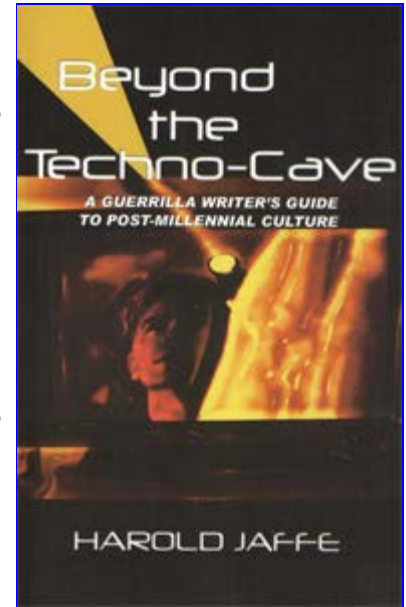


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**Jaffe, Harold. *Beyond the Techno Cave: A Guerrilla Writer's Guide to Post-Millennial Culture*.**

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Harold Jaffe's latest collection, *Beyond the Techno-Cave: A Guerrilla Writer's Guide to Post-Millennial Culture*, provides a fine overview of Jaffe's métier. *Beyond the Techno-Cave*, including as it does both fiction and commentary, will satisfy those already familiar with Jaffe's previous work as a formally innovative, socially engaged writer of fiction while offering a few particularly gratifying surprises. For newer readers unsure of where exactly to access Jaffe's oeuvre (which covers considerable thematic and stylistic range) it makes an excellent introduction to Jaffe's more recent formal innovations. *Beyond the Techno-Cave* is also a highly useful resource for college-level instructors seeking an introductory text to Jaffe in a critical context, as it includes three informed and provocative essays--"The Writer in Wartime", "Slash & Burn: A Narrative Model for the Millennium" and "Five Point Restraints: Art-Making in the Technosphere"--each of which seeks to locate the writer/artist within the complex of contemporary social relations, and to explore the potential for agency within the practice of committed fiction.



Of the fictions on offer, "White Terror" is perhaps most representative of Jaffe's more recent fiction, using as it does a form he calls the docufiction, a satire/pastiche of the prevailing discourse of the infoculture. *White Terror* is an unsituated dialog between two proto-typical "nuke the bastards" American males, with a twist. Commenting on a litany of daily news disasters formulated as conflicts (as they are invariably are by the news media for dramatic effect), the two, when choosing which aggrieved party to "bomb", surprise us by always sympathizing with the powerless, the abject. For example, the story of a diabolically devious cancer-victim impersonator moves our commentators to proclaim they'd "bust him out of jail, pin the coyote medal on his heart, and plant a wet kiss on his thin lips" while reserving their "bomb" for "Branford Rawson, federal prosecutor." Thus the dominant paradigm of Joe Six-pack (our petit bourgeois) instinctively groveling before/aligning himself with the hegemony is subverted to great comedic effect, and a counter-narrative is inscribed, new possibilities indicated.

Jaffe's "Potlatch" also employs the docufiction form, but in a more elevated register. Again utilizing the unsituated dialogue, the text concerns the (real life) efforts of

Rirkrit Tirvanija to feed the homeless. A contemporary Bodhisattva (we use this term in the general sense of one motivated by selfless compassion, though he is a Theravada Buddhist), Tirvanija travels around the U.S., renting the ubiquitous derelict spaces on the margins of urban America, the "empty warehouse or air craft hangar, depleted Kentucky Fried Chicken, terrorized Rite-Aid, spooked McDonald's, gutted Gap," Initially, "Potlatch", reads like a primer for selfless acts, detailing Tirvanija's process of traveling by bicycle from state to state, locating and renting a space, equipping the facility and then hiring homeless to work on staff. A fascinating (if not moving) story of its own accord, to be sure, but the rub lies in the response of the official culture to Tirvanija's good works. In this nation obtaining "the fattest GDP in the first world," Tirvanija has been described by "Art in America and Artforum, the *NY Times* and *Wall Street Journal*" as a potlatch-conceptual artist, the inference being that Tirvanija (who is described as well known in art circles), has in fact an agenda beyond that of his good "works." This, Jaffe indicates, is a part of the ongoing process of recuperation in which any transgressive act is recast as part of the normative content of the dominant ideology. This must give us pause, as we consider the chilling implications of a society in some fundamental way threatened by isolated acts of selfless compassion. Jaffe, as is his wont, pulls no punches here, defining this process as a mediated form of official terrorism, concluding that "Terrorism is a single individual feeding the homeless and almost homeless in the wealthiest country on the globe and having it labeled potlatch conceptual art by the *Wall Street Journal*."

There are other formal models under operation in *Beyond the Techno-Cave*. Three of the texts in a more traditionally realist mode are "The Death of Jeans", "Airport" and "Leper King". These three texts, while differing widely in subject matter, all share a curiously claustrophobic aspect, a sense of diminished experiential horizons, indicating Jaffe's major theme of "colonization" (briefly, à la Frederic Jameson and others: as the footprint of global culture now coincides unerringly with that of late capitalism, subjectivity as neutral or autonomous space is compromised, perhaps fatally). They all three employ international or (in the case of "Airport") transnational settings, and each locates the protagonist as tourist, that most tenuous (and profitable) of identifications.

"The Death of Jeans" describes the *dérive* of a character we might take for Jaffe himself (this is rare in his oeuvre), somewhat adrift in tourist Venice in those dark, hopeless hours preceding the US invasion of Iraq. Ruminating on the power of the official discourse via its media channels (the *International Herald Tribune*, in this case) and the ubiquitous tourist culture (now the number one global industry) of which he numbers among the more critically self-aware, our hero also theorizes potential acts of resistance (in this regard thoroughly in character) by the Italian youth on parade, fantasizing a Dionysian mass burning of jeans as a gesture of almost utopian longing and solidarity. After one aperitif too many, our boulevardier finds himself scammed in a (literal) shell game the text ending on a note of almost painful awareness of the actuality of his circumstance, faltering on the ramparts of a sinking city as the world plunges yet again into war. The sensations of lucid vertigo, existential despair and the dread, inescapable simultaneity of global culture created in this closing section, a sort of imploding epiphany, are quite remarkable. It should be noted that this text might owe something to Jaffe's own wry, sympathetic appreciation of Walter Benjamin as unlikely *flâneur*.

*Leper King* intimates a quest, hot on the trail of David Beckham, metrosexual international, a pop icon of plebeian origins famously at ease with his role as spectacular commodity in the global imaging system. Our narrator, an intelligent and observant protagonist, pursues Beckham and Posh Spice along a Pac Rim endorsement tour: Singapore to Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City to Angkor Wat, with the city of Hanoi the only zone of partial respite from the adrenaline rush of money changing hands. In this narrative's descriptive hierarchy the sights and scents of Southeast Asia are privileged, to great effect, invoking the postmodern towers of Singapore and the vandalized ruins of Angkor Wat, the elusive scent of an Air Singapore hostess and the aromatic oils used in the Bangkok sex trade. Yet the absence of sounds from the street is telling, a symptomatic omission for those, like our narrator, with the expense account insulation from the rush and press of capital, from ten thousand Pedi cabs vying for curb space, from countless lead burning two stroke engines firing the long afternoons across the southern hemisphere, from the counter top barter and banter of the myriad noodle stands and taquerias across this planet of slums. Ambient sound, invasive and anarchic, can be most difficult to filter, to synthesize, stylize and contextualize to the prerogatives of the empire of the image-thus the unmediated din is silenced.

The stalking of Beckham & Posh Spice is motivated-it must be inferred-by a sort proximity effect: the closer one is to the spectacular Beckham the more of "the real thing" one becomes, accessing a faux intimacy with the star, and also a vicarious purchase within the complex of role playing possibilities afforded to Beckham, to Justin, to Madonna, to Brittany themselves. The irony of "capturing" what is essentially an image goes unnoted. Yet the narrative does model a species of transgression in that the pathology of fandom might signal a gesture of defiance, an implicit violation of the processes of recuperation in which fans are meant to passively complete the circuit of exchange. Furthermore, in his pursuit of the authentic, our wannabe star fucker cannot but register the poverty of Pacific Rim, and respect the individuality and presence of the Thai, Vietnamese, Cambodian (the hyper-stylized, narcissistic elusiveness of the handsome, young Singaporean mall walkers [registering the new, So Cal international affect] is another story).

Beckham is, of course, never apprehended; instead he becomes the prism through which the processes of postmodern diffusion are viewed, a one way mirror to the decentering effects of the spectacle: a rush to the head, multi-colored lights spinning as our sense of ourselves weakens. An ambiguous epiphany occurs in Angkor Wat on the "Terrace of the Leper King" site of a lichen-damaged monument whose eroded features have traditionally been confused for the symptoms of leprosy, which rarely afflicted the royal castes. As for Beckham, there can be, of course, "nothing for him" in Angkor Wat: after a brief courtesy visit he retires to "chill in the Softiel Grand which charges \$1,200 per night in US not Singaporean dollars." The text ends with an addendum as denouement, perhaps modeled after Beckham' press kit: a pointless list of stats and vapidities, which is as close as we, or our narrator, will ever get to the *real* thing.

*Beyond the Techno-Cave*, also collects three of Harold Jaffe's recent essays, including "Five Point Restraints: Art making in the Techno Sphere", which analyzes the practices of contemporary artists directly engaged with questions of technology and culture. Jaffe considers the ways in which techno art either interrogates or celebrates techno culture while respecting the inclinations and prerogatives of the

artists themselves. These fifteen or so years on, the cyborg is still a foundational operational metaphor; Donna Haraway is cited as an authority, and her libratory feminist thesis acknowledged, and further, the germane but non-oppositional nature of the work of artists such as Stelarc is given careful consideration, but Jaffe doesn't flinch from his core critique of techno culture (or if you will, our postmodern culture of late capitalism), itself as fundamentally totalized, oppressive and invasive.

Jaffe notes that progressive techno artists have a narrow range of options in terms of staging interventions into the techno culture; indeed, even the arguably successful interventions of artists like Krzysztof Wodiczko run the risk of being recuperated, or re-colonized, back into the official culture. In this light, Jaffe summarizes the desperate critique of Guy Debord: "The spectacle has now colonized every wilderness, exterior and interior. Hence alienation, or contemplation from the outside, essential to art and discourse, can no longer be invoked." What then, short of Debord's own (rather non-melodramatic) suicide, is to be done?

"Whatever," Jaffe might answer, "one can."

Thus the essay concludes with a range of oppositional tactics in support of a strategy of resistance, with Jaffe's qualification that "humanizing, eroticizing, estheticizing, politicizing," the technoculture is going to be a long, hard struggle, and so these "art" practices are only the beginning." Crisis art, process art, dialogic art and dialectical art are all offered as points of departure, sources of praxis and, on a more human level, sources of encouragement for oppositional artists who aspire to share in Gramsci's stirring identification of himself (quoted by Jaffe), as "a pessimist of the intellect, but an optimist of the will."

We might note in passing that technology of course takes many forms, forms which are privileged in their turn by the vagaries of culture/capital. Hard tech per se, and its softer infotech variants, seems to have lost some of its hold on the popular imagination due to the dotcom crash and the increasing banality-via the vulgarities of My Space and *texting*, and the ubiquity (both official and self-inflicted) of electronic surveillance-of its most accessible manifestations. The emergence of gene tech as the new area of contention, as reflected in the discourse surrounding stem cell research, genetic modification, cloning, and gene therapy, can also be considered in light of Jaffe's overall critique, though to gain imaginative purchase we'll need a new metaphor to supplant the cyborg (the term itself having faded from the vernacular). Here it might be useful to remember the arc of Cindy Sherman's work, as traced in Hal Foster's *Return of the Real*, in which the interrogation of the cultural construction of female identity de-evolves into a lucid and horrified contemplation of the reduction of the human form to its most abject constituents, a sort of biological soup awaiting the manipulations of gene tech, an aesthetic preparation for the arrival of the genetic *mutation* as the new operational metaphor, which, as is indicative of a postmodern era, we see upwelling from the mass culture in parallel with its manifestation in the fine arts.

Harold Jaffe's essay, "Slash & Burn: A Narrative Model for the Millennium" offers a similar range of options to oppositional writers and artists seeking cultural junctures at which to, in Jaffe's words, metaphorically "Find a seam, plant a mine, and slip away." These "counter-narratives," which serve to subvert the self-serving official discourse of the existing order (its ideology), are invariably ingenious and compelling, and-as Jaffe ends with an extended riff on "drifter-artist" Cletus Wingo's

sale of "treated" photographs of the corpse of Joan Benet Ramsey to the art establishment-potentially provocative and disturbing.

Finally, Jaffe's essay "The Writer in Wartime" notes that ultimately, "art...is, one way or another, a reflection of and response to contemporary culture and it employs the techniques and references at hand." Jaffe here argues that the pressing nature of the social, political, ethical, environmental and technological challenges at hand must serve to interrogate the privileged, traditional status of the "autonomous" artist. Jaffe counters questions of the authority of the imaginative artist as social commentator by noting the editorial freedom and potential influence these writers possess, and by inference the responsibilities these privileges entail. Questions of esthetic integrity are countered by the observation that in a terminal culture no one can ethically remain completely above the fray. And at any rate one's legacy as an artist is determined by an unknown future audience, whose needs cannot be effectively anticipated; artistic resonance cannot be known, but still, the catalog of committed artists, as Jaffe notes, "is a lengthy one." After an intelligent and nuanced discussion of the intellectual roots of two non-complementary modes of resistance here dubbed "liberation *from* and liberation *of* nature" Jaffe ends with a call to action: "Whether the writer endorses liberation of or from nature, the question of stopping the mindless destruction must still obtain. However skeptical we might be about the practical usefulness of art, can we still invoke (in the committed poet Tom McGrath's words) 'the privilege of alienation?'"

"No, we cannot."

We see then that Harold Jaffe's latest collection embraces both the practice and theory of engaged writing with great formal range and élan, and a critical rigor and directness that reinforce previous observations of the depth of feeling of Jaffe's own commitment.