

Letras & Ciências

As Duas Culturas

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Livro de Homenagem



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Not all gothic fictions of the past are able to adapt themselves to the cultural fears of the present recreating the same feelings of unrest and insecurity that stimulated readers' emotions many years ago. In spite of the trivialization of terrifying and violent images in contemporary film and fiction, the visual and psychological impact of Daphne du Maurier's suicide birds on readers' imagination is still very strong. Its shocking waves continue to reverberate through time and space like the blood red colours of the skyline in Edvard Munch's *Scream*. In an age full of natural disasters and aerial terrorist attacks, we should never ignore the consciousness – raising portrait of terror presented by du Maurier in "Birds", for its references to the bombing raids in England during the World War II and its analogy to the atmosphere of fear in the Cold War years.

The prophetic vision of this story will always be able to translate the existential crisis of contemporary times so well as Picasso's *Guernica*, Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, Francis Bacon's paintings or Kafka's tales. The secret for this so big success, is not merely due to a screen version by Alfred Hitchcock, but because the original story was already like a piece of modern art that defies interpretation. Both film and fiction never explain why the birds attack the humans. Viewers and readers can only be afraid of the unknown and shocked by what overpowers rational calculation and causality. "The End" doesn't appear on the screen and du Maurier didn't give a conclusive end to her story. Both writer and film director leave a message to their public: the terror caused by the birds' revenge will never end, because we never knew how it began. There is no end for fear in a time of terror and this is perhaps the shocking reality no one will want to see. Like the famous shot of a razor cutting the eyeball at the start of *Un Chien Andalou* by Buñuel, du Maurier's story produces a similar shock incision. It seems 'there was something ugly in the sight', but the birds remind us that we shall lose our eyes if we can't perceive the meanings of such ugliness. The grotesque images associated with this story justify direct associations with several works of visual arts, whose power of shock could help us to recuperate a vision so limited by false images.

The expression 'suicide birds' used by du Maurier refers to a kind of animals, whose irrational uncontrollable behaviours seem to imitate man in his most desperate moments, when he loses his will to live and tries to find relief or revenge in death.

"There were dead birds everywhere. Under the windows, against the walls. These were the suicides, the divers, the ones with broken necks." (Du Maurier, 2004: 27) The similarity between man and animal, and their association in tragic and horrific scenes, translate the fusion of human and nonhuman elements, so typical of the grotesque style: "And the silly, senseless thud of suicide birds, the death-and-glory boys, who flew into the bedroom smashing their heads against the walls" (31). Man's emotions of hate and despair seem to be transferred to birds that seem to recuperate the truth about humanity in their destructive actions against themselves and all the human beings who have caged, persecuted and abused them, showing their own egoism and rapaciousness. Being an adequate correlative to man's savagery, these birds' behaviour also represent man's own fear and terror inspired by the insecurity of an absurd world whose unpredictable events he can never control or understand completely.

An emotional correlate to irrational human impulses, the unpredictable birds' attacks can symbolize the occasions the inhuman invades a familiar and quiet world which quickly becomes strange or uncanny, full of totally unexplainable phenomena. This explains the farmer's surprise, when he noticed the birds weren't scared of his noisy plough and it also justifies the difficulty of perceiving the origin of these birds' reactions, whose causes were misunderstood and rationally explained by atmospheric phenomena such as the Arctic stream, or by political conspiracy theories, such as the possibility of the Russians have poisoned the birds, which ironically refers to the Cold War. But in spite of the general lack of perception of the inhabitants of a rural village in Cornwall, du Maurier transferred her power of vision to the main character, when he observed that "Fright made them (the birds) do that." This fascination by fear "the only emotion many people feel" – according to Rob, the psychiatrist, in Hitchcock's film version – is the reason why the birds' suicide impulses seem to parallel man's destructive tendencies, because both partake the same universal emotion that show they are essentially very similar beings: "And like people who, apprehensive of death before their time, drive themselves to work or folly, the birds do likewise" (2).

Du Maurier's perception of this similarity is the reason why the expressive force of the images she created, in this story, have acquired such a strong and prophetic power about our time, as Hitchcock's film also have gained about the 60s, because according to Camille Paglia in *The Birds*, "Hitchcock seems to have anticipated that decade's thrill killings and political assassinations, with their fatal head wounds, as well as the senseless looting and riots. And the Dionysian excesses of psychadelia too" (1998: 64). The amazing degree of premonition du Maurier had when she invented the expression "suicide birds", comes from her sensitiveness to a timeless and universal emotion which surpasses space and time and is common to all living

beings. Suicide instincts motivated by many past memories stored in the brain were going to illustrate the psychopathology of war created not only during the World War II, but more specially nowadays through the terrorist suicide attacks. Usually described as a tense tale of nature turning on humanity, "The Birds" can now be read as a very expressive apocalyptic allegory of the atmosphere of fear generated in America and Europe after September 11. In this sense, it's more a tale of humanity turning on itself, expressing mankind's self-destructive instincts. This massive avian assault, that no one can explain and from which no one may come out alive seems to be so unaccountable as the unexpected use of airplanes to destroy buildings and to kill people, through suicide practices. It's worth noticing that in du Maurier's story, birds are also able to provoke aircraft crashes.

In 1952, the author seemed to be possessed of a very powerful vision of fear, that disturbed the quiet life of Cornish country-side. A desolate strip of the coast inspired her to have a nightmarish idea she clarified once saying that the idea for the story was born on her daily walks along the Cornish Cliffs. She would see the farmer plowing his fields, his tractor followed by flocks of gulls screaming and crying. As they dived for worms and insects, she thought, suppose they stop being interested in worms? In fact it's necessary to create an apocalyptic plague with feathers to wake people up from their boring daily routine, where their perception is completely lost. At the moment of her vision, du Maurier felt, probably, an intense urge to fight human indifference and its consequent dangers, making people acknowledge their limits of perception. Bruegel's painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1568), expressed this same insensitiveness, through the image of a peaceful country life, where nobody noticed Icarus' tragedy, when he drowned. Inspired by this image, the poets W. H. Auden and William Carlos Williams wrote poems that exposed the unbearable silence of indifference which "The Birds" wanted to see interrupted. This theme also attracted Hitchcock, who distinguished this story for its capacity to show "how people are unaware that catastrophe surrounds us all".

Being "The Birds" considered as a silent scream in face of the unspeakable horror, it is natural that its visual power had attracted not only Hitchcock but the film's designer, Robert Boyle, who claimed that the design of the film was inspired by Edvard Munch symbolist painting, *The Scream*. It can be difficult to see that connection in a direct and visual sense, but in terms of this being a film that is about personal anguish, there can be many parallels. Camille Paglia referred to them, when she observed that "Boyle said he was trying to capture 'the sense of bleakness and madness in a kind of wilderness expressing an inner state.'" (1998: 18) This visual association with expressionist art means du Maurier's story had in itself expressive potentialities that could be related to modern art and to the modernist aesthetics. Trying to express the human reaction to bird attack, du Maurier created a very

modern paranoid atmosphere that can find in grotesque and expressionist images many visual equivalents, that are known by being essential manifestations of inner anguish. Centred in the emotion of fear and very close to the concept of cosmic fear explored by Lovecraft his stories "The Birds" had to be associated with a certain psychological reality in which the expressionists were so interested, because they felt it took precedence over mere external realities.

Creating birds that had an "instinct to destroy mankind with all the deft precision of machines", du Maurier created a collective catastrophe, where irrational and primitive forces were invoked to destroy human illusions. If "horror is the removal of masks" (*apud* Lucas, 1981: 46) as Robert Bloch once stated, these winged creatures were able to provoke all the necessary fear and trembling to defy rational certitudes and naïve assurances. Their power of shock is very similar to the effect of provoked by many artistic images that evoke 'beautiful atrocities', specially in grotesque art, where the animal and irrational side of man is very often portrayed. Du Maurier's birds act more like man in their despair and uncontrollable will to hurt and kill people, than if they were merely animals. They are like an organized army in their purpose of reaching their targets. Their irrational power of destruction seemed to be very rationally thought, premeditated and organized because "they've got reasoning powers" (Du Maurier, 2004: 24). It seems they apprehended all the evil in humanity and that they had been waiting for the best moment to send it back, turning man's darkest side against himself, showing humankind as being its worst enemy.

The Birds can represent this animality in man, giving possibility to du Maurier's story to be associated with the grotesque aesthetics both in literature, cinema and in other visual arts. Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is perhaps one of the best examples of this mutual contamination between man and animal and how their natures can be so deeply connected. Gregor is a human being, but at the same time a monstrous insect; he thinks like a man but he has a repulsive body. However *The Metamorphosis* is narrated in an entirely realistic way, as if it were a very common event. Du Maurier's birds are not so ugly, but they have uglier intents, what makes them even more terrible than Kafka's insect. Their presence produces a sense of disturbance and disorientation that can be felt by everyone, especially in times of spiritual crisis. This helps to establish a link between this story and some grotesque images, because as Philip Thomson concludes in *The Grotesque*, "It is no accident that the grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation" (1972: 11).

The fact that the birds' attacks can destroy the balance in Nature, provoking an inversion of roles of the weaker species in the survival process, shows the updated message of this story, which can be read as an alert about the chaotic effects of environmental disasters. A good illustration for this can be the disturbing images created

by Gregory Crewdson, an artist working in the American landscape tradition, but who subverts the sublimity of Nature by the artificiality of close-ups on rotting legs, dead foxes, giant moths, or robins throwing off-balance the equilibrium of the miniature and gigantic. Like du Maurier's story, his paintings turn the peacefulness of rural life into a scene for mysterious crimes, where an apparently safe landscape is converted into a place invaded by dead, decay and environmental disasters. The same happens in the works by Alexis Rockman (1962). His "Airport" shows an actual sea gull being crushed by jet engine and on the real blacktop of "Route 10," a squashed rat and snake, also real, provide the very usual road kill.

Evoking the paranoid atmosphere created by the threat of nuclear holocaust during the middle of the 20th century, "The Birds" surpass their time by du Maurier's capacity for transmitting, with high degrees of authenticity, her characters' visualization of dread and fear. This expressive vision draws this story near to the contemporary gothic sublime, in what concerns its potentiality to imagine the presence of terrible dangers beyond any control in a very common environment. As Christoph Grunenberg states in *Gothic: Transmutations of Horror in Late 20th Century Art*: "No longer concerned with the production of grand or majestic terror, the Gothic sublime today reflects a hesitant and apprehensive state of mind obscured by a deep fear of the unfamiliar future" (1997: 160). If one of the strongest kinds of fear is the fear of the unknown, as Lovecraft well observed, we could easily conclude that this story can find aesthetic equivalents not only in grotesque art, but also in some important modern art movements, centred in this emotion. As Joyce Carol Oates defended in "Reflections on the Grotesque": "Art that presents 'horror' in aesthetic terms is related to Expressionism and Surrealism in its elevation of interior (and perhaps repressed) states of the soul to exterior status" (Grunenberg, 1997: 35).

A source for artistic inspiration not only for Hitchcock, but for many other artists and writers to come, "The Birds" brings to light repressed fears, which are brought to conscience by a metaphorical battle between men and animals, that joint together in a choreography of terror full of psychological, social, political and ethical insights. In a time when destruction and death come from apparently normal presences unrecognized as dangerous by their power to mix and fuse with normality assuming its forms, du Maurier's story has the power to awaken our dulled senses to a terrifying reality we persist in ignoring. Neither her suicide birds nor the suicide bombers are physical monsters, their grotesque monstrosity is invisible but very threatening. Their power of shock consists in their capacity to challenge the foundations of a culture way of thinking, because as Noël Carroll in *The Philosophy of Horror* well observes: "monsters are not only physically threatening, they are cognitively threatening. They are threats to common knowledge" (1990: 34). Birds are supposed not to be dangerous to humanity, yet these birds seem not to adjust to our cultural con-

cept of Nature. They do not fit it, they violate and transgress it. Their transgressive nature is for man a source of terror, because he only fears what he doesn't know and it's precisely his limited knowledge that can turn him into a victim of unpredictable terrorist effects. The best way to cope with this situation is never to lose one's head, as du Maurier's story alerts. We should follow Nat's example, we should be more attentive and perceptive of things around us, watch them as they really are, and learn to respect their differences and motives without any kind of sentimentality or preconception. Nat was a soldier and a farmer, but he possessed an artist's insight showing a deep sensitiveness to the presence of birds and to their motives. As Nina Auerbach noticed, his "knowledge of birds' natural habits was his knowledge of doom" (2002: 148). Like du Maurier's alter-ego, he seems a modern artist in his unsentimental approach to reality and in his unconventional and solitary vision. Both surpassed their time in their astonishing capacity to foresee some of the most terrifying moments of our future.

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