

CARTER SOLES

“And No Birds Sing”: Discourses of Environmental Apocalypse in *The Birds* and *Night of the Living Dead*

Silent Spring is one of the most influential apocalyptic ecocritical texts in American history. It is widely acknowledged to have catalyzed the American environmental movement, initiating a “transformation in the relationship between humans and the natural world” and stirring “an awakening of public environmental consciousness” (Lear x). Rhetorically potent throughout, *Silent Spring* is especially memorable for its graphic opening description of what the world would be like post-environmental apocalypse: First, describing an idyllic American rural town, Carson writes that “a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death” (2). The plight of birds figures heavily in this account and throughout *Silent Spring*; Carson’s very next passage evokes the birds, asking: “where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices” (2). This motif of disabled, missing, and dead—and therefore silent—birds is central to the work as a whole, especially its “And No Birds Sing” chapter, which documents numerous, widespread, lethal applications of DDT and other pesticides to bird habitats by the US government in the American Midwest throughout the 1950s. In short, for Carson, the

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destruction and disappearance of birds is a barometer by which the extent of an imagined yet very real and impending wholesale environmental apocalypse can be gauged.

Ecocritics such as Lawrence Buell and Greg Garrard argue that apocalyptic rhetoric such as that which pervades *Silent Spring* “seems a necessary component of environmental discourse,” a “powerful master metaphor” influencing government policy, galvanizing environmental activism, and, of course, shaping all manner of popular narratives about impending environmental crisis (Buell 285; Garrard 101–02, 113–16). This essay argues that two popular and influential 1960s horror films, Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963) and George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) (*NLD*), share a concern with graphically depicting environmental apocalypse. Analyzed together, the two films mark a progression of public perception about the causes of environmental apocalypse in the post-*Silent Spring* 1960s. Hitchcock’s film presents its attacking birds as an inexplicable force of nature, whose motivations and specific origins are never made clear. In contrast, Romero’s low-budget zombie film, which constitutes a late-60s’ response to *The Birds*, shows that it is human activity in the form of a radioactive space probe that causes the spread of the living dead disease and ultimately destroys human civilization. So while *The Birds* indirectly addresses issues of human-caused environmental disaster—most notably by being partially inspired by real-life bird attacks caused by polluted sooty shearwater habitats—*NLD* tackles human culpability for such disasters head-on, offering an even more nihilistic and ambivalent view of human motivations, chances for survival, and countercultural response than its big-budget predecessor.

In *Hollywood Utopia*, Pat Brereton offers a compelling model for ecocinematic close readings of film texts that analyze the “ecological themes which pervade mainstream Hollywood cinema” (12). He notes that “Hollywood films are good at showing effects but not causes of ecological problems” (140), a tendency that applies to an early-60s’ studio film like *The Birds*. However, ecological thinking of the early 1970s turns to “conflicts embedded within humanity” as well as threats posed by “technological developments and increased pollution” (164). I argue that this trend of locating the *human* causes of environmental pollution and resulting apocalypse is presaged in 1968 by *NLD*, echoing Carson’s indictment of human environmental negligence more explicitly and directly than does Hitchcock’s earlier film.

Brereton observes the “nascent ecological preoccupations embedded within 1950s science fiction” and creature features, of which *The Birds* and *NLD* are generic descendants (139). By 1968, the science-fiction and horror genres shift emphasis from external and extraterrestrial

ecological menaces “out there” to the enemy within: “Don’t watch the skies—watch the insides” (Doherty 182). This very movement can be seen in the transition from *The Birds* to *NLD*. Indeed, Jason Zinoman contends that *NLD* specifically marks the transition from “fantastical” horror of the creature feature and supernatural types to “a new emphasis on realism [. . .] focused not on [special] effects, but on the best way to scare an audience” (6, 7).

As film theorist Carol J. Clover has argued, modern horror films, especially low-budget, low-cultural ones like *NLD*, frequently demonstrate the potential to address structural cultural problems in a more direct and visceral way than their bigger-budget Hollywood counterparts (22). Clover even claims that horror films, which, as mass-produced “folktales,” display “(sub)cultural attitudes” that function as the “repressed of mainstream filmmaking,” are perhaps the ideal popular-cultural means to address contemporary environmental anxieties (10, 22, 20, 129). *NLD*’s location of the blame for the environmental apocalypse with the US government, the scientific establishment, and, ultimately, the American people writ large, highlights a trajectory whereby popular horror films of the 1960s increasingly focused upon human conflicts and human actions as the source of environmental disaster.

Released one year after *Silent Spring*’s publication, *The Birds* is “the foundational narrative of post-Carson eco-horror” (Murphy 184). Although Hitchcock could not have read *Silent Spring* by the time he began production on *The Birds*, he was, in general, an avid reader of nonfiction and newspapers, loving to stay up on current events and to integrate them into his films whenever possible. Thus, he was likely aware of Carson, and it is hard not to see the ornithologist Mrs. Bundy (Ethel Griffies) as a possible onscreen proxy for Carson. Hitchcock took only the title and general premise from the Daphne du Maurier short story of the same name; setting his film in 1960s America, his version of *The Birds* taps into nascent ecological concerns catalyzed by the publication of *Silent Spring*, albeit indirectly.

Carson and Hitchcock both take bird deaths as their point of departure. Carson’s title, *Silent Spring*, evokes the disturbing lack of birdsong in areas devastated by DDT spraying. In *Spring*, Carson characterizes this apocalyptic silence as “eerie, terrifying” and without easy explanation (104). As Carson writes in the aptly titled chapter “And No Birds Sing,” spraying for Dutch elm disease began on the 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 in about a week” (106). Hitchcock’s film is based upon a less systematic but more acutely dramatic real-life incident: “On 18 August, 1961, residents in the town of Capitola, California,

awoke to find sooty shearwaters slamming into their rooftops, and their streets covered with dead birds" (Coombs n.p.). These birds, according to UC Santa Cruz ocean scientist Raphael Kudela, were likely 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 behaviour patterns" including the sooty shearwaters' "kamikaze" activities in Capitola in 1961 (qtd. in Coombs). Hitchcock, who lived in nearby Santa Cruz, would not have known of this later research ascribing human causation to the bird deaths when he requested local news copy to use as "research material for his latest thriller," *The Birds* (Coombs n.p.).

Of course, the titular antagonists of Hitchcock's horror film do far more than simply crash into rooftops and perish in the street; they actively attack the townspeople, demonstrating "the possibility that the birds are their own agents, exercising desire and bent on exacting revenge for the unspecified crimes of humanity" (McCombe 268). Significantly, however, *The Birds* shows the trouble to lie with wild birds, not domestic ones: farm-bred chickens refuse to eat but are never seen attacking humans. Similarly, the caged lovebirds Melanie brings to Bodega Bay, while visually suggested as possible culprits, "never harm anyone" as Cathy points out in the film's denouement. Thus, no direct link between human treatment of birds and the attacks seen in the film exists. Despite ominous hints at human culpability, neither the authorities heard on the radio nor the townspeople gathered at The Tides restaurant ever discover the precise cause of the mass bird attacks, and thus, humanity's exact role in provoking them remains opaque.

This indeterminacy is highlighted in one of the film's most famous scenes, the debate between various townspeople in The Tides about the meaning of the bird attacks. Mrs. Bundy, an ornithologist, explains that birds lack the brain capacity to launch coordinated attacks against people and insists that birds "bring beauty into the world." She starts to further opine that "it is mankind, rather, who insists upon making it difficult for life to exist upon this planet" when she is interrupted by the waitress' shouted order for "three southern-fried chickens." These overlapping lines suggest, but do not confirm, a connection between humankind's mistreatment of animals and the recent bird attacks, and these inconclusive statements are punctuated by the town drunk shouting "it's the end of the world" from the end of the bar. The drunk's interpretation is never contradicted, nor is the later assertion by a hysterical mother that Melanie herself is responsible for arousing the birds' collective ire.

Yet, *The Birds'* narrative indeterminacy cannot disguise the film's central environmental thematic, for "the narrative itself, like du Maurier's original story, gestures towards a much more ominous explanation: an apocalyptic revolt of nature" (Murphy 184). John P. McCombe describes the diegetic milieu of *The Birds* as "a world unable to maintain harmony between humans and nature" and he concludes that the film advances "the belief that institutions such as schools can often create a gulf that divides us from the natural world" (275, 276). However, the ecological apocalypse depicted in *The Birds* remains an apocalypse without a cause. No matter how much scholarly or viewerly debate the film arouses, no one will ever definitively settle the matter of *why* those birds attack. As Robin Wood asserts, *The Birds* "derives its disturbing power from the absolute meaninglessness and unpredictability of the attacks . . . To demand consistency and any form of divine or poetic justice from the attacks is to miss the point altogether" (162). Indeed, this inconclusive, maddeningly mysterious quality probably lies at the heart of the film's enduring appeal: "In *The Birds*, a good portion of the chain of cause and effect that typically governs narration in the Hollywood cinema disintegrates after the first thirty minutes," giving way instead to the increasingly preposterous yet visually titillating levels of horrific spectacle for which the film is famous (McCombe 267).

If Hitchcock's big-budget, studio-produced, somewhat "artificial" film preserves the mystery of the birds' behavior as a device for generating suspense and visual thrills, it also potentially aligns itself with the sentiments of those who denied Carson's findings, refusing to find human fault in bird extinctions and other environmental catastrophes. As Wood notes,

[T]here are several perfectly straightforward shots in the middle of sequences clearly made on location where back-projection is used, and they are always shots of Melanie. Whether intentional or not, it certainly has the effect of giving an air of unreality to her situation, [. . .] of stressing her artificiality by making it stand out obtrusively from natural scenery. (157)

The Birds' studio-set esthetic, high-budget special effects and breaking of the cause-and-effect chain all lead to a feeling of artificiality, unreality, and distancing for the viewer. The film presents a thrilling spectacle but is clearly not real. McCombe argues that "*The Birds* depicts a world so violent and illogical that faith and the potential for recognizing the beauty in living things are illusions," yet *The Birds* revels in its own illusory qualities, creating a showpiece out of its technically

complex and visually dazzling bird attack sequences (270). The film's refusal to assign clear causation to the bird attacks, while in line with Hitchcock's tendency to privilege the affective impact of his films, to focus upon startling visuals over plausible narratives and to eschew forthright explanations, nevertheless leaves *The Birds* wanting from an ecocritical perspective.

By contrast with *The Birds*' widescreen Technicolor presentation and dazzling special effects, George A. Romero's *NLD* lies at the opposite end of the esthetic spectrum, shot black and white in a gritty, documentary style on location outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with a cast of no-name, mostly nonprofessional actors. However, despite the vast differences between their visual esthetics, R. H. W. Dillard notes that "the artistic antecedent for *Night of the Living Dead* is most clearly Hitchcock's *The Birds*" (26). Indeed, Zinoman writes that *The Birds*' influence extends beyond Romero, serving as the antecedent to the "when nature attacks" cycle of films like *Frogs*, *Night of the Lepus* (both 1972), and *Jaws* (1975) that "exploded in the early seventies" (29). There are many structural similarities between *The Birds* and Romero's low-budget zombie film, including a strong male protagonist who shores up the defenses of a rural farmhouse, a female lead who becomes comatose in response to trauma, and even two very similar corpse discovery scenes (Lydia's finding of Dan Fawcett's eyeless body in *The Birds* and Barbara's stumbling across the corpse at the top of the farmhouse stairs in *NLD*). In the broadest strokes, one could say that *NLD* is a loose remake of *The Birds*, with irradiated ghouls standing in for the killer bird flocks of the earlier film.

However, *NLD* is much more realistic than its big-budget artistic antecedent: "The essential quality of the film's setting and of its characters is their ordinary nature" (Dillard 17). To some extent, this emphasis on gritty verisimilitude over Hollywood artifice is germane to the artistic aims of each film's creators: Hitchcock claimed he wanted *The Birds* to be received as "a work of serious art," his "crowning achievement," whereas Romero and his fledgling production company, Image Ten, made no bones about the commercial motivation behind their decision to make a horror film like *NLD* (McGilligan 625, Becker 51). Hitchcock, despite his macabre sense of humor and fixation upon the ways in which middle-class propriety barely conceals darker tendencies in human nature, was essentially a social conservative and a political moderate. By contrast, Romero and company were bohemian hippies, whose film, intentionally or not, is politically engaged in ways that no film by the more staid Briton ever could be (Becker 44). For example, the casting of black actor Duane Jones as the lead in *NLD*, while explained away as circumstantial by co-screenwriter John

A. Russo, nevertheless resonates strongly with the civil rights struggles of the late 1960s, especially when Jones' character Ben is incidentally shot and his body burned at the film's end (51). Romero himself admits that while the Image Ten filmmakers did not set out to make an explicitly political film, "It was 1968, man. *Everybody* had a 'message.' Maybe it crept in. I was just making a horror film and I think the anger and the attitude and all that's there is just there because it was 1968" (Gagne 38).

NLD's focus on graphic violence and conflicted characters, mostly shot in an innovative near-documentary style (excluding a few expressionistic moments),¹ is a product of the shifts in American cultural and environmental consciousness in the years between 1963 and 1968. As Carolyn Merchant documents, the civil rights and anti-Vietnam movements fomented a general questioning of the status quo among the hippie generation and, increasingly, the general public during the 1960s, and "in this social milieu," particularly following the publication of *Silent Spring*, "issues of environmental quality came to the forefront of public concern" (177, 178). In response to heightened public awareness of environmental quality issues such as pollution and resource depletion, Congress passed the Clean Air Act in 1963, the Water Quality Control Act in 1965, and, on October 2, 1968, one day after *NLD* was released, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (180). This period also saw the rise of powerful environmentalist citizens' movements such as the "successful fight against damming the Grand Canyon in 1966," another indicator that a sea change in American attitudes toward ecological consciousness was on the horizon (182).

It therefore comes as no surprise that in *NLD*, the explanation for the rise of the recent dead is made very clear, despite some suspicious hemming and hawing by onscreen government officials: as Dillard observes, "The living dead are revealed to be neither supernatural in origin nor impelled by ideas of revenge upon the living. Triggered by radiation brought to Earth accidentally by a Venus probe, the recently dead have arisen and attacked the living for no motive whatsoever other than a blind need for food" (21). All these facts are explained to the characters and the viewer during a series of radio and, subsequently, television broadcasts in the middle act of the film. The living dead's origins—radiation—and the motivation for their attacks—hunger—dually align them with the threat of nuclear disaster on the one hand, and some kind of natural animal attacks on the other, either of which is explicable by science. Unlike the baffling mystery at the heart of *The Birds*, the rise of the living dead in *NLD* is presented as mundane, explicable, and "really no different from any other natural disaster"—Ben even refers to the undead ghouls as "bugs" at one

point, and their carnivorous behavior can be read as a metaphor for humanity's insatiable need to consume resources (21). In this way, *NLD* dramatically represents the idea that routine human scientific and technological pursuits *over time* might "[come] to play a part in ecology" and that new biological adaptations such as the rise of living dead ghouls might occur as "an accidental result of rigorous scientific work over a century or more" (McNeill 328). It is this very quality of the everyday and the ordinary, formally emphasized by the film's generally unobtrusive filming style, that Dillard argues makes *NLD* so terrifying: What the characters (and by extension, the audience) are most afraid of is not the cannibalistic living dead, nor the disagreements that pit the protagonists against each other, but the "danger of the whole ordinary world itself" (22). And by 1968, due to the public circulation and lasting influence of Carson's language and metaphors, that ordinary world would have come to be seen in increasingly apocalyptic, environmental terms (Merchant 178).

The quotidian nature of the Venus probe mission and its unintentional yet deadly aftereffects echo Carson's arguments about the effect of pesticides on real-life birds: Despite indications that the 1954 East Lansing sprayings were killing and sterilizing local robin populations, pesticide applications were "repeated with monotonous regularity in succeeding springs" (106). Whereas 1968's *Planet of the Apes* (like 1950s "creature features" *Godzilla* and *Them!*) is about the effects of all-out nuclear war, *NLD* is about a routine space launch, scientific and technological business as usual. The living dead plague is an unforeseen and unfortunate byproduct of a seemingly harmless, benign space probe mission, exacerbated by the inability of the leaders of the space program and the military to collaborate on a solution. Thus, the horror of *NLD* stems less from the inexplicable nature of the risen dead or their carnivorous attacks, but rather the maddening inability of the farmhouse occupants to effectively work together for the sake of their own survival, and the denials of military officials about the cause of the disaster, which directly contradicts the viewer's certainty about that cause.

Governmental duplicity is a key theme in *NLD*, evinced in the television broadcast viewed by the group trapped in the farmhouse. After the in-studio newscaster mentions, the "Explorer satellite" that circled Venus has been purposely destroyed by NASA due to its "mysterious high-level radiation," the newscast cuts to a long, handheld camera shot on a Washington street outside a government building. A group of three men—a professor, a general, and a scientist called Dr. Keller—heads to a waiting car as three reporters, including newsman Don Quinn, follow them, asking questions. After the professor twice insists

that there is a “definite connection” between the irradiated Venus probe and the living dead mutations, the general interjects, saying “Well just a minute, I’m not sure that that’s certain at all,” though he is himself interrupted by Dr. Keller, who says that “It’s the only logical explanation we have at this time.” While Keller’s explanation is provisional—“at this time”—it nevertheless carries weight via its agreement with the conclusions of the professor who spoke first. Thus, by the time the general adds “I must disagree with these gentlemen presently, until this is irrefutably proved,” the viewer knows the military man is just avoiding culpability on unjustifiable grounds, and his use of the word “presently” subtly suggests that he may change his tune later in the day.

Denials and cover-ups of this kind are also germane to the insecticide sprayings of the 1950s documented in *Silent Spring*: quoting Michigan State University ornithologist George Wallace, Carson observes that “in spite of the assurances of the insecticide people that their sprays were ‘harmless to birds’ the robins were really dying of insecticidal poisoning; they exhibited the well-known symptoms of loss of balance, followed by tremors, convulsions, and death” (qtd. in Carson 107).² In these cases, the birds were being poisoned not via direct contact with the pesticides, but via their consumption of poisoned earthworms—an indirect process of consumption vaguely analogous to the irradiated living dead passing on their ghoulish “disease” via biting and eating (Carson 107). Most importantly, the television newscast clip reveals to the characters and the viewer that the military authorities are not to be trusted, a point that bears significantly upon the conclusion of the film as well as the real world of Vietnam-embroiled America in 1968.

This well-founded distrust of government and military, and its analogous relevance to the wholesale killing of birds via indiscriminate pesticide use, extends into *NLD*’s nihilistic conclusion: At film’s end, Ben is killed by the very measures meant to contain the mutant threat of the living dead. Like Carson’s pesticide sprayers, the sheriff’s posse goes about their routine pest control business and accidentally kills and burns the wrong man. As Dillard notes,

The end of *The Birds* opens out (as does the last shot) to a sunlit world that is dangerous and inexplicable, but at the same time beautiful and awesome; *Night of the Living Dead* closes in to death and fire, both rendered in black and white, both implying a finality that is neither beautiful nor awesome, but merely ugly and cheap. (26)

In contrast to *The Birds*' refusal to definitively explain the exact cause of the bird attacks, *NLD*'s incessant "people against people" conflicts are shown to be directly responsible for the whole group's undoing, making very clear who is to blame for the disastrous outcome of the wholesale attack by undead ghouls (Becker 52).

NLD's bluntness in pointing to human responsibility for environmental apocalypse is a result of both its industrial and sociohistorical positioning: that is, as a low-budget horror film made far outside Hollywood, on the eve of the explosion of the 1970s environmental movement. As such, it partially subsumes its environmental politics "under the broader quality of life concern" of the period, including "education, health, welfare and planning" and perhaps most emphatically, given its racial politics, "Civil Rights issues" (Gottleib 137, 135). Had it been made a few years later, maybe its equating of the living dead ghouls with other types of ecological agents (like birds, mutant ants, etc.), carrying out cinematic revenge of nature scenarios would have been made even more explicit. Nonetheless, its debt to *The Birds* and the apocalyptic rhetoric of *Silent Spring* is clear, just as it is intertwined with other countercultural discourses prevalent in 1968. Released just two years prior to wholesale legislative changes surrounding the environment, particularly the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970, *NLD* harbingers a turning point in American environmental consciousness (Merchant 180). As J. R. McNeill argues, "From about 1880 to 1970 the intellectual world was aligned so as to deny the massive environmental changes afoot. While economists ignored nature, ecologists pretended humankind did not exist" (336). *NLD* sits on the cusp of the shift away from this denial; it acknowledges the human role in creating environmental disasters of the kind Carson evocatively describes, perhaps anticipating the nationwide shift toward ecological thinking about to take place in 1970 and beyond.

Interestingly, at the end of *NLD*, birds do sing: At dawn, as sheriff McClellan's posse closes in on the farmhouse in which Ben hides, we hear chirping birds on the soundtrack. This subtly implies that things are back to normal and that the authorities really do have things "under control," as the newscaster accompanying the posse tentatively suggests. Yet, the tone of the scene is one of foreboding: the cavalier manner in which the sheriff and his men gun down ghouls, and their callous remarks about a "barbecue" upon observing the burned-out truck wherein Tom and Judy perished, tell us that they are dangerously indiscreet in selecting their targets, indifferent to human life despite their official role defending it. While surely an allusion to the racial unrest of the civil rights era, as well as the ongoing conflict in and over

Vietnam, this harrowing denouement also taps into nascent fears of governmental mishandling of systemic, post-Carson environmental crises, perhaps anticipating in its ambivalence the struggles of the 1970s environmental movement to maintain focus and integrity in the face of Federal government appropriation of environmental discourse, public confusion and apathy about ecological issues, and the accelerating pace of late capitalistic resource exploitation. Of course, there is a final, bleak irony here: in *NLD*, no one survives, and the birds continue to sing well past the moment it is too late to save Ben or anyone else in the farmhouse. As *Silent Spring* makes emphatically clear, we must act *before* such symptoms occur, before the birds stop singing and the ecological apocalypse is well upon us. Perhaps that is what *NLD* is indicating in its uncompromising assault upon the complacencies of everyday American life.

NOTES

1. While the bulk of *Night of the Living Dead* is shot matter-of-factly, there are a few noteworthy expressionistic moments, such as a dramatic point-of-view shot from outside the farmhouse during an early sequence in which the living dead reaches through the windows, and also during the climactic sequence in which Karen Cooper, the zombified daughter, murders Helen, her mother, with a garden trowel.

2. Interestingly, while absent from *NLD*, convulsions like those described by Carson are integral to the human-to-zombie conversion process depicted in later horror films such as the *Dawn of the Dead* remake (2004) and *28 Days Later* (2002). In their apocalyptic analysis of the latter movie, Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann read the virus that causes these convulsions as a metaphor for an antievolutionary rage that threatens humans with extinction unless they accommodate themselves to the natural world (183, 187, 193).

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