

Julia White  
12/02/2018  
Professor Barry  
English 210

### What We Don't Want to See

Many of the literary works we have analyzed over the course of this semester have some strong similarities in the form of aesthetic principles. These aesthetic principles can take the form of genre, figurative language, form, or literary movements. Three of these works that specifically stood out to me were Chris Jordan's *Albatross*, Michael Pollen's "Weeds are Us," and Bill McKibben's "The End of Nature." When looking closely at the mechanics of these artworks, one will see that they all share a precise kind of symbolism. We humans love to associate ourselves with what is called *charismatic megafauna*, which are animals we can sympathize with, like cute giant pandas or adorable little puppies. We try to think of ourselves similar to animals we view in a positive light. The three writings I was drawn to, force the reader to associate humanity and oneself with things we think of as weird or gross, like weeds, birds, or just horrible, egocentric people.

Delving deeper into the aesthetic principle that these three embody, they all relate to the category of figurative language that is symbolism. Charismatic megafauna are animals with symbolic value as well as positive appeal. For example, we compare ourselves to animals that we adore, such as elephants or penguins, or majestic things like lions or horses, or other particularly intelligent species like monkeys. We love to see these animals, which is why these are the type of things we put on the forefront of campaigns for things like sustainability, because we are more likely to look at a poster or advertisement if it has some wonderful cute little dolphin on the cover. What makes these three works; *Albatross*, "Weeds are Us", and "The End of Nature" stand out is that they all force us to see something we don't normally like to see or relate ourselves to. Michael Pollen's "Weeds are Us" shows this idea as early as the title, foreshadowing to the reader that he will be talking about humans in relation to weeds, which are clearly not charismatic megafauna. McKibben's "The End of Nature" is a bit different. This piece still shows the reader something that they normally do not want to think about and it puts humanity as the culprit, but it doesn't have a specific symbol to connect us to. However; McKibben portrays mankind's arrogance and selfishness extremely well, which is not usually something we like to see, especially in such depth. *Albatross*, a film by Chris Jordan gives us the motion-picture version of this by showing us albatrosses *dying*. First of all, we don't normally think of birds as charismatic megafauna, but beyond that, *especially* not dead ones.

In the Chris Jordan's film, *Albatross*, Jordan illustrates the idea of putting in our faces something we would prefer to look away from amazingly well, through his manipulation of time. He gives us these birds which are already a bit gross in the eyes of many people, after all, they

constantly poop on the newest of newly washed cars, not to mention the select few that have had the misfortune of having the disgusting goo rained down onto their head. Most of us have had more bad encounters with birds than good. They also carry around a lot of germs. With all the bacteria, the parasites, and the diseases, birds are gross. It has been established that birds are not exactly the charismatic megafauna we adore, but this film is about something we instinctively want to look away from, immediately. Dead birds that are cut open and full of plastic aka man-made trash. Jordan really throws that in the audience's face by drawing out the length of time he shows these shots. Still frames of plastic-filled birds force the audience to see that there is only one culprit for these birds' demise: humanity. *We* have cut these innocent creatures' lives short, though we have nothing to do with them. How many people have actually seen an albatross in person? Most people probably haven't which is why we don't normally associate our litter and trash with the deaths of birds that live thousands of miles away. We are forced to see how widespread the consequences of our actions truly are. And we are forced to sit and look a lot longer than we would like to.

Michael Pollen's "Weeds are Us" goes a bit of a different route, blatantly telling the reader that humans are weeds. In speaking of our effects on nature, Pollen uses many words having negative connotations to enunciate his argument that humans are the weeds of the animal world. This writing at many points personifies the weeds, for example; "By attacking it at its root -the approved strategy for eradicating most weeds- I played right into the insidious bindweed's strategy for world domination" (Pollen 1083). This quote does an excellent job of showing the connection of such horrible weeds to mankind. It makes the reader consider the concept that humanity's constant innovation and industrialization, essentially killing nature to replace it with an ever-growing mess of buildings and roads, is similar to the way weeds take over a garden, taking up the planted flowers' nutrients and killing them off. The weed grows and grows, and as soon as someone comes to try and get rid of the weeds, it seems like they only grow stronger. Humans aspire to control as much of the world as we can, not taking into account the lives of all other plants and animals in nature, the way weeds take over a garden with no restraint. Pollen also describes the "hierarchy" of a few different plants, one of which was the weeping willows Pollen had planted in his yard for shade. Trees like willows and other softwoods are often considered weeds because they are at the bottom of this human-constructed hierarchy based on commercial value. Hardwoods are at the top because they are the best for us to chop down and build things out of. This whole idea of a hierarchy of plants and what is or isn't a weed is just a human construct. Weeds are only weeds because we named them weeds. What we call weeds are things that are always getting in the way and taking over as much as they can. We don't want to see these relations because humans obviously don't want to describe ourselves as something we despise, we would rather look at ourselves in comparison to some majestic, intelligent charismatic megafauna.

Bill McKibben takes this aesthetic principle yet another way, in showing his version of what we do not want to see. In "The End of Nature," McKibben portrays humans as arrogant,

selfish, wasteful, and destructive. He talks about how the damage brought upon nature and the atmosphere is “a product of our habits, our economies, our ways of life” (McKibben 1121). We know that the environment is damaged, but we don't want to see that that damage comes from *us*. McKibben poses the question that no environmentalist wants to think about: “If nature were about to end, we might muster endless energy to stave it off; but if nature has already ended, what are we fighting for?” (McKibben 1125). We don't want to think about the fact that nature might be too far gone to save. Most people would prefer to think that somehow one of our marvelous inventions will swoop in and save the day, that there's still hope, but the reality is that we need to do something *now* to fix the mess we have made of nature because it is already almost too late. In this writing the fact is also posed that the world doesn't belong to man alone. McKibben writes: “We could limit ourselves voluntarily, *choose* to remain God's creatures instead of making ourselves gods” (McKibben 1128). This quote gives us a choice we don't like to think we have. Like McKibben talks about at the beginning of this writing; we think we just *have* to have every bit of electricity we consume, we *have* to drive everywhere, ask anyone and they will have a list of excuses to justify humanity's aspirations. But, if we don't fix that it will be a lot harder to bring back nature. We all have to make that choice. This writing is another example of the *opposite* of charismatic megafauna, though it doesn't give us a direct symbol that we do not like, it relates to both previous works in that it forces the reader to think about something we would normally try to suppress the thought of.

Each of these three works; *Albatross* by Chris Jordan, “Weeds are Us,” by Michael Pollen, and “The End of Nature,” by Bill McKibben, are unique in many ways, but they all embody a similar aesthetic principle. We normally like to think about charismatic megafauna, or things we perceive in a positive light, but all three works push us away from that perspective. They all put in one's face the realities that humanity does not want to face. *Albatross* shows us birds full of plastic, symbolizing the far reaches our consequences have. “Weeds are Us” blurs the line between man and weed, and describes the human construct that we have applied to all plants. We have made hierarchies of everything, all based off of what *use* it has to us. And, finally, Michael Pollen's “The End of Nature” throws in front of the reader the reality that time is limited, and we need to fix the damage we have done to the atmosphere and environment quick, before it is too late. We don't want to view these highly negative realities, which is why these works are so important.

## Works Cited

Jordan, Chris. *Albatross*. Chris Jordan Photography, 2017.

McKibben, Bill. "The End of Nature." *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, by John Elder and Robert Finch, College ed., Norton, 2002, pp. 1120–1130.

Pollen, Michael. "Weeds Are Us." *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, by Robert Finch and John Elder, College ed., Norton, 2002, pp. 1079–1090.