

A Semiotic Analysis of Hitchcock's *The Birds*

The Birds by Alfred Hitchcock is a thriller that derives its suspense from the violence which stands on the borderline with divine retribution. The birds of the film are the symbol of the said violence and primary actors that contribute to the semiotic revelations of the film. The sounds of birds in the film act as the non-diegetic film music and, perhaps, are a separate symbol preceding the violence. Moreover, the film gives direct hints at the nature of the birds attack in a form of the divine punishment. However, no alleged confirmations in the film are present, therefore it should be seen as the studying prompt of the semiotic relationships between the two.

The Defining Symbols of Violence and Sounds

The film starts with the screeching of the birds while showing the titles and proceeds with the scene of Melanie Daniels entering a pet shop where she meets Mitch Brenner. The scene is slightly disturbing because instead of music traditionally used to introduce the main characters the audience is greeted by the sound of chirping. This sound is practically screeching of birds that remind of the film's genre as a thriller. At the same time, camera angles, which are used to demonstrate the action of the birds' outrage, mirror the notion of divine retribution. This coupled with the shots of the birds' grotesque attacks contribute to the analysis of mimetic theory.

The Screeching Birds

In an essence, the film has the characteristics of classic movies of the '60s akin to Blake Edwards' *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) because of the flirtatious and sly character of the main heroine. It also resembles Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* (1992) with its similarly slow approach to the buildup of the tension. However, the distinct feature of *The Birds* is the lack of film music in its traditional sense, instead most of the time the sounds of birds' screeching and flapping of the wings are the only soundtrack an audience is given (Lee, 2019.)

They play a crucial role in the elicitation of the negative emotions from the audience. The sounds were synthetically generated and stylized by altering the tone and pitch to better fit the atmosphere and action on the screen (Lee, 2019.) Therefore, they have just enough resemblance with the original to be recognizable and become the index of upcoming danger while the birds transformed into the symbol of violence itself.

Violence as the Means of Finding a Scapegoat

Violence in its traditional sense which is shown in the movie acts as the demonstration for the psychoanalytic and mimetic theories. Mimetic desire is the theory that describes the way society is organized as the imitation of aims and needs, and their clash which results in the search for the scapegoat when one's needs are compromised (Greven, 2018.) This theory partially contributes to answering the main question of the film—the reason behind the birds' attacks. From the point of view of psychoanalysis, the attack represents the “outbreak of repressed incestuous desire or maternal superego” caused by the emergence of Melanie in Bodega Bay, which disturbs the relationship of Mitch and his mother (Dunn, 2017, p. 231.) In contrast, there is an argument that akin to the Oedipus myth, Melanie acts as part of and the stranger for the Bodega Bay community as a figure from a high social position (Dunn, 2017.) She acts as the scapegoat to vent out the fear and anger of the citizens who inevitably blame her for the anomaly.

The scene of aggressive actions on Melanie in the phone booth close to the café can be considered a preface for this. Consequently, the birds could act as the plague in the Oedipus myth—an allegory for the spread of chaos and frenzy of mimetic contagion which enacts the need for scapegoating (Dunn, 2017.) Mimetic rivalry can also be seen between Melanie and Annie, an ex-girlfriend of Mitch, who is being the object of desire for the two women. Essentially, the two characters are the doubles of each other, and through certain scenes, their mutual rivalry is evident (Dunn, 2017.) For example, when Annie talks to

Melanie about her past relationship with Mitch or her San Francisco origin, she tries to establish the boundaries between them. She demonstrates a dominant position as a very close friend. Therefore, in a way, the whole movie can be seen as a tribute and a manifestation of the mimetic theory.

The Role of Women

There is a certain resemblance between the women and the birds in the film. The birds might be an outbreak of desires which react to the disturbance in the life of women connected to Mitch. Hitchcock famously had a misogynistic attitude (Greven, 2018), hence the birds' connection to the women may not be simple a coincidence. Arguably, the erratic nature of attacks is the metaphor for the social image of women for Hitchcock (Paglia 2020.) Various scenes point out that after the birds attack, long periods of calm follow. It was shown in the final scene when Mitch tries to get into the car and drives away with his family and Melanie, the birds surround them but do not attack, acting practically docile (Hitchcock, 1963). Hence, leading to the hypothesis that Hitchcock in his film tried to draw the parallel between the birds and women and comparing them to docile animals that may become birds of prey at any time.

The Shots of Godhood

The symbolic relationship between the birds' attack and the divine punishment is also present in the film. In the scene in the café, a certain drunkard at the bar suspects that the bird frenzy is the divine retribution. He recites the suggestive lines from the 6th chapter of the book of Isaiah (Hitchcock, 1963.) There is no confirmation for the said hypothesis but no denial as well. Certain scenes, such as later Melanie's sheltering inside of the phone booth when the camera angle takes an extreme high shot to depict the scene, does contribute to the tangibility of this idea (Ryan & Lenos, 2020.) Moreover, certain scenes such as the one where the audience observes the approaching seagulls, from the sky, can suggest the same

idea. Nevertheless, the final scene in which it is revealed that Bodega Bay is an epicenter of the birds' outrage disregards the idea of doomsday or divine retribution as the way to punish humanity.

Conclusion

In summary, the symbols in the film are as mysterious and alluring as the suspense and the thrill from watching the film. It is possible to denote the symbolic relationship between the mimetic theory and the actions of the birds, the synthetic bird sounds and the sign of danger and fear, the birds and violence. However, the relationship between the birds and women or divine intervention is not as defined as the initial sets. Mainly, they can be addressed to the plausible speculation without any direct hints at their nature. The film demonstrated elaborate work on development of its symbolic manifestations which contributes to its value as the classical film of Alfred Hitchcock.

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