



The marvelous clouds: towards an elemental theory of media

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BOOK REVIEW

The marvelous clouds: towards an elemental theory of media, by John Durham Peters, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015, 416 pp., \$30.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0226253831

In his lyrical *Water and dreams: On the material imagination of matter* (1942), Gaston Bachelard wrote that, “A material element must provide its own substance, its own rules and poetics” (p. 3). Along with his elemental meditations on air (1943), fire (1938), and earth (1943), Bachelard explored how human emotional and psychological states do not occur in a vacuum, but emerge in relation to the specific material elements which generate a poetics of thought. Yet from the perspective of the twenty-first century, Bachelard hearkens back to a more Edenic sense of the natural world before the intensification of ocean acidification, atmospheric warming, mineral extraction, and species extinctions. How might anthropogenic climate change alter how we think about elementality as a perspective, a frame, a taxonomy?

John Durham Peters’ new work, *The marvelous clouds: Towards an elemental theory of media* (2015) emerges in relation to precisely this question of new elementality in the context of media studies. The first two chapters clarify the critical stakes of what it means to think of the environment as a medium, first through a general frame (Chapter 1), and then through case studies of ocean media (Chapter 2), fire media (Chapter 3), sky media (Chapters 4 and 5), and finally two broad chapters on the history of language and writing (Chapter 6) and Google’s aspirations to become an ur-archive (Chapter 7). Peters makes the case for an epistemic shift precipitated by extending the definition of “media” beyond anthropogenic technologies and onto the broader environment.

If we mean mental content intentionally designed to say something to someone, of course clouds or fire don’t communicate. But if we mean repositories of readable data and processes that sustain and enable existence, then of course clouds and fire have meaning. (p. 4)

The natural environment has been the repressed element in media theory, bearing the hidden costs of technical development that demand intense levels of energy consumption, rare earth mineral extraction, and waste disposal (Hu, 2015; Maxwell & Miller, 2012; Parikka, 2015). Yet Peters offers more than a material analysis of media’s hidden costs, arguing for the way in which the natural environment performs the function of an infrastructure, where the conditions that sustain life also form the conditions of possibility for sending/receiving messages over a distance.

However, Peters’ case for considering the environment as a medium depends on the temporal logic of the retrospective view that goes largely unacknowledged. Let me elaborate by way of one of Peters’ own examples. In Chapter 2, Peters notes that the development of military bioacoustics during and after World War II were the precondition for being able to conceive of whales and dolphins as “sign-emitting animals” (p. 73). The development of sonar enabled scientists to see an analogous kind of communication in cetaceans. Thus “New media not only gave epistemic access to the beasts, but redefined what they were” (p. 73). This logic – that a technology reveals the *a priori* technicality of dolphins – is the same logic that undergirds how Peters reads the sky as a technical medium in Chapters 4 and 5. Peters writes that, “The sky is a compass, calendar, and clock if you know how to read it [...] The heavens are also a newspaper, or at least a weather report” (p. 170). If our world had been covered in clouds like Venus, then our terrestrial lives would have been more similar to those of marine mammals, lacking visual “coordinates of meaning-making” (p. 170). Peters argues that throughout human history – the primary unit of time examined here – the sky has served an orientational and thus technical role in our practices. Yet would it be possible to see the sky as specifically

technical without the compass? The accumulation of our media technologies is the prerequisite for interpreting the broader natural environment as having been always-already technical. To view the environment as media, then, involves a subtle temporal gymnastics by which the technical present reinterprets the latent technicity of the past.

Where Peters is perhaps most methodologically provocative is Chapter 2 (“Of Cetaceans and Ships”) where he considers what it would mean to consider the ocean as a medium. Peters chooses cetaceans (whales and dolphins) as his charismatic interlocutors and anthropological subjects, asking what would count as “media” for dolphins and whales in an aqueous environment with their “alien” sense ratios. In this biological speculation, sonic media would be dominant over any visual register; Peters extrapolates that for them “facial expressions” may “exist in sound” (p. 68). With their ability to see into each other via sonar, “dolphin sociability” may exist as “applied radiology” (p. 68). Yet Peters is keen to differentiate between dolphins and humans, in that they could have “memory but no history; poetry but no literature; religion but no scripture; education but no textbooks; law but no constitution; counting but no chalk, paper, or equations; music but no scores,” (p. 82). In other words, they could have speech (a technique) but not writing (a technology), such that the ability to write seems to become a way of marking human exceptionalism and uniqueness. Can the ocean environment have writing? Peters shifts his position at the end of the chapter:

Maybe the whole ocean is their auditory apparatus and archive; by joining their water-based inner ear with the outer ear of the ocean, perhaps they have a medium for being in time that resembles our recording media but contrasts with the apparent instantaneity of our oral communication. (p. 96)

The implications of a zoological comparative media studies have yet to be fully worked out, and it is a shame that Peters only attempts such a foray in one chapter (what about bats and sky media, or earthworms in the archive, or extremophile bacteria in fiery hydrothermal vents?).

The marvelous clouds – along with Edouardo Kohn’s *How forests think* (2013) – is deeply interested in the semiotic plentitude of the world for non-human beings, informing the way he conceives of a “comparative media studies” beginning with the question of what constitute media for dolphins. Yet we can ask a series of disruptive questions to the environmental turn in media theory: when is the sky ever not a medium? Under what circumstances might it work as a non-medium or anti-medium, like the storm that disrupts and disorients, or the satellite that breaks down, or brings acid rain? Is the sky always an instrument of normativity (“Whatever time is, calendars and clocks measure, control, and constitute it” (p. 176)), or can we develop other senses in which it does not synchronize behavior? What about whales that are not simply average “types,” but are deviant in some way, like Tilikum, the orca featured in *Blackfish* (2013) that ate part of its Seaworld trainer, or the infamous Moby Dick? What would an elemental theory of media look like that attended to the conditions of deviance, anti-normativity, and failure explored by queer theory?.

What is at stake is not only the expansion or dilution of a concept of media, but also the unacknowledged effect of normalizing our conception of *homo faber*, cetaceans, and other species (“Many of the same rhythms that shape our calendars are also written into our physiology” (p. 179)). Perhaps the future work, then, is to imagine an ecologically sensitive comparative media studies that does not necessarily generalize what count as media at the level of species, but investigates the event-specific conditions for the legibility of media; and towards this, *The marvelous clouds* offers a broad foray into elemental media, promising to seed research questions in a variety of directions.

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