

Protokoll 03

Nicola Behrmann

Speak to It

Die Vögel fliegen still / durch uns hindurch.

Rainer Maria Rilke

I wrote: Why do the birds in Hitchcock's *The Birds* attack? This is one of the essay prompters that I ask students in my course "Tales of Horror". We don't know why the birds attack, and, for the most part, are busy with the hit-and-response-scheme that unfolds in the film. We take the rift between machinic animals and sentient humans for granted; we accept the tensions between humans who, trapped in their private conundrums, demand to be read and understood, and those lifeless birds with techno voices who energize a dead space. However, if we consider that birds are messengers from the dead and deeply attached to the symbolic, we begin to look for some sort of hermeneutic closure in the film. We then consider the question why Hitchcock's birds attack as a valid, and, given the current state of our ecosystem, even pressing one.

ChatGTP's answer emerged under the category "Unexplained Bird Attacks":

The reason for the birds' behavior is never fully explained in the movie, and this ambiguity is one of the reasons why the film has remained a classic of the horror genre.

What a lame answer that was, I thought: "never fully explained" and "this is one of the reasons". *The Birds*, I tell my students, is not interested in a particular explanation of the birds' attack. Rather, Hitchcock assesses what motors our hermeneutic engines in general. Since answerability is key both in academia and in the world of A.I., almost any kind of on-the-one-hand-on-the-other-hand-response is ultimately correct:

In the movie, some characters speculate that the birds' aggression may be due to a sudden shift in their behavior or migration patterns. Others suggest that the birds may be reacting to environmental changes or human activity.

Here, ChatGTP points to the scene in the diner, where a dead-panned hobby ornithologist denies any biological cause while mocking the superstitious explanations of other guests. When the protagonists' hapless search for a reason of the attack is blasted by the explosion at the gas station, even someone with zero sense of Hitchcockian humor understands that no clear explanation will be made available. All that is left for the algorithm is to render undecidability into a conclusive answer:

However, there is never a clear explanation given for the bird's behavior. The bird attacks begin before Melanie arrives in the town, and it is clear that the attacks are not related to her or her relationship with Mitch.

That's wrong actually, the machine is wrong, I say to myself with a little relief. The birds attack for the first time when Melanie, wearing a fur coat, is in the boat and her hide and seek game with the guy, Mitch, is already in full swing. Yet how do I explain that the apparent disconnect between the flirtatious Mitch-and-Melanie is what connects them to the birds who scratch the surface of the human skin? And how will the machine (my prosthetic student) respond to or incorporate that claim once I post it online?

Speaking of Melanie: That deeply troubled female character is, just like ChatGTP, all about stimulus, reaction, and answerability. Almost mechanically does Melanie respond to each of Mitch's provocations and allows her surface being scratched over and over. And it is almost tragic to see how she, who willfully uses love birds and parrots for her practical jokes, is unable to distinguish between metaphor and machine. Indeed, however practical her jokes turn out, they quickly reveal everything she tries to *redress*.

I have another question:

What does the flirt between Melanie and Mitch in Hitchcock's *The Birds* have to do with the birds' attack?

The answer takes longer this time, and the algorithm appears to be willing to bend over backwards:

[S]ome viewers and critics have suggested that the flirtation between Melanie and Mitch might symbolize a human desire for connection and companionship in the face of a terrifying and inexplicable threat, represented by the bird attacks. The idea is that the bird attacks disrupt the social order and force people to come together in unexpected ways.

In this interpretation, Melanie's arrival in the town could represent a disruption of the existing social order, and her flirtation with Mitch could represent a new possibility for human connection and relationships. The bird attacks, in turn, could represent a threat to this new possibility, and a reminder of the fragility and unpredictability of human relationships.

We are now with the “social order” of Bodega Bay which the algorithm lays out for us like a blanket in a park. The town community consists of the teacher, Annie, a slow lover capable of irony but too stuck with family dependencies. Then there is the widowed wife of a farmer and her daughter, a joint figure that negotiates a whole set of emotions. And there is her son, Mitch, a paternal gatekeeper who is unable to do more than sealing his windows with wood panels. There are bystanders like the shopkeeper, a slow learner who never reaches full understanding of the situation, or the fishermen who are too slow to help the injured socialite; there is the staff of the diner and their guests; and there is a group of women who, like the ghostly Trojan wives, gathers in fear and mourning in a hallway that leads to the diner kitchen where chicken are being killed.

So, what in this social order does Melanie disrupt, exactly? How does her flirtation with Mitch represent *a new possibility for human connection and relationship*? The lack of humor in the algorithmic answer is as striking as ChatGTP’s recourse to emotions when it reminds us of the fragility and unpredictability of human relationships. With such a pathos formula the machinic interpretation has almost exhausted itself. Almost.

However, it is important to note that this is a symbolic interpretation and not a direct explanation of the bird attacks. The true cause of the bird attacks remains mysterious and unexplained in the movie.

We are back where we started our hermeneutic circle. Just like Melanie, who is symbolically stuck in *melan-cho-lie* and does not know whether she can distinguish between a human or a machine, we are left with the thought whether the one who attacks and the one who is being attacked in A.I. might find oneself caught in a similar catatonic state.

31.5.2023