

Beneath the soviets the beach

McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene*. Verso, London, 2015. xxii + 280 pp., £16.99 hb., 978 1 78168 827 4.

Geological time is long; the lifespan of critical terms is decidedly shorter. The sedimentary record of buzzwords logs the granulated residue of terms that were snuffed out not by intellectual gradualism but a particularly volatile mode of cultural catastrophism. We have for a while been standing on the flaky vanilla-coated nonpareil crust left by what used to be called postmodernism; the particulate matter currently clogging the airways has come to be known as the Anthropocene. McKenzie Wark is rightly leery of the term, not least because it manages to smuggle anthropocentrism back into a discussion of climate change that demands precisely a mode of thinking that reaches beyond the earth-is-for-us model. Rather than fuss over terminology, though, Wark sticks with Anthropocene since, he writes near the end of *Molecular Red*, 'perhaps it is better to see it as what it is: a brilliant hack. The Anthropocene introduces the labor point of view – in the broadest possible sense – into geology.' We are finally, Wark claims, at the end of 'pre-history'; history proper begins now that humanity has been forced to fully acknowledge its own role in the production of 'nature'.

One consequence of the 'emergency' of the Anthropocene is that it has finally given those of us who are interested in more than one thing a job to do. Like the war effort, the revolution or alien invasion, the congealing of multiple issues around the Anthropocene has served to sharpen attention towards a common cause. Transdisciplinarity is no longer the pipedream of university managers seeking joined-up governance but the most viable means of mobilizing resources towards solving problems. Scientists and engineers, among others, have known this for some time, but the arts and humanities have largely remained waist-up in the quagmire of individual expression, however much collectivist torque is applied. Deterrence geeks at RAND and economic futurists grasped early on the need for speculative thinking and plugged writers and artists into the mainframe, but only recently has the radical instability of the known world meant that people who make stuff up for a living might be as well equipped as anyone to deal with the situation.

The framing concept of the Anthropocene represents, Jill Bennett has recently argued, a paradigm shift in which 'the external or cultural ramifications ... are at least as profound as the internal or scientific ones'. Neoliberal and neoconservative resistance to climate science is one measure of how such a paradigm shift ripples through the culture; another might be the reallocation of cultural labour as a function of primary production instead of its conventional position as compliantly subaltern or ineffectively insubordinate. Recent impatience with the politics of representation and the perceived exhaustion of critique are, in no small measure, indicators that the limits of the cultural Left have already been exceeded: what is needed is less in the way of diagnostics and more intervention.

Borrowing from Marx's discussion of how industrialized agriculture disrupted the soil cycle, Wark understands the Anthropocene as 'a series of metabolic rifts, where one molecule after another is extracted by labor and technique to make things for humans, but the waste products don't return so that the cycle can't renew itself'. The result of releasing carbon that has nowhere to go has pushed the climate 'into the red zone' and the proposed fixes – the market, technology, individual accountability, romantic anti-modernity – are less than satisfactory. The task Wark sets himself is to 'create a space within which very different kinds of knowledge and practice might meet'. What we need, writes Wark, is 'some new critical theory. Or new-old, for it turns out that there was a powerful and original current of thought that was all but snuffed out in a previous, failed attempt to end pre-history.' In this spirit, *Molecular Red* seeks to put scholarship to work. The result is a playbook for the Anthropocene, a set of moves and strategies extracted from an unexpected canon of texts formed by a mash-up of the Soviet avant-garde and the Californian high-tech imaginary. Remnants of the two great empires of the twentieth century are pitted against the rapacious insurgency of their twenty-first-century progeny, playfully named by Wark as the Carbon Liberation Front.

The Soviet planks of this new programme are both Proletkult veterans: the proto-systems theorist and blood transfusion advocate Alexander Bogdanov and novelist and engineer Andrei Platonov. Representing the American delegation are Santa Cruz cyborg Donna Haraway and sci-fi novelist Kim Stanley Robinson, probably the only liberal member of San Diego's interplanetary colonization lobby. The whiplash produced by the lurch from Bolshevism to West Coast techno-science does not burn as much as you might think, though it is an effective structural détournement that produces some sparky juxtapositions, not least between Bogdanov's and Robinson's respective Martian sci-fi. Part of the attraction of Bogdanov and Platonov for Wark is that they have been largely ignored by critical theory and its attachment to philosophy and cultural critique. Rather than theory that becomes 'just the study of thought', Wark is interested in a 'low theory' that 'sticks close to the collaborative labors of knowing and doing'. The task of a low theory is to 'extract from particular labor processes those diagrams of form and relation that might have experimental application elsewhere'. This is where Bogdanov's empirio-monism comes in. The point of empirio-monism's synthesis of Mach and Marx (aggressively attacked in Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*) is to articulate the collective labour point of view (including science) in the present. As such, the focus is always determined by the task at hand rather than by prior philosophical questions. The merit of such an approach for Wark is not doctrinal but practical: empirio-monism is 'a low theory of the discovery and communication of potential forms of organization between different experiences in a comradely way'. The way these experiences are put to use is through what Bogdanov calls 'tektology', a kind of practice-based systems analysis (with its own terminology of linkages, ingressions and disingressions) that involves experimentally applying 'understandings of one process to quite different processes to see if they can be grasped as analogous'. Tektology, for Wark, is a form of détournement – like reading Proletkult through Silicon Valley – that 'works "sideways", from field to field, rather than from past to present'. Before tektology can organize the material world, though, it needs a Proletkult, a mode of knowledge that emerges from the labour point of view. This potentially radical defamiliarization of the known into new modes of organization – not just new descriptors but new forms – anticipates, for Wark, the kinds of transdisciplinary collaboration required to address the emergency of the Anthropocene.

Writing is a good model for tektological thinking because language is more malleable than other stuff. For the journalist, poet and novelist Alexander Platonov, writing is not the 'life of the mind'; it is work that involves gathering, borrowing, sifting and cataloguing. Writing is a form of working with the materials in what Platonov calls, in a speculative report on the possibility of retooling textual productivity, 'The Factory of Literature'. The attraction of this model for Wark is that it recalls and anticipates a number of constructivist strategies – Wark mentions Vertov, Benjamin, Mass Observation, Acker, Manovich – though it is also clear that Platonov's factory system and the collective scribbling it requires also anticipates the precarious labour of the Internet's millions of 'content providers' and the industrial-scale surveillance of the KGB or the NSA. The point for Platonov, though, is less to iron out the contradictions of such a scheme than to tektologically transpose the factory model onto the archetypal bourgeois practice (creative writing) and see what happens. What would writing look like from the proletarian point of view? What is the view from below? What forms might the articulation of such a view take? How might a collectivity describe itself? What might the function of literature produced under radically altered conditions be? Could such a literature not just represent the world but participate in making it?

Wark attempts to answer some of these questions in the first California chapter, where he is less interested in Donna Haraway as such and more concerned with the assemblage he terms 'Cyborg Haraway' – 'a sort of text-machine of indeterminate type' – built out of Haraway, her sources (Paul Feyerabend), colleagues (Karan Barad) and students (Paul Edwards). Haraway's famous acknowledgement that she is a product of both the Cold War arms race and feminism, like Platonov's Factory of Literature, is double-valenced: utopian collectivism can swing both ways – compartmentalized ingenuity contained within a wider technocratic conformity or radical social movement. The power of 'knowledge infrastructures' such as the West Coast research universities is that they are capable of 'both reproducing the world as commodity and strategy, and yet also of generating intimations of a nonhuman world'. The machine that retools 'nature' (Wark's example, derived from Edwards's work, is the way climate modelling uncouples itself from real-world data gathering by being able to generate more accurate forecasts from simulations) is also the engine that liberates identity from biology, being from 'nature'. Wark is good at summations: 'We are

cyborgs, making a cyborg planet with cyborg weather, a crazed, unstable disingression, whose information and energy systems are out of joint. It's a de-natured nature without ecology.'

The main service Wark provides in the Kim Stanley Robinson chapter is to read the *Mars Trilogy* all the way through so that we don't have to; Robinson may be the 'hard' sci-fi author it is politically acceptable to like but the novels' diligent mapping of competing colonization and terraformation debates has thus far successfully resisted my attempts to get to the end of one of them. Wark is wise to treat the *Mars Trilogy* as theory rather than literature; at least this way aesthetic disappointment can be sublimated into purposeful work. The idea of using the triple-decker realist novel form as a means of working through the ethical and practical aspects of Martian settlement is a good one, but not all good ideas stay interesting. To his credit, Wark keeps it interesting, but, as with the chapter on Platonov, the Robinson material is largely an extended gloss of the texts. There's more to chew on in the Bogdanov and Haraway sections, largely because Wark is more willing to ventilate textual summary with broader contextual and theoretical material. Given the right's dominance of the space colony agenda, it might have been illuminating, for example, to rub Robinson's liberal outlook up against someone like Robert Zubrin, the writer and aerospace engineer who has spent decades campaigning for the human settlement of Mars. Zubrin is a classic pro-growth technofuturist, frustrated with the brake on scientific innovation imposed by bureaucratic, political and environmentalist obstacles to expansion into what he sees as the potentially unlimited resources available on the Martian frontier.

Wark doesn't get into a fight with Zubrin and his ilk since he is more concerned with identifying conceptual and metaphoric models that might do away with the old-fashioned but easily monetized rhetoric of adventurist expansion and resource accumulation that someone like Zubrin mobilizes. Eventually, though, the Proletkult/feminist science studies/situationist/hacker bloc is going to have to deploy the new practices Wark is after – not just to tackle the challenges of living in the Anthropocene but, before that, to demolish the legitimacy of the corporate, neocon, climate-science-denying technocapitalists and the infrastructure upon which such a position depends. It is not clear how the strategies Wark excavates from his reading might do that, but what he has identified, in the provocative pairing of early revolutionary Russia and late-twentieth-century

California, is a means of thinking through the antinomian possibilities thrown up by radical social and technological change. The work of Bogdanov, Platonov, Haraway and Robinson is produced out of an engagement with the crackle and spit of the enormous utopian energies put to work to build worlds, however disastrous the consequences of those revolutionary impulses might have turned out to be. None of Wark's writers roll with the programme but dig away at its structure while at the same time siphoning off power from the grid. It is a shame that Wark did not devote more space to mapping the interzone between Bolshevism and high-tech California, but *Molecular Red* does provide the coordinates for such a weird, as yet unexplored convergence. One way or another, the next move has to be 'comradely' – the Bolshevik-California nexus is clear on that, as is Wark's conclusion: 'We all know this civilization can't last. Let's make another.'

John Beck

Lovers' discourse

Kathy Acker and McKenzie Wark, *I'm Very Into You: Correspondence 1995–1996*, Semiotext(e), South Pasadena CA, 2015. 160 pp., £9.95 pb., 978 1 58435 164 1.

There is a telling anecdote about Kathy Acker in what is arguably Chris Kraus's best novel, *Torpor*, when the disgruntled novelistic couple, thinly disguised versions of Kraus and her husband, the French theory lothario and editor of Semiotext(e), Sylvère Lotringer, try to come up with a list of names for a well-paid German anthology of American poets and writers. The only woman Lotringer is able to think of is Kathy Acker. Kraus herself is not taken seriously by her husband as a potential editor of such an anthology, despite being extremely well-versed in contemporary experimental writing. Indeed Kraus and other (often feminist) women artists are regarded as boring by alpha-male intellectuals like Lotringer. By contrast, the predatory, oversexed Acker is the only kind of woman sexist male intellectual circles ever accept or consider their equal – largely, perhaps, because they are scared of her.

The 'problem' with Acker's writing, and what made her underappreciated, was that her novels were always read via her outrageous persona. The fairly spectacular career she enjoyed in poetic and arty circles in the 1980s and 1990s came, in part, from a combination of two things: scandal and very good