Mark Bould, *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture*
(Verso, 2021)

The profession of English is in the midst of a rancorous debate about the value of Critique. Should we engage in 'paranoid' reading or 'reparative' reading (the terms, of course, are Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's)? Should we 'interrogate' a given text – put it in thumbscrews until it gives up its hidden ideological content? Or should we, as Kosofsky Sedgwick proposes, do our best to extract 'sustenance from the objects of a culture'?[1] Is to practice Critique a form of (as the Marxists say) praxis, or is it an abdication of responsibility altogether?

In her influential book *The Limits of Critique* (2015), Rita Felski has argued that to confine ourselves to what Paul Ricoeur calls 'a hermeneutics of suspicion' is to ignore the experience actually offered by study of the Humanities, in which 'critical caveats are interspersed with flashes of affinity or sympathy; bursts of romantic hope coexist with the deciphering of ideological subtexts'. For Felski, 'our language for describing and justifying these various activities remains remarkably underdeveloped'.[2]

Tom Boland addresses his book *The Spectacle of Critique* (2019) to anyone who is 'equally frustrated and fatigued by reading weighty critical tomes which describe the complex awfulness of modernity, or seeing critics of all stripes proclaiming the acuteness of the contemporary crisis, all to no avail'.[3] Boland is concerned to chart 'the repetitive and directionless conflict engendered by critique' (any critique of Critique is, of course, itself an instance of critique), which has become, Boland says, merely another capitalist 'spectacle'. Boland writes: 'Beyond seeing Critique as a ridiculous spectacle, a farce or mere illusion, it may be necessary to consider it as a tragedy, to understand our connection to it, how it entices or even tempts us, how we are constituted, at least partially, by Critique – insofar as we are "modern" subjects.'[4]

Patricia Stuelke's recent book *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique* (2021) argues, *inter alia*, that the 'reparative turn' in recent literary scholarship abjures a responsibility to make plain the operations of an increasingly violent and racist global neoliberal hegemony. For Stuelke, the hermeneutics of suspicion is not dead, merely sleeping – given knockout-drops by a seductive and irresistible twenty-first-century racial capitalism;

[1] Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123-52 (p. 150).
[2] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 4.
[3] Tom Boland, *The Spectacle of Critique: From Philosophy to Cacophony* (Routledge, 2019), p. 1.
[4] Boland, *Spectacle*, p. 4.

and critics who reject Critique risk complicity with state violence (here's where the rancour starts to creep in).

All of these interventions address themselves to the tricky matter of Critique's observable failure to effect meaningful structural change. Half a century of Critique, and the free-market fundamentalists are still in power. Indeed, they are somehow more in power than ever. If, as Boland argues, we are ourselves to some degree constituted by critique, is our collective tragedy to be named in the failure of critique to change the world for the better? And how does all of this help us think about horror and the gothic?

You may find yourself pondering these questions as you read Mark Bould's *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture*. This is not just because Bould's book is in some ways as pure an example of capital-C Critique as you could hope to find, but also because it is overtly polemical. It's a pamphlet – short, witty, informal, jazzy, hectoring, cogent, and angry. For scholars of the gothic, *The Anthropocene Unconscious* has inarguable relevance, not just because it reads various 'genre' texts closely, but also because it is a book whose informing critical idea is basically the return of the repressed, and if there's one move that the gothic makes compulsively, it's the unearthing of repressed cultural, political, or psychological material. In a sense, Bould's book provokes the reflection that the narrative mode of contemporary reality itself might, in fact, be the gothic.

Bould's title invokes an obvious lineage: we are deep in Fredric Jameson country here. Jameson's 'political unconscious' is, of course, history: the thing that determines text and context whether you notice it or not (hence 'political', hence 'unconscious': as Adam Roberts points out in his short book on Jameson, the title of *The Political Unconscious* (1981) does *not* mean 'the Marxist Freudianism').[5] What is Bould's 'Anthropocene unconscious'? It is the biosphere: the thing that determines everything whether you say it does or not, the repressed that is always already returning.

In the age of the Anthropocene (from *Anthropos*, 'human', and *cene*, 'recent'; the term was perhaps first used by the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000), History, in Jameson's sense, must be re-conceived in geological, indeed biospheric terms. Bould's bold move is to assert that 'the Anthropocene *is* the unconscious of the art and literature of our time' (p. 15, emphasis in original). In the early years of the twenty-first century, it has become clear that human beings have altered our species' physical environment irreparably for the worse. How

[5] Adam Roberts, *Fredric Jameson* (Routledge, 2000), p. 79.

can we *not* think about this, even if we seem, as we often do, to be thinking about something else?

Bould begins by targeting a specific antagonist: Amitav Ghosh, whose *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) is, Bould says, 'the most widely read and highly regarded book on literature and climate change' (p. 2). In that book, Ghosh suggests that there is a lacuna at the heart of our culture. He imagines the 'readers and museum-goers' of a 'substantially altered world, when sea-level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans and made cities like Kolkata, New York, and Bangkok uninhabitable', scrutinising the art and literature of our time. Will they find 'traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance?' Ghosh suggests that they will not, and that the people of the altered future will 'conclude that ours was a time when most art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognising the realities of their plight'.[6]

For Bould, '[t]his is, of course, nonsense' (p. 3). 'Auguries abound' in our contemporary art and literature. Our texts are 'pregnant with catastrophe'. Where Ghosh sees 'near-universal failure', Bould finds '[n]ot silence but expressive aphasia, teeming with tongue-tied questions':

> Must a text show tides rising in a world that is elsewhere parched, must it mash up *Waterworld* (1995) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), to be 'about' climate change? […] Is there no room for the symbolic, the oblique, the estranged? No room to think about the capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal histories, systems and structures that are historically and foreseeably responsible for climate destabilisation, and through which it has, is and will be experienced? No room to consider texts that do not say 'climate change' aloud? To discover what happens if we stop assuming a text is about climate change? (pp. 3-4)

This is Bould's method: he looks for the climate lacunae in a wide range of contemporary texts. In this, he follows Jameson, who in *The Political Unconscious* counselled critics to 'foreground the interpretive categories or codes through which we read and receive the text'.[7] For Bould, 'the Anthropocene' is now unquestionably the most significant of these categories or codes. In Freudian (or indeed, gothic) terms, the Anthropocene is the repressed, returning. 'What if all the stories we tell are stories about the Anthropocene? About climate change?' (p. 17).

The Anthropocene Unconscious therefore examines a heterodox array of contemporary texts, including science-fictional and gothic texts, in search of unconscious material: Critique

[6] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 14.
[7] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Routledge, 2002), p. ix.

in action. He begins with Syfy's cheapo *Sharknado* franchise, which, it turns out, has since 2013 generated a whole ludicrous mythos of its own across six made-for-TV movies. '[T]he [*Sharknado*] franchise', Bould writes, 'enacts – and speaks to – a habituated desensitisation to the ever-present existential threat of anthropogenic climate destabilisation'. But this 'doesn't mean that the franchise is not about climate change' (pp. 26-27).

This is fun; but it's also a little bit too easy (applying the methods of Critique to examples of 'trash' culture is simply Theory 101, no?). Better – though no less fun – is Bould's concluding assessment of the *Fast and the Furious* (2001 – present) franchise (incredibly, there are now twelve of these films, even though neither you nor anyone you know has ever seen one). Here, once again, 'the latent always outweighs the manifest content'; for Bould, the *Fast and the Furious* franchise is something that 'spew[s] from the Anthropocene unconscious':

> Extruded from carbon culture's death drive, all they see is the Earth, scorched, and they cannot look away, cannot think about anything else. They are all distraction and dissimulation, swagger and bluff. But they cannot conceal their terror. They know it is game over. (p. 134)

The argument that unspools between Bould's demolitions of *Sharknado* and *The Fast and the Furious* ranges from Paul Kingsnorth's historical novels of medieval England to Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002), with pit-stops at Paul Auster's *4 3 2 1* (2017), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Alan Moore's run on *Swamp Thing* (1984-87), Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* (2016), and the Tom Cruise film *Edge of Tomorrow* (dir. by Doug Liman, 2014), among others. There are various pleasures here, various startling *apercus*. For instance: has it occurred to any other critic of Karl Ove Knausgaard that the landscape of the 1970s childhood and youth exhaustively reconstructed in *My Struggle* (2009-11) 'is ineluctably, if incidentally, that of an accelerating global petroculture: not just the oil rigs and oil tankers glimpsed offshore, but the plastic bags and bottles and gas stations, the journeys by car, bus, train and, increasingly, plane, the groceries and other commodities gathered in from across Europe […] the shifting Scandinavian demographics …' (p. 46), and that these markers are present in the text '[a]s if they have slinked up unnoticed from some abyssal basement' (p. 46). This is Critique at its best: startlingly recontextualising not just Knausgaard's work, but the interpretive categories that we have brought to bear on it, and throwing those categories into crisis.

Hitherto, most of Bould's published work has been on science fiction. In *The Anthropocene Unconscious*, he reveals himself as a critic with a much broader purview (and a

more enjoyably uninhibited prose style). But mere criticism – or mere Critique – is not his mission here. *The Anthropocene Unconscious* wants us not just to think but to *re*think. 'On the one hand', he writes in his closing pages, 'a fast, furious, thanatropic race to destruction, and on the other, a yearning for fullness. In between lies a space in which to imagine the world to come' (p. 141). Bould is explicit about the choice that faces us: 'Ecosocialism or barbarism. Ride or die' (p. 142).

It's a stirring call to action. But it also feels like a vexed conclusion. At one and the same time *The Anthropocene Unconscious* reminds you of the force that Critique at its best can possess – its capacity to compel us to see ourselves historically, bound in time and space, subject to half-hidden ideological pressures – and brings you up sharply against the problem that all those scholars, from Sedgwick to Felski to Boland, have gone to such lengths to articulate: Critique does not appear to be capable of provoking meaningful political action. Can Critique change the world? Bould's gamble – and perhaps it's everyone else's gamble, too, at least inside the academy – is that we have no choice but to say yes. Critique *must* save the world, or try to.

The Anthropocene Unconscious is a kind of final gamble on the value of Critique. Ride or die. It leaves you with the suspicion that we have exited where we entered: seeing more, hoping more, and wondering if seeing and hoping will, in the end, be enough.

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