

Baseball, Hot Dogs, Apple Pie, and Severed Heads:

Review of Hal Jaffe's *15 Serial Killers*

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15 Serial Killers, by Harold Jaffe. Raw Dog Screaming Press: 2003. 177pgs. ISBN: 0-974503-10-X. Paperback. \$13.95.

Serial killing ... has its place in a culture in which addictive violence has become a collective spectacle, one of the crucial sites where private desire and public fantasy cross ... one discovers again and again the excitations in the opening of private bodily and psychic interiors: the exhibition and witnessing, the endlessly reproducible display, of wounded bodies and wounded minds in public. In wound culture, the very notion of sociality is bound to the excitation of the torn and opened body, the torn and exposed individual, as public spectacle. -Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*¹

Remote control in hand, we surf to the pertinent channel, whether it's called *Discovery* or *Biography* or *Stupendous Crimes of the Century*. We see the monster-perpetrator of course, we witness a gory scene or, more often, a hyperreal, contrived-for-TV gory scene. We see and hear numerous talking heads: cops, reporters, more cops, victim's relatives, a human who lived in the same condo as the serial killer. -Harold Jaffe, "Nazis, Sharks & Serial Killers"²

With the publication of *15 Serial Killers*, his latest "salvo of guerilla writing" (Filas 348), Harold Jaffe explodes the very social, political, and narrative structures supporting capitalist culture's illusory edifices, further cementing his reputation as one of our finest literary terrorists/freedom fighters. The poet laureate of America's "wound culture" – an

¹ See page 253 of Mark Seltzer's *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*.

² See Harold Jaffe's "Nazis, Sharks & Serial Killers." *JaffeantiJaffe*: Harold Jaffe's Official Web Site, <<http://www-rohan.sdsy.edu/dept/press/fi/home/nazis.html>>. Date accessed: January 11, 2004.

ever-emerging socius in which, according to Mark Seltzer, the private and public spheres constellate around (re)presentations of physical and psychic trauma (253) – Jaffe reveals the cultural logics that not only create, but package, market, and all too frequently celebrate the serial killer as multi-media celebrity, while equally malevolent (and far more prolific) murderers squirm in the shadows, hiding behind their promises to “educate and reform,” “protect and serve,” and “make the world safe for democracy.” By turns hilarious and chilling, informative and speculative, *15 Serial Killers* sutures together an assortment of seemingly diverse literary genres, illustrated by Joel Lipman’s meta-commentative collages, to create a remarkably compelling text that allows readers to inspect the grisly, decomposing remains of an “American Dream” that has always been somebody else’s worst nightmare, a “manifest destiny” ultimately founded on fear, carnage, and genocide.

Jaffe labels *15 Serial Killers* as a collection of “docufictions,” a conflation of the terms “documentary” and “fictions” that illustrates the inescapable subjectivity precluding any attempt at conveying an objective “truth,” as well as fiction’s ability to expose the intricate networks of power relations that often go undetected in so-called “non-fiction” texts. In other words, the various narratives that make up Jaffe’s latest book arise from the messy fissure between the always already hemorrhaging categories of “fact” and “fantasy.” Like the assorted serial killers and the disarticulated “human beans” they leave in their bloody wake, Jaffe’s writings probe the gaping ideological lacerations we all too often dismiss as mere scratches on an apparently impenetrable veneer of civility, exposing readers to the notion that not only have we been living “in the cut” for longer than we may imagine, but that the “delectably menacing consumables” (Jaffe para 1) that populate the pages of Jaffe’s text are inevitable byproducts of a culture in which humans are far too often reduced to disposable commodities. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that almost all of Jaffe’s “docufictions” link mass murder with the figurative consumption of other “humans.” Nor does it seem inappropriate that in tales like “Dahmer,” “Big Ed,” and (albeit to a far lesser extent) “Slick Ted,” Jaffe engages in detailed descriptions of cannibalism. If, as Robin Wood posits in his introduction to *American Nightmares: Essays on the American Horror Film*, “[c]annibalism represents the ultimate in possessiveness” and is, consequently, “the logical end of human relations under capitalism” (21), then the aforementioned killers are merely living up to their civic responsibility as good Americans.

In the spirit of such “biting” cultural critique, Jaffe includes Henry Kissinger and his nefarious patron/collaborator in carnage, Richard M.

Nixon, at the heart of his “murderer’s row,” illuminating how foreign policy and political interventions in the name of “freedom” are all too often brutal atrocities made palatable, indeed addictive, given the sufficient amount of media spin and sugar coating. As he does in the sections dedicated to such renowned serial killers as John Wayne Gacy (“Clown”) and Richard Speck (“Speck”), Jaffe skillfully constructs a portrait of Kissinger as an alienated loner hungry for personal empowerment. Rather than describing a traditionally compulsive butcher methodically dispatching of bodies in a hands-on fashion while savoring the immediate physicality (and unmediated carnality) of the kill, in “Dr. K,” one of the collection’s finest offerings, Jaffe illuminates the actions of an ambitious, affectless fiend cramming the crawlspaces of history with corpses resulting from his favorite “stand-up comedy routine”: “Worldwide genocide” (79). The “Iago” to Nixon’s “Iago,” Henry Kissinger is the ideal monster hiding in plain sight, an observation made brilliantly clear by “Dr. K”’s closing passage:

Henry Kissinger’s legacy.

Official First World history has it that he is brilliant, resourceful, prophetic even. Our Nobel Peace Laureate. The Statesman of Statesmen.

Unofficially. A serial mass murderer of Hitlerian proportions.

Jaffe’s prose peels away the scab-like caul of “history,” illustrating that those “official” accounts people so often take for granted function on a level not all that far removed from the basest offerings of tabloid TV.

Furthermore, Jaffe’s indictment of Kissinger extends his razor keen observations regarding the selfish uses and abuses of socio-political power. Indeed, although the majority of the book’s 175 pages challenges the mass media’s reductive “portraits” of serial killers by acknowledging that the grotesque, inhuman actions described throughout were committed by psychologically complex human beings (“every narrative...” we are continually reminded, “must have its genesis” [17]), Jaffe never fails to illuminate the cultural forces that not only allow such activities to transpire, but that enact their own pernicious brand of violence within institutionalized settings. Consider, for instance, Jaffe’s condemnation of the sexism, racism, and homophobia within police departments and prisons in “Dahmer,” as well as the ease with which impoverished people swept up in an indifferent legal system can be exploited for financial gain

in “Wuornos.” In the former, Jaffe’s careful prose style elucidates the hierarchies of “hate”ful prejudice that render law enforcement at least partially culpable in Jeffrey Dahmer’s infamous crimes:

Jeffrey Dahmer

In his deceptively calm manner, Dahmer is explaining to the cops that Konerak is his 18 year old lover who swallowed too much sweet wine and fell on his face.

Harriet Cross and Luella Cleveland protest that the Asian boy was trying to resist the blond man who was punching and kicking him up and down the street.

The cops have to make a decision.

The tall stiff white dude is an identifiable homo that sexes with colored orientals.

A combo any righteous cop’s gonna hate from his heart.

But the other two are mouthy black females.

No contest; the females are told to go home.

Then the cops in their black shoes escort the blanketed oriental and tall white fag to Dahmer’s one bedroom apartment on the second floor of 924 North 25th Street, the Oxford Apartments.

The apartment smells funny but is neat.

Homos tend to be neat. (12)

Conveyed in a minimalist, limited-omniscient third person perspective that privileges, through the use of racial and gender biased epithets, the discourse of a bigoted repressive state apparatus, Jaffe’s “docufictional” account of the events surrounding Jeffrey Dahmer’s killing spree posits the intolerant police as complicit in, if not outright accessories to, the Milwaukee cannibal’s murders. This “unofficial” crime, Jaffe’s narrative suggests, is compounded years later by Jeffrey Dahmer’s own brutal death in prison at the hands of Malcolm 2X Scarver, a “fiercely violent, schizophrenic black nationalist” with whom Dahmer and a fellow inmate/murder victim, a racist by the name of Jesse Anderson, were inexplicably left alone for slightly less than fifteen minutes.

Similarly, in “Wuornos,” Jaffe reveals how, in a culture of greed and exploitation in which people are too frequently reduced to objects, an alleged victimizer can quickly become the victim of “evil” (57) individuals searching for their own brand of “mark” or prey. Lonely and isolated within the legal system of the “sovereign state of Florida” (54), Lee Wuornos, the “docufictional” abused highway prostitute turned killer

(in “self defense”), is all-too-susceptible to the dubious machinations of the “born-again” (46) Helga-Lee Uberroth (who eventually adopts Wuornos) and the former rabbinical student turned weed-smoking rock singer/lawyer, Harvey Medved. Throughout the story’s darkly comic “unsituated dialogue,” a literary device to which Jaffe returns several times in *15 Serial Killers*, Uberroth and Medved’s manipulation of Wuornos’ precarious legal situation – a venture quite possibly motivated by a desire to “make money from the movies, TV specials, books and such, without Lee’s protestations” (56) – appears every bit as vicious and suspect as Wuornos’ purportedly pre-emptive strikes upon the men she perceives as potential rapists/sodomizers. Indeed, by the end of the tale, following Lee Wuornos’ plea of guilty (at Medved’s bequest) and the pronouncement of her death sentence, Jaffe’s text raises complex questions as to the effectiveness of the American judicial system and the logics behind what behaviors are seen as “criminal” or “murderous.” Appropriately, in perhaps one of the most telling pronouncements by any of the serial killers in Jaffe’s book, Wuornos responds to her sentencing by declaring: “I’m innocent! I was raped. Scumbags of America, I hope you all get raped in the ass!” As the “docufiction”’s unsituated dialogue suggests, however, such a fate may not be enough to correct any potential injustices since “[i]f they all get raped in the ass they’ll still be scumbags” (57).

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Jaffe’s latest collection, though, is his satiric, postmodern flattening of temporality (in the anachronistic/Jamesonian sense), a rhetorical and thematic strategy that reveals disturbing continuities in America’s wound culture by exploring why serial killers, from Charles Starkweather and Charles Manson to Ted Bundy and Ted Kaczynski, continue to occupy such a vital position in the American cultural imaginary. In other words, when 1950s icon Starkweather and his “babe” discuss “snuff”ing her “hokey dad” and then “snuffing” enough people on the road to a cinematic “Kalifornia” to warrant getting her “sweet ass on TV” or, better, “the Internet” (130), Jaffe’s readers have to wonder just how many “hits” at such a web site would result from clicks of our very own mice. Likewise, when “Dr. Death” visits a live Internet talk show to discuss “assisted suicide” and other medical issues with an anonymous host and fellow guest, Charo, “[t]he original coochie coochie girl” (81), one gets the sensation that they’ve seen or heard all this before, perhaps while watching a similar exchange between the controversial pathologist and a well-known “gap-toothed” and “arrogant” (92) late night talk show host. One also has to speculate if, in the end, serial killing is as American as baseball, hot dogs, and apple pie, or at least as American as the faceless corporations

and “timeless” institutions that sell the public such conventionally wholesome, if ultimately hollow images.

If freedom, as the Georges Bataille quote that opens *15 Serial Killers* suggests, exists “only at the extremes” (9), then perhaps the “delectably menacing consumables” (“Sharks...” para 1) that provide the raw material for Jaffe’s “docufictions” are far more liberated than those of us who sit on our couches and Lay-Z-boys, channel (or web)-surfing the serial killers’ “official histories” and absorbing the murderers’ pre-packaged pathologies into our technological unconscious. At least some of the serial killers openly acknowledge their roles as either victimizers or victims (or sometimes both) in the construction and maintenance of America’s wound culture. As Jaffe implies in his essay, “Nazis, Sharks & Serial Killers,” in a culture in which the “pristine body has been rendered profane” and “the profaned body (via war, rape, homicide, serial murder) has been turned into spectacle” (para 20), it might be “infinitely preferable” to swim with the sharks themselves rather than associate with “the hunter who hunts them, the TV producer who displays them, and the sponsor who capitalizes on them” (para 40).

Works Cited

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