

Paolo Pitari

Mark Dery, I Must Not Think Bad Thoughts: Drive-by Essays on American Dread, American Dreams

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Mark Dery, *I Must Not Think Bad Thoughts*: Drive-by Essays on American Dread, American Dreams

- 1 Irreverent and shocking stand to Mark Dery's *I Must Not Think Bad Thoughts* as sunny and beautiful do to the best summer day in Bora Bora – they're both accurate *and* deadly boring descriptions of the matter at hand. The book's value, I think, stands in the breadth of its interests, its dragging you from subject matter to (very different) subject matter and forcing you to inspired critical effort, its moving you to constructive skepticism.
- 2 Its irreverence does contribute to its value; but it seems, at times, to turn into a double-edged sword. At one point, it becomes too much, and it seems to be there for shock-value. Interest is revived when irreverence is left behind, when the topics don't necessarily have to be death and sex (usually together) or weird fetishes and perversions, and Dery's concern for moral and social issues is there in plain sight, pure, on the page. All in all, while reading, I felt both envious and inspired of/by the work a social critic like Mark Dery can produce, of/by the freedom and meaningfulness of the practice. One can't but tip one's hat.
- 3 In the introduction Dery reflects on hypocrisy in American politics; using Winthrop's "City Upon a Hill" as the point of reference with which to compare JFK's sending of Secret Service agents to deliver "for framing 'sexually explicit photographs of a naked president with various paramours'" or Reagan's "green-lighting illegal arms sales to fund the right-wing insurgency against Nicaragua's leftist government" (6).
- 4 The purpose of the book is already evident: revealing "the darkest undersides" of the "stories America likes to tell itself most" (7); in other words: "Thinking Bad Thoughts is above all else a refusal to recognize intellectual no-fly zones" (2).
- 5 Dery wants to think the unthinkable, to follow David Lynch's steps, and those of his forebear – in what is my favorite correlation of the book – Nathaniel Hawthorne:
- [This] is, after all, the point of the book in your hands: to cast a critical eye on the accepted order of things, to read between the lines of the world around us, considered as an ideological text—in short, to Think Bad Thoughts (3).
- 6 The first and most sizeable section of the book is titled "American Magic, American Dread" and contains twelve essays, ranging from discussions on popular music to gender criticism to fascism. What you start noticing almost right away – and this is one fun fact about reading books of essays – is the writer's most favorite writing tricks (e.g. Dery's passion for the catchy final one-liner) and his obsessions (e.g. his persisting quoting of J.G. Ballard, Baudrillard, Camille Paglia, Susan Sontag, De Sade, Freud, and Marilyn Manson). The first essay, "Dead Man Walking," discusses zombie representations as indicative of cultural issues and from there develops an analysis of class exploitation and racism in America – e.g. "America's nightmares are haunted by vampires and zombies—the bloodsucking Wall Street elite, drunk on seven-figure bonuses, and the dead-eyed, bone-gnawing underclass" (14). Themes – those of "America's winner-take-all culture" and deliberative capitalism – that come back in "Gun Play," an essay which argues (and the argument sounds as logical as elementary to us Europeans) that there's absolutely no weird complications under U.S. gun problems. Just take the guns out of people's hands. Problem solved.
- 7 You also get two essays on American masculinity that discuss how the issue of homophobia is far from being solved in the U.S.A., and trace the problem back to larger topics of American ethos: i.e. America's "Holy Trinity: Sports, Free Market, and Christianity" (48-49). The essays on Lady Gaga, Madonna, and David Bowie display an insightful (and I must say really fun) example of postmodernist analysis of contemporary times, engaging with rock stars' constructed selves in an era when reality and meaning are substituted by symbolism and perception. In short, you get Lady Gaga and Baudrillard in the same essay (by the way, these

essays focus on in short: Lady Gaga's dumbness, Madonna's sexy Big Toe, and Bowie's genius). You also get two random ventures: one on Mark Twain's literary output and persona (in occasion of the publication of Twain's autobiography in 2010); and one on man, nature, and anthropomorphism. The section closes with three essays on the holocaust and the Nazis. "Shoah Business" discusses the distorting of history, the creation of myths, postmodern death of affect, death-camp tourism and people enjoying meals in what was once Auschwitz's processing center. "The Triumph of the Shill" discusses Hitler's gift for marketing and the general dumbness and anti-Semitism in English blueblood, while "Endtime for Hitler" is a fun essay on the YouTube parodies of the Hitler-going-bats scene from the movie *Downfall*.

8 Part two, entitled "Myths of the Near Future: Making Sense of the Digital Age," contains six essays. The first is on blogging and the world of contemporary information. To Dery, the good bloggers are *blogger-reporters* like Chris Allbritton "who reported the war in Iraq in country, on his readers' PayPal dime" (116), or the ones whom through their blog offer a journey through their consciousness in blogs such as Boing Boing, Dangerous Minds, Kottke.org, and WarrenEllis.com: "reading blogs like these is like subscribing to someone's stream of consciousness; it's the closest thing we have to telepathy" (118). The second essay is on Facebook and the random, unexplainable returns of "friendships" that were – or mostly never had been – decades ago and the weirdness of social interactions, best explained through the example "of the *New York Times* writer Hal Niedzviecki, who, "absurdly proud of how many cyberpals, connections, acquaintances and even strangers [he'd] managed to sign up, invited his Facebook Friends to hoist a jar at his favorite bar. Out of seven hundred, one showed" (129). This one is followed by an essay, titled "Word Salad Surgery," on the poetic value and Dadaist and Surrealist style of spam e-mail, a very interesting and fun read, which manages to question our relationship to and our defining of art. In trying to avoid spam filters, spambots create wordplay (or art) that might recall that of Burroughs, Duchamp, or John Cage: e.g. "'feverish squirt feat transconductance terrify broken trite fascist axis stultify floc bookshelves'" (147). The other three essays in the section make plainly clear what we could only guess up to this point: Dery has a weird obsession with sex, porn, fetish etc. One essay is on HAL from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, its "homosexuality," that of Turing, and that of Arthur Clarke. Another is on "techno-porn burlesques" and "Robo-Copulation" (151) "narratives" based off of *Star Trek*, and the last one starts out: "Recently, while websurfing in search of Xtreme kink" (159). I find myself unsure about how alluring these topics are. They certainly are irreverent and shocking though.

9 The third section is titled "Tripe Soup for the Soul" and contains five essays, all of which have to do, either explicitly or implicitly, with religion and religious impulses.

10 "Tripe Soup for the Soul" (the essay which gives the section its title) deals with self-help culture's history and with how it has turned into "a \$2.48-billion-a-year industry" (169). It's refreshing, after all those essays on sex perversions, to have a deadly serious read on self-help business and culture. This also highlights what is really fun about reading books of collected essays: the play of navigating through an author's mind, both becoming acquainted with his recurring themes of interest and wandering through the breadth of topics of concern, always knowing you can find the totally unexpected when turning the page, but also finding the same sense of *familiarity* in that page's voice. The essay points the finger at Americans' want for easy and quick pragmatic solutions, even for the soul, exemplified by such books as "*72 Hours to Success*, *Fast Food for the Soul*, or *Instantaneous Transformation*" (170). It is also an obvious example of how even smart American authors (and therefore, American people in general) always tend to think of America as The Center of the Universe: i.e. it is weird to read of clear Western problems continuously defined as peculiar American ones. Anyway, Dery's final reflection on the topic of self-help is that "maybe we should ask ourselves: What is our manic pursuit a flight *from*? What are our daily affirmations a lucky charm *against*?" "Pontification" deals with John Paul II's "genocide, plain and simple" (180), his ordering to eschew birth control and the subsequent enlarged spreading of HIV in Africa; but also with an artist's persistent lookout for ways to appear nonconformist, which finally render him/her (the artist) not just not-nonconformist but a sellout: the examples given are those of

Salvador Dalí's and Patti Smith's spineless artistic/religious revolutions in the name of shock appeal. "The Prophet Margin" and "2012" treat the theme of humans' appetite for apocalyptic prophecies; treating respectively Jack T. Chick's comics, and the American (uninformed, distorting, and commercially oriented) appropriation of Mayan culture. "The Vast Santanic Conspiracy" constitutes an overview of the research on the history of the myth of Santa Claus and contains many clever and extremely funny parallels between Santa and Satan (they're anagrams: *boom!* Revelation.) like: "Did you know that the Devil's signature entry line, in medieval miracle plays, was 'ho, ho, ho!'" (196)?

- 11 The fourth and last section is titled "Anatomy Lesson: The Grotesque, the Gothic, and Other Dark Matters." It contains an essay on the cultural terror associated with teeth which also reminds you, by discussing Freudian theories, how much nonsense can be uttered just by skillfully handling rhetoric in so-called logocentric discourse. Another, entitled "Gray Matter," on "invisible literature," which is, in short, medical texts, which often proves more out-of-this-world than any creative fiction can be; check this:

Somewhere, across the wounded galaxies of inner space, gas-station attendants are found "dead on the floor following...rupture of the bowel from a grease-gun edema"; an elderly man is found naked and very much deceased, his penis stuffed into the attachment of the still-running vacuum cleaner lovingly cradled in one arm. A forty-two-year-old Asian man accidentally hangs himself from a rope attached to the raised shovel of his backhoe tractor. "Determination of autoerotic death was made from decedent history and circumstantial indicators," report the authors of "Autoerotic Fatalities with Power Hydraulics," in the *Journal of Forensic Sciences*. "The victim kept a journal of love poetry dedicated to his tractor that he had named 'Stone,' outlining his desire for them to 'soar high' together (215).

- 12 Then...you can learn there is such a thing as a Church of Euthanasia (for the first couple of paragraphs I was struggling to understand what kind of complex metaphor was I trying to grasp) – no joke, www.churchofeuthanasia.org – on which I choose to exercise my right to shut up.

- 13 Four essays, one on the crypt of the Capuchins, another on severed heads, another (yes, the second) on apocalypse culture, and another on La Specola (museum in Florence)'s anatomical "venuses," have, as you might have already guessed, something in common, something which is obviously very dear to Dery's heart: sex and death. The last two essays I found particularly interesting. One is entitled "Cortex Envy" and treats of the history of IQ testing, its use for eugenics and the tests' rottenness "with the cultural and class biases of their makers, a diagnostic deck stacked against minorities, immigrants, and those at the bottom of the wage pyramid" (271) and their (the tests) ever-present neurosis-producing impact on Americans' psyches. The other, entitled "Goodbye, Cruel Words: On the Suicide Note as a Literary Genre," moves through – as Dery always likes to do – weird and astonishing anecdotes like that of Blair Newman, who deleted all of "the countless comments he had contributed ... [to] ... the seminal online community the WELL" (263), before committing suicide, in an attempt to achieve complete self-erasure; or suicide notes such as "the wrenching note pinned to the shirt of the young boy who hanged himself beside the family Christmas tree ('Merry Christmas') (261); or "Dear Betty: I hate you. Love, George," or "'I would like my sister Frances to have the piano that you have in your apartment. Do this or I will haunt you. Good-bye Sweets. Be seeing you soon. Love, Joe.'" (from a guy to his ex-girlfriend)" (262). But it also tells – which I found very surprising – that "most people—three out of four—don't leave suicide notes" (263), and most importantly (we need more people to say this) – while discussing writers' (Plath, Hemingway, Sexton, Woolf, and the list is endless) obvious attraction for suicide – that:

Of course, the romanticization of suicide is mere bullshit. In reality, suicide is a miserable, wretched business, a scourge that in 1999 snuffed out more than twenty-nine thousand Americans and inflicted psychic collateral damage on their friends and families. It's the eleventh leading cause of death in the United States; more Americans die by their own hands than from homicide (260).

References

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