

Weird birds and abandoned places: Pigeons' role in post-industrial settings

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This article examines the role of pigeons (Columba livia domestica) in post-industrial settings and presents a case study of an abandoned pulp mill silo in Meri-Toppila, Oulu, Finland. Pigeons and humans have a long-shared history, during which the former's role has changed from commodity to "nuisance" species. Using participant observation and perspectives from weirding and queer theory, this study explores the transformation of the human-bird relationship by observing a colony of pigeons at a culturally and historically significant site. In our urban cities, pigeons have found nesting places in attics, on building ledges and in nooks and abandoned structures. Even though we, as humans, avoid these abandoned places, these weird pigeons do not care about our dystopian images and instead thrive in places that we no longer consider valuable. Our everyday life could benefit from interaction with pigeons more than we might believe. Pigeons have become an integral part of our industrial heritage and could have a significant role to play in our daily lives if we were to only give them a chance.

KEYWORDS: pigeons; post-industrial landscapes; weird; queer; abandonment

Introduction

At first, there are just two of them, staring at me from the ledge of a building. I watch them curiously as they take a few nervous steps from side to side. Then more birds land on the ledge with their wings flapping. They start cooing and the first two birds lose interest in me. I watch their funny dancing and chest puffing for a while and it seems that they are forgetting to guard their post at their former home, the abandoned Toppila¹ pulp mill silo.

– Field diary, 26th March 2023

This article looks at pigeons and how they relate to post-industrial settings.² I have a background in archaeology and heritage studies and my fascination with industrial ruins has introduced me to the world of pigeons. What is their role in industrial settings? Are they a mere nuisance or are they an important part of our industrial past? To answer these questions, I am focusing on pigeons (*Columba livia domestica*), which I view through the lens of an abandoned pulp mill silo in Toppila Oulu, Finland, that was inhabited by a colony of pigeons for many decades. The silo, designed by the renowned Finnish architect Alvar Aalto (1898–1976), is now safeguarded as a culturally and historically significant structure. Over the past three decades, its decayed state has sparked a heated debate and led to it becoming known as the “pigeons’ place”.

Birds have fascinated people throughout history, and our existences are intertwined in many ways (Goldhahn 2019, 17). Birds are social beings that have traits similar to ours, as they also “argue, fight, cheat, deceive, manipulate, kidnap, kill, and divorce” (ibid. p. 9–10). With these traits, birds have interacted with humans for thousands of years, spanning different aspects of life. Birds have provided us with food (meat), decoration (feathers), fertiliser (droppings) and spiritual content (myths and beliefs). From early in human history, migratory birds have played a role in indicating the change of the seasons and arriving birds, such as cranes, swans, swallows, and ducks indicated the coming of spring and beginning of new life (Herva and Lahelma 2020, 141). And when the time came for the birds to fly back to the south again, it was a sign of the coming winter and demise. In this light, birds can be seen as messengers between life and death, existing across the boundary between different worlds.

1 In this article I refer to the Meri-Toppila silo as ‘the silo’ or ‘Toppila silo’. The neighbourhood where the silo is located is nowadays known as Meri-Toppila, but the area is commonly referred to as Toppila.

2 In Finland, the post-industrial era usually refers to the period beginning in the late 1950s and the 1960s.

Pigeons and humans have a long-shared history, during which their role has changed from commodity to “nuisance” species. The role of pigeons underwent a transformation when their capabilities as messengers were exploited for political ends from the 1800s onwards. Their contribution to successes on the battlefields elevated their status and these feathered creatures have continued to be used in contemporary military contexts, as shown by their deployment during the Syrian conflict in 2011 (Hakkarainen 2021). The history of pigeons in Finland is limited, with their primary use being as messengers or as decoy birds in hawk traps during the late 19th century (Vuorisalo et al. 2001, 120, 124).

Pigeons, often referred to as “rats with wings” (e.g. Blechman 2013, 221; Jerolmack 2013, 7) are urban dwellers that live among us because we have provided them with places to live and food to eat. They are weird, uncanny and transgress boundaries by sharing “our everyday life environments, perching on our windowsills and eating from our trash cans, they are both close and distant, intriguing and disturbing” (Rautio 2017, 97). This transgressive nature allows them to move between the worlds of ruins, modernity, otherworldliness, and mystery. We have lived together for thousands of years (Johnson and Janiga 1995, 6), and we still do not know much about their life (they do not sing like other birds, and it is rare to see a pigeon chick).

Animals are often seen “as out of place” (Edensor 2005, 48), as something that does not belong in a particular place. How do these “unwanted” pigeons, which are filthy and capable of transmitting disease (Jerolmack 2008, 73), manage to settle in abandoned structures where they do not belong, and what kind of interactions do we have? I posit that in the human world, pigeons take the opportunities us humans offer to them and use them for their needs. This behaviour often surprises us because it crosses the boundaries set for other species. As the birds may not be aware of such orders, rules and restrictions, they overstep these artificial boundaries. For example, I visited the former Kajaani pulp mill in Finland, where seagulls were becoming a problem when they crossed these boundaries. The factory’s property manager said that these seagulls thought they owned the place, and their population was at times so abundant that they caused traffic accidents by attacking the workers on their bicycles. She also revealed that the owners of the factory were currently using air cannons to scare the seagulls and other birds away from the factory premises.³

Birds, and especially pigeons, have made the journey from commodity to pets and nuisance species and, without question, this has had a profound impact on the

3 Personal comments from the factory’s property manager, 14 June 2021.

cultural significance of and our interaction with these animals. As archaeologist Joakim Goldhahn (2017, 17) has stated: “interpreting birds and their actions not only makes it possible for us to express ourselves; it also triggers our imagination and curiosity about the world.”

Theoretical perspectives

I used participant observation to study the daily behaviour and social interactions of the pigeons and their environment, keeping a distance from the pigeons and objectively studying their activities, as well as investigating one of their habitats – the silo – where I was also exposed to *their* observation as I was allowed to enter their world. I also take a look at how birds, and especially pigeons, have been presented in contemporary popular culture, particularly in films such as Hitchcock’s *The Birds* and Brooks’s *High Anxiety* as well as representations of ruined and dystopian futures in various television series. Pigeons inhabit a liminal world that exists between human society and the world of birds. Perceptions of birds by humans and their perceptions of us differ notably, although the latter remains largely unexplored. However, pigeons’ weird behaviour, such as their use of buildings created by humans, represent a transgression between these worlds.

The concepts of “weird” and (global) “weirding” are primarily used in the field of geography to describe the significant changes occurring in the current Anthropocene era. These changes are a result of climate change, and they are affecting the environment and how we live in this “weirding” world (e.g. Turnbull and Platt 2022; Turnbull 2021; Canavan and Hageman 2016). These concepts are also utilised in *Weird Fiction*.⁴ This article uses the term “weird” in the context of the behaviour of pigeons and industrial ruins as sites of the otherworldly. Although I could have used just the term “weird”, I also utilise “queer” to examine the gendered elements of human-bird interactions. For the queer perspective, I refer to Austin Monson’s article “The Sociological Significance of Pigeons,” where he studies pigeons from a sociological viewpoint using queer theory to analyse negative attitudes towards pigeons (Monson 2016, 2). The way I look at queerness is to use it as a descriptor for something that is different from norms or disruptive to the established order (Ahmed 2006, 565). I use both the terms “weird” and “queer” as they can imply strangeness or uniqueness or indicate something that deviates

4 ‘Weird Fiction’ is a sub-genre of science fiction that encompasses stories exploring the weird or addressing questions of otherworldliness and human existence; works within this genre include, for example, *Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer and the stories of H.P. Lovecraft.

from the norm in a way that is perceived as strange or unusual. Additionally, they may connote something that is dubious or suspicious.

Interspecies interactions in urban environments can have different meanings and effects depending on the context, class, gender or place (Jerolmack 2013, 5). At the core of queer theory and research is the idea of “transgressing boundaries and aiming to challenge boundaries, between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’.” (Hird 2004, 85, 87) Pigeons could be considered queer in this respect, as they “transgress their ascribed role as ‘bird’ by existing alongside humans in very un-bird ways” (Monson 2016, 2).⁵ One definition of “queer” is to be classified as abnormal or deviant according to prevailing norms (Hall 2003, 13). From a human perspective, pigeons are often viewed as weird and unclean birds, prone to spreading disease, which has led to them being placed at the bottom of the bird hierarchy. Nonetheless, a contrast between pigeons and other birds inhabiting urban areas reveals differences in both behaviour and vocalisation; pigeons do not make their nests in the forests, instead preferring our neighbourhoods. Additionally, pigeons’ song differs from typical bird song. Thus, they can be classified as liminal animals since they exist on the boundary between distinct normative classifications in the bird kingdom, as they are “neither one thing nor another” (Wischermann and Howell 2019, 2).

Weird birds...

Weird creatures are those which exist in places they ostensibly should not.

– Turnbull and Platt 2017

Pigeons, “rock pigeons”, also known as “rock doves” (*Columba livia*) have been a part of our history and cultural life for between 5,000 and 10,000 years (Johnson and Janiga 1995, 6). We have witnessed change in the bird-human relationship as these birds have blended into different roles as scavengers and commodities (MacKinnon 2018, 177). The “rock pigeons” were domesticated (*Columba livia domestica*) about 5,000 years ago and for thousands of years humans have bred them to meet our different material needs as food and messengers, for religious and military purposes, to produce fertiliser, as racing birds, and as symbols on different objects (Johnson and Janiga 1995, 270; Jerolmack 2013, 9; Blechman 2006, 8–9; Blechman 2013, 222). From this perspective, pigeons can be seen as providers and heroes. The feral pigeons we see in our urban

⁵ Although this view is very human-centred, the category of bird should of course be considered more open to different ways of being a bird.

environment today are the descendants of those domesticated “rock pigeons” that got lost on their message delivering routes or just decided to escape and see what else the world had to offer.

What makes pigeons, these dull-coloured scavengers who hang around other-worldly abandoned places (Skandrani et al. 2014, 12) weird? Pigeons are neither pets nor wild, instead they are *synanthrope* species who live in a *commensalism* interaction with us “when they leave their natural habitat to settle in the urban one to nest and live” (Baldaccini 2020, 51). “*Synanthropes* are wild species that live in association with or in human-made habitats” (Lucas 2018, 106). In our urban cities, pigeons have found nesting places in our attics, on building ledges and in nooks and abandoned structures. *Commensalism* in turn means “interactions between two species in which one species benefits and the other experiences no net effect” (Mathis and Bronstein 2020, 167). We have provided these fellow urban residents with places to live and food to eat but how are we benefiting from pigeons today?

Interactions with birds have always been common and interestingly, in industrial settings, these relationships have lasted for years, such as in an old sawmill workshop in Pateniemi, Finland, where workers used to build shelves in the corners of the workshop room for swallows, which could come and go from the room as they pleased. Nowadays, this workshop room has been turned into a sawmill museum and the shelves are still in place, serving as a reminder of this interspecies connection.⁶ Providing nesting sites for birds goes a long way back in history, as architectural heritage in Iran and Central Anatolia includes impressive dovecotes from the 11th to early 20th century that are still admired today (Amirkhani et al. 2010: 46, 48). These dovecots and shelves in the sawmill workshop are “classic examples of synanthropic architecture” (Lucas 2018, 106). With these examples we can see the change in the human-bird relationship, from providing deliberately prepared nesting places for birds, to today’s situation where the birds have to settle for places abandoned by humans.

As ground feeders, pigeons are at home in an urban environment where food is plentiful, thanks to us humans and our growing amounts of waste. All the accumulated food leftovers and rubbish provide these “bio-recyclers” (term used by Gaietto 2019, 57) with a feast and one reason to stay put (another reason being good and predator-free nesting places). Despite of all the “mess” these birds might create the pigeons we see today fit perfectly into the urban surroundings. Their plumage in different hues of

6 I worked as a museum guide at Pateniemi Sawmill Museum in summer 2017 and saw the shelves and learnt about these interactions between workers and birds.

grey matches the colour of the urban architecture. Pigeon feathers are not only beautiful to look at and sometimes even to collect, but they have also been used as bioindicators of how pollution (especially heavy metals and sulphur in particular) is affecting our life (Adout et al., 2007). This is one example of the positive effect birds have on our well-being. Bird feeding and bird watching are activities that can also have an effect on our wellbeing as they are “one of the principal forms of human-wildlife interactions in the contemporary world” (Jones 2011, iv).

It is an undeniable fact that while pigeons are enjoying the benefits we offer, they also leave waste behind. The horrendous ravens of Hitchcock’s film *The Birds* were replaced with pigeons in Mel Brooks’s comedy film *High Anxiety* and one of the horror scenes involves the flying pigeons that are defecating all over the main character as they are running. Pigeon droppings are probably one of the most feared and visible features of these birds and as faeces are considered taboo in many cultures, this is why many feel this “marginal stuff”, whether human or animal, should be avoided (Douglas 2002 [1966], 147, 150). In Piazza San Marco (St Mark’s Square), Venice, Italy, it is said to bring you good luck if a pigeon defecates on your head, or so the superstition goes. However, this is probably just a way to make an unpleasant “accident” more bearable.

This pigeon excreta and its effects on our lives are the results of the pigeon diet, which has changed together with our diets; it has become less nutritious, and it is resulting in more acidic excreta, which is more harmful to human-built structures (Spennemann and Watson 2017, 27). One example of this comes from Kajaani, Finland, where pigeon excreta led to the collapse of a shopping centre’s roof, with the reason given being the corrosive effect and the huge weight of the faecal matter (Saroniemi 2023). Even though pigeon poo seems to be the major concern for buildings, there may be different factors that cause dislike towards pigeons, such as the effect of birds’ presence degrading the aesthetic appeal of buildings (Spennemann et al. 2017, 63). This aesthetic appeal is also connected to post-industrial landscapes and ruination as these “ooze aesthetic values and can be perceived as ‘wastelands’ or ‘scars on the landscape’” (Edensor 2005, 21). The fact that pigeons choose to live in such places, and the resulting damage caused by their seemingly unrestricted lifestyle, makes them weird.

...in a gendered world

When we look at pigeons from our perspective, we see that our encounters have been to a significant extent class oriented and gendered. Within working-class culture in the UK in c. 1870–1950, men were avid bird admirers and pigeon race enthusiasts (Johnes 2007). Pigeon racing rooted these fanciers in their urban community and “confirmed the value of the labour the men devoted to race preparation” and it also offered fanciers “financial and egoistic” gains (Jerolmack 2013, 17–18). Men were seen as nurturers and in that way providers, but “caring for the pigeons didn’t pose a threat to their masculinity” (ibid. p. 103). In Brooklyn and Queens, New York, the pigeon world has been male dominated, a place where “almost all of the men came from a blue-collar background, and they pursued working-class occupations and lifestyles” and spending time with the pigeons gave them a way to be “in the comfort of the man’s world”. Whereas women’s role with the pigeons were not that close and they were left in charge of the domestic world (ibid. p. 154–155). In this sense, pigeon fanciers can be seen as queer because of this gender role deviation.

Austin Monson, in his sociological research, has interestingly compared Kivel’s “gender role” box (the traits valued in a man) to the “act like a bird” box, showing some common assumptions of “normal” bird traits compared to “deviant” pigeons (Monson 2016, 3–5).

OTHER BIRDS	PIGEONS
Relatively colourful, and pleasing to look at	Usually grey (stereotypical idea of urban pigeon)
Perch on bird feeders and nibble at seeds	Are scavengers
Make pleasant chirping	Make cooing sounds and a ruckus
Occasionally show themselves	Are an unavoidable presence in the city
Should exist apart from humans	Thrive on their connection with humans
Respect designated spatial boundaries	Utilise all space we occupy as their own

Table 1. Differences between other birds and feral pigeons of what “a bird should be.” (Based on Monson 2016, which in turn used Humphries, 2008.)

Although the table is simplistic and reductive, it shows the most obvious and more general differences between pigeons and other birds. Pigeons seem to present themselves and act differently to other birds and that makes them intriguing and able to transgress different boundaries created by humans.⁷

⁷ Of course, there are other birds like crows (*Corvus*), magpies (*Pica pica*) and seagulls (*Lari-
dae*) that are more pigeon-like birds, but they are not studied in this article.

Over the years, there has been a change in the pigeon-human relationship. Pigeon fanciers and racer communities are still male dominated and in existence today, but not on the same scale and women (in very general perspective) have changed into “bird ladies”, who feed the pigeons but otherwise have no active role in the pigeon world (Jerolmack 2013, 2). These “bird ladies”, and others who break the rules of “do not feed the pigeons” are also transgressing the boundaries of “law and order” as pigeon feeding has become a nuisance and forbidden in many previously “pigeon friendly” places like Trafalgar Square, London and Piazza San Marco, Venice (ibid. p. 71).

While pigeons prefer abandoned and ruinous structures for their habitat, at the same time these structures can give certain city areas a rundown feel or character. These decaying areas can be sites for “alternative cultural identities and practices”, and they may be connected with “aestheticized or even eroticised” (Edensor 2005, 41) activities like loitering, vagrancy, and even homosexual acts, as was the case “in New York in the 1960s” (Jerolmack 2013, 72). Ruins and abandoned places can be considered *queer* and liminal because they cross the boundaries of “normal” and “abnormal” structures within the urban landscape, just as pigeons do in comparison to other birds.

The silo

As I put my mask on and enter the building, all I can see is dark, and what appears to be a very high space. My senses sharpen. The air around me feels cool and damp. I can hear pigeons flying around and I hear their sounds echoing in the pipes that comes through the walls. I feel at the same time excited and baffled. I have just entered the abandoned cathedral-like Toppila pulp mill silo.

– Field diary, 23rd March 2021

The Meri-Toppila district where the silo stands is located some three kilometres north of Oulu city centre. The English company Peter Dixon & Son Ltd founded Toppila Ltd in the late 1920s to construct and run a sulphite pulp mill. Alvar Aalto, a famous Finnish architect, was commissioned to design the buildings and the construction works began in 1930, with the factory opening in 1931 (Hautala 1982, 109–110). After more than 40 successful years of production, due to financial difficulties the owner sold the company to Kajaani Ltd in 1973. In 1985, the sulphite pulp market collapsed, and the mill was closed (Manninen 1995, 117). Several buildings within the factory premises were preserved, while other sections were demolished. The closure of the factory resulted in a significant social decline in the surrounding area.

The silo, which has cultural historical value (which has prevented its demolition) has changed through the years of its existence: from a productive part of a pulp mill to a derelict building, and further to the habitat of pigeons, now with its future unknown. The silo has been a significant landmark in the area and even though the neighbourhood around it has changed dramatically over the years, the silo has stayed the same. This kind of phenomenon is, of course, not unique in post-industrial cities and in particular Detroit, in the USA, has become one emblematic example of this process (Apel 2015). Changes around the silo have also affected the ecology in the area. Some of these ecological changes are the result of human activity: creating new houses and roads, and some transformations continue without human interference: plants grow in new places and new animals inhabit the area (Bangstad 2022, 222), with pigeons being one species that have found the surroundings of the silo (and the silo itself) to provide a new habitat (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The looming silo and its inhabitants, the pigeons. Picture: Author 2021.

If we view the silo “as a dynamic entity rather than an inert pile of turf, stone and wood” (Lucas 2014, 111) it can be perceived as queer, because of its ambivalent presence (and being somewhere between “normal” and “abnormal”). We can also play with the idea of whether the silo has a gender; could the silo be an old, grey man left to deteriorate alone or a mother of pigeons, which she protected and that now have to leave their nests?

Silo with pigeons

If looking for a place to settle, the old Toppila pulp mill silo, with its dark, mouldy interior and no electricity, littered with rubbish and abandoned pieces of factory machinery lying everywhere, buried inside a deteriorating and tapered concrete skeleton, would not be my first choice (but then again, I do not necessarily appreciate the same things pigeons do). But these two, the pigeon and the silo, have found each other and have shared a life together for decades. They are *synanthrope* species, with the silo providing a place for the pigeons to dwell.

Figure 2. Pigeon sitting atop its nest in the corner of the silo. Picture: Author 2021.



I have had the opportunity to visit the silo a few times, the first time was when the pigeons still lived inside the building, and that was the most memorable visit. When I entered the silo it caused a commotion among the pigeons, but soon they went back to their business as if nothing had happened; male pigeons cooing in empty pipe holes inside the walls, trying to attract females' attention (see figure 1.), some pigeons just staring at me, and some flying so close over my head that I could have grabbed them. The air was thick with dust and small feathers. The floor and every other surface I could see were covered with pigeon faeces. The place was undoubtedly owned by these pigeons.

When I ventured further inside the silo and upstairs, I saw an unhatched egg, eggshells and even a pigeon parent incubating an egg in the corner of the concrete floor (Figure 2). In contrast to new life being born, there were also corpses of dead birds to be seen. This silo has provided shelter for the entire lifecycle of the birds and for many generations, as pigeons are attracted to architecture from different time periods as well as any conspicuous, dark opening and optimal nesting sites that are sheltered, semi-dark, and protected from the wind (Johnson and Janiga 1995, 5, 7), all of which the silo has offered to the pigeons.

Looking at the silo from outside, its appearance and presence of the pigeons send a message of neglect and disorder. However small scale it may be, the silo may be considered to foster the creation of the kind of apocalyptic landscape indicated in Kelling and Wilson's (1982, 3) "broken window theory", which suggests that "untended property becomes fair game for people out for fun or plunder", thereby attracting pigeons, waste, vandalism and other things and activities outside organised society.

Silo without pigeons

The building is a persistent entity which is self-sustaining in relation to its environment. It exists and persists through its relation with other entities, especially humans.

– Lucas 2014, 115

The silo was bought for €6251 from the City of Oulu in 2021, and the new owner, the Spanish-based Factum Foundation, has already started to make changes inside the silo. Its interiors have been cleared of loose debris and pigeon excrement, and access for avian and other animals to the building has been blocked. However, the pigeons still thrive in the vicinity of the silo, still looking for new entrances to their former lair, because they will not give up their territory that easily. The pigeons have stubbornly returned to

the silo despite the human efforts to evict them numerous times. They have kept this building as their home for generations and at the same time become a part of the silo's history. The silo's transformation from unruly to nice and proper leaves no more room for these unruly animals. Both the silo and the pigeons are now stuck in a limbo: where do they go from here? The silo waits to see how the new restoration plans proceed and the pigeons are looking for a new place to set up home.

Pigeons have been a part of the silo and now they are seen as separate, something alien to the silo and its heritage status. Removing them also removes the memory of the "bad reputation" the silo has as a rundown and deteriorating relic of industrial heritage. The Culture Power Station, an association that was renting the silo at one time, arranged a rock concert at the silo and named it *Pulurock* (Pigeon Rock). (Figure 3.) Inside the silo there still is graffiti with a logo of *Pulurock*. This commemoration is one example that shows the weird relationship between us and these pigeons: they are inspiring, but on the other hand, they are nuisance that need to be gotten rid of. This ambivalent attitude is also seen in the exploitation of these birds' image as a tool of different symbols and cultural reminders in the human world, symbols of *industrial achievements* so to speak, such as on credit cards, soaps, chocolates and as the symbol of peace (Blechman 2006, 8–9).

Figure 3. *Pulurock* graffiti. Commemorating the pigeons of the silo. Picture: Author 2021.



What is the role of the birds in urban cities today? As Paula Escobar mentions in her article on the pigeons of Trafalgar Square: “to be cultural the square (Trafalgar) had to be pigeon-free” (Escobar 2014, 363). This seems to be the case also with the silo, and for it to be culturally appropriate (for us humans) it has to be pigeon-free. Although they (the pigeons) gave their name to a rock concert that was held in the Toppila silo, their presence has also affected the value of the silo and their removal from the silo has been difficult. Although the silo is a culturally significant building, it was once considered a place only suitable for pigeons (Degerman 2020). The value of the building was declining because of the pigeons (and this certainly had nothing to do with human neglect?). Removing the pigeons from the silo would also remove the threat to culture and the aesthetics of the building, and the apparent threat to human health, as was the case at Trafalgar Square (Escobar, 2014, 372). In this respect, the role of pigeons is contingent on the type of environment they inhabit. It appears that pigeons are only deemed suitable for urban environments when it benefits humans.

The existence of pigeons in contemporary urban environments persists despite the elaborate and deliberate efforts of humans who share their habitat and seek to eliminate them (Gaietto 2019, 63). This has happened with the pigeons of the silo and elsewhere, where we try to keep them away from our spaces with “Do not feed the pigeons” signs. The pigeons of the silo also serve as a good representation of the atmosphere we have created today around these birds; we are so used to seeing them everywhere that we tend to overlook them. Only when we see the damage they have caused to our buildings or statues do we acknowledge their presence. But when something happens and they disappear, we notice their absence and begin to think about what they have meant to our heritage, histories, and the places they have inhabited, and to us.

Ruined places, ruined birds

Deindustrialisation and the resulting emergence of dystopian urban landscapes characterised by abandoned factories and industrial spaces are ubiquitous around the world, and inevitably bear witness to the effects of industrial decline. These dystopian images, while weird, stimulate our imagination. Recent examples from popular culture demonstrate our fascination with such landscapes and concepts that stem from ruination and decline. This is particularly evident in TV shows that depict apocalyptic scenarios resulting from deadly viruses and zombies (such as *The Walking Dead*, 2010–2022, and *The Last of Us*, 2023). Abandoned spaces can be taken over by non-humans, erasing

distinctions between the wild and the tame, the urban and the rural. According to Edensor et al. (2012, 66), abandoned places are ones where human and non-human control is absent, allowing plants and animals to rapidly colonise the area they were once excluded from. Although abandoned buildings may appear empty, they serve as sites for diverse species and natural occurrences. Rain and wind impact the exterior of these constructions, while mould and fungus mycelium proliferate within their walls. Human and non-human inhabitants alike traverse these buildings at will (Ingold, 2010, 5; DeSilvey, 2017, 30). Non-human species do not utilise these structures for the same purposes as humans.

Pigeons and abandoned industrial ruins are undergoing a process of decay. Hence, they could be considered queer as they diverge from the expected “normal” or status quo. Buildings are left to fall into disrepair and pigeons are facing “ruination” of their own kind. Their bodies are being “ruined” by our food scraps and waste, and they are impacted by environmental pollution, especially lead (Cai and Calisi 2016). Pigeons usually want to live near humans but do not want to be disturbed. They are “constantly on the lookout to discover new places in which to dwell and use” (Edensor 2005, 72). Pigeons have a tendency to enter human-occupied areas such as markets and parks where they have unrestricted access, a behaviour that distinguishes them as unusual and peculiar among other bird species. They live in places that are not typically their habitat, which can have a positive or negative impact on humans and vice versa (Clucas and Marzluff 2012).

Why do pigeons choose these places and what do these places provide to pigeons? Ruined buildings, despite being overlooked by many, offer various material and situational opportunities for non-human entities to appropriate them in different ways (Hudson 2014, 194) and this has also been the case with the pigeons of the Toppila silo in Oulu. Shelter from different weather conditions and sources of harm is of course one obvious reason, but what else do these places offer to these animals? Usually these places are isolated and safe, lacking predators. The places are ready to use as they offer different structures and ledges for nesting and pigeons live in large flocks, so finding a mate is easier within these close communities (Johnston and Janiga 1995, 62). Possibilities shift as the physical, social and cultural environment evolves and influences our perception of what is available (Hudson 2014, 194), and this has happened with the silo and at the same time with the pigeons and their living space.

As these ruins can be used in different “transgressional” ways (for loitering or exhibitionistic practices) the same can be said about pigeons; they transgress between ordered and disordered spaces (Jerolmack 2013, 226–227). In this respect, it is also

interesting that these two have “found” each other and are now sharing the same spaces. “Stories narrating how lives and livelihoods emerge from ruins through multispecies collaborations offer important lessons in the Anthropocene, in which narratives of dystopian futures abound.” (Kirbis 2020, 845). We can see parallels in this as a part of abandonment and the idea of loss and sorrow – that is something we can feel when we see the deteriorating landscape around us and marginalised pigeons that transgress the boundaries of order and disorder and are “lumped together with rundown parks, congested streets and petty crime” (Jerolmack 2013, 227). The concept of the ruined world could be further explored by considering the cultural image of the “pigeon lady.” The film *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* (1992) depicts pigeons as being associated with a scary woman. She appears to live on society’s edges and to have disconnected from other people. Instead, she spends her days in parks with her pigeon companions. Abandoned industrial places are *unruly*, not amenable to control, where other-than-human species can roam and make their home and where “every landscape is haunted by past ways of life” (Gan et al. 2017, 17). As you enter the abandoned building, you feel a strange uneasiness, as sense that something has happened in this place, but you are not sure what. These places are uncanny, and they can feel otherworldly as they were not made for humans (in themselves) but rather the machines that used to occupy these vast spaces. So, it is quite fitting that when humans leave these places behind and before harnessing them back for human use again, they offer an opportunity for different, other-than-human species, like the pigeons, to take them over.

Otherworldly places and otherworldly beings

Birds also have a mythological side, as creatures that have had effects on human relationships. They have been associated with bringing bad luck and misfortune and attacking the order of universe (see for example Tambiah 1969; Goldhahn 2019; Herva and Lahelma 2020). This way, birds can be seen as a parallel to abandonment (they fit the idea of loss and sorrow, which is something we feel when we see the deteriorating landscape around us). In Nordic mythology, birds have been seen as indicators of changing seasons, messengers of good and bad news, as persons and as omens of supernatural happenings (Goldhahn 2019; Herva and Lahelma 2020, 141) Uncanniness combines birds and the abandoned ruins, as they both transgress different boundaries that keep up the “normal” order.

Pigeons are not actual songbirds, but they make cooing sounds. This sound, together with the surroundings of the old Toppila pulp mill silo, created an eerie sound-

scape for me when I visited the place. Abandoned places and ruins “possess the attraction of decay and death” and to enter them one might venture into “darkness and the possibilities of confrontation with the unspeakable and one’s own vulnerability and mortality” (Edensor 2005, 13).

Pigeons are also connected with otherworldliness. Among pigeon enthusiasts, pigeon racing was seen as “a portal to *magical world in which fanciers were the play-things of nature’s transcendent world*” (Jerolmack 2013, 18) and in Piazza San Marco pigeon feeding was endowed with a *magical* quality (ibid. p.53). Birds’ ability to fly (among other things) is something that makes them otherworldly, weird creatures and convenient for speculations of transgressions between different worlds as “they guide our vision between heaven and earth” (Herva and Lahelma 2020, 141). Birds operate in the world that is unknown to humans as they move amid horizontal and vertical surfaces, whereas humans only move horizontally (by nature).

While various different monsters and other weird creatures that can transgress different borders (cf. Holloway 2017) are often seen as scary or threatening, birds are also seen as representing freedom, grace, or wisdom. But birds can also be frightening as they fit the same category as other uncanny creatures associated with “monster-like attributes – harmful and dangerous, transmitting diseases and occurring in masses, hard to control and subversive” as Annika Kirbis has pointed out (Kirbis 2020, 834). Birds, especially pigeons, are often described as being filthy and transmitting diseases (e.g. Blechman 2006) and they do occur in masses or, more precisely in flocks. These vast and unsteady flocks can be likened to those in Alfred Hitchcock’s film *The Birds* (1963), where the peaceful image of a sleeping town is shattered by the arrival of birds. This film introduced the concept of “monster birds” to our consciousness. What then makes these birds monsters? In Hitchcock’s film, birds “become not only animals of physical violence but also, because of their non-humanness, abstractions for metaphysical chaos possible in the world. They represent an irrational disorder pushing in on the world’s seemingly ordered atmosphere” (Simper 1975, 197, 230). This same kind of metaphysical chaos is seen in Yasmine Musharbash’s article about uncanny bird singing and its affects among Australian Aboriginal populations, where birds’ “voices are indexical auditory signs of monstrous presence” (Musharbash 2016). Birds are thus scary and monster-like because they can transgress the ordered human atmosphere physically and psychologically.

The Toppila silo’s pigeons differ from those birds depicted in Hitchcock’s film as they are more closely linked to the environment of the silo. They do not present the same kind of contradiction, owing to the fact that Toppila (and particularly the Meri-

Toppila area) is not considered an idyllic neighbourhood, as it bears the hallmarks of a low-income area and other indications of depression in the area, which correlate with notions of a collapsed society.

What then is the role of the birds in the urban environment? Although their role may be more ambiguous, our co-existence with pigeons may be more beneficial than we realise. Interacting with birds fosters a vital connection with nature (Jones 2011, iv), which is relevant given the increasing disconnect from nature in modern times. Why do we not appreciate them when they are present and playing an active part of our everyday life?

Conclusions

I try to locate the pigeons. First it seems that they are all gone, but then one lands on the edge of the roof. Soon there are two of them. Maybe they are a pair, at least, they seem affectional towards each other. I feel sadness on behalf of the pigeons. I wonder if they feel the same.

– Field diary, April 23rd, 2023

Birds are amazing. They are dualistic animals as they are at the same time fascinating and uncanny, beautiful and ugly, they walk among us, and they fly high up in the sky. With this transgression they move between the worlds of ruins, modernity and other-worldliness. We have lived together for thousands of years, and they are still in a way a mystery to us.

In a post-industrial environment, there are neglected places created by humans, still in the grip of cultural heritage status, now occupied by more-than-humans. These beings do not care about our dystopian images as they thrive in places where we no longer see any value. I posit that in a human world, pigeons take the opportunities from these places and use them for their needs. And we are surprised by these actions because they transgress the boundaries we have set, even though birds are likely unaware of these orders, rules, and restrictions.

Birds also have a mythological side as creatures that have had effects on human relationships. They have been associated with bringing bad luck and misfortune and attacking the order of the universe. This way, birds can be seen as a parallel to abandonment, as they fit the idea of loss and sorrow, which is something we feel when we see the deteriorating landscape around us. Uncanniness combines birds and the abandoned ruins, as they both transgress different boundaries that keep up the “normal” order. Ruins and the Toppila silo represent something that was beautiful once and the pigeons

remind us about life and times gone by. And as the pigeons are weird with their secret lives, so are the industrial ruins as they seem to “pop out” from the picture. Pigeons have a secret life that enhances the mystery of them and the abandoned spaces. They can fuel both our imagination and fear of unknown. There is life and hope inside these abandoned structures created by humans that seem cold and dead.

The old Toppila pulp mill silo has provided shelter for the entire lifecycle of the birds and for many generations, as pigeons are attracted to conspicuous, dark openings and optimal nesting sites that are sheltered, semi-dark, and protected from the wind, all of which the silo has offered to the pigeons. Pigeons still live among us and share our urban environment despite the different ways we have tried to get rid of them. This has happened with the pigeons of the silo and elsewhere. Despite the beneficial effects we can get from interacting with these birds, we try to keep them away from our spaces with “Do not feed the pigeons” signs. The pigeons of the silo represent the atmosphere we have created today around these birds well; we are so used to seeing them everywhere that we do not pay much attention to them. Only when we acknowledge the negative effects pigeons have on our cultural heritage do we recognise their presence. But when they disappear, we begin to wonder what they mean to our heritage, and to us. What kind of future awaits the silo and its former residents, the unruly pigeons, is to be seen. Are they “cultural icons of dereliction” or just a memory in graffiti on the silo wall? These questions will have to wait to be answered in the near future.

P. S. The pigeons of the silo may have replacements, as I saw a blue tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) that had made a nest in a hole in the brick wall of the silo on 5 May 2023. Maybe it will have better luck with the silo.

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