animals and birds behave so aggressively towards human being. It claims that the reason behind the birds' resentment against humanity is due to the marginalization of other creatures and a selfish anthropocentric tendency. As humans keep them in the center, the nature hits back to them time and again.

Causes behind Anthropocentric Psychology

Environmental theories express a serious problem over the anthropocentric tendency. Callicott (1984) in an article defines the anthropocentrism as a theory that regards human beings intrinsically valuable and all other things, as being instrumentally valuable only to the extent that they are means or instruments which may serve human beings (p. 299). *The Birds* challenges this notion of anthropocentrism. It advocates for biocentrism that regards the intrinsic worth of all fellow beings. Environmental discourse concerns with the sound relationship between organisms and the environment. It raises questions against the human interference in biotic communities. So many institutions are devoted to study about the relationship between organisms. Living Planet Report (2020) published by World Wide Fund (WWF) reveals:

In the last 50 years our world has been transformed by an explosion in global trade, consumption and human population growth, as well as an enormous move towards urbanization. Until the 1970s, humanity's ecological footprint was smaller than the earth's rate of regeneration. To feed and fuel our 21st century lifestyles, we are overusing the earth's biocapacity by at least 56%". (p. 6)

This report also reveals that a million species of animals, plants and insects are threatened over the coming decades to centuries (p.12). Anthropocentric activities are the cause behind the threat of entire ecosystem. The decline and even extinction of several species of fishes, birds and mammals are several examples of this threat.

Because human beings regard other animals and birds as the means for their benefit, they have an arrogant behavior towards them from the beginning of civilization. Beckmann et al. (1997) claim that the essential feature of the anthropocentric dimension of the cosmological domain is the belief that humans are separate from and ethically superior to the rest of nature. As a result, humans consider themselves to be rightfully, the masters of nature subduing it for their own instrumental purposes. Its reflection can be seen in the pet shop in *The Birds* also. There are hundreds of subdued birds caged for selling for the instrumental pleasure of the keeper. It is an example of anthropocentrism.

The anthropocentrism has further extended to patenting rights also. Shiva (2001) opposes the patenting act over the plants and animals. She remarks that this act has plundered the living rights of animals and plant species. She claims that patents on life and the positioning of man as a creator of other beings have tremendous economic and ecological meanings, apart from moral problems (p.42). She wonders over the fact that currently, hundreds of genetically engineered animals, including fish, cows, mice and pigs are figuratively standing in line to be patented by a variety of researchers and corporations (p.41). Shiva feels that the genetic engineering of animals, birds and other species on modern laboratories are anthropocentric activities which put other creatures in a marginal hierarchy. The caged birds in the movie look like a patent right of the aviary where the owners have every right to keep them the way they like.

There are many elements of anthropocentrism in Hitchcock's movie *The Birds*. In contrast to the spirit of deep ecology envisioned by Arne Naess (1990) who regards that human life is just one element among millions of lives on earth, the birds are caged and they are used as gifts for the human events. The pet shop is also a place where numbers of animals and birds are imprisoned for the fun of human beings. Innocent mute creatures are captured from their shelters and sold for people's benefit. This shows that neither Mitch nor Melanie gives a thought for the rights of those caged creatures. Even after Melanie is attacked by a seagull, they do not think if the birds are behaving so strangely due to hunger. People nowadays feed animals and birds but Melanie and Mitch do not feel to do so. Nor they contemplate about any other possible cures about how the birds can be silenced. Their only concern is for themselves; how they can be safe from the birds' attack.

***The Birds*: Gothic Horror as Rhetoric**

When the film opens, a group of crows are flying. It adds suspense from the beginning. The birds call their friends to join them. Melanie sees a flock of seagulls swarming above the town. The cawing of the crows foreshadows something ominous

taking place. Melanie's fear is confirmed when the birds start circling around. The exposition of birds as ferocious creatures is frequently repeated in the film. Alfred Hitchcock sets the ground to give the Gothic impression from the opening. Bishop (2011) states that by reinventing the melodramatic romance, Hitchcock has created supernatural horror film, a movie that crosses the boundary into science fiction and leaves viewers with an uncanny and unresolved conclusion (p.135). But the ominous scene of the film, in the beginning, sets grounds to remind humanity of the possible apocalypse that the present civilization is heading to. Hogle (2022) describes that the Gothic literature stems from the way it helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, sources of anxiety from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural (p.4). Hitchcock's concern here is for human beings' cruel behavior towards other species. He adopts Gothic pattern to punish humans so as to make them realize their cruelty. Allen (2013), talking about the electronic sound track of "The Birds" comments that Hitchcock has intensified the horror by making children play the electronic sound that sounds like the annoyed birds' sound. He says that all these environmental sounds are linked to Melanie's attack. She is trapped like a bird in a cage. The car she entered in becomes a chamber of horror. So, the movie uses Gothic horror rhetorically. Hitchcock uses Gothic horror to make human beings realize that their situation would be like Melanie's if they disregarded the fellow creatures.

The Birds: An Apocalyptic Rhetoric

Environmental apocalypse has long been used as rhetoric in literature. Environmental critics Buell (1995) and Garrard (2012) claim that apocalyptic rhetoric such as "Silent Spring" seems to be a "powerful master metaphor" influencing government policy, environmental activism, and, shaping all manner of popular narratives about impending environmental crisis (Buell, p. 285; Garrard, p. 101-02). Their point is that the literary rhetorics put a pressure to the concerned sectors to think over the environmental degradation and take necessary precautions. Making a comparative study of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Hitchcock's *The Birds*, Soles (2014) remarks that Carson and Hitchcock both take bird deaths as a symptom of ecological apocalypse. Carson's title, "Silent Spring", evokes the disturbing lack of bird song in areas devastated by DDT spraying (p.528). Carson (1962) writes that spraying DDT for Dutch elm disease took place on Michigan State University campus in 1954. By the following year, "the sprayed area had become a lethal trap in which each wave of migrating robins would be eliminated (p.106). Both Carson and Soles envision a possible apocalypse of the environment due to the use of DDT to destroy the birds.

There are reflections of some true events in *The Birds*. Coombs (2008) writes that the film is based more acutely on dramatic real-life incidents. On 18 August 1961, residents in the town of Capitola, California awoke to notice sooty shearwaters slamming into their rooftops, and their streets were covered with dead birds (n.p.). These birds, according to UC Santa Cruz Ocean scientist Raphael Kudela, were perhaps suffering from domoic acid poisoning caused by septic leaks from local sewage treatment plants. As Kudela claims in 2008, “animals poisoned by domoic acid have erratic behavior (qtd. in Coombs). Quoting an ornithologist Mrs. Bundi, Carter Soles describes that birds do not possess the brain power to intrigue coordinated attacks against humans. These birds, as she claims, bring beauty to the world. She opines that it is humanity that makes life difficult upon this planet (p.529). Similarly, Murphy (2013) asserts that *The Birds* is an apocalyptic revolt of nature (p.184). As the birds do not care about their own predicament while attacking the humans, the apocalyptic steps are realized everywhere. Abrash (2011) explains that once the attacks start, the humans are not safe in any place, any time and finally the assailants, in their single-minded determination, to carry out the planned massacre, are utterly indifferent to their own fate (p.169). The seagulls, crows, sparrows, and the farmhouse chicken are found dead here and there, a complete chaos pervades the environment. Humbert (2010) finds that Hitchcock writes in a cluster of themes. *The Birds* is the variation of the work of 1950s rather than a complete new point of departure. It is an apocalyptic crystallization of the themes that had always preoccupied Hitchcock (p.88). The critics seem to agree that Hitchcock’s *The Birds* envisions a complete breakdown of the civilization. They also stand in agreement to each other that anthropocentric attitude is the cause of this impending apocalypse.

Causes behind Birds’ Strange Behaviour

In Hitchcock’s movie, the birds behave unpredictably. There are some critics who see no reasons behind the birds’ attack over the humans. Wood (2002) argues that *The Birds* obtains its power from absolute meaninglessness and its unpredictability of the attack (p.162). It is true that the movie does not clearly depict any cause and effect scene that the birds are terrorized by human behavior. However, the messages are not always straightforward. It cannot be denied that there is human beings’ fault at the extinction of birds and many other environmental catastrophes. Towards the start in the movie Melanie purchases a pair of lovebirds for Cathy’s birthday gift to surprise Mitch. She leaves these birds in a cage outside someone’s home. The birds almost die of suffocation there. It was a very cruel behavior on the part of Melanie. The seagulls perhaps noticed the suffering of those lovebirds kept outside in a cage. Out of compassion, they probably thought to fight back for the freedom of those caged birds. Therefore, the birds showed strange behavior towards humans.

Bogdanovich (1997) remarks that *The Birds* is about the fact that nature can turn on people. For him, the birds' attacks were targeted against human follies (p. 535). Merrit Abrash writes that Hitchcock chose a scenario as unlikely as attacks by birds because he had read of individual aggression and unpredictable mass migration of birds. So, the choice of birds as attackers proves the state of his consciousness (p. 169). After the release of the film, Hitchcock was asked what he really wanted to hind by the birds' attack. Truffaut (1967) found that Hitchcock gave no profound reason for the attack in the film (p. 216). But Hunter (1997) describes the scene in which many different kinds of birds attack Melanie in the attic. Hunter replied to Hitchcock that it demonstrated a unified attempt to annihilate the human race (p.34). According to Hunter Mitch and Melanie speak lightheartedly at first. They try to joke about the attack but the humor falls flat and there is chill of horror in Melanie's words. She says the finches came down the chimney in a fury as if they wanted everyone in the house dead (p.47-48). From Hunter's description, it can be said that the birds attacked the humans to avenge for their atrocities. Gerard (1979) remarks that the 'Sacred' of all those forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man's effort to master them (p. 31). As the birds dominate the humans as a force of contagion that is linked to man's attempt to control nature. So, the birds stand as sacred symbols of the ultimate and unbridled power to punish wrongdoers. They resemble an anarchic crowd that penalizes the evil. They establish a truth that the sacred, as Gerard claims, is present everywhere in an uncontrolled and violent form to establish peace, harmony, and order.

Conclusion

Alfred Hitchcock's birds symbolize so many things together. They represent terror in the bizarre world dominated by humans. The birds also stand for the unconstrained power of nature. Though they are peace lovers, they cannot tolerate the extreme cruelty over the nature. They do not care for their own fate when the human interruption exceeds the level of tolerance. Through their unpredictable attacks and punishment to the humans, they prove that human beings are not the most powerful species of this universe. They are rather miserable in front of avian power that can make them silent in a while. The birds influence Lydia transform herself from an authoritative mother to a caring one. Similarly, Melanie and Mitch are forced to accept their powerlessness in front of birds. They think of moving to some peaceful place for their safety. By giving the movie a typical end without ending, Hitchcock intends to make everyone reflect that the possibility of an unpredictable peril is always there if human hubris is not checked in time. Thus, the film contains a strong flavor of biocentrism. It advocates that the atrocity of human beings must stop for the healthy and harmonious living. It also opens ground for the further study of this movie from film and technocratic theories.

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