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The Moment of Reckoning: On Forgetting and Remembering the Air

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The threat of global warming¹ has recently risen to the forefront of political, ecological, scientific, artistic, and humanistic discourse and action around the world. The debate revolves around two core issues: first, how are we to reduce carbon dioxide emissions to prevent temperatures from rising beyond the decisive 1.5 degrees defined as the 'safe' limit of climate change? The second issue, which ominously underlies the first, is an even deeper source of concern: is it even possible to sustain (human) life on this planet, particularly in the form that we enjoy today?

In order to nurture and safeguard life on Earth, we must identify modes of representation that allow the claim of life to be made and heard. This idea proposed by philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler links together media and survival. In short, what we recognise as valuable is contingent upon its claim of life being made perceptible as a thing of value, as something worthy of preservation.²

Climate and weather-related events, changes, and fluctuations have made their presence felt more tangibly in recent years. Humanity has woken up to the fact that global warming is among the greatest threats to its survival. Butler's ideas about making visible the claim of life are difficult to apply to global warming, however. It is far easier, for example, to comprehend the value of a plant or animal under immediate threat of extinction. When a rare insect species that is normally invisible to the human eye is made perceptible, its claim of life becomes something we can readily grasp.³ Where climate is concerned, however, the issue is more complicated. Not only is climate a more abstract entity than an insect, it is also omnipresent. Furthermore, its core material component, the atmosphere, is virtually invisible.

With this in mind, both art and other media, indeed all who work with any form of representation, have a special responsibility to make visible all those living beings and life-sustaining entities that are otherwise invisible to the human eye.

1 In the spirit of Timothy Morton, I specifically use the term 'warming' to preclude the notion that the climate has always been subject to 'change'. Morton even suggested that we should start calling global warming 'mass extinction', which is the net effect. Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological*. London: Penguin Books, 2018, 45.
2 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London & Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2009, 181.
3 See e.g. *The Beetle* by Henrik Håkansson.



The roof of the Nordic Pavilion in Venice, 2018

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen

If we consider the menace of global warming in relation to its representation, we find ourselves locked into patterns of the past: human history has defined the terms and limits of our experience, and thereby also our expectations of the future.

Life-sustaining representations are similarly tied to the past and to historical readings of reality that have shaped the present into what it is today. Recognising a valuable claim of life therefore necessitates negotiation between past experience, past horizons of possibility, and anticipation of future events. We must continually return and retrace our footprints in order to improve our ability to read and comprehend them.⁴

We may have gone astray in our construals of air, the key material agent of the climate. Humanity perhaps chose the wrong path by becoming enamoured with all that is solid, weighty and perceptible with the senses. What if, at the hypothetical 'beginning', we had looked more carefully at the things that are difficult to see, at everything that exists in a form that is not visible or tangible as a solid object or piece of matter? We would perhaps have been 'nurslings of the air', as once ventured by the early Romantic philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder.

Would our lot be different today had we learned to 'see' air from the very outset? Would society have taken a different path – would communities, economics, politics and art have evolved differently? Is the current ecological emergency the upshot of our having forgotten air, the element that makes the least noise about itself?

Humankind has yet to settle its score with the history of air. We are only just beginning deeply to analyse and deconstruct this relationship. This is the task and onus of 'our age'. Tackling global warming entails more than just pre-empting the future or creating new technology – it also necessitates a critical rethink of our habits of representation and a reinterpretation of the footprints of history.

4 Eduardo Cavada, *Words of Light. Theses on the Photography of History*. New Jersey & Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1997.

When, back in the early 1980s, the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray wrote about ‘the forgetting of air’, she was not referring to global warming, but targeting her critique at the exclusion of women in metaphysics. She described how the western metaphysical tradition discounted and disregarded air, and focused instead on solid, weighty matter. ‘The Being of man will be constituted on the basis of a forgetting: of the gift of this *from which* of which he is.’⁵

Irigaray nevertheless writes brilliantly on the subject of air. She describes it as an element of openness, expansiveness, buoyancy and light. She observes how it unites everything, transcending the world of forms and phenomena, yet nothing could exist without it. And, even after we recognise its indispensability as a fundamental condition both for seeing and for the existence of all life on this planet, it insists upon remaining virtually invisible.

For Irigaray, air is the origin and destination of all things, without itself demanding to be located anywhere. It is a platform or founding structure, but it cannot be a structure, for it is constantly moving yet simultaneously static, mobile and immobile at the same time. It cannot be construed as an integrated entity, for it exists everywhere as the vehicle and mediating agent that makes things perceptible, while very rarely making itself detectable. Irigaray compares air, the vehicle of life, to all things feminine, maternal and natural. Air is also a democratic element in that it unites all living beings through the act of inhalation.

The curious thing about air is that it almost never manifests itself as a presence. Thus, western philosophy (or at least Martin Heidegger, opines Irigaray) has construed air as a void, an absence, nothingness, for the philosopher is unable to come up against air as a ‘being’ or a ‘thing’. But, because air moves freely, edgeless and unfettered, it takes nothing, but gives generously of itself to others. And, indeed, others take abundantly. Air is harnessed to perform a great variety of *enabling* functions.

The first of these relates to the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide; here, air performs the function of sustaining and carrying life. In culture and history, air has performed critical services for humanity, enabling various technical inventions such as coal, steam and fossil power. These inventions have in turn enabled the advanced lifestyle we enjoy in the modern world, leading to the advent of concepts such as the Anthropocene and fossil capitalism.

Physically, the word ‘air’ denotes the layers of gas that constitute the Earth’s atmosphere. It is one of the four classical elements, but it materialises only fleetingly in the form of ever-shifting clouds, fog and smoke, or as light. Although it never truly assumes a material form, it penetrates everything so completely that no scientist is able to place his tools in between air and ordinary living creatures.⁶ It seems paradoxical to think that, despite its immateriality, air is the most ‘natural’ thing in the world; it refuses to bow to the laws of economic exchange, and is a universally shared preserver of life on Earth.

Air can be described as something that transcends modern control, existing in a realm beyond culture. Not only is it impervious to historical and cultural change, it is also unaffected by human labour and production. Even so, or perhaps for this very reason, air has always had *metaphorical* power. ‘A breath of fresh air’ is a phrase describing an experience of natural aesthetic beauty or a joyful moment of spiritual refreshment.

It is surprising that the links between air and modern art theory and aesthetics have not been recognised to the extent they deserve until only recently, with theorists gradually waking up to the need for a critical evaluation of the history of air and the atmosphere.⁷ This may be due to the language of philosophy, which couches its messages in metaphorical terms, or because we tend to dwell upon all that is heavy and solid rather than things weightless that elude our perception, as theorised by Irigaray.

5 Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*. Transl. Mary Beth Mader. London: The Athlone Press, 1999 (1983), 30.

6 The invention of the air pump is notable in this regard, for it enabled a momentary escape from the ubiquity of air. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Transl. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993 (1991).

7 Tobias Menely, ‘Anthropocene Air.’ *Minnesota Review*. Issue 83, 2014 (93–101); Gillen D’Arcy Wood, ‘Constable, Clouds, Climate Change.’ *The Wordsworth Circle* Vol. 38, 1–2/2007, 25–33.



Heli Rekula, *Landscape no. 20 An Tiaracht*, 2002, media art, a screen capture from the DVD, 19min
 Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

If air is a foundation-less foundation forgotten by metaphysics, it has certainly breathed life into modern art theory. The philosopher Walter Benjamin describes an *aura* as a tremor or sigh of nature, as something that we literally ‘breathe’.⁸ Benjamin’s description chimes well with the original Greek and Latin meanings of ‘aura’ (‘gentle breeze’ or ‘breath’), as he was referring not to a human-made artwork, but to objects of nature, evoking the Romantic trope of distance when encountering natural beauty. Even so, the aura can be seen as the special tremor that animates an artwork – a subtle emanation like a breath or breeze. The aura is something untouched by humans and culture; it might be the mark of time, or perhaps the touch of authenticity, where ‘authenticity’ implies something external that cannot be controlled, shaped, contained or grasped rationally.

In modern times, air has come to represent the opposite of everything that is oppressive, heavy and temporally bound: air is timeless, unchanging, invisible, infinite, difficult to control, a free agent that carries our every breath. In the book *Aesthetic Theory*, the philosopher Theodor Adorno writes that we are so immersed in an objectified world where everything is marked by human presence that it forces us to seek solace within nature, to step

8 Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Frankfurt/Main Suhrkamp, 1962 (1936), 15. ‘An einem Sommernachmittag ruhend einem Gebirgszug am Horizont oder einem Zweig folgen, der seinen Schatten, auf den Ruhenden wirft - das heißt die Aura dieser Berge, dieses Zweiges atmen.’

out in the open and inhale a breath of fresh air.⁹ Nature is the redeeming, unchanging fount of freshness that exists beyond history and human civilization. Adorno writes: 'What appears untamed in nature and remote from history, belongs – polemically speaking – to a historical phase in which the social web is so densely woven that the living fear death by suffocation.'¹⁰ The modern individual is, in other words, compelled to flee the all-pervasive influence of human culture and step into the open air to escape asphyxiation.

In modern aesthetic theory, air is the untamed, calming and stabilising counterweight to the stormy vicissitudes of culture and history, for air rules the unfailing circadian rhythm and cycle of the seasons.

But, in its invisibility, elusiveness and ineffability, air has been something of a stumbling block as far as visual representation is concerned. Air is typically visualised as clouds, masses of vapour gathering in the sky or, as convincingly argued by the art historian Hubert Damisch, as disruptions of the linear order of perspective. A cloud is an uncontainable semiotic operator that interacts with linear perspective, wedging itself between the foreground and background, between sky and earth, between here and there. A cloud marks the border between representation and that which cannot be represented.¹¹

The atmosphere thus appears to be construed as an allegory symbolising all that is untamed, external, and impervious to change. Air is infinitely flexible, a fluid metaphor, but difficult to grasp and even more difficult to control and, therefore, challenging. Air has posed a challenge not only for metaphysics and linear perspective, but it also presents conceptual complications for materialist readings of history. The literary scholar Tobias Menely traces the conceptual history of air, starting with the political thinker Thomas Hobbes, observing that in modern political, aesthetic and economic thought, air represents an ideal that transcends history and materiality. Menely notes that it even acquires fetish-like characteristics – being shapeless, veiled and invisible, it remains a mystery.¹²

These past conceptualisations of the atmosphere nevertheless fail to address the temporal specificity of 'our Anthropocene epoch' and the long-term, inescapable impacts of fossil capitalism. The French philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour has often pointed out that already long ago, air ceased to be 'natural' and became political.¹³ Citing the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, Latour illustrates the politicisation of air with a wartime anecdote describing First World War trench warfare in the Belgian town of Ypres, when new weaponry no longer sought merely to eradicate the enemy's body, but also to poison the air around it. 'If an enemy's body can no longer be liquidated with direct hits, then the attacker is forced to make his continued existence impossible by his direct immersion in an unliveable milieu for a sufficiently long period of time', writes Sloterdijk.¹⁴ Gas attacks marked the beginning of chemical warfare waged against ecologically interdependent vital functions, such as respiration, the central nervous system, temperature and radiation.

The First World War was not, however, the first time that humans had jeopardised their survival by polluting the atmosphere. The ancient Romans had already complained of the 'heavy heavens' caused by excessive wood-burning.¹⁵ Indeed the harmful atmospheric impacts of fossil combustion have been evident since early history. Medieval London was so dangerously polluted that Edward I outlawed the burning of sea coal in the city. His ban was ignored, just as numerous successive attempts to restrict coal-burning at various times in history have failed to rein in air pollution. Admittedly, recent regulation has achieved positive

9 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. London & New York: Continuum, 1997 (1970), 62–63.

10 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. London & New York: Continuum, 1997 (1970), 65.

11 Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of Cloud. Toward a History of Painting*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002 (1972), 199.

12 Tobias Menely, 'Anthropocene Air' *Minnesota Review*. Issue 83, 2014 (93–101).

13 In actual fact, air became politicised as early as the 17th century, when the philosopher and scientist Robert Boyle invented the air pump. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Transl. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993 (1991), 15–20.

14 Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007 (2002), 16.

15 Mark Z. Jacobson, *Atmospheric Pollution: History, Science, and Regulation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 82–83.

outcomes, the situation having ostensibly improved in many European and American cities where energy recapture and renewables are gradually replacing fossil fuels.

Coal-burning caused such widespread pollution in 19th-century Europe that a new word was coined around 1905 to describe its impact in Britain's cities: 'smog', a portmanteau of 'smoke' and 'fog'. London's 'pea-souper' was made famous by James McNeill Whistler and Claude Monet's paintings, in which the thick, foggy air created a special 'atmosphere' hanging over the city. The smog was portrayed not as something deadly and suffocating, but as an aesthetically evocative visual experience – only later was the pea-souper associated with air pollution.

The early British meteorologist Luke Howard concluded his 1830s lecture on *The Constitution and Properties of the Atmosphere* by describing 'the many uses of this aerial covering of our globe'. He draws attention to the respiration of humans and other aerobic living beings (plants and animals), and makes note of the air's influence on the landscape and various weather phenomena.¹⁶ The weather was an object of keen observation, scientific study and enthusiastic portrayal by artists in the decade following the Battle of Waterloo, which witnessed a veritable 'meteorological moment' in British culture.

Despite the known, acknowledged, sensed and suffered problems associated with air pollution, people of the modern world still tend to regard air as life's backdrop rather than as an explicit condition of survival that should be nurtured and valued. When smog becomes visible, people assume that technology will come to the rescue or that the pollution will eventually drift away and vanish into the seemingly boundless atmosphere.

Today we are living our own 'meteorological moment'. We face a struggle to survive and preserve our very lives, as well as our ecological systems, natural scenery and culture.

When Irigaray wrote *Forgetting the Air*, she interpreted air principally as a feminine element. She addressed Heidegger and the heavy legacy of western metaphysics primarily in terms of gender exclusion. Back in the early 1980s, air was not the concrete, material thing that she later saw when in 2014, during the global warming era, she and philosopher Michael Marder co-authored an article describing urban air pollution as a crime against humanity.

The article, published in *The Guardian* (17 March 2014), is addressed directly to the reader. The polluted air that leaves a bitter aftertaste in big cities is no longer just a metaphor, allegory, symbol or semiotic marker. Today air is simply the physical substance upon which we all depend. Irigaray and Marder urge readers to learn to respect life by emulating the vegetal world, which silently pledges its loyalty to life, including the lives of others. Plants and forests not only produce oxygen, but even purify contaminated air in doing so. The philosophers call upon us to recognise our reciprocal relationship with plants and the need for us to learn to share and embrace our coexistence both with our fellow humans and vegetal life forms.¹⁷

Expanding on Irigaray and Marder, I would further contend that not only do we need to understand that clean, life-sustaining air is vanishing, but also the fact that air sustains everything that makes our lives worth living. What we are seeing today is that when air is artefactualised, it destroys all the things that modern culture traditionally associates with it: externality, boundlessness, freedom and joy in life. Perhaps this is why air has become visible in contemporary art in a wholly new way during the past decade. It has been made visible in photography and also presented in installations, whether as fog, coloured light, rain, particulate emissions, or in the form of a breeze.¹⁸

16 Luke Howard, *Seven Lectures on Meteorology*. London: Harvey and Darton, 2009/1843 (1833), 20.

17 Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, 'Without clean air, we have nothing.' *The Guardian*, 17 March 2014.

18 Examples of artworks that focus on air and the atmosphere or make air visible include the following: Heli Rekula, *Landscape n:o 20, An Tiaracht* (2002); Lauri Astala, *Gamelan* (2010); Antony Gormley, *Blind Light* (2007); Random International, *Rain Room* (2012); Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project* (2003–2004); *Your Blind Movement* (2010); *Fog Assembly* (2017); Ryan Gander, *I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorise (The Invisible Pull)* (2012); Josefina Nelimarkka, *Kairos*² (2018).

Ultimately, the present ‘meteorological moment’ has forced us to confront the fact that there is no such thing as a natural place that exists beyond modernity – we can no longer, as before, step out into the open and fill our lungs with clean air.

Will we finally learn to see and represent air as part of human history only after it has been altered to the point of injuring all the heavy, visible things to which we are attached and anchored? Has air finally become visible, now that it is so polluted that we can no longer see through the veil of smog, with atmospheric carbon so dangerously high that it jeopardises our conditions of survival and threatens to alter and destroy life as we know it?

The paradox lies here: in the challenge of making visible something that is inherently invisible, yet is valuable only as long as it remains invisible and undetectable as a life-sustaining condition of survival on Earth.

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