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All That is Solid melts into Air The Atmosphere as Living Space and Visual Field

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1. AIR IS (NO MORE) INVISIBLE

There has been a renewed interest in the works of the philosopher Günther Anders within the contemporary ecological movement. His relatively unknown novel *Die mollussische Katakombe* published in Germany in 1992, the year of the author's death, has yet to be translated into English¹. In this book, two characters are jailed in an underground prison, an extreme kind of quarantine one might say, and discuss the authoritarian regime ruling the outer world through a stunning series of tales and speculative reflections. Among the short stories told by the protagonists Olo and Yegussa, there is one that is particularly interesting. An anonymous worker on strike answers his employer's disdainful accusation of being a sheer nothing, a negative element arguing that "Positive is invisible. You don't feel the air you breath. You acknowledge its value only when it's brought away, you understand that it is necessary only when it lacks. And, indeed, we are your air!" In the following debate between Olo and Yegussa, Olo who is older and wiser declares that the positive matters are invisible, and they are revealed only by the negative counterpoints. One can see it clearly from the example of health and peace, says the prisoner. The value of health is revealed only in sickness while peace is only recognized as important when a war breaks out. Olo concludes by stating that "materialism is indeed a theory of the invisible".

Beyond its more general insight on the political issue of the collective perception as well as the acknowledgement of values, this literary anecdote might also help us to read the crucial shift in common attention triggered by situation of the Covid-19 pandemic. We suggest that, to a certain extent, the viral problem is the negative element which, all of a sudden, makes the positive and imperceptible elements matter: from the public service to the care workers. Thus, we could say that the current crisis represents (or could do so) a shock therapy for our distracted perception that usually, in particular within the current neoliberal trend, fails to consider, appraise and protect the social meshwork that surrounds and sustains us invisibly, but necessarily. Such an ecological distraction is not limited to our social ecosystems but it stretches more widely to the complicated environmental phenomena that, because of their nature as hyperobjects, are especially difficult to observe and seize for human subjects². Even though we are able to produce and transmit a great deal of mathematical data and scientific analysis, it remains difficult to raise people's empirical consciousness to these kinds of distributed and stealthy conditions situated on an environmental scale that the individuals can hardly perceive, at least in the quick and straightforward way needed by the climate urgency. To rephrase Olo's statement, one might say that, faced with the environmental issue, *materialism is a theory of the invisible hyperobjects*.

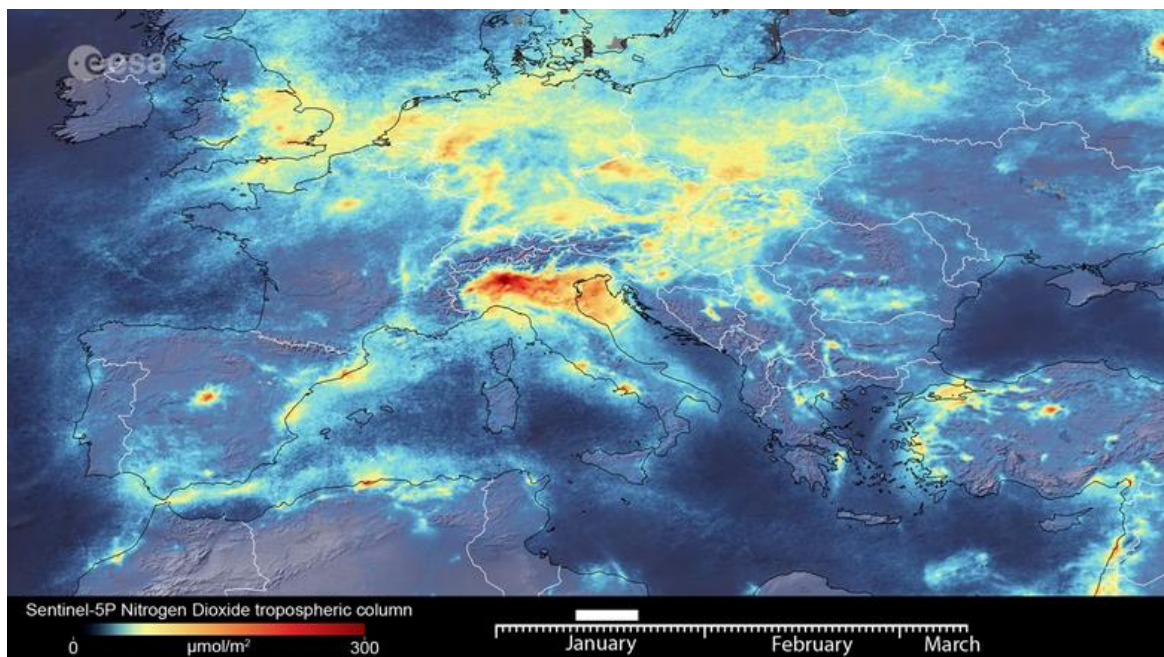
Air or, more accurately, "atmosphere" is one of these crucial hyperobjects: positive (that is materially fundamental) but mostly invisible. In this regard, we can say that air is the invisible ecological matter *par excellence*: a sort of hyper-medium or ur-medium connecting lives. And we can also underline that the importance of this environmental factor is proportional to the difficulty to pay attention to it – air, therefore, is a typical case of something "hidden in plain sight"³. However, the situation raised by the negative contrast of the Covid-19 pandemic may be changing, albeit slightly, our perception and understanding of this environmental medium

¹ Günther Anders, *Die mollussische Katakombe*, Beck, Munich, 1992.

² Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2013.

³ Eviatar Zerubavel, *Hidden in Plain Sight. The Social Structure of Irrelevance*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2015.

which is often considered irrelevant, a given that seems empty and intangible. In the wake of the virus crisis, we discover suddenly that atmosphere is not as indifferent as we might have thought the air is rather a very meaningful space that we inhabit actively and through which we are permanently connected to the environment surrounding us as well as to the other living beings that share it⁴. The fundamental act of breathing is, in this respect, the mechanism that binds us tightly to our environment while blowing away the distinction between our individual domain and the outer world. I'm thinking, for instance, of the central scientific debate about our viral footprint on the air space surrounding the breather that has widely circulated through the mass-media and is meant to shape the health policies in our countries (in terms of social distance, mask obligation...)⁵. This reminds us that as breathing beings, like animals or plants, we cannot help but inhale the external world and, at the same time, project ourselves into the environment through the air exhaled. This remains true also on a collective and social scale: all our activities have an atmospheric footprint that is not constant and fixed (though time, space, productive systems...). Against its ordinary neglect, such banality has been clearly acknowledged during the Lockdown period thanks to the striking data. These data have often been visualized in aerial images, comparing air pollution in the filthiest zones of our world, such as Milan or the Wuhan region in China. In fact, last spring, several academic researchers tried to make sense of the high mortality rate in northern Italy, for instance, by correlating these data with those on the atmospheric pollution because the Po Valley, the economic and industrial heart of Italy, is also one of the most polluted regions in Europe⁶.



Im. 1 | “Coronavirus: nitrogen dioxide emissions drop over Italy” (ESA, 13/03/2020)

⁴ See on ‘the breathing right’ emerged within the contemporary crisis: Achille Mbembe, “Le droit universel à la respiration”, *AOC*, 6/04/2020.

⁵ For example: AA.VV., “Aerosol and Surface Stability of SARS-CoV-2 as Compared with SARS-CoV-1”, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 382, 2020.

⁶ Yaron Ogen, “Assessing nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) levels as a contributing factor to coronavirus (COVID-19) fatality”, *Science of the Total Environment*, 726, 2020.

2. EARTH'S EVAPORATION IN THE CAPITAL ERA

In this sense, the temporary necessity of protecting ourselves from others in our shared breathing sphere might end up unmasking the urgency of *protecting first the atmosphere from ourselves in order to, finally, protect ourselves too as inhabitants of this atmosphere*. Worrying about viral emissions from sick individuals in the frame of the Covid-19 pandemic will hopefully lead us to consider the toxic carbon emissions from our social activities. The human impact on air quality and, therefore, on the climate change, represents the core of the successful notion of the Anthropocene, which has gained more and more ground in the eco-political debate since its inception twenty years ago. It's interesting to notice that this category was brought into the scientific debate, and then towards the broader public arena, precisely by the atmosphere geochemist, Paul Crutzen, who had spent several years working on the chemical composition of the atmospheric space. In a seminal text dating back to 2000, Paul Crutzen and fellow scholar Eugene Stoermer, proposed to call our geological era "Anthropocene" because of the influence of human societies on the evolution of our planet, mostly in terms of greenhouse gas emissions⁷. Among the proposals trying to situate this new epoch from a chronological perspective, Crutzen's dates the beginning of the current era – that is, the beginning of massive human pollution of the air – back to the rise of the thermo-industrial civilization and, more accurately, to the invention of the steam machine by James Watt in the late 18th century. Even if this interpretation has fostered a wide debate and a fair number of alternative suggestions, what remains compelling in Crutzen's proposal is the fact that the steam engine could be considered a highly symbolic synecdoche of *the whole thermo-industrial metabolism that relies on a monstrous transformation of the earth's heavy materials, once extracted, into airy element*. In a sort of zombie scenario, the defunct matters buried underground are brought back to the surface and scattered into the atmosphere where they will haunt us in return with their spectral and hyper-objective presence. From coal to oil, our civilization could be seen as a rather frightening machine that, in order to obtain the energy needed by its growth, turns the solid and dark matters of our subterranean planet into atmospheric ghostly gases responsible not only for the greenhouse global warming but also for the intoxication of all breathing beings.

Back in the middle of the nineteenth century when the "spectre haunting Europe" was different from today's coronavirus, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were writing their famous "Manifesto of the Communist Party", which summarized their analysis around the socio-economic effects of the industrial revolution in England (where the steam engine played a key role)⁸. One of the several iconic sentences drawn from this text stated: "*All that is solid melts into air*". Even if this statement referred to the capitalist and bourgeois logic of constant and frantic change (from "production" to "social conditions"), it could also be seen as the condensation of the thermo-industrial thirst for energy which has been relentlessly converting the hard, thick and weighty matters of the earthly ground into small particles floating in the atmosphere. "Composita solvantur": the compact and thick matters will be dissolved⁹. Thus, "all that is solid melts into air" describes, at least according to our actualisation, *the toxic aerosol generated by burning extracted fossil fuels in order to power an ever-increasing mobility and expansion of our socio-economic regime*. This reflection reminds us that quite a few scholars criticising the supposed responsibility of the

⁷ Paul Crutzen & Eugene Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene'", *Global Change Newsletter*, 41, May 2000.

⁸ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, 1848.

⁹ It is an excerpt of the Latin inscription on Francis Bacon's grave.

whole of mankind behind the concept of the Anthropocene suggested a different term to define our epoch and its impact on the global environment: Capitalocene. The main purpose of such lexical shift, a really political one, was to put forward the fault of a specific socio-economic organization that does not concern the entirety of humanity (neither on a chronological axis, nor on a geographical one). This perspective launched by Jason Moore, therefore, turns our attention to the impact of the capitalist mode of production, well rooted in the wider modern context, as a “major geological force” in atmospheric transformation¹⁰. According to Moore, the objective and the means of this system was precisely a “cheap nature” (quick, easy, standardised, disposable...) turning material and entangled resistances of our environment into “air” (malleable, displaceable, accessible...).

In the account of the climatic consequences of this thermo-industrial society, the cinematic system has its not insignificant share. Nadia Bozak’s research explains clearly how much cinema, as a technical and industrial production in a capitalist context, is involved in the extractivist and polluting project of modern civilization¹¹. The entire chain of cinematic activities (from the creation to the distribution) needs resources and energy, produces waste and, eventually, has an important footprint on the environmental stage. Therefore, it participates in a literal way in the dangerous evaporation of geological matter, but (on a more metaphorical level) it also embodies the capitalist transformation of solid reality into volatile substances from the perspective of its capacity to displace and manipulate objects and beings (at least their image recorded and edited) through time and space. As Bozak states, cinema is not carbon neutral, even if more and more initiatives try to define and eventually reduce the cinematic impact on the environment. Most of them (from the European program “Green Screen” to the French “Ecoprod”) are setting up tools to measure the gas emissions as well as the waste production of a certain type of cinematic activity in order to define numerical data that allow us to seize the ecological shadow cast by such activity, more or less unconsciously. But *what about the capacity of the aesthetic medium of cinema itself – or at least its attempt – to make perceptible the invisible phenomena going on in the atmospheric medium around us?* Could it be a helpful player in the game of the ecological materialism on the tricky field of the invisible hyperobjects?

3. ATMOSPHERIC TRACES ON THE CINEMATIC MEDIUM

In a short and well-known philosophical tale, the writer David Foster Wallace put two fish on stage, talking about how difficult it is to pay attention to their daily environment: namely, water. “The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about”, comments Foster Wallace¹². We could easily say the same of our subject (air, or more widely the atmosphere). Could cinema help us to take hold of this environmental field, a medium at the same time vital and imperceptible? *Could cinema make atmosphere matter and expose its imprints, where tenacious scientific reports with their numbers and graphs have failed to affect us?* A first way to answer such a question, in a general sense, would be to remember that the cinematic medium as an optical device to record the outer world relies, too, on atmospheric conditions, for instance air and light. It is, in this regard, a *weather medium*, at least, as long as it remains within its original technical configuration and constraints (everything would change with further innovations, from lightning devices to Computer-Generated Imagery). Nadia Bozak, for instance, underlines that the very first studio in cinematic history, Edison’s Black Maria, was crafted as a mobile set, turning in search of the necessary day light, just as a sunflower may do. She also explains how the early establishment of the cinematic

¹⁰ Jason Moore (ed.), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, PM, Oakland, 2016.

¹¹ Nadia Bozak, *The Cinematic Footprint*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2012.

¹² David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water*, Little & Brown, New York, 2009.

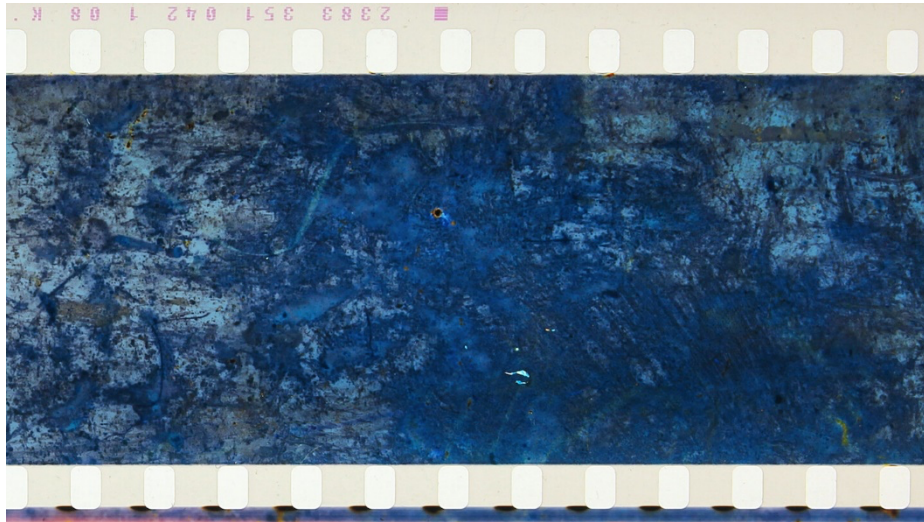
industry in the South-West of the United States was a search for the best atmospheric condition to shoot images outdoors: bright and dry weather. Instead of lingering at this general and historical stage, though, we prefer to present a few contemporary examples of cinematic exposition of atmospheric hyperobjects that could raise, through their strategies, our common awareness on this subject. In each film presented, we will see how the “*negative*” and *uncontrolled decomposition of the “solid” matter of naturalist images will open up the possibility of revealing some thin and vibrant atmospheric phenomena*: from air movement to electromagnetic field and radioactivity. The “natural” existence of these phenomena, therefore, access to the domain of the “social” existence that is determined, according to Maurizio Ferraris’ concept of “documentality”, by the possibilities and the acts of recording, registering and sharing on a medium¹³.

The first case is a Japanese short movie from the experimental field, shot in 2014 by Tomonari Nishikawa in a supposedly safe zone next to the Fukushima site. *Sound of a million insects, light of a thousand stars*, makes the atmospheric presence of atomic radiations perceptible by exploiting the sensible surface of a 35mm film laid down outdoors overnight. The patterns of this two-minute film result mainly from the weak light of the starry sky, some involuntary scratches as well as the chemical reaction to the invisible radioactivity of the air after the collapse of a nuclear plant designed to turn uranium (a mineral solid matter) into electricity. Here, Nishikawa takes advantage of the already known tendency of film chemistry to absorb and record not only light but also atomic radiation, even though inadvertently. In this regard, we might remember that Kodak has been aware of such interferences since the forties, when the company found out that its film stocks had been mysteriously spoilt by a fogging process that would eventually be explained as the effect of some military atomic testing¹⁴. Space agencies were also concerned by this kind of problem, thus becoming an object of scientific study, because of the higher level of radiation in the environments outside the Earth’s atmosphere, where they have to operate¹⁵. Thirty years before Tomonari Nishikawa’s experimental movie, the Chernobyl accident had already been an occasion to test the sensitivity of analogue film to unusual levels of radiation: the pioneers Igor Kostin (photographer) and Vladimir Shevchenko (documentary filmmaker) succeeded in taking pictures of the Ukrainian power plant but, both, had to manage the surprising “mutation” of their recording medium affected by the invisible radioactivity in the atmospheric medium. In all these cases, we can observe the visual footprint of the radioactive atmosphere on the film’s sensitive body.

¹⁴ Robert L. Shanebrook, *Making KODAK Film*, Shanebrook, Rochester, 2016.

¹⁴ Robert L. Shanebrook, *Making KODAK Film*, Shanebrook, Rochester, 2016.

¹⁵ Richard Slater, John Kinard and Ivan Firsov, *The Effect of Radiation on Selected Photographic Film*, NASA, October 2000.



Im. 2 | Tomonari Nishikawa, *Sound of a million insects, light of a thousand stars*

A similar aesthetic and political issue, how to expose diaphanous atmospheric hyperobjects by (manipulated) cinematic matters, inspires another experimental movie that chose a different creative strategy: the 16mm movie *Quite Zone* (2014) by David Bryant and Karl Lemieux. The material interferences on the analogue film, this time created rather than recorded, represent again a manifestation of the atmospheres that we inhabit and transform with our presence. Bryant and Lemieux intended to make an experimental documentary on the electromagnetic fields generated by our communication infrastructures and the consequences on sensitive beings. In the context of our ever-increasing connection, it isn't electromagnetic pollution but another toxic contamination of the atmospheric space (greenhouse gases or radioactivity) that could threaten the health of living beings, even if in a slow and latent way. In this sense, the electrosensitive persons, like the one witnessing in the voice-over of *Quite Zone*, could be understood as living and empiric sensors of hyperobjective phenomena triggered by our technological civilisation. Their perception of the atmospheric environment troubled by the electromagnetic saturation is translated, on the visual level and for the spectator, by a special processing of the film called “bleach etching” that deforms the image: the result is a visual recording of landscapes decomposed and disturbed in order to reveal the unnatural threat hidden in the air. The movie attempts to show visually the dark effects of a massive telecommunication turn that has often superficially been depicted as a “dematerialisation” (while it is just a transformation from more solid, tangible and localised vectors, the case of printed documents for instance, to another one more volatile, imperceptible and ubiquitous)¹⁶.

¹⁶ Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, *Greening Media*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012.



Im. 3 | David Bryant and Karl Lemieux, *Quite Zone*

In a third example from experimental cinema, the digital work of the French artist Jacques Perconte, we find the same mutual implication between the cinematic manifestation of invisible atmospheric events and the matter of the medium. *This kind of work, in fact, relies on two different and interdependent endeavours to put forward two material backgrounds usually unperceived (the environmental and the medial).* To address the fundamental structure of Perconte's images we need to mention and connect two different gestures: firstly, the digital field recording of natural landscapes; secondly, the intervention on the computer programs running the reproduction of those images that ends up overthrowing the regular and "naturalist" display in favour of abstract and painting-like mutations. What eventually generates the stunning moving images of his videos is, therefore, a combination of the meshwork of living elements registered by the camera with the digital processing of such material modified by the artist on the coding level. As underlined by Vincent Sorrel who was on set in the Alps for Perconte's *Faust*, the choice of a deep optical field thanks to a certain type of long focal lens makes his camera sensitive to complicated events taking place in the middle of the air, imperceptible to the human eye and impossible to direct for the filmmaker¹⁷. The movement of air masses (hot and cold) in the sky, the flights of birds and insects, light vibrations, powders: all these elements that embody the dynamics of the atmosphere as a place full of life and animation are digitally recorded by the French artist. Whereas numerical processing usually synthesizes and erases these kinds of details, producing an average background (for the sake of the optimization of the memory), for Perconte's creation, the atmospheric movements and components matter and become the unintentional and unexpected agents that twist and decompose the digital matter of the images turned visible and ductile. To a certain extent, we can also say that this operation dismantles another illusion of dematerialisation, the "melting into air" of electronic images (compared to the analogue ones), showing us the material processes lying behind such visual surfaces.

¹⁷ Vincent Sorrel, "L'alpiniste est un homme qui conduit son corps là où ses yeux un jour ont regardé": les longues focales de Jacques Perconte", *Cahiers Louis-Lumière*, n°12, 2019.



Im. 4 | Jacques Perconte, *Faust*

4. IMAGES FROM A GROUNDLESS ECOLOGY

As stated above, the capitalist quest for (cheap) energy in the name of a constant compression and acceleration of socio-economic activities turned the material structure of our planet upside-down, by digging out underground fossil matter to burn and then spray it into the sky as gas particles. This process, somehow, fits into the larger picture of *a modernist tendency to revolutionize and invert the spatial and perceptive relationship between the earth and the sky*. The sky that we observed from below as a distinct and often holy space, has fallen down; just as Asterix feared in the famous comics. Now, we look at the flattened surface of our ground from above, from the atmosphere or even beyond it (from outer space, through the atmosphere). Within a reflection on our post-historical conditions, the eclectic philosopher Vilém Flusser stated that our era no longer sticks to the distinction between up and down, heaven and hell: our times are no longer grounded¹⁸. We have taken off and we live in the floating and unstable space of the atmosphere, thus, we have become used to watching ourselves and our environments from and through such uncertain and mobile points of view. Another key thinker of our time, the artist Hito Steyerl, has called “vertical perspective” this groundless situation and its intertwined range of political and aesthetic implications¹⁹. In this regard, she states, that our vertical and atmospheric condition could be understood both as an occasion of emancipation but also as a context of renewed domination, a conclusion similar to the one drawn by Flusser’s analysis.

The combination of visual devices and flying technologies, often developed within a military context, are responsible for this taking the air of our perspective. In this sense, as the historian Sebastian Vincent Grevsmühl or the socio-anthropologist Bruno Latour have asserted, *the pictures of our planet observed externally, from above and as a whole, foster a new form of global control, optical as well as political, on our environments*²⁰. The picture of continental air pollution, already mentioned, taken by the European Space Agency is a clear example of this visual context. According to Hito Steyerl, such process is an updating of the old government of space implied by the

¹⁸ Vilém Flusser, “Notre ciel”, *Post-histoire*, T&P Work Unit, Paris, 2019.

¹⁹ Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall. A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective”, *The Wretched of the Screen*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2013.

²⁰ Sebastian Vincent Grevsmühl, *Le terre vue d’en haut. L’invention de l’environnement global*, Seuil, Paris, 2014; Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, Polity, New York, 2017.

horizontal paradigm of the linear perspective (a single, stable, external as well as calculable point of view). Its decreasing relevance makes room for the “growing importance of aerial views: overviews, Google Maps views, satellite views”. Since the 19th century, several factors (from military aviation to aerial map views) have subverted the subjective and political paradigm of linear perspective in order to produce another condition of sovereignty and mastery: vertical, disembodied, functional. In Steyerl’s opinion, *this process represents more a “radicalization” than an “overcoming” of the precedent paradigm that transforms our environment into an even more empty, plastic and governable space.*



Im. 5 | Eléonore Weber, *There Will Be No More Night*

Since its early work on the military aerial imagery (*Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, 1988), the analytical cinema of Harun Farocki has been working on the troubling consequences of this shift from grounded view towards atmospheric perspectives, in an operational field. He tried to bring those images back to an aesthetic context, in order to articulate a speculative exposition and a political critic of such visual regimes. Close to Farocki’s line, Eléonore Weber intended to present in the 42nd edition of Cinema du réel (in March 2020) *There Will Be No More Night*, an impressive movie based on the images shot by American and French forces during nighttime military missions in Afghanistan and the Middle East. The French filmmaker shows and comments critically on the vertical perspective from which western armies dominate eastern territories and their populations: the environment and the persons inhabiting it are flattened and synthetized to an operational view that is supposed to be optimal for surveillance and targeted killing²¹. The opposite point of view, resisting from below the God’s eye of the vertical perspective, is mobilized by a complementary cinematic work: *It’s never night-time in the map* (2016) by the Brazilian director Ernesto de Carvalho. His striking short movie sets up a battle for the local and interior self-organization of urban communities against the vertical and external government of politico-economic oligarchy embodied by the mapping activity of Google Maps that turn such territories into modeled environments, ready for economic exploitation, information extraction or military monitoring. De Carvalho’s movie is built around a gesture

²¹ On this point, we might also take into consideration the issue of the drone regime (visual and operational, at once) as analysed by Grégoire Chamayou, *Drone Theory*, Penguin, London, 2015.

of staring back, bottom-up, to the vertical surveillance that interrupts its indifferent domination: something that already takes place in a couple of Weber's most crucial images.



Im. 6 | Ernesto de Carvalho, *It's never night-time in the map*

But the groundless perspective of our technical regime means not only a disembodied, automatic and external administration of our living environment, at least in Steyerl's understanding. It could also lead to a situation of "liberation", "multiplication" and "delinearization" that she calls "free fall". *The atmospheric perspective, in this regard, implies the disintegration of the ground, synonym of unity and identification, in favour of a new situation of contamination, hybridization and circulation.* In his interesting study of the vegetal world, the Italian philosopher Emanuele Coccia invites us to rethink ecology precisely from the point of view of the atmosphere (that is from the connections due to the living respiration) in order to define an environmental paradigm that is not based on the proprietary concept of land or home (*oikos*)²². "We are not the inhabitants of the Earth: we inhabit the atmosphere" he declares in opposition to "geo-centred" tendencies in ecological thought. If we conceive of our life as something shared in an atmospheric ecosystem, dynamic as much as common, it will be difficult to draw a neat distinction between the interiority of an individual body and exteriority of the surrounding world, and eventually it will be complicated to establish a natural and static order. Thus, according to Coccia, *we might say that an atmospheric and groundless ecology corresponds to a general situation of mixture.* In the cinematic field, we can find an example of this paradigm in the astonishing work of Robert E. Fulton, an eclectic and cosmopolitan American artist, who was at the same time an aviator and filmmaker. His experimental movies are built on a stunning multiplication of the images with rapid and dexterous editing, where a multifaceted, hectic and erratic portrait of an environment is sketched. It could be, for instance, the Carpenter Center on the site of the Harvard University (*Reality's Invisible*, 1973) or the Machu Picchu geo-anthropological context (*Inca Light*, 1972). Through the whirling and fragmented kaleidoscope of Fulton's cinema, such environments are unsettled as identified and "natural" grounds in a vertiginous combination of unstable points of view: this subversive and creative process is evident the pace and the dispersion of the cinematic creation (that mix together the natural and the cultural components of an environment). If the influences on Fulton of Free Jazz, experimental cinema (*à la* Stan Brakhage) or oriental wisdom cannot be underestimated, his passionate experience in the aviation field also plays a crucial role in the definition of his unusual and liberated cinematic approach. Beyond the rich presence of aerial shooting in his movies,

²² Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants. A Metaphysics of Mixture*, Polity, Cambridge, 2018.

we could say that the freedom and openness by which he perceives and represents our worlds have been fostered by the visual perspective of his atmospheric experience.



Im. 7 | *Inca Light*, Robert E. Fulton

5. WEATHER WORLDS & QI GONG CINEMA

A groundless ecology could be translated into a dominant logistics over our environments but also in the multiple and metamorphic point of view of collaborative life spaces: we can define the first approach “vertical perspective”, whereas the second could be named “atmospheric perspective”. The former implies a towering and disconnected perspective from the outside (the soldier in the helicopter or the picture of the ground from a satellite), whereas the latter implies a mutating and entangled perspective from the inside. In this sense, a real groundless ecology shouldn’t entail a sort of escape from the earth (to better dominate it, or just to not stop doing so) towards the elsewhere of the sky, like the evasions that have been dreamed of by some sci-fi movies as well as by utopian engineers. Its slogan is not the escapist and conqueror “plus ultra”, but rather the involved “plus intra”: the atmospheric perspective hints at a mobile fusion of earth and sky that shapes and is shaped by the lives of all the living matters implicated. Let’s think about the meteorological condition to grasp this situation more clearly. In this sense, inhabiting an atmospheric environment means being alive in the middle of a “weather world”, to speak with Tim Ingold’s lexicon, that envelops us and intermingles the earthly field and airy one: “A living, breathing body” according to Ingold “is at once a body-on-the-ground and a body-in-the-air”²³. Even if the British anthropologist adopts the term “ground”, he does so by twisting the common understanding of such a term as something stable and permanent: “the ground as a surface that itself undergoes continual formation within an unstable zone of interpenetration in which the substances of the earth mingle and bind with the medium of air”. In Ingold’s meteorological perspective “the

²³ Tim Ingold, “Footprints through the weather-world”, *JRAI*, 16, 2010. URL: <https://quote.ucsd.edu/sed/files/2014/09/Ingold-Footprints-through-the-Weather-World.pdf>

relatively solid *substances* of the earth and the relatively volatile *medium* of the air” cannot be separated and the ground acquires atmospheric properties; it’s not a solid and pre-existing surface, but a mutant field that “undergoes *continuous generation*”. Coming back to Coccia’s philosophy, we could say that *the environmental condition should be understood not from the common starting point of grounded, interior and domestic soil, but from the perspective of an unsettling weather space that becomes habitable thanks to the crossed collaboration of the living beings that absorb and transform the meteorological matters* (namely, the air and the sunlight). That’s why he proposes to substitute the indoor term “ecology” (home) with different outdoor terms like “atmospherology” (air) or “uranology” (sky). Our common challenge of inhabiting the unstable and sometimes inhospitable ecosystem of our atmosphere (described by Coccia) could be *literally* shown by the striking performances of the French artist Abraham Poincheval, who tried to live for several days in the middle of the sky on a small platform on top of a 20-metre pole (the *Vigie* series) or to walk through the clouds (*Marche sur les nuages*, 2019)²⁴.



Im. 8 | Abraham Poincheval, *Walk on the clouds*

Aesthetic techniques, such as the cinematic ones mentioned above, should help us to experience our more-than-human atmospheric implication as a necessary condition of existence that usually remains unconscious. The atmosphere is our living environment: fundamental, shared, not always comfortable, whose habitability or inhabitability is determined by its own inhabitants and their emissions. Plants’ breath injects oxygen into our airy ecosystem, making it liveable, whereas our carbon emissions turn it into a toxic field. Are data and scientific analysis able to make us aware of these ontological and political conditions? How can we feel the weather forces or the air texture and our interactive presence in the middle of such field? To summarize and conclude, we wish to suggest *a comparison between cinematic creation as an empirical and sensitive space where the atmosphere becomes perceptible, and the physical art of Qi Gong*. This analogy comes from an embodied research experience that took place during a PhD workshop organised within my previous research unit (UMR 5316 Litt&Arts), a couple of years ago. The fellow PhD student and Qi Gong teacher Martin Givors proposed a training session for us in the middle of the afternoon, where we discovered this powerful oriental practice that relies mostly on the mastery of breathing as well as the exercise of our perception of the thin and energetic presence of our environment²⁵. These skills are based on the weather paradigm of the Chinese cosmology that is particularly sensitive to the fluid and permanent transformations of substances, between the solid state and the gaseous, as well as between the visible and the invisible. One of the gestures we practised together was precisely the one of making the air between our two hands thicker,

²⁴ Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World. Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018.

²⁵ Martin Givors, « Possibles animismes. Réflexions sur la perception du qi à partir d’une pratique de Zhiheng Qigong », in Héléne Schmutz (ed.), *De la représentation de la crise à la crise de la représentation. Esthétique et politique de l’Anthropocène*, Chambéry, Presses Universitaires Savoie Mont Blanc, 2020, p. 375-390.

in order to experience its vibrant field. Something that I just began to feel after one hour of practice, as I remarked with a certain surprise. I keep this feeling and this memory in my mind while I watch and analyse the movies I have mentioned above. I believe that a Qi Gong cinema could exist as an aesthetic training or rather a technique of sensible initiation that lets, little by little, the atmospheric medium and its forces matter. As in the Qi Gong practice, access to this experience might not be immediate and easy, but demands developing and feeding a certain kind of attentive perception.

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