

A Grotesque and Thrilling World: Alienation in *The Fluted Girl**

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As a popular science fiction writer, Paolo Bacigalupi has drawn great attention with his marvelous fictions and novels, yet limited researches have focused on his novels rather than short stories, mostly analyzing from aspects like ecogism, feminism, dystopia, and anthropocene. This paper intends to analyze one of his short fictions, *The Fluted Girl*, using the theory of alienation to unveil the social problems hidden in the story, in order to further explore the author's writing intention. In this grotesque and thrilling story world, Bacigalupi shows his ethical concern for the era we are living in, urging the readers to rethink about the alienation in our world.

Keywords: alienation of people, alienation of consumption, alienation of technology, alienation of aesthetics

Introduction

Paolo Bacigalupi is a new rising star on the stage of American science fiction and fantasy writing. His first novel *The Windup Girl* (2009) won the Hugo and Nebula "Best Novel" awards. His later novels *Ship Breaker* (2010), *The Drowned Cities* (2013), and *The Water Knife* (2015) have also been nominated for science fiction awards separately. In addition, his short stories are impressive, beautiful and terrifying, as "Short fiction seems more targeted—hand grenades of ideas, if you will. When they work, they hit, they explode, and you never forget them" (Engberg, 2011, p. 71). This article tries to analyze *The Fluted Girl* (2003) with alienation theory to reveal why did author design this exquisite story world.

Alienation of People

For Lidia, the fluted girl, the alienation can be seen mainly from four aspects:

First, the alienation of labour products. According to Marxism, the product of one man's labour should belong to the man himself, and he has the power to use it. However, Lidia's labour product did not belong to her, but to her liege Belari. Somewhat, Belari used it as a commodity that could exchange for money. It was Lidia who worked and created the performance, but her performance was not her labour product. Rather, it was Belari's private commodity, as she treated it as a financial investment.

Second, the alienation of labour process. Labor is a spontaneous act in which one can develop one's physical and intellectual capacities to the fullest, and in which one can achieve satisfaction. However, in capitalism the labour is alienated, as "... labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not

***Acknowledgements:** this paper is funded by key project of China National Social Science Fund (Project Number: 19AWW007).
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develop freely his physical and mental energy, but mortifies his body and ruins his mind” (Marx, 1988, p. 74). Lidia was just the case. All her labour is not voluntary, but coerced. While lieges regarded the performance as beauty and art, Lidia herself thought with disgust, “We perform pornography, pornography for the profit of Belari” (Bacigalupi, 2008, p. 41). There was no sense of accomplishment, because it was not out of her own wishes. Her labor is a kind of self-sacrifice and mortification, but not art or beauty.

Third, the alienation of species being. Species being is what makes man different from animals, and the essential difference between man and animals lies in man’s species life—labour activities. “An animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young ... only under the dominion of immediate physical need, while man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom” (Marx, 1988, p. 77). But under capitalist conditions of production, alienated labour turns labour into a way of sustaining man’s physical existence, and makes a man losing his species being. Lidia worked merely to maintain physical survival, something that should be the only concern for animals. All she cared about was how to survive through labour, and her nature and her spiritual species’ property became alienated to her.

Fourth, the alienation of her relationship with other people. Lidia was hostile to almost everyone around her. She was afraid of Burson, for he could always find her from her hidey-hole, and he is a symbol of punishment. She despised her sister, thinking that she was like a toy or pet that accepted everything her owner did to her submissively and blindly. For Belari, she had a complex feeling. She hated Belari, for she was treated as “Belari’s investment”, “property”, “creature”, “subject”, and “protégé”. But Belari gave her food and clothing, and ensured people in her fief quite a good life, so she then believed that she was a respectable fief. Even her relationship with her only friend Stephen was alienated. She thought Stephen was a dreamer, who didn’t understand the true ways of the world. After Stephen’s death, Belari made his body into sweet sliced meats, and Lidia unconsciously ate her friend’s meat, consumed the “good ingredients” (Bacigalupi, 2008, p. 38). This little trap by Belari cut off Lidia’s last relationship with others and the world, resulting in her alienation from the whole world around her, and caused Lidia’s later murder.

Alienation of Consumption

Apart from the alienation of labour from the perspective of the individual, the whole society here shows a typical alienation of consumption, which expresses in three ways:

First, the alienation of the consumers. The consumers get deeply stuck in the consumption, and lose their minds in the process. They consume badly to feed their lust and desire, and the more they consume, the more they want, leading to a vicious circle that one can hardly get out of, as Baudrillard put it, “the fundamental character of consumption, its unlimited character” (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 61). In the story, the upper class chased madly after stars and celebrities. They were always waiting to see new stars and performances, wanting more erotic and exciting shows, which led to the common behaviors of using the top medical technologies to transform stars into man-made beautiful “artifacts”. And their need, on the other hand, pushed the development of technologies forward and increased the consumption in return, finally building this consumer society.

Second, the alienation of consumption. Consumption turns from material consumption into symbolic consumption, with symbols replacing objects as a marker to distinguish consumption and people. According to Baudrillard, the satisfaction of consumers’ needs lies first and foremost in the meaning of the values attached to

the objects. The consumer's taste is the level of a person's identity, status and class. In this sense, symbols become the markers that distinguish and segregate people. The reason why the fluted girls were striking to the lieges lay in three features of their appearance: One, they are young, pale and vulnerable, with their features frozen at thirteen by Revitia treatments, skins Kabuki pale drained colour using pigment drugs, and bones hollow and fragile after surgeries. Two, they themselves were humanoid musical instruments. There were cobalt boreholes on their spines. Glinting stops and keys made of brass and ivory ran along their fluted frames. Three, they had rare and precious black eyes, which symbolized the far and mysterious Eastern World. These three features truly showed their value, rarity and beauty, and these symbols sent the entire audience into a frenzy, demonstrating the alienation of consumption in the story.

Third, the alienation of the society. With symbolic consumption, the governing class achieves a new control over society by disciplining and dismantling people. Consumption controls people by luring them into the illusion of infinite consumption with comfort and satisfaction, and thus losing their sense of resistance. Also, the symbol behind the consumption affirms the class differences of the symbols unconsciously, becoming a powerful weapon for the ruling class to maintain its domination. The aristocrats and the lieges set the rules that the market wanted unique performances and commodities, and the small people just worked extremely hard to produce more beautiful, valuable and precious products, and indulged themselves in these commodities, always obeying the rules and never considering making some change. In this way, the lieges consolidated their reign.

Alienation of Technology

The alienation of consumption has revealed part of the nature of this complex society, yet under the consumption level, there exists an even deeper layer: a society controlled by alienated technology.

First, the social structure in the story world was based on mass production and industrial technology. According to some traces, it could be indicated that the productive forces were highly developed. All the small people in the story earned their livings through "old arts abandoned in the face of efficient manufacturing", being artisans like glassblowers, potters, blacksmiths, and so on. Stars worked as performers and artists (Bacigalupi, 2008, p. 34) while the lieges and aristocrats did not need to work for a living. However, if all the people worked as artists or did not even work, how did they get living products like food and clothing? The answer lay in the "efficient manufacturing", which meant that machines had already replaced human labour. However, small people also had to struggle over living, while industrial technology to produce food, clothing and other basic living material was tightly grasped in the hands of the technocrats. In this way, technocrats used industrial technology as a weapon to control people, and technology was alienated in return (Hong, 2020).

Second, the highly developed biological-medical technology led to the alienation of the human body. In the story, the technology had already achieved an extremely high level that humans could be transformed not only in appearance but also in function. It could keep one perennially young, and it could even make one immortal. Humans have already achieved the process of knowing and transforming living subjects, not only natural objects. As a result, human individuals showed a trend towards objectification and instrumentalisation. For example, the fluted girls were transformed into commodities that pleased the lieges. Using the technology of "cocktails of disease prophylaxis, cell-scouring cancer inhibitors, and Revitia" (Bacigalupi, 2008, p. 30), they froze the hormone levels so they wouldn't grow old. The guard Burson had bloodhound genetics, and "it was difficult to

tell where the jackal, dog, and human blended in the man” (Bacigalupi, 2008, p. 29). With special skills like “augmented irises bloodshot with enhancements scanning her skin’s infrared pulse” (Bacigalupi, 2008, p. 32), Burson became a handy tool for Belari, but rather a person. Vernon Weir, the liege and investor of Belari, used contraband chemical cologne so that he could make others dizzy and believe in him. This showed another way of body transformation apart from the former two. But in all, the technology demoted the human body to a mere substance, an object to be dealt with, thus leading to its control of the human body.

Third, the ethical dilemma caused by medical technology resulted in the alienation of human mentality. The development and application of technology has triggered negative psychological reactions on humans, mainly in the form of an emotional tangle of technology dependence and technology fear. On the one hand, the fact that technology can optimize and enhance the human body, both to repair certain genetic defects and to cure various diseases, and even to extend the life span of human beings and give them immortality, has led people to indulge in the expectation and dependence on technology. On the other hand, there were certain side effects of these technologies: Immortality would require people to wire TouchSense under their skins and be subject to remote control, and the addition of animal genes into human body made Burson bloodthirsty and fond of hunting. These side effects led to people’s confusion, anxiety and even fear of the technology, which pointed out the new ethical dilemma under the technology era people living in.

Fourth, the technology strengthened the alienation of social ethics and the class solidification. Facing such advanced biological-medical technology, the members of society are thus divided. The rich stars constantly made themselves more attractive through technological transformation and thus gaining more money, while the small people who have no money lacked the ways to change themselves through technology and instead remained in their old class positions, getting poorer and poorer. This led to the bifurcation and solidification of the social classes. Additionally, family ties and interpersonal relationships are alienated by technology. For instance, the fragile fluted girls that wouldn’t grow up were a burden to their parents and thus had to be sent to the liege. The family blood ties between people became thin and ethical values were gradually lost. The social and kinship nature of the human being was gradually extinguished under conditions of technological alienation.

Alienation of Aesthetics

Now we see the alienation of people, consumption, and technology in the society. But in all, people were under the alienation of aesthetics at the root and could hardly realize that they were in an alienated world.

First, the alienation of aesthetic products. Along with the development of medical technology, the aesthetic products turned from art craft into human body, and eventually became man-made body-instruments like the fluted girl. The Frankfurt School proposed that an entertainment industry system that uses modern science and technology to produce, replicate and disseminate cultural products on a large scale is “cultural industry”. In the fiction, the technocrats furthered the step and produced what can be called “body industry”. Stars were produced by technology like products with their bodies transformed like material. And their bodies became “the finest consumer object” (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 129). Like literary and art in cultural industry, the human body here became a result of mass aesthetic production and replication.

Second, the alienation of aesthetic standard. Under the control of technology and consumption, the aesthetic standard was shaped by technocrats, spread by lieges, used on stars, and all-accepted by people. They shared a

unified standard built and supported by technocrats which pursued “uniqueness”. Technocrats constructed an aesthetic authority of unique elements and unique pleasure: the former like the fluted girls’ Eastern appearances that Western people could hardly see, and the latter like the incestuous excitement and erotic stimulus the performance aroused. With the help of technology, almost all the beautiful appearance could be made by man. Therefore, due to aesthetic fatigue, stars and lieges sought for unique and natural beauty in the world. However, once they found an aesthetic uniqueness, they put it in the technology, and this uniqueness would soon become common, which made them even more obsessed with the exploration of unique beauty that could not be replicated. This led to a vicious circle that increasingly alienated people’s aesthetic standard.

Third, the alienation of aesthetic ability. When considering what was beautiful, people no longer relied on their own personal experience, ideas or feeling. Instead, they directly took the aesthetic object advertised by lieges and stars as the prototype of their recognition, development, and creation of aesthetics. Aesthetics was no longer carried out in an individual way. It was unified, professionalized, commercialized, and produced on a large scale, performing the so-called “agent aesthetics” (Zhou, 2006). What’s more, the aesthetic pleasure was no longer the natural feeling individual spontaneously obtained after an aesthetic enjoyment, and it would not bring the happiness of soul or pleasure on emotion. What it produced was a pathological desire and enthusiasm passively aroused by chemical material, which aimed at promoting consumption and encouraging the purchase of stars’ share. The aesthetic pleasure became a method of commodity promotion serving the technocrats and capitalist consumption society, but not the private enjoyment and aesthetic appreciation it used to be.

Conclusion

Although this short fiction *The Fluted Girl* happens in a whole new world from the reality we are in, Bacigalupi gives a warning to the readers by building such a grotesque and thrilling world. With this grenade, he portrays a society of alienation of human, consumption, technology, and aesthetics. Writing all these social problems in an impressive story, he urges the readers to rethink about the alienation in our world. At present, we are in an era of mass media with capitalized aesthetics, and we are also facing many practical disadvantages of “agent aesthetics”. Bacigalupi shows his ethical concern for our era, and triggers the deep thinking of how to deal with the alienation in life, keep ourselves free from the control of capital and technology, and have some free and comprehensive labor developments, personal interests, and aesthetic abilities.

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