

Emilia Borowska: *The Politics of Kathy Acker: Revolution and the Avant-Garde*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019

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1 In recent years, the New York novelist, poet and post-punk-icon Kathy Acker and her writings have received increased interest and critical attention resulting in a considerable corpus of texts, informed by postmodern, poststructuralist and feminist discourses. Michael Hardin's *Devouring Institutions: The Life Work of Kathy Acker* (2004) and Carla Harryman's and Avital Ronell's *Lust for Life: On the Writings of Kathy Acker* (2006) have familiarized the reader with the complexity of Acker's literary production. Polina Mackay's and Kathryn Nicol's study *Kathy Acker and Transnationalism* (2009) has proposed a more political and cross-national approach, while Georgina Colby's *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible* (2016) has examined Acker's experimental use of language. Following the latter's attempt to rethink Acker's work outside of the territory of postmodern discourse, Emilia Borowska provides an innovative reading of Acker's novels, which successfully tackles Acker's radical politics and revolutionary objectives.

2 Borowska's *The Politics of Kathy Acker* decisively differs from Spencer Drew's *Learning for Revolution* (2011), which mainly sheds light on Acker's pedagogical programme as a revolutionary project. Situated "at the intersection of historical, theoretical, artistic and scientific contexts" (42), Borowska investigates Acker's search for inspiring revolutionary models of the past such as Spanish anarchism, Russian nihilism, and the revolts of the 1960s as the writer's attempt to resuscitate their transformative potential and to develop her own political vision. Thus, Acker continues and re-politicises the project of the historical avant-gardes as she invokes "an eventual understanding of revolution, broadly understood as a moment of possibility" (6). Borowska's book is an over-due innovative contribution to the existing Kathy Acker criticism, as it proposes Acker as a revolutionary voice, which lost none of its pertinence in the here and now.

3 While each of the five chapters of Borowska's book focuses on specific Kathy Acker novels, the 'Introduction' sketches the shifting notions of revolution and their different meanings over the course of time. Sifting through past revolutions, Borowska aims to acquaint the reader with a number of foundational theoretical approaches by thinkers such as Alain Badiou, Hannah Arendt and Gilles Deleuze. Chapter one explores Acker's literary configurations of revolutionary terrorism in two of her early works, *The Burning Bombing of America: The Destruction of the US* (1972) and *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining*

(1974) in relation to “twentieth-century militant Maoism and nineteenth-century Russian nihilism” (51). Borowska traces Maoist ideologies and the imagery of an exploding bomb in *Burning Bombing* as part of the urban “terrorist turn” (42) of the evolving counterculture of the 1960s and shows how this emblematic explosion and its “politics of dissolution” (51) are further underpinned by means of textual fragmentation and additional spacing. In related terms, Acker’s *Nymphomaniac*, which is modelled on Blaise Cendrars’s novel *Moravagine*, shifts Cendrars’s depictions of revolutionary Russia in 1905, to a later American setting. Drawing on “the wave of prison riots of the sixties and early seventies” (67), Acker relates the prisoners’ revolutionary martyrdom and sacrifice to Russian anarchist philosophies. Analysing Acker’s transnational compilation of revolutionary terrorism, Borowska brilliantly succeeds in demonstrating how Acker’s radical politics transcends temporal and spatial borders, while foregrounding the infinite potential of past revolutions and its failed heroes.

4 In the following chapter Borowska turns to Acker’s novel *Don Quixote: Which was a Dream* (1986), which is deeply informed by a widespread cynicism within Western societies in the 1980s that successfully contained revolutionary and utopian beliefs. According to Borowska, Acker’s reinterpretation of Cervantes aims to fight modern cynicism with its subversive turn to classical tradition, hoping “to instil revolutionary spirit into politically barren times” (87). In this attempt, Borowska identifies “[p]arrhesia (truth-telling), the grotesque body, and satire . . . [as] the three classically Cynical tools that [Acker] . . . employs repeatedly to advance [her] . . . potent critique of a modern cynical rationality” (91). Borowska’s subtle analysis exposes modern cynicism’s deficiencies, which *Don Quixote* brings to the fore, by uncovering its resemblance to a Hobbesian logic of totalitarianism and a Machiavellian *realpolitik*. Acker – according to this reading – endeavours “to replace cynical *realpolitik*” (126) with what Borowska calls a ‘dreampolitik’, the political agenda of which is located by Acker in the example of the Spanish revolution. Borowska’s complex – if sometimes overfraught – philosophical and historical analysis successfully foregrounds Acker’s creation of her own political vision through re-configuring revolutionary models of the past, which could have otherwise been read as portrayals of repeated revolutionary failure.

5 The next, comparatively short chapter continues this exploration as it provides a reading of *Don Quixote*’s middle section entitled ‘Russian Constructivism’ “outside of the context of postmodern discourse of appropriation” (138-9). As she traces Acker’s explicit aesthetic borrowings from the Russian avant-garde, Borowska foregrounds ‘Russian Constructivism’s “engagement with revolutionary history and [its] affiliation with the visual arts” (138) that has been largely neglected by 1980s and 1990s (postmodern) Acker criticism. More specifically,

Borowska points to Acker's affinity to cubism in terms of the "plurality of materials" (141), and the use of abstraction in Acker's textual collage. By revisiting post-revolutionary Russia and subsequent "Constructivism's revolutionary passion" (155) on American ground, Acker hopes to create new possibilities in the present. Borowska closes this chapter suggesting that Acker modelled her abstract, yet passionate depictions of St Petersburg on Sherrie Levine's *1917* installation.

6 Chapter four looks into Acker's novel *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) and "its proximity to an evental past" (43). Focusing on the novel's political intricacies, Borowska's meticulously detailed analysis draws attention to the ways in which, "Acker fuses the events of May 1968 in France, the Algerian Revolution and the Haitian Revolution to create a new global revolutionary space in the present" (160), resuscitating the "Situationist avant-garde project" (160) and its transformative figures of turbulence and topology along with its closely connected concepts of femininity and fluidity in *Empire's* revolutionary chaos. Borowska's unconventional intertwining of history, art and science turns out to be a fruitful interdisciplinary approach in uncovering the novel's revolutionary potential, which is not to be equated with revolutionary success, but is first and foremost, "a chance of achieving that goal" (202).

7 While the chapter on *Empire of the Senseless* draws the reader's attention to the historical event as a moment of political possibility, the final chapter of Borowska's study looks into *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990) to explore Acker's insistence "on the role of individual commitment in realising and sustaining evental promise" (202). In keeping with Badiou's notion of subjectivity, Borowska traces Acker's search for a comparatively open concept of the subject amidst the atonal worlds of 1871 Paris as well as 1980 America and England. According to Borowska's analysis Acker uses Arthur Rimbaud "to explore the becoming of a political subject and a responsible artist" (43), evoking both, "the lost potentiality of childhood" (214) and the Paris Commune, whose genuine creativity and revolutionary strength may thus be read as a "suppressed evental promise" (241) ensuring the becoming of a truth-seeking, decisive subject. Despite Borowska's plausible outline of Acker's prospect for a responsible subject, her compilation and application of historical and philosophical ideas to *In Memoriam* appears to be fairly far-fetched. Her short concluding remarks turn to Acker's last work *Eurydice in the Underworld* (1997), which "combines autobiographical material with the collective voice of responsible [female] artists" (246), with whom Acker aligns herself, becoming in turn a responsible artist herself.

8 As a whole, Borowska's book successfully unravels the revolutionary fervor inherent in Acker's novels. It is a remarkably well-researched study with an impressive and

interdisciplinary scope that is imperative when exploring Acker's unwieldy body of work. Occasionally, her complex web of historical, philosophical and political threads might be difficult to follow for readers not thoroughly familiar with Kathy Acker's work. Individual chapters tend to be overfraught with meticulous historical accounts while seemingly providing little evidence drawn from Acker's texts. Overall, a fundamental contradiction surfaces in this study, foregrounded by Borowska herself, who believes that Acker's revolutionary fervor "follow[s] an invariably Brintonian cycle of attraction and disappointment . . . [in that] Acker positively wills revolution into being, while simultaneously depicting it as repeatedly failing" (2). Acker's utopian outlook proposed by Borowska is thus accompanied and counteracted by Acker's invariably gloomingly hopeless and traumatic literary landscapes. Borowska's study shows how this tension underscores Acker's revolutionary politics as "radiat[ing] with possibilities" (144).

9 Borowska's monograph provides a necessary novel account of Acker's historical rewritings and revolutionary politics, thus pushing existing criticism on Kathy Acker's work into a radically new direction. By emphasizing the universal responsibility of artists to "return to past [historical] events as a resource brimming with potential for transforming the present" (41), *The Politics of Kathy Acker* is an exceptionally topical text with wider applicability, offering a utopian political vision without imposing a rigid blueprint.

Works Cited

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