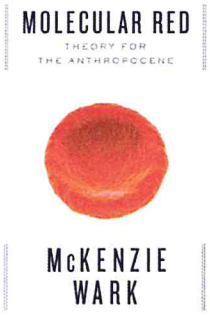


McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene* (Verso, 2015, 304 pp, £9.99)

Reviewed by Paul March-Russell (University of Kent)

Despite its unpromising title, McKenzie Wark's new book has plenty of interest for the sf reader. Three of its four chapters focus on individuals of substantial importance in the history of sf: Alexander Bogdanov, the Bolshevik intellectual and author of the seminal Communist utopia, *Red Mars* (1908); the cyborg theorist Donna Haraway; and lastly, but not least, the author of the Mars trilogy, by Kim Stanley Robinson. The other figure is another Russian, Andrei Platonov, the most important writer to emerge from the Proletkult movement initiated by Bogdanov, whose fiction, despite having no obvious sf credentials, nevertheless shares affinities with the sf mindset by focusing less upon individuals in themselves and more upon how they fit within a prevailing social structure or system. Wark, too, adopts a systemic approach by assembling the work of these seemingly disparate figures into what might become a viable theoretical response to the current reality of climate change and humanity's seemingly irrevocable intervention in the geological record – the arrival of the so-called Anthropocene.

As David Higgins remarked at SFRA 2016, the Anthropocene can be thought of as a 'slow catastrophe': its effects are so gradual and so multi-faceted that it dwarfs the human imagination to respond to it until it is already too late. In that sense, the Anthropocene also exemplifies what the critical theorist, Timothy Morton, has termed a 'hyperobject': the sheer size, scale and complexity of the Anthropocene defies the attempts of people, mostly without a scientific education, to understand it – even though its presence increasingly defines and determines our reality. Into this situation Wark arrives, reclaiming a left-wing theoretical position buried under the dominance of Marxist-Leninism, which he hopes will address the Anthropocene and render its implications comprehensible. As Wark announces at the start, he has little time for the political defeatism that the slow, all-consuming inevitability of the Anthropocene appears to engender; now is the time to formulate a theoretical response which will establish a praxis that might yet stave off its worst effects. In that sense, Wark is as cautiously utopian as the writers with whom he engages.

Furthermore, despite the sometimes bewildering array of theorists, philosophers and political activists upon whom Wark draws, he positions his book squarely against what he terms 'high Theory', by which he does not mean the high-point of critical theory within the Humanities during the 1980s and 1990s, but a theoretical perspective that looks down from a transcendent position upon society – what could also be called 'metacriticism' – in order to construct an abstract, generalizing statement. Such a position not only mirrors the hyper-objectivity of the Anthropocene, by appearing to float above the society that it seeks to intervene, but it also negates genuine political action since this

can only arise at ground level where the Anthropocene is not perceived as an extra-human reality but as a phenomenon that emerges from, and feeds back into, the daily experience of man-made activity. So, Wark proposes instead a 'low Theory' which, as the somewhat schematic divide between 'high' and 'low' suggests, is generated from the experience of everyday life. Such a theoretical position would, Wark hopes, produce a praxis that not only addresses the Anthropocene as a fundamental phenomenon – a living part of daily reality – but can also feature the willing participation of the public, responding to the Anthropocene in ways and means that they can understand, most importantly, in the relationship of the worker to his or her environment.

This shift in theoretical perspective serves to explain Wark's title. He establishes a distinction between what he regards as a 'molar' and a 'molecular' approach. The former looks down from above, regarding each element as no more than one part within a larger structure, whereas the latter looks upwards, starting with each element and seeing how they fit individually into the larger network. The 'red' self-consciously alludes to Bogdanov but this is no simple harnessing of a Communist message to an ecological agenda. Instead, Wark's title signals a red alert, an urgent warning to the reader, but also a moment of crisis, a point at which a new kind of utopianism in the spirit of Bogdanov can come into being.

If nothing else, Wark's book features one of the most sustained engagements in recent years with Bogdanov's thought and fiction. An early member of the Bolshevik Party, Bogdanov fell out with Lenin over its future direction. His prequel to *Red Mars*, *Engineer Menni* (1913), due to its valorization of the technocratic hero, partially restored his fortunes but Bogdanov's subsequent advocacy of Proletkult – not merely a form of working-class cultural production, the alleged naivety of which was caricatured and ridiculed by Trotsky, but a type of cultural activity seen from, and descriptive of, the proletarian experience – condemned him once more to the margins of the Party. Bogdanov's marginalization also meant that the technical organization of labour, known as 'tektology' in *Red Mars*, was subsequently forgotten within histories of cybernetics that only saw its starting-point within the work of Norbert Weiner in the 1940s. The link to cybernetics underpins chapter 3's discussion of Haraway but here, in this opening chapter, Wark is more keen to emphasize how Bogdanov interpreted Marx less in terms of the class struggle and the (supposedly) inevitable dialectic that culminates in the dictatorship of the proletariat than in terms of the division of labour and, in particular, the perspective of the alienated worker. Tektology, in this sense, has less to do with the Taylorist methods of efficiency introduced by Alexei Gastev – and satirized in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921) – than with the overcoming of alienation by valuing the worker as part of a technically organized system of labour. Already it is possible to see why Wark is drawn to the idea of Bogdanov's social assemblage because he too is seeking to overcome the alienation of the public from the reality of the Anthropocene by reconnecting them to a social and economic order that would be ecologically beneficial. As Wark clarifies, however, Bogdanov's notion of a collective yet distributed network was also inspired by his reading of Ernst Mach, whose relativistic theories concerning time and space were officially condemned by

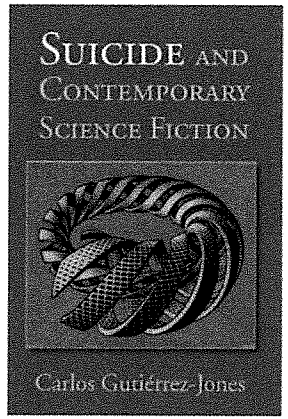
Lenin. In today's reality, such relativism complements the need to understand the Anthropocene both at its global level and in terms of its local effects; where the monolithic and hierarchical structures approved of both in the East and the West are not only inefficient but contributing factors in, what Garrett Hardin once termed, 'the tragedy of the commons'. Bogdanov, as Wark suggests, did not necessarily realize the full implications of his socio-economic model nor was he motivated by ecological concerns as we might be today but, nevertheless, he holds out the promise of revolutionary change not through the idealizing structure of the class struggle but through the everyday reality of the individual worker.

It is a relatively simple step, in chapter 2, for Wark to move from Bogdanov to Platonov, a writer whose close observations of the interface between labour and environment went, if anything, further than those of his intellectual mentor. If Bogdanov represents the basis of a theoretical position with which to address the Anthropocene, then Platonov, by his conversion of theory into art, represents how this position might become a form of praxis: a means not only of reflecting but also of intervening in the world. In the second half of the book, Wark opts not to look further into the literary naturalism of Platonov but to turn his attention back to science fiction which, although useful for readers of *Foundation*, does seem to create a false divide between sf and what Samuel R. Delany would term 'mundane fiction'. Although sf readers naturally assume the genre to be a privileged form of literature in terms of critically reflecting on a world of social and technological change, non-sf readers would also want to point to those naturalistic writers who have effectively carried on Platonov's work (the Scottish author, James Kelman, would be an exemplary figure). Since so much of contemporary literature is now engaging with ideas that might have once been regarded as the prerogative of sf (Tom McCarthy's *C*, Will Self's *Umbrella* and Don DeLillo's *Zero K* are all recent examples), this apparent divide needs to be reassessed, especially if Wark's hopes for a collective response to the Anthropocene are to be achieved.

Instead, having established a dialectic between the theory and praxis of Bogdanov and Platonov, Wark now shifts to the work of Donna Haraway in what I feel is the book's weakest chapter. Primarily, this is because, although Haraway is its nominal focus, she tends to get lost amidst reference to other thinkers such as Karen Barad and Paul Feyerabend. Wark begins with a move familiar to viewers of Adam Curtis' recent documentaries by focusing upon Silicon Valley and the designers of the internet as both a boon and a curse. On the one hand, according to Wark (and Curtis), the internet represents the kind of networked thinking essential for contemplating the Anthropocene but, on the other hand, it embodies a utilitarian response in which, whilst insulating the self within its own echo chamber, effectively deprives it of agency and renders it an appendage to the machinery. Wark turns instead to Haraway not only because of her proximity to Silicon Valley but also in her consideration of networked systems that offers a radical re-visioning of what the internet does in practice. For Wark, Haraway's blurring of the categories of human, animal and cyborg represents – albeit unconsciously – a recreation of Bogdanov's theoretical system of tektology by starting pragmatically from the point of view of the subject rather

than imposing a hierarchy upon it. In this chapter, however, Wark also wants to arrive at a position where climate change is not simply understood in terms of the environment as an eco-system (a cybernetic construct promulgated by such early environmental thinkers as the architect Buckminster Fuller) but as a tektology where, as in Bogdanov and Haraway, individuals are not deprived of agency but contribute to the sustaining of the network. To get to that conclusion, however, Wark has to pass through several theoretical positions and, for once, Wark's breezy, somewhat journalistic style – although accessible – lets him down. Ironically, considering that Wark's intent is not to sacrifice the part for the whole, Haraway's own distinctiveness as a thinker tends to get lost within the welter of references. (Indeed, Wark tends to love citation – the reader is constantly switching between the main text and the numerous endnotes, which makes reading his argument discontinuous.)

Nevertheless, Wark does eventually arrive at the position he wants to get to and both he and we can now settle down for the closing chapter's fine reading of Robinson's Mars trilogy, in which the various strands of Wark's argument are brought to bear. Wark makes it very clear that he considers Robinson to be Bogdanov's true heir and the utopian writer whom we should all be reading in order to articulate a practical response to the Anthropocene. Still, it is odd that Wark skates over the mass of detail that often discourages readers of the Mars trilogy; odd too that Wark makes little or no mention of Robinson's other work (*2312*; the Science in the Capital trilogy) that engages more specifically with the science and politics of climate change. Nonetheless, in the context of Wark's book, it is not only a persuasive reading but it also rounds off Wark's analysis in fine style. To that extent, Wark should be read alongside Robinson's collection of essays, *Green Planets*, co-edited with Gerry Canavan (reviewed in *Foundation* 125). Overall, Wark's book is not only a further instance of what Istvan Csicsery-Ronay once termed the science-fictionalization of theory but also an indication that this interaction is at a close; sf as both theory and praxis, Wark wants to convince us, is now the only viable response to the most pressing crisis of our day.



Carlos Gutiérrez-Jones, *Suicide and Contemporary Science Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 2015, 201 pp., £75.00)

Reviewed by Asami Nakamura (University of Liverpool)

5pm, rush hour, Tokyo. The train was approaching the station, and suddenly I heard a long horn followed by emergency braking. Another suicide jump. Suicides in train stations are an ordinary event in Tokyo, merely signifying troubles: how to get the transportation system back into schedule, how much delay passengers will have to endure and what alternative route there is for them to get to