

Low Theory

MAT T AP P L E G A T E

McKenzie Wark. *Telesthesia: Communication, Culture, and Class*. Polity Press, 2012. 241 pp.

Occupy Wall Street (OWS) is the new and enduring object of political and intellectual inquiry for the Left in the United States. Indeed, like the 1999 Seattle WTO protests before it, OWS is perhaps more momentous, more impactful, or even more ‘revolutionary’ in its after-effects and in its memorialization than it was in the time and space of its production. For some of us in academia that participated in local demonstrations or travelled to Zuccotti Park, OWS has become a thought experiment and a provocation as its physical manifestations have all but disappeared. Written in its wake, McKenzie Wark’s *Telesthesia: Communication, Culture, and Class* (2012) is an artifact of the occupation. It is simultaneously an attempt to rewrite the method through which radical thought is articulated in academic contexts and an attempt to surpass academic constraints on intellectual production given the event of OWS—in Wark’s words, *Telesthesia* is “a book about method [...] but one that explains the method by performing it” (9). As a kind of action-oriented text, then, *Telesthesia* situates Occupy as both its launch pad and its medium, its provocation and its means of articulation.

Occupy bookends the text—here chapters feature meditations on the space and function of OWS, as well as one of its most famous slogans, “Shit is Fucked Up and Bullshit”—reminding the reader of the present political context from which *Telesthesia* emerges, but also of the malleable shape of political thought that Occupy demanded. In this way, *Telesthesia* is not so much a book *about* Occupy—perhaps one of its faults: Wark draws connections between the politics of maimed babies, hacking, ‘Disco’ and ‘Techno’ Marxism, growing up lower middle class, September 11th, the anonymous texts of anarcho-communist collective Tiqqun, and porn-star Sasha Gray (and more) to perform his method—but a book about remotion and relocation. These are not only the functional acts of occupation; they are the methodological imperatives of the text. The question, then, is precisely how does Wark allow thought to emerge from spaces that breach academic constraint and how is thought mobilized toward the transformation of intellectual labor?

Two concepts in particular guide the reader through this double movement: ‘Low

Theory' and 'Telesthesia.' In the first case, Low Theory "experiments with the creation of new relations between practices and modes of communication" (206). As Wark is so eager to demonstrate, Low Theory 'makes up its own rules' as it is implemented. It is a mode of methodological improvisation. Given its medium, the conceptual mechanics of Low Theory might seem like a means of reinventing the form and function of the book as such. And in some ways, this is precisely what this concept is mobilized toward. Like Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Massage*, *Telesthesia* is a kind of visual metaphor wherein the book-form manifests the theoretical work of the text. When one considers Wark's own intellectual history and the rise of Media Studies and digitally mediated literatures, Low Theory might be situated as a missing link between literary production and digital technologies. In the context of the text, however, Low Theory's conceptual intervention is most easily identified in its attempt to rethink the function of genre. *Telesthesia* is simultaneously a compendium of concepts (Wark **bolds** a select set of vocabulary that he later defines in the book's 'keywords' section), a diary, a narrative of surveillance societies and technological development, and a revision of his 2004 *Hacker Manifesto*. Indeed, *Telesthesia* is a generic mix, often overlapping without explicit indication.

The generic fluidity definitive of Low Theory in this text is not only an avenue of experimentation; it perhaps offers a conceptual framework with which to make sense of Occupy's creative energy. By contrast to the narrative of major media outlets—Fox News' mocking OWS for its lack of coherency comes to mind here—Wark's own stylistic itinerancy can be read as a means of legitimizing and offering credence to the idea that political projects are not necessarily united through a program, a party platform, or an immediately transparent set of political acts. Like an actual site of protest, the reader is met with a multiplicity of styles, voices, and concerns. In the vein of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze's dialogue in "Intellectuals and Power," the text enacts a kind of relay between theory and practice, prioritizing both simultaneously. But by doing so, Wark willingly removes his work from traditional theoretical discourse, recognizing that what we do as scholars is largely removed from popular discourse both topically and intellectually. What is necessary, then, is a process of its actualization, both textually and institutionally.

While there is a certain cacophony to this text, there is also a tactics. *Telesthesia*, the book's eponymous base concept, is the form through which Low Theory manifests. It is "perception at a distance;" "its key quality is to bring what is distant near, and make what is distant a site of action" (207). Although this speaks to the already realized possibilities of telecommunications and the Internet, it is also an opportunity for Wark to perform his method. On the one hand, Wark intentionally highlights the book's multiple sites of production in the title of each chapter: *Telesthesia* is written in 12 distinct locations with differences drawn between Zuccotti Park, NY and New

York, NY. From Taipei, Wark theorizes the “transopticon:” the surveillance state’s homogenization of time, space, and information. In Gijón, he narrates the expansion of game space, claiming that digitization is a mark of privatization, and thus an extension of primitive accumulation. And writing in Delhi, Wark accounts for the transformation of information into private property, redrawing class lines and reorganizing resistance to capital. In this way, *Telesthesia* is a global text and it is only in its organization as a book that the times and spaces of Wark’s writing are made to relate. The book brings disparate sites of production into communication, but also into view. On the other hand, the action-oriented component of this concept is also its political demand. In bringing what is distant near, and in making what is distant a site of action, telesthesia removes objectivity from the intellectual act; it places the reader in the midst of a hostile terrain and disallows her any point of remove.

Despite its modes of experimentation, Wark’s readers will recognize the idiosyncratic vocabulary and theoretical mechanics developed in his *Hacker Manifesto*. The vectorialist class is still the corporate-fascist class, transforming all information and intellectual production into intellectual property, and the hacker class remains at the forefront of the struggle against the capitalization of everything. However, with *Telesthesia*, the vectorial/hacker binary transforms in at least two ways. First, Wark incorporates and introduces anarcho-communist collective Tiqqun’s figure of the ‘young-girl’ from their recently translated *Preliminary Materials For a Theory of the Young Girl* into his critique of capital and the privatization of information. Here, Wark attempts to account for the means by which capital has become productive of our most intimate relations, indeed, our very subjectivity, under neoliberal economic regimes. Second, with his focus on Occupy, Wark foments new imperatives for the coarticulation of intellectual labor and political action.

First published in France in 1999, Tiqqun’s *Theory of the Young-Girl* does not describe a gendered concept—the young-girl is *not* a ‘young girl’—it is the “anthropomorphosis of capital,” a technique of capitalist management at the level of subjectivity (18). Stated another way, the figure of the young-girl describes the condition by which subjectivity, desire, language, and affect are transformed into commodities. It is the concept that describes the force of real subsumption, or, as Jason Read indicates so succinctly in his *Micropolitics of Capital*, the force by which “the production of subjectivity itself becomes productive for capital” (136). In chapter seventeen of *Telesthesia*, “The Little Sisters are Watching You,” Wark mobilizes the concept to describe a new interface of power through which the vectorialist class and the hacker class relate: a means of “making the inhuman look like something approachable” (177). Challenging the easy binary between friend and enemy, vectorialist and hacker, the figure of the young-girl accounts for the capitalization of desire, but also the means by which even those who resist capital are embroiled in its logic. Under real subsump-

tion every subject of capital is enmeshed in its apparatus' and is productive of them. In this sense, resistance to capital confronts an internal obstacle—resistance to capital is no longer a simple confrontation between individuals and institutions, it is a confrontation between our desires and our actions as well.

In a tangible sense, this refocuses the imperatives of the hacker class on the very question of technology. On the one hand, Wark cites a difference in modes of technology. Social-networking sites like Facebook trade precisely on the kind of commodification of the self so prevalent under real subsumption, whereas a platform like Tumblr allows for the proliferation of “anonymous and pseudonymous identities” (186). Here, if the privatization of information is to be resisted, we can no longer be the agents of its privatization. On the other hand, Wark's turn to the figure of the young-girl evokes a more fundamental question. At what point are these technologies their own obstacle in the attempt to overthrow capital? As Tiqqun insists, the life of the young-girl is littered with commodities and completely given up to advertizing. In both virtual and real space, so is the hacker. Nathaniel Troy Maye and Tiwana Tenise Thomason come to mind here. Having acquired access to over 700,000 stolen identities in 2012 and 2013, the pair was arrested after they posted a picture of an expensive meal to Instagram. In this sense, one could argue that the proliferation of identity offered by digital technologies was not effective in overthrowing capital, but delivering subjects to it, and thus to the surveillance state.

Clearly, this focus on real subsumption extends into our modes of intellectual labor. If not a question of hacking as a practice, considering real subsumption in an academic context requires intellectual practices that oppose it or evade it. This is not an original claim; figures like Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, George Caffentzis, Sylvia Federici, Gigi Roggero and the Edu-Factory Collective have dedicated much more time and effort to addressing it. But as profit-bearing knowledges are prioritized, intellectual labor made more precarious, and as the next generation of scholars is met with a virtual non-response to these transformations by tenured faculty, the strength of Wark's text rests on linking struggles outside of a university context to the performance of intellectual labor. While not post-disciplinary, *Telesthesia* does demand that interdisciplinary scholarship take on new forms and find new modes of expression. This is what his turn to OWS allows. But, if the theory of the young-girl indicates anything, it is a need for a kind of transformation of the self in the face of capital. *Telesthesia* enacts a transformation of *who* and *what* the academic performs in the face of the university's thorough and immediate capitalization.

It is here, however, that Wark's text perhaps meets its own limitation. Who among us, especially those of us in the most precarious intellectual positions, can afford intellectual experimentation in this manner? Of the most tangible concerns for a

young academic, will Low Theory and Telesthesia find us a seat at the table and set a course for the tenure-track? While these are not the most glamorous or even the most desirable questions one might draw from reading Wark's book, it does speak to the position and kinds of action Wark demands of the reader. Where knowledge production in the university is becoming more and more accountable to the metrics of profit demands for more traditional work (think of the closure of so many language and interdisciplinary departments in the Humanities across the U.S.) also rises. What is necessary, then, at least for those of us on the precarious end the academic track, is perhaps a form of crypto-telesthesia. On that the figure of the hacker or the creative energy of Occupy might offer some insight, but it is yet to emerge, still to come, and only just glimpsed at the horizon of intellectual labor.

Works Cited

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