

**MALTHOUSE EDUCATION**



**THE**  
**BIRDS**

BY DAPHNE DE MAURIER, ADAPTED BY LOUISE FOX

VCE THEATRE STUDIES — PROMPT PACK A

THE WINDS WILL CHANGE. AND THEY'LL BE WAITING.

**MALTHOUSE THEATRE  
ACKNOWLEDGES THE  
UNCEDDED LANDS OF  
THE KULIN NATION. WE  
ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR  
SOVEREIGNTY AND  
THEIR SONGLINES. WE  
PAY RESPECT TO THEIR  
ELDERS AND THEIR  
CHILDREN. WE EMBRACE  
AND CELEBRATE THE  
OLDEST CULTURE IN  
THE WORLD.**

Malthouse Theatre presents *The Birds*.

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Malthouse Education Coordinator

**THE BIRDS**

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# WELCOME

Welcome to Malthouse Theatre.

This **Prompt Pack A** is a collection of resources, provocations and activities (#nospoilers!) intended to support you and your students' exploration and analysis of this exciting new stage adaptation prior to attending the show. Think of it as your very own Dramaturgy Pack.

The **Background** chapter includes the plot, history of the source material and this adaptation, and information on the team involved.

**Contexts** provides selected material to get students started in their research of the play's source material, inspiration and style, as well as the challenges in interpreting the script to the stage.

The **Themes** chapter elaborates on some of the intended meanings and topics forming this work: climate collapse, societal breakdown, misinformation in the media, economic anxiety, and many more – as well as a short comparison of how some of du Maurier's 1950s themes have morphed into those we might see in this new production.

The **Production** chapter takes students through a comprehensive series of questions and prompts to spark their imaginings and help shape their own interpretation of the playtext onto stage.

Finally, **Resources** is where you will find a list of further reference material – some referenced in this Prompt Pack, some simply extra resources for teachers or students to use at their discretion, including books, articles, documents, videos and podcasts.

Remember that the purpose of the Prompt Packs are to provide inroads and information about the production, not provide definitive answers. Students will need to engage in their own broader study and discussion.

**Prompt Pack B** (available late May) will throw open this production's specific resource bank. This pack will include behind-the-scenes information, production and design images, interviews, performance memory-joggers, observations and insights intended to support their deeper analysis and evaluation of the production.

Rounding out our award-winning education resources will be the digital workshop **Revisit the Play** (booked separately, released in September), to recap and synthesise students' knowledge and skills as they journey towards their final VCE Theatre Studies exams.

If you have any questions regarding this material, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me at [lbrooks@malthousetheatre.com.au](mailto:lbrooks@malthousetheatre.com.au).

I'm confident *The Birds* will be an absolutely exhilarating experience for you and your students, and one you will all remember for a very long time.

See you at the theatre!



**Lyall Brooks**  
Malthouse Theatre Education Coordinator

# WARNINGS & SUPPORT

## THIS PRODUCTION CONTAINS:

- occasional coarse language
- descriptions of violence and injury
- references to death or dying, including an act of pedocide
- horror themes
- smoking

Malthouse Theatre is a new work company, meaning a lot of our productions are being written and rehearsed in-house before premiering on our stages. A lot can change along the journey from concept to production, as scripts are redrafted, actors make discoveries, designers bring in new elements and directors make changes right up to opening night.

We update content information throughout rehearsals as the show takes shape and publish this on our dedicated Content Warnings page on the Malthouse website, [malthousetheatre.com.au/content-warnings](https://malthousetheatre.com.au/content-warnings).

You are encouraged to read any content information we provide, explore this Prompt Pack in advance, use your best judgement when disseminating or discussing information, and make yourself and your students aware of the support offered by the organisations on the right.

Please contact Education Coordinator Lyall Brooks at [lbrooks@malthousetheatre.com.au](mailto:lbrooks@malthousetheatre.com.au) if you have any questions.

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### BEYOND BLUE

1300 224 636

[beyondblue.org.au](https://beyondblue.org.au)

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### HEADSPACE

[headspace.org.au](https://headspace.org.au)

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### REACHOUT

[au.reachout.com](https://au.reachout.com)

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### LIFELINE

13 11 14

[lifeline.org.au](https://lifeline.org.au)

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### KIDS HELPLINE

1800 55 1800

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### SUICIDE CALLBACK SERVICE

1300 659 467

[suicidecallbackservice.org.au](https://suicidecallbackservice.org.au)

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# BACKGROUND





# THE SOURCE MATERIAL

Daphne du Maurier's *The Birds* was first published in 1952 as part of *The Apple Tree: A Short Novel and Several Long Stories* (later republished as *The Birds and Other Stories*). While already an acclaimed author – renowned for *Rebecca* (1938) and *Jamaica Inn* (1936) – du Maurier's take on psychological horror in *The Birds* marked a shift in her storytelling, exploring themes of nature's indifference, existential dread, and human vulnerability. The story was well received, praised for its tense, slow-building terror and ambiguous ending. Unlike traditional horror, *The Birds* offers no resolution, no explanation and no catharsis – leaving readers trapped in the same powerless state as its protagonist.

The story became internationally famous when Alfred Hitchcock adapted it into a film in 1963 – though he radically altered the narrative. Rather than a bleak, rural tale set in post-war Cornwall, Hitchcock relocated the story to Bodega Bay, California, and introduced new characters, including Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) and Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor). He transformed du Maurier's psychological horror into a cinematic spectacle, adding romance, interpersonal conflict and iconic set pieces like the schoolhouse attack and the bird siege on the Brenner home. Hitchcock's adaptation omits any clear explanation for the birds' behaviour, maintaining the original story's eerie ambiguity. However, while du Maurier's birds behave like a calculated military force, Hitchcock's version presents them as chaotic and unpredictable, reinforcing a sense of primal terror.

Hitchcock's *The Birds* was a major cultural phenomenon, becoming one of the most famous horror films of all time. The film's technical achievements – including its groundbreaking use of special effects, sound design and montage editing – set a new standard for cinematic horror. The decision to forgo a musical score in favor of an experimental electronic soundscape made the bird attacks even more unsettling. Despite mixed reviews upon release, *The Birds* became a classic of suspense cinema, influencing filmmakers like Steven Spielberg (*Jaws*), John Carpenter (*The Fog*), and M. Night Shyamalan (*Signs*).

Beyond film, *The Birds* has inspired a broader artistic legacy, influencing literature, theatre, and popular culture. The story is frequently cited as a precursor to eco-horror, a genre exploring nature turning against humanity, seen in works like Frank Schätzing's *The Swarm* (2004) and Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014). It has also shaped apocalyptic fiction, with echoes in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and even the zombie genre (*28 Days Later*, *The Walking Dead*), where survivors fend off relentless, inhuman forces.

Du Maurier's *The Birds* remains one of the most studied and adapted works in literary horror, a story that refuses to fade, much like the creatures at its heart. Whether through Hitchcock's cinematic vision or new theatrical reinventions – like Malthouse Theatre's binaural stage adaptation – the story continues to evolve, reflecting each era's greatest anxieties.

*The past is never dead. It's not even past.*

**WILLIAM FAULKNER**



THE  
APPLE  
TREE

# THE APPLE TREE

*a short novel  
and*

DAPHNE  
du  
MAURIER

*several long  
stories by*

DAPHNE  
du MAURIER

GOLLANCZ

BIRD

# PLOT

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## ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

Tessa, a woman in her 40s, appears and introduces the audience to her world – an idyllic coastal town where she and her family sought refuge from the chaos of city life. She instructs the audience to put on their headsets, immersing them in the sound design. Her husband, Nat, reinforces their desire for a peaceful life. However, hints of past trauma emerge: Nat's breakdown, financial struggles, and an undefined 'incident' that forced them to leave the city. Tessa reflects on how safe they believed they were – until now.

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## ACT ONE, SCENE TWO

Tessa walks along the shoreline, observing an unusual number of gulls. A local man with his dog warns her about the shifting wind, but dismisses her concerns about the birds' erratic behaviour. Suddenly, a gull swoops aggressively, knocking off his hat. Though shaken, the man insists it's nothing. But as Tessa looks to the sky, dense with circling birds, she knows something is wrong.

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## ACT ONE, SCENE THREE

In the dead of night, Tessa is awakened by a soft tapping at the window. She dismisses it at first, but when she finally checks, a bird flies directly at her, pecking her hands and drawing blood. More birds soon swarm into the house, attacking with violent desperation. Tessa and Nat fight to drive them out, only to hear their daughter, Jill, screaming from her room.

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## ACT ONE, SCENE FOUR

Tessa rushes into Jill's room to find a frenzied swarm of birds attacking her, crashing into walls and furniture. Tessa shields her daughter and fights them off, eventually managing to drive them away. In the aftermath, the room is littered with dead and injured birds. As dawn breaks, the surviving birds retreat, leaving only silence and the unnerving sense that this was no ordinary event.

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**ACT ONE, SCENE FIVE**

At breakfast, Tessa reassures Jill and (son) Johnny that the birds' attack was just a freak event. But in private, she and Nat share their unease. Tessa notices some of the birds look foreign, unfamiliar. Is this an environmental shift? An invasion? She decides to dispose of the dead birds, hoping to put the incident behind them.

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**ACT ONE, SCENE SIX**

Walking her children to the bus stop, Tessa remains hyper-aware of the birds. A simple squeaky toy startles her, heightening her paranoia. The kids, initially amused, soon sense her distress. She hurries them onto the bus, silently berating herself for overreacting – yet she can't shake the feeling that something is deeply wrong.

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**ACT ONE, SCENE SEVEN**

At the local shop, Tessa encounters Muriel, a struggling single mother. When Tessa mentions the bird attack, Muriel jokes about conspiracy theories – that birds are government drones spying on them. Her dismissiveness unnerves Tessa further; is she the only one who sees the danger?

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**ACT ONE, SCENE EIGHT**

Tessa and Nat clean up the remains of the dead birds. As she examines their bodies, she notices strange injuries – swollen bellies, broken beaks. Could they be diseased? Infected? Nat refuses to speculate, shutting down the conversation. Tessa decides to take the carcasses to the sea, unaware of the horror she is about to witness.

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**ACT ONE, SCENE NINE**

At the beach, Tessa attempts to dispose of the birds, but the wind catches them, lifting their lifeless bodies eerily into the air. As they float over the waves, she notices something out at sea: thousands of birds, lined up like an army. Silent. Waiting. A wave of terror hits her, and she runs.

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**ACT ONE, SCENE TEN**

Panicked, Tessa races home, her thoughts scattered. Should she warn the school? Call the police? She crashes into the house, barely able to breathe, just as the first waves of birds begin hurling themselves against the windows and doors. The siege has begun.

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**ACT TWO, SCENE ONE**

A news broadcast confirms the attacks are happening nationwide. Tessa and Nat reinforce the house, but their perspectives clash – Tessa sees an apocalyptic threat, while Nat clings to normalcy. Meanwhile, media reports speculate about environmental factors, magnetic fields and bizarre theories, but no one has answers.

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**ACT TWO, SCENE TWO**

The radio shifts from scientific speculation to mockery. Talk show hosts joke about viewing parties. Just as Tessa rages at their ignorance, the daylight abruptly vanishes. Stepping outside, she and Nat witness the horrifying truth: the sky is blotted out by an incalculable mass of birds.

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**ACT TWO, SCENE THREE**

Preparing for a rescue attempt, Tessa urges Nat to arm himself, but he spirals into shock. Determined, she sets out alone to retrieve their children, carrying only a broom as a weapon.

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**ACT TWO, SCENE FOUR**

At the school, Tessa gathers Jill and Johnny, carefully avoiding the unnerving flocks. She hails Muriel for a ride, but Muriel's paranoia has twisted into xenophobic conspiracy theories. Reluctantly, Tessa sends her children with Muriel, unsure if she has made a terrible mistake.

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**ACT TWO, SCENE FIVE**

As Tessa walks home, she is violently attacked by a swarm of birds. They rip at her flesh, targeting her eyes. Near collapse, she fights back, finally reaching home, where Nat drags her inside just as a massive bird dive-bombs the door.

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**ACT THREE, SCENE ONE**

Wounded and traumatised, Tessa tries to reassure her children. The radio delivers an emergency government lockdown announcement, but communication soon cuts out. The only sound left is the birds, amassing outside.

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**ACT THREE, SCENE TWO**

The family fortifies the kitchen, their last refuge. Tessa clings to hope, telling stories to calm the children. But the birds are not retreating. Instead, they infiltrate the attic, scratching through the ceiling. The siege is tightening.

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**ACT THREE, SCENE THREE**

In the middle of the night, a military helicopter arrives – a beacon of hope. But as it descends, the birds intentionally sacrifice themselves into the rotors, bringing it crashing down in flames. The reality sinks in: this war cannot be won.

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**ACT THREE, SCENE FOUR**

As despair takes hold, Tessa loses control, raging at the birds. She gathers dead ones and uses them as barricades, desperate for any defence. But her anger gives way to eerie clarity. Why are the birds doing this? What do they want?

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**ACT THREE, SCENE FIVE**

During a lull, the family ventures to Muriel's farm. They find the house abandoned except for Muriel and her children, brutally slaughtered. Among them, little Alice clings to life, barely breathing. Tessa makes a harrowing decision – she gently suffocates Alice to spare her further agony.

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**ACT THREE, SCENE SIX**

In shock, Tessa leads her family home, stepping over a landscape of ruin. The birds watch, eerily still. A horrifying realisation sets in – this is not an accident. The birds do not want territory. They do not want food. They want the extermination of humankind. And they are winning.

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ALFRED  
HITCHCOCK'S  
"The Birds"

TECHNICOLOR **THE BIRDS**®

# CAST & CREATIVE TEAM

## CAST

**PAULA ARUNDELL**

Performer

## CREATIVES

**MATTHEW LUTTON**

Director

**DAPHNE DU MAURIER**

Writer

**LOUISE FOX**

Adaptor

**KAT CHAN**

Set & Costume Designer

**J. DAVID FRANZKE**

Composer &  
Sound Designer

**NIKLAS PAJANTI**

Lighting Designer

**MARNI MOUNT**

Assistant Director

**SIDNEY YOUNGER**

Assistant Lighting Designer

**ROSEMARY OSMOND**

Stage Manager

## OTHER CREATIVES

**GIDEON COZENS**

Sound Associate/Operator

**PATRICK JONES**

Scenic Art

**DAVID WOTHERSPOON**

Set & Costume Intern





**MALTHOUSE  
THEATRE**





# MALTHOUSE THEATRE

Malthouse Theatre collaborates with local and international artists to create inventive performances that cut to the core of the human experience. Their work explores the world – personally, socially and politically – to provoke a dialogue with and within audiences. Malthouse consistently and proudly serves as a counterpoint to the mainstream and, to this day, its distinctive style resonates locally, nationally and globally.

The company champions artistic and cultural diversity and seeks out alternative points of view. They invite collaboration without bias, actively address inequities in representation, and believe fiercely in gender equality. They champion positive change and passionately influence its enactment.

For over 40 years, Malthouse Theatre has fanned the flames of Melbourne’s radical culture, exerting significant influence on the city’s artistic community. In 1976, Carrillo Gantner, Graeme Blundell and Garrie Hutchinson formed the Hoopla Theatre Foundation, which transitioned into the Playbox Theatre Company in 1980.

In 2004, Michael Kantor reimagined Playbox as Malthouse Theatre, named after the iconic venue that had been the company’s home since 1990 – a historic beer-making malthouse built in 1892, the building at 113 Sturt Street, Southbank was gifted by Carlton & United Breweries to Playbox Theatre in 1988.

Converted into an agile and contemporary theatre complex, the Malthouse comprises a world-renowned 500-seat Merlyn theatre, the more intimate 180-seat Beckett Theatre, the flexible Tower theatre space, rehearsal rooms and meeting spaces, and the largest on-site set construction workshop in the southern hemisphere.

It is Malthouse Theatre’s dedicated venue – a home for innovation and live experiences that provoke and entertain.

# CONTEXTS











# TIME

The diegetic time period of *The Birds* is contemporary Australia, yet its coastal town setting carries a sense of timelessness and isolation. Though no exact year is stated, there are subtle but pointed references to recent global events – mentions of economic downturns, government lockdown messaging, and an ambiguous ‘incident’ that forced Tessa and Nat to relocate. These details suggest a world still shaped by post-pandemic uncertainty, a post-disaster society where fear lingers just beneath the surface. Long before the birds arrive, something in this world already feels broken – whether economically, environmentally, or socially.

The script you have to study is the ‘rehearsal script’ – the one the creative team takes into the rehearsal room, where it may undergo further editing in response to discoveries the director, performer and designers make on the floor. It was completed in early 2025, at a time when Australia continues to grapple with climate anxiety, economic instability and an overwhelming flood of misinformation. The country is experiencing more frequent and extreme weather disasters, including bushfires, floods and cyclones, leaving many people feeling increasingly powerless against both nature and the institutions meant to protect them. The play, in many ways, speaks directly to this anxiety – highlighting the fragility of the systems people rely on and the moment they fail.

At the same time, the 21st century rise of binaural theatre and immersive storytelling reflects a growing desire for intimate, sensory-driven experiences in contemporary theatre. By delivering sound directly into the audience’s ears, this production invites them into an unsettlingly close and personal experience of fear, paranoia, and isolation – mirroring not only the characters’ deteriorating world but also the heightened psychological states many have experienced in times of global crisis.

*Time changes everything, except something within us which is always surprised by change.*

**THOMAS HARDY**

## ACTIVITY: TIMELINE REMIX

Imagine *The Birds* set in a completely different time period. How would the story change? How would the social, political, and technological context of that era affect the play's themes and characters?

In small groups, choose an alternative time setting and explore how it reshapes the play. Some possibilities include:

- 1950s Cold War paranoia (du Maurier's era): The birds symbolise nuclear fear, mass hysteria, or foreign invasion.
- A dystopian future 50 years from now: Climate collapse has made the world unliveable, and the birds are either an ecological consequence or humanity's punishment.
- A post-WWI, pre-television small town: With no instant news updates, isolation is even more extreme.
- A late-1800s settlement town in Australia: The play takes on colonial undertones, with the birds representing nature resisting invasion.

*OPTIONAL: Rehearse and perform a short scene from the play, but adjust the dialogue, movement, or setting details to reflect the new time period.*

Come back together as a class and discuss:

- What changed in the story?
- What new metaphors emerged?
- How might shifting the time period affect how the audience perceives fear, power, and survival?
- How does this 2025 update of *The Birds* reflect our modern anxieties in a way that the 1952 short story or 1963 Hitchcock film couldn't?









# PLACE

The setting of *The Birds* is a coastal Australian town, small and seemingly tranquil, yet vulnerable in its isolation. This town, while geographically removed from major urban centres, remains connected through media and government broadcasts – a lifeline that becomes increasingly unreliable as the crisis escalates. The coastline itself, traditionally associated with freedom, escape and open horizons, takes on a more ominous quality in this adaptation. The ocean is no longer a place of retreat but a boundary, a site of foreboding change. It is from the sea that the birds come, migrating, gathering, and waiting.

This environment offers rich opportunities for metaphor and symbolism, particularly in the context of climate disaster. Rising sea levels, violent storms and ecological shifts mirror the play's central anxieties. The town, which once provided safety for Tessa and Nat after their 'incident' in the city, is now turning against them. The land, the sky and the sea itself feel hostile, reinforcing the play's themes of powerlessness and displacement.

Though the script does not name a specific location, the Malthouse creative team has drawn inspiration from Apollo Bay in Victoria – a small town surrounded by ocean and national parklands, where nature feels both majestic and untamed. However, others might picture a setting like Portland, Victoria, an industrial harbor town with a more exposed and windswept coastline. Or perhaps somewhere on the South Gippsland coast, where dairy pastures extend right to the edge of the beach and farmhouses are often a mile or more apart. These differing interpretations leave space for dramaturgical exploration: What kind of town is this? How do its specific environmental and social characteristics affect the unfolding crisis?

## EXPLORE

Look at real-world disasters, coastal or otherwise (such as extreme storms, floods, bushfires, or ecological collapses). How do communities respond when nature turns hostile?

What is the role of isolation in horror storytelling? How does setting influence the sense of helplessness in films and plays like *Jaws*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, or *Wake in Fright*?

What if it took place in an urban city – how would the birds disrupt modern infrastructure? Would the attacks feel more apocalyptic, with birds swarming skyscrapers, clogging roads, and overwhelming emergency services? Would the government and media response be different in a high-population setting?

*The local footy team bus, packed tight with our neighbours... They're leaving for the city...*

## ACT THREE, SCENE NINE

## ACTIVITY: TOWN PLANNING

Design the town:

- As a group, create a visual and descriptive map of the town. What are its key features? Is it a tourist town, a fishing village, or an industrial port?
- Decide on a major landmark that plays a role in the crisis (e.g. a lighthouse, a pier, a local pub, an abandoned building).
- Imagine how the townspeople would react in Week One of the birds' strange behaviour – before the full attacks begin. How does tension spread? Who dismisses it? Who panics first?









# SOCIETY, POLITICS & CULTURE

*The Birds* is not just a horror story – it is a social and political reflection of the world it was written in. This particular adaptation explores a society shaped by economic instability, government inaction, misinformation and growing divisions between people. The play is set in a small, coastal town, where status, survival and trust in authority all come into question as the crisis escalates.

At its core, this adaptation asks:

- Who do we trust when disaster strikes?
- How do people behave under pressure?
- What happens when the systems that are supposed to protect us fail?

These questions lead us to examine the social, cultural, and political forces shaping the world of the play.

*We couldn't afford the prices. Couldn't afford the noise... The break ins...*

## **ACT ONE, SCENE ONE**



## SOCIAL STRUCTURE

### *Class, Community & Survival*

The play highlights economic precarity – Tessa and Nat left the city because they couldn't afford to stay. They sought safety in a quieter life, but their stability is an illusion; the birds arrive to shatter it. Meanwhile, Muriel, a struggling single mother, is further down the social ladder, and her fate reflects how those with fewer resources are often left behind in disasters.

At first, the town's social structures remain intact, with characters still trusting media reports and government messages. But as the birds continue their attacks, a breakdown occurs. People turn on each other. Help does not come. The play suggests that in times of crisis, survival may not depend on morality, but on power, luck and access to resources.

### DISCUSS

- How do different characters respond to crisis? Does class affect their ability to survive?
- Who else do we see as Muriel's real-world counterparts? Who is most vulnerable when disasters strike?
- Would this story play out differently in a wealthier town? In a more diverse community?

## CULTURAL FEARS

### *What the Birds Represent*

The birds may be a symbol of nature reclaiming control, but they also represent fear itself. Fear spreads faster than the attacks do – through media speculation, government inaction and human paranoia.

This adaptation reflects modern cultural fears, including:

- Climate change: Nature turning against humans, the unpredictability of the environment.
- Pandemic trauma: A slow-building disaster that people first dismiss, then panic about too late.
- Misinformation and distrust: Some characters believe official sources; others turn to conspiracy theories.

At its heart, the play mirrors real-world societal fractures, where crises often expose deeper fears, prejudices, and inequalities.

### INVESTIGATE

- Find lines in the script where characters either dismiss the danger or react with panic. What does this reveal about their worldview?
- How does the play depict trust vs. paranoia? What is the role of media in shaping this?
- What do you think the birds 'mean' in this version? How could different interpretations change how the play is staged?

# POLITICAL SYSTEMS

## *Failure of Institutions & Government Response*

The birds do not attack all at once – they test, they wait, they escalate. Meanwhile, the government response is slow and ineffective. The play highlights how institutions are often too rigid, bureaucratic, or self-interested to act decisively in real crises.

Modern parallels may be clear:

- Bushfires, floods and pandemics (sometimes) have exposed government delays and poor communication.
- Misinformation spreads quickly, often creating more fear than the actual disaster.
- Those in power are often disconnected from those most affected.

The play questions whether people can rely on leadership in times of crisis – or if survival ultimately depends on the individual.

## ACTIVITY: DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Imagine you are in Tessa and Nat's town when the attacks escalate. Resources are scarce, and you have to decide who gets access to shelter, supplies and protection.

**STEP 1:** Each student is assigned a character role – a government official, a journalist, a wealthy business or homeowner, a single mother, a nurse, a migrant worker, etc.

**STEP 2:** The group must debate and decide who should get priority in the town's only safe shelter.

**STEP 3:** After the debate, reflect:

- How did class, status or personal bias shape decisions?
- Did moral reasoning change when survival was at stake?
- How does this exercise relate to the themes of *The Birds*?

*Society exists only as a mental concept; in the real world, there are only individuals.*

**OSCAR WILDE**





# LANGUAGE

The language of *The Birds* is naturalistic and contemporary, reflecting the everyday speech of a modern Australian town. The script is written in prose, not heightened or poetic language, which grounds the story in realism. Within the often visceral dialogue, however, there can also be found deep, subtextual layers of tension and fear – characters don't always say what they mean, and their words often contrast with their emotions or actions.

In this adaptation, language plays a crucial role in shaping mood and meaning:

- Characters use language to reassure themselves – but their words often ring hollow.
- Unspoken truths linger – some things are too terrifying to acknowledge aloud.
- Repetition and fragmented speech patterns reflect growing anxiety and breakdown.
- Perhaps most significantly, silence becomes just as important as spoken dialogue.

As the attacks escalate, language starts to break down, and the play shifts subtly into a space where sound design takes over some of the storytelling. Silence, distortion and layered voices create meaning and affect interpretation. The planned binaural soundscape will replace words, immersing the audience in a world where human communication becomes secondary to survival instinct.

*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.*

**LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN**



## INVESTIGATE

Look for moments in the script where...

- Characters talk about normal things despite increasing danger. What does this reveal about denial and fear?
- A character repeats phrases, creates lists, or fragments sentences – does this show distress, uncertainty, or an attempt to control the situation?
- Someone avoids answering a direct question – what does this tell us about power dynamics or unspoken fears?
- Characters lie to themselves or each other through language – what effect does this have?

*The Pagan Reed Warbler*

*The Mysterious Starling*

*The Vermillion Flycatcher*

*The Carolina Parakeet*

*The Lord Howe Gerygone*

*The Laysan Honeycreeper*

*The Bridled White-Eye*

*The Passenger Pigeon*

*The Lord God Bird*

**ACT THREE, SCENE TEN**



# THEATRE HISTORY & STYLE

*Poor Theatre. High Tech.*

**LOUISE FOX**

*The Birds*

*The Birds* is a rare script that is written for a very specific design utilisation – binaural soundscapes – and asks for a highly stylised production that blends multiple theatrical forms to create an immersive, psychological horror experience. Rather than relying on conventional staging and spectacle, *The Birds* distorts theatrical expectations and makes sound design and sensory manipulation as crucial as performance.

At its core you could argue *The Birds* combines elements of:

- Horror Theatre: A rare but growing presence in live performance, relying on suspense, tension and audience immersion.
- Poor Theatre: Stripped-back staging that prioritises actor physicality, voice and minimal design, creating a raw, intimate experience without reliance on elaborate sets or technical effects.
- Binaural and Sensory Theatre: Using sound as a primary storytelling device, creating an intimate, almost inescapable experience for the audience.
- Australian Gothic: A subgenre of Gothic storytelling that blends isolation, psychological terror and an eerie sense of the landscape turning against its inhabitants.
- Eco-Horror / Climate Horror: A contemporary form of horror theatre exploring the fear of nature's revenge and the consequences of environmental destruction.
- Immersive Theatre: By placing sound directly into the audience's ears, this production manipulates perception and proximity, pulling the audience inside the protagonist's mind.
- Expressionism and Psychological Realism: The world of the play is realistic, but as Tessa's fear grows, the environment warps, reflecting her internal unravelling.

## DISCUSS

- What other theatrical styles are suggested in the script?
- Do you see this play as 'eclectic theatre'? If so, which theatre styles (listed or otherwise) do you think it draws from?
- What makes this a 'horror play' rather than just a thriller or drama? Does horror work differently in theatre than in film? Why or why not?
- What does this play say about the evolution of theatrical storytelling, especially in relation to technology and sensory immersion?
- How might the binaural sound design change the relationship between actor and audience?
- How does the script create a feeling of Australian Gothic isolation? What descriptions or interactions reinforce this?

## EXPLORE

Research theatre productions that have experimented with horror.  
How does *The Birds* compare?

Look at immersive theatre techniques (Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, Malthouse Theatre's very own *Because the Night* or *Hour of the Wolf*, or other binaural theatre productions). What is gained when audiences are 'inside' the experience rather than watching from a distance?

Explore the history of Australian Gothic in literature and theatre.  
How does the Australian landscape contribute to horror storytelling?

*Theatre is the art of looking at ourselves.*

**AUGUSTO BOAL**











# CHALLENGES

This activity is designed to get students thinking practically, dramaturgically and empathically about the challenges of staging *The Birds*. Below, I've expanded the list of challenges for each group, covering logistical, creative, safety and audience-experience concerns.

## ACTIVITY: DEPARTMENT HEADS

Divide the class up into five groups. Put students in the shoes of either the actors, the director, the designers, stage management, or the audience.

Using the script, their task is to annotate and brainstorm as many challenges as they can. These may include logistical, creative, safety, audience-experience concerns, and/or simply questions like 'how will this work?' They can then report their findings back to the class. Then, as a whole class, come up with one or two potential mitigations for each challenge.

Remind them to only use what's evident in the script. There will likely be quite a few overlapping challenges identified by more than one department/group.

Here are a few you can use to get them started:

## ACTORS

- Dynamic character switches: If one actor plays multiple roles, how do they distinguish them physically, vocally, and emotionally?
- Emotional wellbeing: The play deals with grief, death, isolation, and violence. How do actors protect their mental health while performing such intense material night after night?
- Working with binaural sound: If sound effects (such as voices, bird calls, or whispers) are being piped into audience headphones, how does this affect timing and delivery?
- Interacting with unseen elements: The birds are never physically present; how does an actor make an attack feel real and terrifying?
- Physical endurance: The role of Tessa is demanding; how does an actor maintain stamina through multiple performances?

## DIRECTOR

- Staging something physically impossible – the birds: How can the production evoke their presence without actually showing them? How do we make the audience 'see' them in their minds?
- Integrating high-tech elements seamlessly: How does the director balance live performance with the pre-recorded binaural soundscape?
- Directing for a headphone audience: How does the use of binaural sound change blocking, movement and audience perception?
- Maintaining tension and pacing: Without traditional horror film editing, how do you control suspense in live theatre?
- Navigating abstraction vs. realism: Should the production lean into psychological horror or remain fully grounded in realism?

## DESIGNERS

- Supporting rapid scene and character changes: If an actor plays multiple roles, how do costumes, lighting and sound help differentiate them?
- Representing multiple locations: The play moves between a house, a beach, a school, a shop and an abandoned town. How can design support these transitions in a minimal, flexible way?
- Designing within an immersive soundscape: How does lighting, set and costume design work when the audience's primary sense is hearing? Does it need to be more or less visually detailed?
- Balancing realism and abstraction: Should the world of the play feel hyper-real, symbolic or surreal?
- Creating fear through design: How do light, shadow and spatial elements contribute to tension and unease?
- How does the show adapt for different theatre spaces or touring?
- What are the accessibility challenges? How do you adapt a binaural experience for audience members with hearing impairments?

## STAGE MANAGEMENT

- Onstage safety: Are there weapons or tools being used? Is there running, falling or sudden movements that need to be rehearsed safely?
- Cleaning up potential mess: If there's blood, dirt or other stage effects, how do you ensure quick resets between performances?
- Protecting set and costume: If the show involves physical struggle or intense movement, how do you prevent damage to props and costumes?
- Syncing with sound cues: If the show relies on pre-recorded sound, does it need perfect synchronisation with live action?
- Audience experience logistics: How do you handle headphone malfunctions or audience discomfort?
- Is there an emergency plan if technical difficulties arise (e.g. sound system failure, power outages)?

## AUDIENCE

- Sensory overload: How do you warn and prepare audiences for an intense binaural experience, especially those sensitive to sound?
- Emotional triggers: How do you ensure audiences are aware that the play includes violence, death and pedocide?
- Offensive language and content: Are there cultural, religious or ethical sensitivities to consider in the audience?
- Managing audience immersion: How does the production keep the audience engaged but not overwhelmed?
- Audience agency: Does the headphone experience make them passive spectators or active participants in the horror?



# THEMES





# CLIMATE COLLAPSE & ENVIRONMENTAL DISPLACEMENT

In this adaptation of *The Birds*, the natural world is not just a setting, it is an active force, unpredictable and hostile. The birds' attack is not framed as a random event but as something that has been building over time, mirroring the slow, inevitable march of climate change. Solastalgia (the emotional distress from environmental change) is deeply present.

The play repeatedly mentions sudden shifts in seasons, abnormal weather patterns and the feeling that something is 'wrong' – hints that the world is changing in ways the characters do not fully understand. Tessa and Nat are no longer just unsafe, they are *wrong to have believed safety was possible*.

Unlike in earlier versions of *The Birds*, where the attacks are left ambiguous, in this adaptation there's a feeling of nature turning hostile – not just in a mysterious way, but in direct response to human action; a world that no longer makes sense because of human impact. Could the birds be a metaphor for nature taking revenge, reclaiming control, or resisting human destruction?

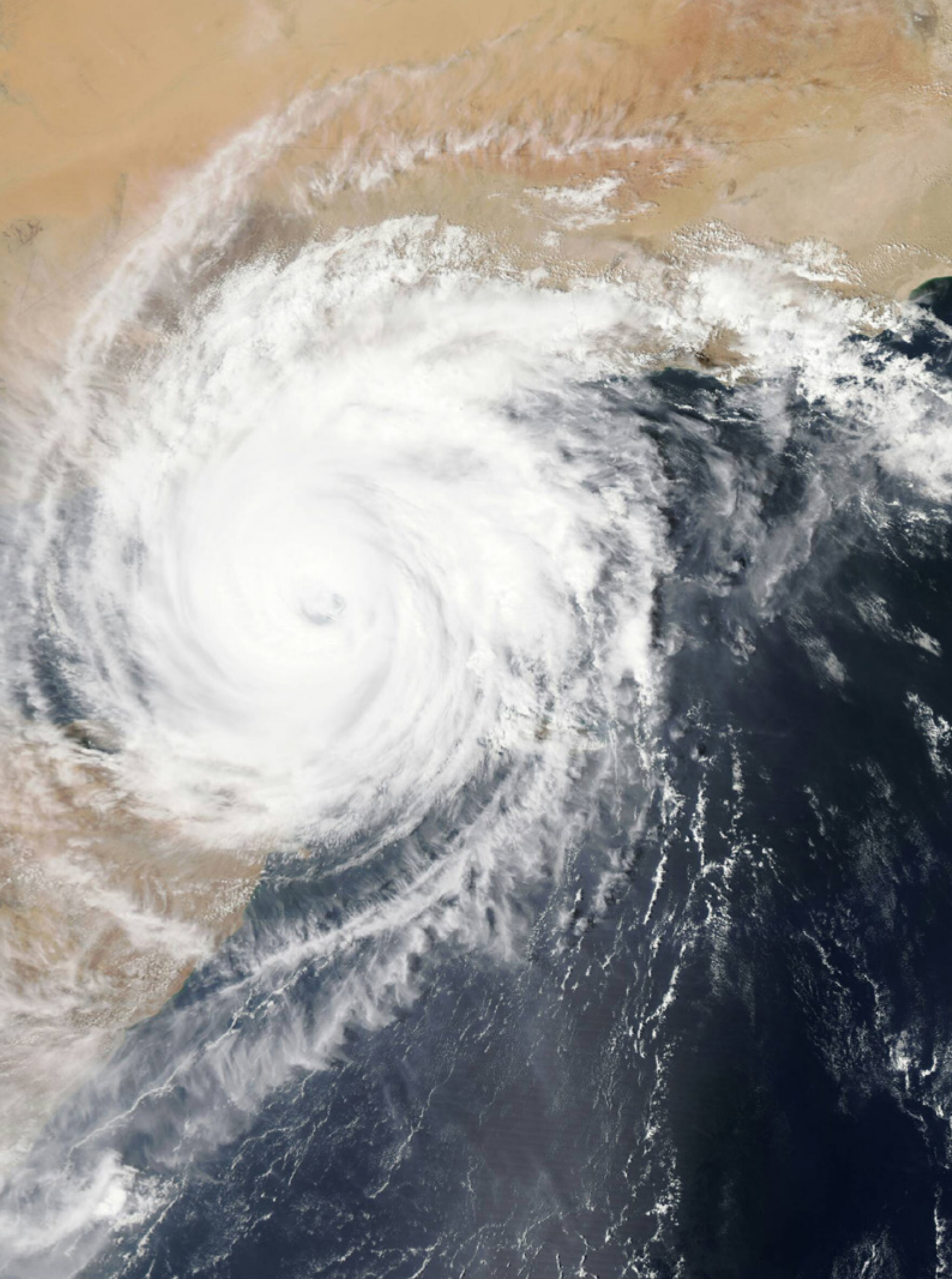
The theme of environmental displacement is also crucial. Tessa and Nat have already fled one life, seeking refuge in a coastal town, only to find there is no true escape from the consequences of a world in crisis. As the birds' attacks escalate, their town is no longer liveable. The characters are forced to adapt, flee, or perish, just as communities around the world face forced migration due to climate disasters.

Conversely, the idea of birds themselves migrating from the North, 'flooding in', or being invasive species could parallel climate refugees, rising sea levels, or environmental collapse forcing species (and people) into new and unnatural movements. Or, perhaps, in this interpretation, the birds do not represent an outside threat but a reckoning – a sign that the natural world has reached a breaking point.

*Even yesterday, as the wind changed overnight and it was suddenly winter –  
we thought, we truly thought, we were safe.*

## **ACT ONE, SCENE ONE**







THERE IS NO  
PLANET B





## INVESTIGATE

Look for lines in the script where characters notice changes in the environment. What clues suggest the world is shifting?

Are there moments where characters dismiss or downplay the birds' behaviour? How does this reflect real-world climate denial?

Is there a connection between human decisions and the birds' arrival? Are they reacting to something, or was this inevitable?

## EXPLORE

Compare *The Birds* to other climate disaster stories – films like *Don't Look Up*, novels like *The Swarm*, or theatre works exploring environmental collapse. What are the similarities in structural touchpoints, character or archetypes, or symbols? What are the differences?

Look at instances where climate change has forced human migration. How does the play reflect these experiences?





# SHARED TRAUMA & SOCIETAL BREAKDOWN

As the birds attack, the world of the play begins to unravel – not just physically, but socially and psychologically. Fear, uncertainty and isolation erode the trust between people, and the characters are forced to confront not only the external horror of the birds but also the internal fractures within themselves and their community.

The script is steeped in post-pandemic residue. There are references to lockdowns, isolation, job loss and an undercurrent of paranoia about ‘the incident’ that forced Tessa’s family to relocate. The birds act almost like a pandemic-style contagion, spreading through towns, disrupting society and forcing people into survivalist mindsets.

*Civilizations die from suicide, not by murder.*

**ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE**

Meanwhile, Muriel, a single mother at the margins of society, represents those most vulnerable when disaster strikes. Their town, at first a place of quiet retreat, becomes a site of escalating fear, misinformation and individual survivalism.

This theme reflects how societies respond to crisis; how disasters, pandemics, and global events don’t just threaten our physical safety but also test our ability to remain unified, empathetic and rational. As resources dwindle, tensions rise and order collapses, we are left to ask:

- When fear takes hold, do we turn to each other, or against each other?
- Is societal breakdown inevitable when survival is at stake?
- Can trauma ever be fully left behind, or does it shape how we react to future crises?
- How do we cope with disaster when institutions fail us? Who do we trust when catastrophe arrives?

## EXPLORE

Research how societies have responded to collective trauma in real life (e.g. post-9/11, COVID-19, bushfire and flood recovery efforts).

Compare *The Birds* to other stories of societal breakdown (*The Road*, *Contagion*, *Lord of the Flies*). What patterns emerge in how people behave under extreme stress?

Look at psychological studies on group panic vs. collective resilience.

What factors determine whether people help or harm each other in a crisis?

*We know your time is important to you.*

*Stay on the line to speak to a service provider.*

*You have advanced in the queue.*

*Your call should be answered in approximately...*

*...25 minutes.*

**ACT TWO, SCENE FOUR**





# THE MEDIA & MISINFORMATION

*And the birds are controlled by the Chinese.*

*Or the Russians.*

*Do you think it's the Chinese?*

*I wouldn't put it past them.*

## **ACT TWO, SCENE FIVE**

In *The Birds*, the media acts as both a source of information and a source of deception. While government broadcasts and news reports offer official narratives of events, they also downplay, misinterpret, or outright dismiss the severity of the crisis. This mirrors real-world instances where disasters are politicised, turned into entertainment or ignored until they spiral out of control.

Throughout the play, there are contradictory messages. Some characters rely on media for guidance, while others distrust it entirely, turning instead to conspiracy theories, rumours or their own interpretations. In a world where the truth is uncertain, people are left to decide for themselves what to believe – and who to trust.

This theme is particularly relevant in 2025, where misinformation spreads rapidly through social media, 24-hour news cycles and politically biased reporting. The play asks:

- When faced with crisis, do we turn to official sources, or do we question them?
- How does the media shape public perception of danger?
- What happens when misinformation spreads faster than the truth?

The play's partnership with sound design reinforces this theme – radio broadcasts, distorted messages and conflicting reports make it difficult for both the characters and the audience to determine what is real.

*Censorship no longer works by hiding information from you; censorship works by flooding you with immense amounts of misinformation, of irrelevant information, of funny cat videos, until you're just unable to focus.*

**YUVAL NOAH HARARI**

## **DISCUSS**

- How does the play critique media? Does it suggest that media makes things worse in a crisis? Or does it serve a necessary function?
- How do different characters react to news reports? Who trusts them, and who dismisses them?
- How does the presence of misinformation increase fear and paranoia?
- What happens when these characters (and/or real-world citizens) disagree on what they've heard, or contradict each other? How does this create conflict?
- Why do people believe false narratives even when facts are available?

*A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.*

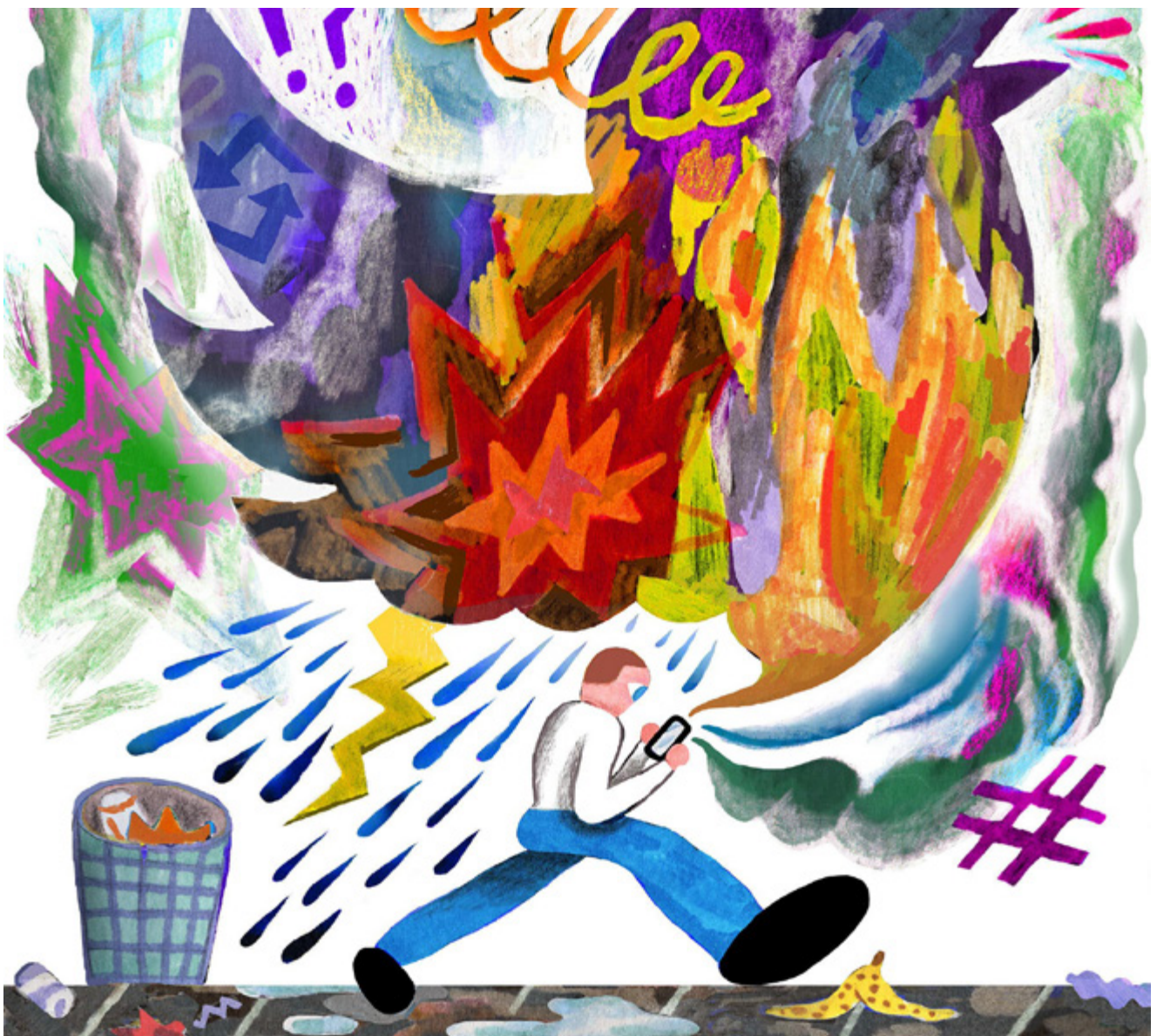
**MARK TWAIN**

(MARK TWAIN DID NOT ACTUALLY SAY THIS)

*We can't have, like, willy-nilly proliferation of fake news. That's crazy. You can't have more types of fake news than real news. That's allowing public deception to go unchecked. That's crazy.*

**ELON MUSK**

(BUT ELON MUSK DID, LIKE, UNIRONICALLY SAY THIS)





# ECONOMIC ANXIETY & CLASS DIVIDE

At first glance, *The Birds* appears to be a story about survival in a time of crisis, but beneath the horror lies a stark economic reality: not everyone has the same ability to endure disaster. Class and financial status shape how the characters navigate the unfolding catastrophe.

Tessa and Nat left the city because they could no longer afford to stay, seeking stability in a smaller town – a particularly 2025 concern in Australia, where housing crises, inflation and economic precarity dominate. They are middle class, but precariously so – one bad decision or event, and they are vulnerable. Meanwhile, Muriel, a struggling single mother with substance issues and fewer resources, is at an even greater disadvantage. Her social and financial status makes her an easy target for dismissal, her fears unacknowledged, her struggles overlooked.

The play explores who gets left behind when disaster strikes. Wealth and power often determine who gets access to safety, resources and reliable information. In this world, like in our own, survival isn't just about strength or intelligence – it's about privilege.

*The Birds* in this adaptation isn't just about fear of the unknown, but fear of losing what little security we have. The play asks:

- How does class impact survival in this crisis?
- Who gets listened to, and who is dismissed?
- Is economic status an advantage, or does disaster make everyone equal?

*Poverty is the worst form of violence.*

**MAHATMA GANDHI**

## EXPLORE

Research how wealth shapes survival in real crises. Who was most affected during COVID-19, extreme weather events, or economic recessions?

Compare *The Birds* to other stories of class struggle in disaster (*Parasite*, *Snowpiercer*, *Contagion*). What patterns emerge?

Look at news reports about Australia's housing crisis. How do rising costs force people into more precarious living situations?





# OTHER THEMES

## COULD THIS PLAY ALSO BE ABOUT...

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### CLIMATE CHANGE?

*Absolutely.*

The abrupt shift in seasons reflects real-world weather unpredictability.

The birds could represent a natural system correcting itself, attacking the species that has damaged it most – us.

The government's delayed and ineffective response mirrors real-world climate inaction.

---

### HUMAN HUBRIS?

*Yes.*

Tessa and Nat thought they could escape the chaos of the city, but there is no escape.

The birds don't attack at random; they systematically dismantle human life – first testing, then swarming, then laying siege.

We think we are dominant over nature. The birds prove us wrong.

---

### COLONIALISM & FIRST NATIONS DISPLACEMENT?

*Very possibly.*

This adaptation introduces the idea of invasive species, mirroring the history of colonisation in Australia.

The birds 'don't belong here' but who decides what belongs where? (Just as settlers decided that.)

The birds, like the land itself, may be rejecting those who tried to claim it.

---

### XENOPHOBIA?

*Like the original?*

Is this a story about how societies react to outsiders?

Could the birds symbolise climate refugees, political scapegoats, or even cultural anxieties about invasion?

---

### ECONOMIC COLLAPSE & THE DISPOSABLE CLASS?

*Sure!*

The characters' financial struggles suggest a world where not everyone's survival is guaranteed. Could the birds be a metaphor for the growing divide between those who can escape and those who are left behind?

---

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**MENTAL HEALTH?**

*Maybe!*

Are the birds an external force, or do they represent Tessa's deteriorating mental state?

Could the entire play be a metaphor for how trauma rewires the brain to expect disaster?

---

**SURVEILLANCE & LOSS OF PRIVACY?**

*Interesting...*

With sound design playing a major role, does the play evoke themes of being constantly watched, listened to, or manipulated?

Could the birds represent the inescapable presence of technology, government surveillance, or the loss of personal autonomy?

---

**INTERGENERATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY?**

*Go on...*

Are the birds a reckoning for past human mistakes?

Does this play serve as a warning that younger generations will inherit the consequences of previous ones' failures?

---

**RELIGION & JUDGEMENT DAY?**

*Ooooh...*

By the end, Tessa realises this is not just a strange event – this is war.

The birds are deliberate. They are winning.

The script suggests this isn't an accident of nature, but a reckoning.

The birds aren't just mindlessly attacking – they are watching, waiting, learning.

Maybe they aren't mindless at all...

---



# EVOLUTION OF THE ORIGINAL THEMES

This section explores how the themes of Daphne du Maurier's original short story have been changed in this Malthouse adaptation.

## 1. FROM WARTIME PARANOIA → EXISTENTIAL & ENVIRONMENTAL PARANOIA

Du Maurier's version was heavily influenced by WWII fears and Cold War anxiety – the idea that destruction could arrive at any moment, beyond human control.

The stage adaptation retains that feeling of inevitable doom, but shifts the cause to ecological imbalance and systemic failure.

In 1952, the threat was war; in 2025, the threat is ourselves – our consumption, denial, and destruction of nature.

## 2. FROM SIMPLE SURVIVAL → PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR & MORAL COLLAPSE

The original story was about barricading the house and waiting for the birds to leave.

This version is about losing your mind in the process. Tessa goes from defensive to enraged, literally stuffing dead birds into the walls as a kind of warding symbol.

The ending takes it further:

In du Maurier's version, survival is uncertain.

Here, Tessa actively kills a suffering child because she sees no other way.

The birds have driven her to commit what would otherwise be unthinkable.

*The Birds* now explores not just survival, but what survival does to the human soul.

## 3. RURAL ISOLATION → THE UNCERTAINTY OF A GLOBALISED WORLD

Du Maurier's protagonist, Nat, faces the crisis in a small Cornish farming village with limited access to outside information. Survival means relying on local knowledge, instinct and isolation.

This adaptation, set in a coastal Australian town, presents a world still connected by media, government messaging and external authority, but the information they receive is contradictory, vague or misleading. The modern fear is not just being alone, but being bombarded with conflicting narratives and not knowing what to believe.





# THE PRODUCTION









This chapter is a series of questions to ignite students' imaginations about how the playtext might be interpreted on stage. A long list, but certainly not exhaustive! These prompts and provocations are based on many of the contexts and themes already explored in this Prompt Pack.

This could be delivered as an open class discussion, workshop activity in groups, or individual writing task.

## **HOW DOES THE TIME PERIOD SHAPE YOUR INTERPRETATION?**

- Would your version lean into 2025 anxieties, making the setting explicitly contemporary, with references to climate disaster, pandemic trauma and government failures?
- Could you set the play in a near-future dystopia, where the birds are a response to environmental collapse?
- Would placing it in the post-war 1950s, like du Maurier's original, shift the fear from environmental disaster to Cold War paranoia?

## **HOW DOES PLACE AFFECT THE PLAY'S MEANING?**

- Is your version hyper-local (recognisably Australian) or more abstract, a nameless coastal town?
- Would shifting the staged setting from a coastal town to an urban city (or a remote, bushfire-ravaged landscape) change how the birds' attacks are experienced?
- Could the setting feel more claustrophobic, with a constantly shrinking world – perhaps an even tighter single-location staging, like an underground shelter?

## **HOW DOES THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE IMPACT SURVIVAL?**

- In your interpretation, does the wealth or class of the characters determine their ability to escape the crisis?
- Could you emphasise social division, with wealthier characters still trusting the media and government while working-class characters recognise the danger earlier?
- How do community relationships factor in? Do people turn on each other, or is there an attempt to unite?

## **WHAT CULTURAL FEARS ARE BEING EXPLORED?**

- How does this story reflect dominant Australian anxieties (fear of nature, isolation, government inaction, misinformation)?
- Could the birds represent a colonial reckoning, nature rebelling against human interference, or the silencing of marginalised voices?
- In your version, does the breakdown of society reflect real-world cultural tensions – fear of 'outsiders', pandemic paranoia or loss of control?

## WHAT POLITICAL UNDERTONES EXIST IN YOUR INTERPRETATION?

- Is your version a direct political allegory, where government inaction makes the crisis worse?
- Could emergency broadcasts and misinformation be used to critique modern media and political responses to real-world disasters?
- What do you think the birds 'mean' in this version? How could different interpretations change how the play is staged?
- If the birds represent a rebellion against human dominance, what does that say about power structures in your staging?

## HOW DOES THE LANGUAGE OF THE SCRIPT GUIDE INTERPRETATION?

- Does the script's naturalistic dialogue suggest a hyper-realistic, immersive experience – or could you experiment with stylisation, heightened text, or fragmented speech?
- Could you use audio layering, distortion, or repetition to emphasise paranoia or trauma in the characters' speech?
- How might silence, or the removal of speech altogether in key moments, shift meaning in your version?
- How might the binaural sound design in this production act as its own 'language'? What could it communicate that words do not?

## WHAT THEATRICAL TRADITIONS OR INNOVATIONS INFLUENCE YOUR INTERPRETATION?

- How does this play fit into Australia's theatre history – does it echo other works of horror, eco-theatre, or psychological realism?
- How does the binaural sound design shape staging choices – do you make the audience feel like they're inside the protagonist's mind?
- Would your version play with other immersive techniques, like audience participation, site-specific staging, or altered sensory experiences?

## WHAT DETAILS IN THE SCRIPT ACT AS CLUES FOR INTERPRETATION?

- What does the progression of the bird attacks reveal – are they a slow takeover or a sudden, chaotic war?
- How does Tessa's transformation over the play signal the real horror – does she become more desperate, paranoid, or even bird-like herself?
- What elements of the script remain ambiguous and how does your version choose to fill in the gaps, or leave them unanswered?



## HOW DO THE BIRDS FUNCTION IN YOUR INTERPRETATION?

- Are they a metaphor for climate collapse, pandemic contagion, or societal breakdown?
- Do they have an intelligent, almost supernatural intent, or are they simply nature correcting an imbalance?
- Are they truly attacking, or are they reclaiming?

## HOW DOES SOUND SHAPE THE AUDIENCE'S PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE?

- Could binaural sound be used to blur the line between reality and paranoia?
- Should the audience feel like they are inside Tessa's head, experiencing her breakdown in real time?
- Does the sound create a suffocating, inescapable world, or moments of unsettling silence?

## WHAT DOES SURVIVAL LOOK LIKE IN YOUR VERSION OF THE PLAY?

- Is Tessa's arc a descent into madness, or is she the only one seeing things clearly?
- Is the ending tragic because the birds have won, or because Tessa has become the thing she feared?
- How does the play explore the morality of survival – who gets to live, and at what cost?

## WHAT DOES THE SETTING TELL US ABOUT THE WORLD?

- Does your interpretation emphasise isolation, suggesting there is no help coming?
- Does the sea represent freedom and escape, or a false hope, a trap?
- How does Tessa and Nat's house change over the play – from a sanctuary to a prison?

## WHAT ROLE DOES THE AUDIENCE PLAY?

- Should they feel like witnesses, trapped alongside the characters, or detached observers?
- Could there be moments of direct address, pulling them into Tessa's paranoia?
- Should sound or lighting shifts manipulate audience perception, making them question what's real?

## HOW DOES THIS STORY SPEAK TO 2025 AUSTRALIA?

- Does your interpretation emphasise climate disaster, economic collapse, or government inaction?
- How do the media and misinformation themes play out in your staging?
- Would you incorporate real-world audio snippets (news, emergency broadcasts, political speeches) to ground it in our world?

## WHO OR WHAT IS THE REAL ANTAGONIST?

- Is it the birds, or is it human arrogance and denial?
- Is it society's inability to act in crisis?
- Is it fear itself – the way panic destroys us before the real threat even arrives?

## HOW WOULD YOU STAGE THE THEME OF CLIMATE COLLAPSE & ENVIRONMENTAL DISPLACEMENT?

- Would you lean into eco-horror, making nature feel more monstrous?  
Or would you play it subtly, letting the unease creep in?
- How would lighting, sound and movement reflect a world breaking down?
- If the birds represent nature's revenge, is there any hope for the characters?  
Or is this an irreversible collapse?

## HOW WOULD YOU STAGE THE THEME OF SHARED TRAUMA & SOCIETAL BREAKDOWN?

- Would you make the community feel close-knit at the start, or are divisions present from the beginning?
- How does staging show the increasing breakdown. Does the space feel smaller, more fragmented, or more claustrophobic?
- Does the play suggest there is any hope for rebuilding, or is the collapse complete?

## HOW WOULD YOU STAGE THE THEME OF THE MEDIA & MISINFORMATION?

- Would you make the media presence feel overwhelming, with constant audio feeds?  
Or would you highlight silence, emphasising the lack of reliable information?
- How would you use sound and lighting to show the spread of misinformation?  
Could projections, overlapping voices, or sudden audio distortions be used?
- If the play took place in the age of social media, how would that change its meaning?

## HOW WOULD YOU STAGE THE THEME OF ECONOMIC ANXIETY & CLASS DIVIDE?

- Would you emphasise class division visually through costume, set design, or character movement?
- How would you highlight economic struggle through language, tension, or contrasting lifestyles on stage?
- Does the play suggest that class matters in survival, or does disaster make everyone equal in suffering?



# RESOURCES





# RESOURCES

These resources are divided up into the chapters and sections for which they were used as references or sources.

Note that all resources are hyperlinked to their source for those clicking on a digital Prompt Pack but, for those holding a paper version, shorter bitly links have been provided to copy into your browser (note these are case sensitive).

In addition to the references and links below, you can also find a general **Resources Dropbox** for Malthouse's production of *The Birds* that will be gradually populated with things like set and costume design files, recorded Q&As, extra reading, reviews, show program and other material as it becomes available – so keep checking back there throughout the year.

## BACKGROUND: THE SOURCE MATERIAL

- **The Birds by Daphne du Maurier**  
Original short story | 1952 | [bit.ly/BIRDSBackground01](https://bit.ly/BIRDSBackground01)
- **The Birds by Daphne du Maurier**  
Audiobook | Classic Ghost Stories Podcast | 2023 | [bit.ly/BIRDSBackground02](https://bit.ly/BIRDSBackground02)
- **The Birds directed by Alfred Hitchcock**  
Film adaptation | 1963 | [bit.ly/BIRDSBackground03](https://bit.ly/BIRDSBackground03)
- **Daphne Du Maurier: One of Cornwall's Greatest Ambassadors**  
Audio documentary | ABC Radio | 2023 | [ab.co/41WnJq0](https://ab.co/41WnJq0)
- **60 Years Later, The Birds Is a Potent Reminder That We're Not in Charge**  
Article | [inverse.com](https://inverse.com) | 2023 | [bit.ly/BIRDSBackground04](https://bit.ly/BIRDSBackground04)
- **Book vs. Films: The Birds**  
Comparative essay | [litreactor.com](https://litreactor.com) | 2019 | [bit.ly/BIRDSBackground05](https://bit.ly/BIRDSBackground05)
- **Review: The Birds by Conor McPherson**  
Theatre review | [stagebuddy.com](https://stagebuddy.com) | 2009 | [bit.ly/BIRDSBackground06](https://bit.ly/BIRDSBackground06)

## CONTEXTS: TIME

- **What is Hitchcock's The Birds Really About?**  
Analytical essay | Medium | 2017 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts01](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts01)
- **Apocalypse, Constantly**  
Article | The Atlantic | 2024 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts02](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts02)

## CONTEXTS: PLACE

- **Watching Alfred Hitchcock's The Birds During a Pandemic**  
Article | Film Companion | 2020 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts03](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts03)
- **The Lost Summer**  
Illustrated article | ABC News | 2020 | [ab.co/4isY533](https://ab.co/4isY533)

- **The Isolation at the Heart of Australian Horror**  
Article | Kill Your Darlings | 2020 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts04](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts04)
- **Wide Open Fear: Australian Horror and Gothic Fiction**  
Book Extract | [thisishorror.co.uk](https://thisishorror.co.uk) | 2013 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts05](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts05)
- **Sounding 'Unstable Terrain' in Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock***  
Article | Metro Magazine | 2017 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts06](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts06)
- **Stories of M: *Picnic at Hanging Rock***  
Show information | Malthouse Theatre | 2018 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts07](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts07)
- **Wake in Fright Opening Scene**  
Video | Youtube | 1971 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts08](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts08)
- **Stories of M: *Wake in Fright***  
Show information | Malthouse Theatre | 2019 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts09](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts09)
- **Jaws directed by Steven Spielberg**  
Film | 1975

## CONTEXTS: SOCIETY, POLITICS & CULTURE

- **Review of COVID Response Finds Australians Unlikely to Accept Lockdowns Again**  
Article | ABC News | 2024 | [ab.co/4bWB0U1](https://ab.co/4bWB0U1)
- **As Bushfires Rage, Australia Faces Another Challenge: Protecting National Mental Health**  
Article | Time | 2020 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts10](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts10)
- **Too Little, Too Late: Australia's Disaster Response has been ... a Disaster**  
Article | The Guardian | 2022 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts11](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts11)
- **Sociology of Disasters**  
Journal Article | Colorado Natural Hazards Center | 2021 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts12](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts12)

## CONTEXTS: LANGUAGE

- **In Dialogue, What is Subtext?**  
Educational article | Gotham Writers | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts13](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts13)
- **What are Pinter Pauses? And Other Pinteresque Devices**  
Article | London Theatre Direct | 2018 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts14](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts14)
- **Why More Filmmakers Should Use Silence In Their Work**  
Article | [nofilmschool.com](https://nofilmschool.com) | 2024 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts15](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts15)
- **Metaphors We Live By by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson**  
Book | The University of Chicago Press | 1980 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts16](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts16)

## CONTEXTS: THEATRE HISTORY & STYLE

- **Forget Immersive Theatre, This Play Takes Place in Total Darkness**  
Article | Wired | 2017 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts17](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts17)
- **Theatre Styles**  
Education page index | The Drama Teacher | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts18](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts18)



- **Expanding Sound Design in Performing Arts**  
Journal Article | Critical Stages | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts19](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts19)
- **The Empty Space by Peter Brook**  
Book | Simon & Schuster | 1968 | [bit.ly/BIRDSContexts20](https://bit.ly/BIRDSContexts20)

## THEMES: CLIMATE COLLAPSE & ENVIRONMENTAL DISPLACEMENT

- **The Evolution of Eco-Horror**  
Article | [atmos.earth](https://atmos.earth) | 2022 | [bit.ly/BIRDSThemes01](https://bit.ly/BIRDSThemes01)
- **The Last of Us and the Radical Possibilities of Eco-Horror**  
Article | Kill Your Darlings | 2023 | [bit.ly/BIRDSThemes02](https://bit.ly/BIRDSThemes02)
- **Thousands of Australians Each Year Move Home Because of Extreme Weather Events: Study**  
Article | ABC News | 2024 | [ab.co/4bW2ljH](https://ab.co/4bW2ljH)
- **Climate change and inequality**  
Educational resources | Oxfam America | [bit.ly/BIRDSThemes03](https://bit.ly/BIRDSThemes03)
- **The Age of Solastalgia**  
Article | The Conversation | 2012 | [bit.ly/BIRDSThemes04](https://bit.ly/BIRDSThemes04)
- **Don't Look Up directed by Adam McKay**  
Film | 2021
- **The Swarm by Frank Schätzing**  
Novel | 2004
- **The Uninhabitable Earth by David Wallace-Wells**  
Non-fiction book | 2019
- **Parable of the Sower by Octavia E. Butler**  
Novel | 1993
- **The Drowned World by J.G. Ballard**  
Science fiction novel | 1962

## THEMES: SHARED TRAUMA & SOCIETAL BREAKDOWN

- **Recovering Emotionally from Disaster**  
Article | American Psychological Association | 2013 | [bit.ly/BIRDSThemes05](https://bit.ly/BIRDSThemes05)
- **Burnt Out**  
Pictorial article | ABC News | 2020 | [ab.co/4iyG1on](https://ab.co/4iyG1on)
- **Representing Crowd Behaviour in Emergency Planning Guidance: 'Mass Panic' or Collective Resilience?**  
Journal Article | Taylor & Francis Online | 2013 | [bit.ly/BIRDSThemes06](https://bit.ly/BIRDSThemes06)
- **The Manifestation and Causes of Public Panic in the Early Stage of COVID-19 in China: A Framework Based on Consciousness-Attitude-Behavior**  
Journal Article | Frontiers | 2024 | [bit.ly/BIRDSThemes07](https://bit.ly/BIRDSThemes07)
- **Surviving in the Age of Disaster**  
Podcast | To The Best of Our Knowledge | 2025 | [bit.ly/BIRDSThemes08](https://bit.ly/BIRDSThemes08)

## THEMES: THE MEDIA & MISINFORMATION

- **Bots and Trolls Spread False Arson Claims in Australian Fires ‘Disinformation Campaign’**  
Article | The Guardian | 2020 | [bit.ly/ BIRDSThemes09](https://bit.ly/BIRDSThemes09)
- **Fires Misinformation Being Spread Through Social Media**  
Article | ABC News | 2020 | [ab.co/4hld87Z](https://ab.co/4hld87Z)
- **W.H.O. Fights a Pandemic Besides Coronavirus**  
Article | NY Times | 2020 | [nyti.ms/4kWpThW](https://nyti.ms/4kWpThW)
- **Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky**  
Non-fiction book | 1988
- **The Social Dilemma directed by Jeff Orlowski**  
Documentary | 2020
- **Network directed by Sidney Lumet**  
Film | 1976

## THEMES: ECONOMIC ANXIETY & CLASS DIVIDE

- **People Are Exhausted, Angry and Anxious: What I Learned from Your Stories of Australia’s Housing Affordability Crisis**  
Article | The Guardian | 2024 | [bit.ly/BIRDSThemes11](https://bit.ly/BIRDSThemes11)
- **Children Going Hungry, Missing School amid Australia’s ‘Perfect Storm’ Cost-of-Living Crisis**  
Article | ABC News | 2024 | [ab.co/4iVvenV](https://ab.co/4iVvenV)
- **Disasters and Inequality are Two Sides of the Same Coin**  
Article | World Meteorological Organisation | 2023 | [bit.ly/BIRDSThemes12](https://bit.ly/BIRDSThemes12)
- **Capital in the Twenty-First Century by Thomas Piketty**  
Non-fiction book | 2013
- **Parasite directed by Bong Joon Ho**  
Film | 2019
- **Snowpiercer directed by Bong Joon Ho**  
Film | 2013

## OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Birds Resources Dropbox**  
[bit.ly/BIRDSPromptPack](https://bit.ly/BIRDSPromptPack)
- **The Birds Malthouse show page**  
[bit.ly/BIRDResources01](https://bit.ly/BIRDResources01)
- **Malthouse Education**  
[bit.ly/MalthouseEdu](https://bit.ly/MalthouseEdu)



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