

## Surfaces



Jay, Martin, *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique*, New York and London: Routledge, 1993

Robert Harvey

Volume 4, 1994

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1064978ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064978ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

1188-2492 (imprimé)

1200-5320 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Harvey, R. (1994). Compte rendu de [Jay, Martin, *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique*, New York and London: Routledge, 1993]. *Surfaces*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064978ar>

Copyright © Robert Harvey, 1994



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

## BOOK REVIEW

### MARTIN JAY, *FORCE FIELDS: BETWEEN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY AND CULTURAL CRITIQUE*

Robert Harvey

**Jay, Martin, *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique*, New York and London: Routledge, 1993.**

Those familiar with Martin Jay's previous work, with his partiality to the thought of Jürgen Habermas, and who expect therefore to hear in *Force Fields* a critic predictably hostile to poststructuralism (particularly to Jean-François Lyotard's contentions during the debate over the postmodern) will find themselves refreshingly surprised (or disappointed). What makes these essays so compelling is that they lay bare, more graphically than any homogeneous "big book" could, the *démarche* over a five-year period of one of our most important intellectual historians.

Jay's reputation as an intellectual historian was clinched when he introduced the U.S. (and, to a large extent, France) to the rich legacy of the Institute of Social Research. In 1984, following the acclaimed *Dialectical Imagination* (1973), the same year as his book on Theodor Adorno, Jay published *Marxism and Totality*, a major study of the handling of holism by virtually every twentieth-century leftist European thinker. The concept of totality and the debates that swirled around it provoked the emergence of what has been identified as a "Western" alternative to the totalitarian versions of Marxism incarnated by the USSR and other Soviet-style regimes.

The essays comprising *Force Fields* elaborate either on conference papers Jay delivered between 1986 and 1991 or on contributions he wrote during the same period for his regular column in *Salmagundi* and that turned out too long for that format. Since this is a medium with lots of space and since the breadth of Jay's interests warrants it, I would like to summarize and comment on the thirteen essays that comprise *Force Fields* as I comment on the collection as a whole.

In "Urban Flights," Jay seizes an occasion to probe beyond Adorno's laconically cryptic remark that no more than a bit of "undeserved luck" fostered the critical acumen of the first generation of intellectuals comprising the Institute of Social Research that was only to be canonized under the sobriquet of the Frankfurt School after most of the original members had died. He employs institutional sociology to explore "the School's genesis in its specific urban and academic contexts" (11). Concretely, first of all, the philanthropic financial support lent the Institute (especially by the aloof grain merchant Hermann Weil) allowed its illustrious members the privilege of autonomy from both the university and their mentor. They thus enjoyed complete freedom in choosing methods and subject matter. Emphasizing the Institute's abhorrence of compartmentalized models of learning and its predisposition for interdisciplinary and holistically integrated models, Jay highlights the pedagogical institutionalization, during Max Horkheimer's tenure as Institute director, of Marx's dialectical theory of research and presentation. The essay applies the metaphor of the book's title in demonstrating that "the Frankfurt School was [...] never merely a direct product of its urban or academic origins, nor of any organized political movement" and that "[r]ather, it emerged as the dynamic nodal point of all three suspended in the middle of a sociocultural force field without gravitating to any of its poles" (17).

To fully appreciate the Frankfurt School's adaptation to the profoundly different academic and cultural environments of Weimar Frankfurt, wartime New York and Southern California necessarily involves examining the reception of the School's ideas, that is, our processing of them and the use to which we put them, in addition to their genesis in the early days. The conflicts that these very different urban environments brought to bear on the individual members' personalities contributed to the now celebrated inventiveness of their intellectual productivity. However, by insisting on the importance of the history of reception, Jay shatters the image of a Frankfurt School with a seamlessly evolved philosophy: the reception by poststructuralists of ideas spawned by the Adorno and Horkheimer generation placed the early school at odds with Habermas.

In the second essay, Jay focusses on the "critical leverage" that Habermas obtains from his infrequently discussed performative contradiction argument enabling him "first, to criticize inconsistencies in his opponents' argumentative practice and, second, to provide a standard by which social contradictions can be judged" in the wake of bankrupt Marxist dialectical models (29). Jay tests the effectiveness of Habermas's argument by thrusting it into the arena with the poststructuralist critique of communicative rationality embodied by three gladiators (Michel Foucault, Rodolphe Gasché, and Paul de Man), while reserving Derrida and Lyotard for other confrontations. This might appear slightly disingenuous because of the relative facility (of late) in mounting moral attacks against Foucault and de Man, although I hasten to add that it is not primarily on moral grounds that

Jay takes them to task. The essay concludes with what Habermas would or indeed has responded to each of these arguments. To Jay's credit, he always modulates his near total adherence to Habermas's position with a genuine consideration of positions opposed to it, like Adorno's skepticism concerning the possibility of community within current social and economic reality. He even levels a mild form of criticism at Habermas by posing three questions aimed at his devaluation of conflicts in the empirical order which Jay affirms cannot be subsumed under communications or systems theory.

Conventional wisdom either indicts poststructuralism and its forebears (Sade, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Bataille, Blanchot) on the grounds that they are devoid of ethical potential, or else it ignores them altogether. Reading and actually attempting to follow an astounding array of poststructuralists (a task all too many of those who declare themselves their enemies are loathe to undertake), Jay examines what he quickly allows is their "intense and abiding fascination with moral issues" which in turn demands that serious thought be given to the ethical questions they raise (39). Examining several ruminations on ethics contained in texts by Foucault, Lyotard, Emmanuel Lévinas (obliquely), Lacan, and others, Jay reiterates their common resistance to normative moral systems -- something he believes makes it nearly impossible for them to envision egalitarianism, mutuality, and reciprocity. Their ethics -- a sort of aesthetics of self -- opens upon somewhat stark sociological whimsy which nevertheless jibes paradoxically with recent Anglo-American moral meditations by Alasdair MacIntyre and Bernard Williams. Convinced as poststructuralists are that humanism led to the several coercive political systems of the twentieth century, they remain doggedly antihumanistic. But Jay's predilection for ideological dialogue and even accommodation of tenets belonging to the most inimical philosophies can be credited in his refusal to dismiss poststructuralist ethical skepticism most in evidence when collectivities are characterized as "unrepresentable" (Lyotard), "unworkable" (Nancy), "unavowable" (Blanchot). One can feel Jay pushing and pulling, trying to adapt these conceptualizations to Habermasian communicative discourse in order to prevent their stagnating as mere "evocative rhetoric" (47).

Beyond the implicit provocation in juxtaposing one of the harbingers of poststructuralist thought with the quintessential proto-Nazi, Jay's next essay sheds light on the central place that both Carl Schmitt and Georges Bataille gave to concepts of sovereignty recast for a modernity on the verge of crisis. He investigates and compares the sources for the rather distinct notions of sovereignty. In order to demonstrate how misguided both thinkers were when it came to speculating on possible political incarnations that sovereignty might give way to in their day, Jay broaches the subject of Bataille's guarded optimism in the face of Nazism (57): a ticklish operation (given the extent of reverence for Bataille) that Jay carries off with his usual diplomacy. In reviewing all aspects of sovereignty to underscore the concept's fundamental instability in anyone's hands, Jay identifies two crucial differences between Schmitt and Bataille on this account. Even though both shared the belief that sovereignty could be employed as a

weapon against "bourgeois notions of exchange and liberal concepts of the rule of law" (54), Schmitt's sovereignty was still grounded in the fiction of a secularized God in the form of a state interposed between the ruler and popular sovereignty, while Bataille located sovereignty in the heterogeneous forces of a Dionysian, acephalic, "unavowable" community of living individuals involved in the sacred ritual of dismembering the supreme being.

Next, in a close reading of Agnes Heller's work which is at the same time an encomium to the woman, Jay spotlights her increasingly open admission of adherence to theses developed by Hannah Arendt as she downplays her early debt to Lukács. He reviews Arendt's and Heller's tutelage, the one under Heidegger, the other under Lukács -- two of the century's politically most controversial philosophers -- , their adoration and emulation of Rosa Luxemburg, and, perhaps most interestingly, reveals their mutual debt to Lessing.

The notion that fascism was the product of aestheticized politics was first conceived by Walter Benjamin. In the sixth essay, Jay observes that this notion (whose diminished critical power through overuse he deplores) was displaced by de Man from historical to literary analysis when he launched on his critique of "the aesthetic ideology." The task Jay sets before himself here is to gauge the extent to which de Man's critique of ideology is self-defeating because it is itself ideological. After reviewing three uses -- overdetermined in his view -- to which the aestheticization of politics argument has been put, Jay pauses at Josef Chytrý's *The Aesthetic State* to consider his discussions on Schiller and Kant. This in turn leads him to two twentieth-century philosophers for whom aesthetic judgment may hold the key to a politics cleansed of rational norms imposed from without: Lyotard and Arendt. This reviewer was left with the distinct feeling that a final knot would have tied this essay more tightly together: one that would have linked up again with Benjamin in order to reexamine his "solution" to the trap of ideology through the politicization of art.

Jay next guides us through one of those concise and informative *tours d'horizon* at which he excels, presenting current apocalyptic discourses in science and religion. But postmodern variations prompt him to pose the question: "Why [...] is the only sure thing we can reasonably predict in connection with the apocalypse the fact that its four horsemen will continue to come around the track again and again?" (85). The infinite regression, the forestalling of (or allergy to) conclusion characteristic of poststructuralist apocalypticism create an emotional after-effect that Jay identifies with the inability to mourn, that is, in Freud's definition, melancholy. While Jay shows himself here to be at his least patient with those whom he calls "the more cynical and antiredemptive postmodernist voices in the apocalyptic chorus" (93), he nonetheless requires analyses by Jean-Joseph Goux, Julia Kristeva, and especially Lyotard in order to situate this contemporary manifestation of melancholy within a cultural perspective where it may make a certain amount of sense as "a permanent dimension of the human condition" (97)

and to differentiate profitably "between [a] regressive nostalgia and [a] mourning process" that may still be compatible with the project of the enlightenment.

The next four essays offer glimpses of Jay as he began to elaborate the problematic leading to his latest major project, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (1993).<sup>[1]</sup> Along with the works of Foucault, Paul Ricoeur, Goux, and Christine Buci-Glucksmann, Jay detects in that of Jacques Ellul a particularly strident voice raised against the ocularocentrism that has sustained Western culture during this millennium. In the first of these four essays, he argues convincingly that the cultural experience at the crux of "antivisual discourse [...] has prepared the way for the popularity of hermeneutics today" (101). However, in doing so, he tacitly cautions against prematurely embracing eccentric alternatives to the primacy of vision.

Jay begins the next piece with the hypothesis that modernity's culture of vision is not as homogeneous as has been thought. Although perspectivalism dominates, there are at least two very different "scopic regimes" (Christian Metz) that we inherited from the past: the "art of describing," as Svetlana Alpers has called it, and which comes to us from the seventeenth-century Dutch painters, as well as a way of seeing akin to the baroque. While it is easy to see Descartes behind the hegemony of perspectivalism, Jay helpfully correlates descriptive artistic practice with Baconian empiricism and our latter-day baroque manner of envisioning vision to the multiplicity of viewpoints in Leibniz's theory of monads, to Pascal's thoughts on paradox, and to Counter-Reformation mystics' openness to rapture. The baroque affords Jay yet another opportunity to reflect sympathetically on the implications of the aesthetics of the sublime and unrepresentability. It is once again thanks to Jay's openness to competing philosophies that he ultimately favors an interdependent coexistence of these three scopic regimes ... or of as many of them as humanity can contrive.

While he usually prefers to critique critiques of ocularocentrism under a much broader acceptance of poststructuralism, in the tenth essay of *Force Fields* Jay zeroes in on the big daddy of deconstruction, Derrida, de Man (its master proselytizer), Gasché (one of their most eloquent champions), and, to a certain extent, Sarah Kofman. It is perhaps because this essay isolates deconstruction from other poststructuralist projects (Lyotard's or Deleuze's easily come to mind) that on this particular occasion Jay sounds uncharacteristically harsh. Valuing intellectual exercises that foster ethical practice in the material world, Jay has found, in examining various manifestations of deconstruction, "precious little evidence to show that baring literary devices really changes anything outside of the practice of literary criticism" (141). Not only does he doubt deconstruction's capacity for promoting noble human causes such as "solidarity, community, universality, popular sovereignty, self-determination [and] agency" (142), he

fears that the "experience" (as Derrida calls it) could delay or even nullify such projects. Although he applauds the vigorous questioning that deconstruction has inspired, Jay contends that a philosophy for which "mystification is a universal constant of the human condition" (145) is ultimately nihilistic and therefore harmful.

Reconstructing the dual cadenced chronology of the *Force Fields* essays, one can perceive Jay's growing preoccupation with -- some might even call it seduction by -- certain poststructuralist positions and arguments. This willingness to negotiate, of which the historian is unapologetically aware, is encouraging given the commonly held view that because it is often antithetical to Habermasian communicative rationality and totalizing, poststructuralism is necessarily incompatible with it. In convincing us that bashing oculo-centrism for the sake of freeing the world of ideology can itself easily metamorphize into an ideological position, this essay represents less Jay's stepping backward in his long-standing courtship with poststructuralism than it does the self-conscious negotiation necessary to create a workable compromise.

While modernism has usually been identified with the drive to purify and perfect form, Jay next sets out to review the project's counterimpulse toward "impurity and obscurity" in order to pursue the "critique of visual primacy" (149). Reminding us of the influence of both exotic primitivism (an influence dubiously rendered possible by the expansion of Europe's colonial empires) and of Nietzsche's intuition concerning our Dionysian impulse upon modernist aesthetics in causing it to resist the privileging of form, Jay examines Surrealist experiments in photography as interpreted by Rosalind Krauss and Bataille's theory of the *informe* as highlighted by both her and Denis Hollier. The *informe* becomes a gauge by which the tension between form and formlessness -- neatness and messiness if you will -- can be measured and a level of aesthetic tolerance for that which stands beyond measure can be achieved. Instead of adopting the "perspective [from which] all of these changes might be damned as complicitous with a dangerous counterenlightenment irrationalism and libidinal politics" (157), Jay pays tribute to the cogent expressions of this balance between the graspable and the out-of-reach found in Lyotard's critique of Kant's aesthetic of the sublime.

The tendency to break down the theoretical barrier between text and context is what worries the opponents of the textual approach to intellectual history. In the penultimate essay, Jay calls that iconoclastic tendency or movement "disintegral textualism" and he identifies three current strains of it. The first, identified with the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, sees the text as exploding beyond its own boundaries and insists that its meaning is essentially the history of its reception, that is, the sum total of all readings, past, present, and future. The second strain, which simply claims that all culture is a text, was inaugurated by cultural anthropologist, Clifford

Geertz. While both of these versions preserve the possibility of meaning, deconstruction--predictably the third version of "disintegral textualism"--"contends that the very textual mediation of [...] meaning prevents it from ever being self-sufficient, transparent even to its originators and open to harmonious fusion with the horizons of later readers" (163). Although deconstruction makes its claims obliquely or obscurely (and oftentimes in infuriating ways) Jay softens his earlier criticism by expressing belief that what it has to say about the function of meaning is not only true but useful. He ends on a teasing note by assuring intellectual historians that, in all events, they run less the risk of "being transformed kicking and screaming into literary critics" than the latter do of becoming new historicists (166).

Despite our assenting to the rule that the best argument persuades us in what Alvin Gouldner calls the "culture of critical discourse," we are just as often swayed by the weighty authority of an eminent name thrown at us, or, as Jay puts it (making the locutioner the subject of his sentence): "For all our guilt at name-dropping as a mode of legitimation, we still find it virtually impossible to drop names" (169-70). Why? Is this ritual a secularized vestige of the Judeo-Christian tradition of commenting on sacred texts? Is it, as Dominick LaCapra has said, a case of the universal truth of Freud's concept of transference? To answer, Jay once again calls Habermas to the rescue (177). However, before Habermas's utopian model of a world community of communicative rationality can even be contemplated, there are, in my opinion, so many material conditions hampering so many individuals' freedom that need to be lifted.

Jay is a rare critical scholar who, while remaining skeptical of much in Lyotard's oeuvre, nonetheless comprehends, accepts, and even finds use for the fundamental (and far too frequently misunderstood) notion that the postmodern (despite the term's unfortunate prefix), has little relation to something that would follow modernism. The postmodern, as Lyotard has tirelessly tried to make clear, coexists with the modern, erupts in its midst, actually rendering it possible. My point in bringing up only this one example of Jay's agility with archetypical stumbling-blocks resting between poststructuralists and historicists is to reintroduce the matter of all the unsuspected affinities with Lyotard that *Force Fields* reveals. Jay's increasingly explicit efforts to reconcile Lyotard and Habermas-- without diluting the potency of either--is for this reviewer and among all the other merits of *Force Fields* the single most exciting twist that appears and reappears throughout. The first meeting-place between Jay and Lyotard might be Kant's Third Critique, for in reviewing points of agreement between Agnes Heller and Hannah Arendt, Jay lauds "the fruitful convergence of aesthetic taste and political ethics" (68). But one can see the gravitational pull exercised by Lyotard upon Jay in many passages. When, in "Women in Dark Times," the essay on Heller and Arendt, he writes: "The republican tradition may be irreducible to radical democratic notions of popular sovereignty and the general will, but it would be a mistake to abolish all notions of consensus from political will-formation" (69) he is



obviously resisting the attraction of heterogeneity by invoking familiar Habermasian tenets. But, clearly, when all is said and done, Jay delights in the "unresolved tension" (6) created by inserting a high charge of poststructuralism into his own force field where, as has been evident for a long time, Habermasian rationalism is heavily favored.

Within *Force Fields* intellectual history pulsates with maximum energy. Jay's grasp of a formidable range of cultural currents and his commitment to the notion that engaging in debate through critical practice might actually contribute to changing the world for the better never fails to charge up the reader. Jay, it seems, has never left the peak of his forces: having obviously decided to leave his field open to friendly invaders, he promises to remain at that peak for a long, long time--perhaps even long enough, if we are undeservedly lucky, for the world approximating utopia he's working for to come within sight.

**Robert HARVEY**  
**SUNY Stony Brook**  
**RHARVEY@ccmail.sunysb.edu**

[\[1\]](#)Reviewed by Christine Bernier in *Surfaces* IV.02.