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Maelstrom; or, Life After the Woods:
Paolo Bacigalupi's "The Gambler"

Otto Neubauer
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Much of contemporary space-based science fiction tends to ignore nature completely, with food replicators and life support systems eliminating the need for plants as anything but decoration. In contrast, Earth-based science fiction stories often center on a conflict between man and nature. Yet though the primary themes in Paolo Bacigalupi's "The Gambler", Bruce Sterling's "We See Things Differently", and Harlan Ellison's "'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman" are political (with "The Gambler" being a critical portrayal of the fourth estate), each offers a small window into how man ought or ought not to relate to nature. While the latter two offer criticism of our preference for a 'fake' nature, "The Gambler" both glorifies the infinite diversity of nature and at the same time criticizes journalism's adoption of the fundamentally natural 'survival of the fittest' ethic.

In the paragraphs where Bacigalupi first describes the Maelstrom (the system which tracks in real time the number of hits, links, tweets, and pings that every news story or blog post on the entire web gets), he invokes a rainbow of colors and uses many nature words:

> In the maelstrom, their work flares, tagged with site location, content tags, and social poke data. *Blooms of color*, codes for media conglomerates: shades of blue and Mickey Mouse ears for Disney-Bertelsmann. A red-rimmed pair of *rainbow* O's for Google's AOL News. Fox News Corp. in pinstripes gray and white. *Green* for us: Milestone Media—a combination of NTT DoCoMo, the Korean gaming consortium Hyundai-Kubu, and the smoking remains of the New York Times Company. There are others, smaller stars, Crayola shades flaring and brightening, but we are the most important. *The monarchs of this universe of light and color*.
>
> *New content blossoms* on the screen, bathing us all in the bloody glow of a Google News content flare, off their WhisperTech feed. They've scooped us. The

> posting says that new ear *bud* devices will be released by Frontal Lobe before Christmas: terabyte storage with Pin-Line connectivity for the Oakley microresponse glasses. The technology is next-gen, allowing personal data control via Pin-Line scans of a user's *iris*. Analysts predict that everything from cell phones to digital cameras will become obsolete as the full range of Oakley features becomes available. *The news flare brightens and migrates* towards the center of the maelstrom as *visitors flock* to Google and view stolen photos of the *iris*-scanning glasses.
>
> (Bacigalupi 33, Emphasis Added)

Many of the nature references here are subtle. The Oakley microresponse glasses scan the user's iris—an iris being not only a part of the eye, but also a type of flower. Rather than headphones, Frontal Lobe is releasing new ear bud devises—a bud also being an embryonic shoot of a plant.

Notably, Bacigalupi chose the color green to represent the corporation that employs Ong, the main character. By associating Ong with the color of nature, Bacigalupi both (a) highlights the contrast between his idealistic, somewhat naïve idea of what journalism should be and the fact that the readers are more interested in celebrity gossip and actual news; and (b) foreshadows his final decision to place his trust in the Darwinian nature of the web:

> We look at each other. Two gamblers evaluating one another. Deciding who is betting, and who is bluffing.
>
> I click the "publish" button.
>
> The story launches itself onto the net, announcing itself to the feeds. A minute later a tiny new sun glows in the maelstrom.
>
> Together, Janice and I watch the green spark as it flickers on the screen. Readers turn to the story. Start to ping it and share it amongst themselves, start to register hits on the page. The post grows slightly.
>
> My father gambled on Thoreau. I am my father's son.
>
> (Bacigalupi 49)

Bacigalupi's frequent mention of Thoreau creates an interesting parallel with Ellison's "'Repent, Harlequin!". In the passage from Thoreau's Civil Disobedience that Ellison selected to introduce "'Repent, Harlequin!'", Thoreau condemns men, not for thinking themselves above nature, but precisely for not doing so:

> In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens.
>
> (Thoreau, in Ellison 368)

Thoreau's words quoted in "'Repent, Harlequin!'" are essentially the thesis of "The Gambler"; Bacigalupi created a world where the narrator, Ong, is the only character who thinks twice about the moral implications of the Maelstrom. The other characters in the book (other than his parents) all act as Thoreau's 'wooden men', whoring themselves out to readers for a paycheck, giving no regard to any journalistic ideals.

> But there is something else, something about this frenzied hunt for page views and click-throughs and ad revenue that suddenly feels unclean. As if my father is with us in the car, disapproving. Asking if he posted his complaints about his missing friends for the sake of clicks.
>
> (Bacigalupi 47)

Faced with living in a world of wooden men, Ong chooses (as the Harlequin did) to take a risk, to gamble on hope. If his gamble fails, he might be deported beck to Laos, where the fascist government would resocialize or simply kill him. I get the feeling that, given a choice, Ong would rather die among nature, as Marshall Delahanty did—"deep in the Canadian forest two hundred miles away". (Ellison 375)

Though “The Gambler” reserves most of its criticism for the Maelstrom, it echoes “We See Things Differently” in some of its views on America. Both Ong’s and Sayiid Qutb’s America lack an appreciation for natural things. In “We See Things Differently” (which takes place in the winter—when plants are withered and dead), Qutb notes that the stage is covered in Astroturf, a “bizarre American parody of grass” he describes as an “itchy green fur”. (Sterling 619) As a political term, to "Astroturf" is to create a false impression of a grassroots movement[1]; Sterling clearly uses it here both as a symbol for Boston’s political campaign. And in a conversation with Boston’s wife, Valya Plisetskaya, she describes grain, timber and minerals as “Third-World stuff. [America isn’t] your farm.” (Sterling 618)

But America as a place was a minor theme in “We See Things Differently”; Qutb’s major objection was to the attitudes of Americans. He writes that we “are like dead leaves”—focused on physical appearances and lacking any sort of self-control. (Sterling 612) Ong seems to echo Qutb’s attitude in many ways. He is shocked when Kulaap puts her feet up, given that it is considered rude in their native culture. Even though he wasn’t raised in America, he recognizes that living in America has gradually eroded his self-control:

> I want to go on, to tell her of my frustrations. But now I am embarrassed at my loss of composure. I have no face. I didn’t used to be like this. I used to control my emotions, but now I am an American, as childish and unruly as Janice. And Kulaap laughs at me.
>
> (Bacigalupi 47)

In deciding to continue writing nature articles at the conclusion of “The Gambler”, Ong is placing his faith in the anarchic, Darwinian, and ultimately natural Maelstrom of public opinion. Every other character in the story is one of Thoreau’s “hollow men”, as are most of the

[1] The earliest recorded use of ‘Astroturf’ as a political term was in 1985, by Sen. Lloyd Bentsen. “A fellow from Texas can tell the difference between grass roots and Astroturf… This is generated mail.” (Sager)

corporation's readership and the populations in "'Repent, Harlequin!'" and in "We See Things Differently". Thoreau might be describing the Master Timekeeper's department when he writes of "others [who]—as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and officeholders—serve the state chiefly with their heads". Sayiid Qutb would undoubtedly agree with Thoreau that "they are as likely to serve the Devil, without intending it, as God." Yet Ong risks all for the hope of those "very few, as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men, [who] serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part." (All Quotes from Thoreau in Ellison 368)

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