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Greening the Media

From Industrial Hell to Digital Paradise

What keeps us from making the connections?

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In 1855, Herman Melville—disillusioned by the flop of *Moby Dick* four years earlier—published a short story in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* entitled “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids.” The first part recounts a narrator’s visit to London “in the smiling month of May,” where he meets up with a group of well-heeled, bachelor lawyers who share kingly amounts of food, drink, and traveller’s tales. The second part finds the American narrator traveling in a mid-winter snowstorm to an isolated New England paper mill, where he hopes to secure a deal for the direct supply of mailing envelopes for his lucrative seed business.¹

In stark juxtaposition to the paradise of bachelors, he observes female millworkers confined to hellish repetition of rag preparation, pulping, pressing and folding—their faces “pale with work, and blue with cold”; their eyes “supernatural with unrelated misery.” The mill owner tells him that they are all unmarried—the “maids” of the title—because married women are “apt to be off-and-on too much. We want none but steady workers: twelve hours to the day, day after day, through three hundred sixty-five days....”

The bachelors and maids live worlds apart, divided by stratifications of geography, wealth, class, and gender as well as experiences of time, space, and risk.

The bachelors measure time not by the clock, but by “a wine chronometer.” Each pour is a counterpoint to periods of conviviality. For the workers, the “metallic necessity, the unbudging fatality” of the machine at the mill’s heart sets workflow to an “unvarying punctuality and precision.”

The bachelors perceive an expansive world from their perch at the center of the British Empire; the same imperium isolates the “girls” in the periphery, keeping them from grasping a life beyond the underworld prison of the assembly line, the Tartarus of maids.

The men’s fine apparel and good health contrast with the dangerous and toxic conditions at the mill, especially in the rag room, where the women drag strips of cloth across the blades of a “glittering scythe... thus ripping asunder every seam, and converting the tatters almost into lint.” The narrator can barely breathe, yet “the girls don’t cough,” as the “air swam with the fine, poisonous particles, which from all sides darted, subtly, as notes in sun-beams, into the lungs.”

Melville was writing at a time when recycled cotton and linen rags were the primary raw material for industrial papermaking, years before innovations in chemical processing made wood fiber a viable resource. Insightfully, he connects the dots between the millworkers and socially marginal ragmen in European towns like London who collected clothing from rubbish to sell for export to the US, where cloth for the mills was perennially in short supply through most of the nineteenth century.² “Tis not unlikely, then,” says Melville’s narrator, “that among these heaps of rags there may be some old shirts, gathered from the dormitories of the Paradise of Bachelors.”

Worlds apart, and yet each is bound to the other through a global economy linking the fortunes of cosmopolitan elites to the misfortunes of workers at the outer edges of the capitalist system—a story of technology workers

that has remained largely unchanged since the age of print. Even today, workers in the periphery rarely appear in accounts of high-tech's provenance—the technologies all seem to come from the geniuses at Apple, Google, IBM, and their kind, who form an aristocracy of techie talent living in conditions uncannily like Melville's paradise of bachelors.

You'd think that in this age of constant connectedness, the system would be apparent to for all of us to see. But we resist the facts of systemic interdependence; we deny that our digital paradise is one with the hellish conditions of technology production. Maybe it's the enchantment with technology and the marketing that exploits our optimism about everyone benefiting from high-tech living.

As Melville sensed in his day, we must tell more stories that make the connections real. Would he be surprised to learn that today's workforce in electronics factories in Mexico, China, and elsewhere is still mostly young, unmarried women? Not much gender progress in the new paradise of digital bachelors either—roughly speaking, he would have to substitute one woman for one of the nine lawyers in his story to reflect the small number of women working at these electronics boys' clubs, where conditions can be disheartening and alienating³ and in some cases, as in "Gamergate," life-threatening.⁴ Our most renowned novelist connected dots that were separated by distance and inequality. Can we?

1. Herman Melville. "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 10: 670-678. New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, April, 1855. <https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furrgr/i2l/par-tar.html>

2. Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, *Greening the Media*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012: 46-50.

3. Claire Cain Miller. "Technology's Man Problem." *New York Times*, April 5, 2014: BU 1. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/technology/technologys-man-problem.htm...>

4. Brianna Wu. "Brianna Wu on why Gamergate trolls won't win." *Boston Globe Magazine*, March 4, 2015, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2015/03/04/brianna-why-gamergate-tr...>



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