

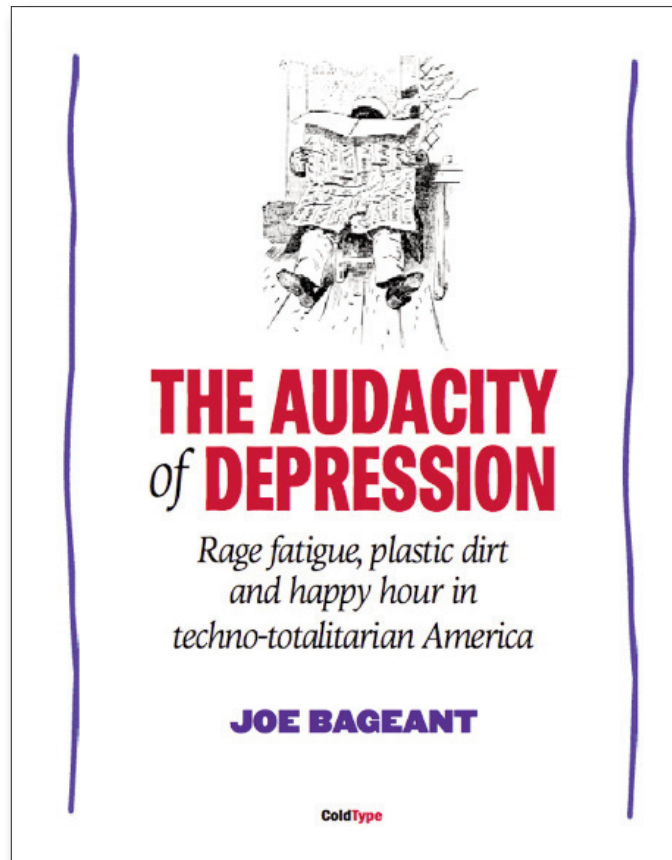


THE AUDACITY *of* **DEPRESSION**

*Rage fatigue, plastic dirt
and happy hour in
techno-totalitarian America*

JOE BAGEANT

ColdType



Joe Bageant is the author of the recently-published book, **Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War** from Random House Crown.

A complete archive of his online work, along with the thoughts of many working class Americans on the subject of class may be found at <http://joebageant.com>.

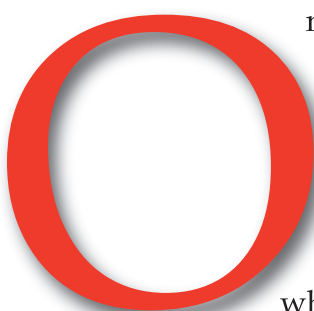
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WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD
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ne of the best things about the hundred or so book festivals in America is that, with luck, a writer can manage to get drunk with some of his or her readers. And with more luck, the readers pick up the tab. Bear in mind that 90% of all real writers, people for whom writing is their sole income, spend much of their time counting their change in the rest room of the hotels where they are being put up while on tour. Believe me, there are better rackets than writing.

So here I am at the Virginia Festival of the Book copping a smoke on the back dining patio of the Omni Hotel in Charlottesville with one of my readers – a somewhat elegant sixty-plus blonde who runs a small public library financial support group down in ancient marshy Northumberland County, Virginia. Created in 1648, it is the area James A. Michener wrote about in Chesapeake, and a place where, she tells me, periwinkles planted three hundred years ago on the graves of slaves still bloom. My wife, a historical librarian doing colonial African-American research, tells me these periwinkle marked slave graves can be found throughout Virginia.

Immensely energetic and a lifelong activist for literacy and informed thought, this cigarette voiced Northumberland librarian has built the county's new little library, and even managed to coax enough money out of the local government for two employees,. In a county with a population of 12,000, that's no small political feat.

At the moment, though, politically speaking, the Obama-Hillary dirt fight is in full fury, so I asked the obligatory question of the week, "Who will you vote for?"

"Oh, Obama, I guess. It's so hard to get excited over the elections. Lately I've been just plain depressed," she said.

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“About what?”

“Oh just everything. It seems to have become so pointless in America, as if we are entering a Dark Age. I’ve come to wonder why I do anything at all.”

On that melancholy note, we return to the lounge to join my wife for that last drink. The next one always of course being the “last one,” in the early stages of these situations, before all pretense is dropped and people start taking off their clothes or falling off those infernal high stools that replaced good old fashioned chairs — the kind where your feet reach the floor at all times and with arms you could grip if the room starts spinning.

Over the past couple of years I’ve had hundreds of encounters with reading Americans — and by encounters I mean conversations, not falling off chairs — which is to say book loving, thinking people like the Northumberland librarian, people of every stripe. They have ranged from the good ole boy Texas electrician who took me to a real smoke choked pool-table-and-concrete-floor joint to professors of literature and Washington policy wonks who actually use the little red cocktail napkin that accompanies their martinis.

During this period I have noticed a change in the nature of discussion with these previously unmet readers. Four years ago, much of it centered on the outrageousness of the Bush administration, the stomach turning criminality of the Iraq War, Cheney The Fanged Man of Wax, with a little rage at our planetary ecocide thrown into the mix. In other words, about what you might expect from a baby roasting alien commie readership such as mine, made up of such folks as school teachers, union members, sociology profs and other congenital malcontents, the sort of people who resent things like student strip searches in public high schools (HR 5295, The Student Teacher Safety Act of 2006, which, to its credit, at least bans cavity searches by faculty. You gotta be a cop to do that in our public schools) and other subversive types.

Lately though, I don’t hear so much outrage. In fact, the readers seem to be suffering from what someone aptly called “rage fatigue.” Which is another way of saying the bastards have simply worn us out. And it’s true.

I am not kidding when I say rage fatigue victims have fallen into an ongoing mid-level depression. (Looks to me like the whole country has, but then I’m no mental health expert.) The less depressed victims can be found lurking near the edges of the Obama cult, consoling themselves that a soothing and/or charismatic orator is better than nothing. Obama may yet be borne through the White House portico by a Democratic host of seraphim, but he cannot do much without the consent of a bought and paid for Congress. Only George Bush can do

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that, and we can only hope God broke the mold after he made George. And like whoever else wins the presidency, Obama can never acknowledge any significant truth, such as that the nation is waaaaay beyond being just broke, and is even a net debtor nation to Mexico, or that the greatest touch-me-not in the U.S. political flower garden, the “American lifestyle,” is toast. But then, we really do not expect political truth, but rather entertainment in a system where, as Frank Zappa said, politics is merely “the entertainment branch of industry.”

Still, millions of Americans do grasp at The Audacity of Hope, a meaningless marketing slogan of the publishing industry if ever there was one. At least it has the word Audacity in it, something millions of folks are having trouble conjuring up the least shred of these days. And there is good old fashioned “Hope” of course — that murky, undefined belief that some unknown force or magical unseen power will reverse the national condition — will deliver us from what every bit of evidence indicates is irreversible, if not politically, then economically and ecologically: Collapse.

Compounding everything is the fact that it is quite human and even pragmatic to passively accept reality as it is. Until it's too late to do anything. As my late friend Virgil the philosophical backhoe operator summed it up: “If we fucked everything up so bad tryin’ to do our best, maybe we oughtta just leave’er be for a while. Quit thinking about it so much.”

More Band-Aids for the trained chickens, please!

Virgil may be popping open a Keystone Light lager somewhere in heaven, or in maybe a much warmer venue. I dunno. But people are thinking about it more than ever. Among sentient people everywhere there is a deep, visceral unease, and among those most aware there is genuinely acute suffering. I hear this expressed quite articulately not only in places such as this Omni Hotel “writers’ lounge,” but in working and middle class living rooms and in emails from Americans and around the world.

Naturally, the bunny and cupcake set of Americans are still oblivious, or at least pretend to be, but even at the more inchoate and private level, there is a growing awareness that things are going very wrong, and doing so on an incomprehensively massive and complex scale. There is the feeling that even if what is happening could be made comprehensible to the majority of humanity, to all those people just trying to keep afloat on the planet, from Zimbabwe to Flint, Michigan, overall it is unstoppable. Unfixable except in the fleeting media/politics Band-Aid sense, and then only in locales rich enough to afford the illusion-

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ary Band-Aid fixes politicians dream up when they write their campaign “plans for change.”

All of which is horseshit, of course, since real change would entail undoing most of the machinery of planetary destruction and extreme pressure to standardize humanity that we have come to know as modern civilization and mass society — halting, then reversing the momentum this monolith has achieved.

We now live as the technoculture’s subjects, not its masters and will from here on out as viral technology mediates, homogenizes and monetizes human experience worldwide, in ever more remote corners. I watch it regularly in the Third World, where the power of gadgets such as cell phones is wiping out the core foundations of indigenous or longstanding cultures within a decade or two. The global machine’s technological nervous system and production musculature, the techno grid now embedded in the world, grows in quantum fashion to control every aspect of our lives deeper and more thoroughly than is imaginable by the folks living those lives. It’s so pervasive we don’t feel it at all.

For instance, I just hit the ATM machine in this hotel for forty bucks. And in doing so I joined the Manhattan book editor, the black Carib village fisherman in Dangriga, Central America and the taxi driver in Capetown, South Africa in performing the same activity. We all stand submissively before the global ATM machine network like trained chickens pecking the correct colored buttons to release our grains of corn. Freedom, and to a large extent joy, as we understand it in our common technoculture, is mostly just the grid’s monetized consumer offerings, each with its own type of packaging, its own technologically produced overlay of commercial skin. These choices, by the way, do not include the non-uniform products or experience, unauthorized products or joys such as hashish or deviant sex. Not officially at least, but perhaps when technoculture solves the uniform packaging and delivery problem ...

If anybody solves that problem, it will be the Japanese. There seem to be no bigger suckers for technoculture than the people who have given the world plastic dirt (“half as dense as and a thousand times cleaner than real dirt”) the UFO-detecting keychain, the online lie-detector and the hydroelectric toilet, which “assesses what variety of waste you’ve just put into it.” Technoculture is stressful enough, but obsessing over how clean or dense dirt is, and assessing the varieties of you bodily waste (last time I looked there were only two) well, there may be a certain justice in the Japanese suffering the highest levels of anxiety, stress, and depression. It’s so bad that according to Dr. Kunio Kitamura, director of the Japan Family Planning Association, “Japanese people simply aren’t having sex, and the suicide rate has been rising rapidly.”

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Personally, I am not having much sex either, but that has not yet pushed me to toward suicidalism and probably never will. After age sixty sex became perhaps my fifth highest priority, just below the availability of cheap beer or maybe even a double bourbon after six PM, which of course has a helluva lot to do with that fifth priority and its likelihood. All of which is more than you cared to know, I am sure.

Sucking the cuff in Totoland

“Eventually the system will reach a point... where the social cue is ‘integration’ – where the universal dependence of all moments on all other moments makes the talk of causality obsolete. It is idle to search for what might have been a cause within a monolithic society.” – Theodor Adorno

In other words, Teddy boy, a totalitarian society. Not a nice word, according to our Western Civ instructors. An ironic one too, considering that Americans and Europeans sowed so much of its original seed. But the reality is that totalitarian society (dubbed “Totoland” in my household in a grim effort toward mockery: Dear Dorothy, fuck you and your little dog too! Signed, Bill Gates) is already here. And most of the planet accepts that as long as nobody next door is getting beheaded and at least some grains of corn keep dropping out of that ATM machine. Such is the belief in technology’s supposed production efficiency in dealing with the supply and demand problems of this world’s six billion.

That belief will remain because the technology will remain. Until it collapses along with the corporate aristocracy that make and own it. Otherwise, it cannot be dismantled without dismantling the world as we have made it and we cannot undo our own evolutionary species trajectory. Regardless of what the New Agers and Earth worshipping goddess cultists believe, we cannot haul six billion people back into pre-technology or support them in any natural sustainable fashion. Most of the world’s common people accept this, however unconsciously, thus the lack of protests and counter efforts on any meaningful scale. The new totalitarianism is its own justification, and nobody in America or Europe is going to kick up much sand so long as the Darfurs and Haitis remain on the god-damned TV screen where they belong.

At the same time, those empowered to do what little can be done, the world’s aristocrats, do what they have always done: surf the crest of power and wealth with their dicks pointed into the sunset of their civilization and their heads up

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their asses. A delighted nation cheers as a brunette corporate aspirant sucks on Donald Trumps pant leg on the Donald Trump Show. (“Ya gotta really want it baby!”) As a hobby, the guy owns The Miss Universe Organization, Miss USA and Miss Teen USA pageants. He’ll never want for pants suckers.

Meanwhile, I’ve got forty ATM bucks that have to last me two days at this book bash.

A new Dark Age? Hell, why not?

“A new barbarism, illiteracy and impoverishment of language, new kinds of poverty, merciless remodeling of opinion by media, immiseration of the mind, obsolescence of the soul. Massified, standardizing modes, in every area of life, relentlessly re-enact the actual control program of modernity. Capitalism did not create our world; the machine did.” – Jean-François Lyotard

I’ve painted a grim picture for sure, made worse by claiming that hope is a sucker’s game, even a religion for millions of “people of faith” who believe hope and faith are the same thing. Ah hope! That fuzzy hearted Hallmark world of mass produced sentiment and emotions, even about “bereavement,” a world where thinking is regarded as a rat in the larder of bourgeois smugness. Thinking gnaws away at everything so relentlessly, until it finally breaks a tooth on one truth or another. And one of those truths is that the technology enabling those digital greeting cards that play “Happy Birthday” is systematically destroying nature and toxifying and maiming the millions of drudgery filled souls whose sole purpose for existence is industrial.

I’m convinced we are watching Lyotard’s illiteracy and impoverishment of language and merciless remodeling of opinion by media and “massified” standardizing in action. I could be wrong – my wife and kids assure me I am wrong about most things. But I have at least one scholarly author type on my side, Dr. Morris Berman, who argues that we are indeed seeing the approach of a new Dark Age. I’m willing to bet that the tens of millions living on less than a dollar a day or any of the women and children sold into the world’s multibillion-dollar sex-slave trafficking (including those under American auspices of Dyncorp and Halliburton subsidiaries like KBR) feel that it’s here already. Not that anyone is asking them or anyone else in the Third World.

Living as I do much of the year in a Third World village, watching daily the cost of the American lifestyle on the village’s people, the technocultural cheap-

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ening of their lives, physical hunger, I feel guilty even being in such a posh hotel as the Omni. I should be back in Central America finishing up the water and sanitation project I recently started there (and probably would be if I were not out of money). Yet, through the patio's glass door I can see the people round my table, the Northumberland librarian, the writer Tom Miller whose moving testimonies of Latino immigrants open up worlds unseen by white Americans, my own good wife who brings to life the truth of slavery by excavating memories in an amnesiac America ... These are people who understand that human life is short and history is long, and that their humanly elegant efforts will not only go unheralded by that history, but mostly go unacknowledged in their own darkening time, and be all but eradicated by the sheer impoverishment of language and literacy in their native country during a New American Dark Age that comes cloaked in glittering technology instead of a coarse woolen cowl. Such unassuming and dedicated people are among our best.

This sordid American drama, the one I am calling a Dark Age, will in all likelihood not be completed until well into this century or the next, with a slew of increasingly nasty episodes along the way. Everyone here in the hotel lounge will say goodbye to this world long before America says the Big Goodbye.

Until then, we are left to play out the game day by day. That being the case, we should elect to play it out with the best among us, the ones on humanity's side, that hidden and unheralded aristocracy – those quiet lamp lighters making their way through the deepening dusk of American civilization.

E. M. Forster described them as, "Not an aristocracy of power, but an aristocracy of the sensitive, considerate and the plucky. Its members are to be found in all nations and classes and through the ages, and they know each other when they meet. ... Authority, seeing their value, tries to net them and to utilize them... But they slip through the net and are gone; when the door is shut they are no longer in the room; Their temple is the Holiness of the Heart's Imagination, and their kingdom, though they never possess it, is the wide open world."

In this they are deathless.

Like periwinkles.

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