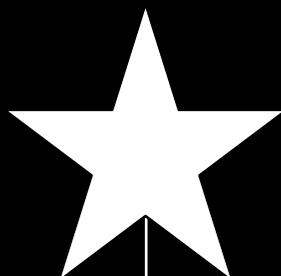
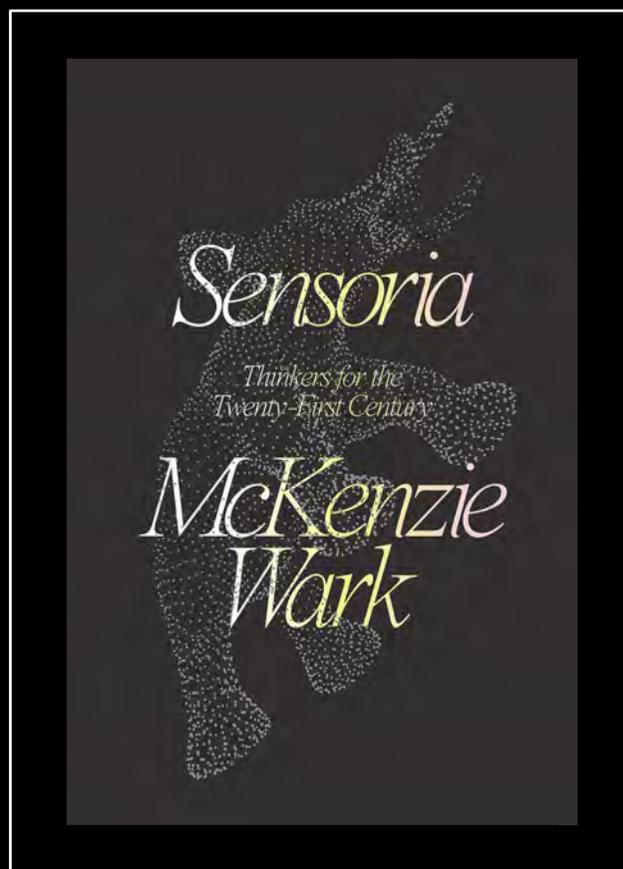


JARROD GRAMMEL & ETHAN DEERE

Sense and *Sensoria*

Epistemology and Thought in
McKenzie Wark's *Sensoria*:
*Thinkers for the Twentieth
Century*



In her newest book, *Sensoria: Thinkers for the Twenty-First Century*, McKenzie Wark casts a wide net, taking on the project of epistemology in a world of ever increasing specialization. As Wark rightly points out, scholars in their respective fields often become blinded to the shortcomings of their own ways of producing knowledge while simultaneously claiming a “privileged knowledge of the world as a totality.”¹ For Wark, the problem lies precisely in these claims of knowledge of the totality, as in the age-old story about blind scholars touching an elephant while all providing vastly different, and often contradictory, accounts.

Yet, Wark does not necessarily want to do away with the possibility of knowing the totality in general. Rather, she believes that the best hope we have of producing anything close to a knowledge of the totality has to begin with an acknowledgement of the shortcomings inherent in every method of knowledge production. In her own words:



Each way of knowing the world touches a part of the elephant. Rather than give in to claims to know the whole elephant in advance, let's work out collaboratively, as a common task, some practices of putting parts of the elephant as we sense and know them next to one another. Not so much to produce a seamless picture of the whole, but to understand the differences between all of the partial sensings. The common task is to produce a knowledge of the world made up of the differences between ways of knowing it.²

Sensoria is divided up into three sections: aesthetics, ethnographics, and technics (or “design”). Each of the sections feature six individual thinkers who Wark attempts to situate within her larger goal of “putting parts of the ele-

phant” together.

One of the major challenges of the text arises from the scope of the various thinkers, combined with a lack of sustained engagement in theoretical groundwork for each of the given topics covered. For example, in the first chapter, Wark attempts to introduce, via Sianne Ngai, the three new aesthetic categories of “zany, cute, and interesting.”³ Wark argues that these three categories are both more relevant and distinct from the classic categories of the beautiful and the sublime, but she does not once engage with theorists of these latter two categories.

In her chapter on Hito Steyerl, Wark notes that “Steyerl does not hesitate to use the F-word: fascism.”⁴ Yet, in the half page or so that fascism is mentioned, it is described as merely a stage in which political representation has collapsed. Even more, in this analysis, fascism is the result of this collapse in representation. Again, as in the Ngai chapter, the lack of engagement with foundational theorists leaves the discussion both misleading and confusing. While Wark is certainly right to situate Antonio Gramsci here, fascism needs to be understood within the specific material conditions that give rise to this collapse in representation. Both Daniel Guérin and Robert Paxton have written excellent works in this regard.

One of the strongest chapters is on Jackie Wang’s *Carceral Capitalism*. Wark astutely recognizes the liberal need for

Black people murdered by state forces to “be innocent.”⁵ There is a rush to posthumously prove that the murdered Black victim was not just innocent but also an upstanding citizen. But “[w]hy should only the innocent children be worthy of care? Of life? Why not adults who may not be pure innocent beings?”⁶ Further, Wark is correct to point out that expanding incarceration is a popular policy in rural areas where employment opportunities are often scarce⁷ and cheap land makes construction of prisons much more appealing. One should well keep this in mind when liberals point specifically to private prisons as the primary driver of mass incarceration. Whether privatized or not, prisons provide both cheap prison labor and desperately needed jobs in post-industrial rural U.S. towns. The only thing to upend here is the assertion that “[p]olicing protects property, not social relations.”⁸ Why not both?

However, the structure of the text does not lend itself to, and largely fails, to provide a vehicle for synthesizing these diverse thinkers into something resembling a unified argu-



ment. Wark's most consistent theme lies in her argument that a rising *vectoralist* class is dramatically reshaping the nature of society and culture. Although this new class, along with its companion, the hacker class, appears a number of times in *Sensoria*, Wark leaves this argument to her other books. This is troubling primarily because she lifts the vectoralist class to a central position as a lever of the primary contradiction of capitalism today. She writes that, "I call them the vectoralist class. Where the capitalist class owned the means of production, the vectoralist class owns the vector of information. That is the ruling class of our time."⁹ While the control of information is no doubt a vital feature of capitalism, this major claim is left as a given from her other work. Without further justification, the centrality of the vectoralist class to the text appears less necessary than its repeated emphasis might otherwise hint.

Despite this lack of unity, if not because of it, *Sensoria* offers up a collection of interesting, and sometimes valuable, observations of capitalism today. Almost every chapter of *Sensoria* reflects on truths obscure and obscured, whether in reflecting on the pirate origins of most U.S. media conglomerates¹⁰ or how newer versions of technology use old versions of that same technology as representative icons (think the old-school handset in a green square on many modern cell phones) as a way easing us into new machines with a sense of

familiarity.¹¹

"The ruin our civilization is leaving does not look like the pyramids. It's a planet wrapped in fiber optic,"¹² Wark writes in the final section of her *Sensoria*; and it is this kind of poetic statement that captures and defines the work. *Sensoria* offers a fantastic, often dizzying, view of the sociotechnical complexity arising around us, shaping us as much, if not more so, than we shape it: "[T]he forces of production...reveal and create an ontology of information that is both historical and yet ontologically real."¹³

In another sense, perhaps Wark floats too high and too far. Her insistence that such an exploration is "[...] best conducted on the basis of a rough equality of all ways of knowing"¹⁴ seems more an embrace of a postmodern ethos than a solid epistemic foundation. The desire to explore transdisciplinary territory, searching for the edge effects arising between divergent domains of knowledge, is a promising motive, but it is not a guarantee of success in and of itself. We are left wondering whether it was necessary or helpful to discuss the Afrofuturism of Sun Ra or the ethics of piracy or even if there was ever meant to be a definite conclusion in the first place. In short, be it through a lack of structural cohesion or conceptual clarity, it is not entirely clear that the work itself justifies the method.

Yet it might not be fair to judge Wark's work so harshly. It is true that we have left ourselves

with relative blindspots where our problematic twenty-first century reality finds its sharpest expression, where the historical-theoretical legacy of Marxism, rigidly defined, seems least fit to operate. In this context, the value of Wark's work for today's Marxists is not so difficult to appreciate. As Wark stated in a 2017 interview, "[M]y job is to corrupt other people's grad students." Perhaps the point is not about achieving some ill-defined level of correctness, but to get us thinking, especially about those things that we would otherwise wish to avoid.

Endnotes

1. *Sensoria*, p. 3
2. *Sensoria*, p. 4
3. *Sensoria*, p. 9
4. *Sensoria*, p. 56
5. *Sensoria*, p. 88
6. *Sensoria*, p. 88
7. *Sensoria*, p. 90
8. *Sensoria*, p. 90
9. *Sensoria*, p. 55-56
10. *Sensoria*, p. 166
11. *Sensoria*, p. 196
12. *Sensoria*, p. 184
13. *Sensoria*, p. 188
14. *Sensoria*, p. 14

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