

Google revives the ancient dream and nightmare of a “book of life” in which every human deed is recorded for the Day of Judgment and thus stands in a long line of sacral and bureaucratic bookkeeping.⁵⁴ Writing classically combines mortuary and memorial functions, and so many traditions see the realm of the dead as maintained textually. Ancient Babylon had books of fate, and Egypt had decrees signed by the god Thoth. The Greek fates were always either knitting or writing in the primal unity of text and textile. In the Jewish tradition, in contrast, there was no book

The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media

John Durham Peters

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What happens to our understandings of humanness and of nature if we take seriously the question, “Are clouds media?” The answers one brings to this question have significant impacts on our understanding of a range of human endeavors, from ethical obligation to the nature of art.

What is intended by the term “media” in John Durham Peters’s *The Marvelous Clouds* is expansive: media are the containers and vehicles through which our fundamental being is communicable. Media are not only the means through which messages are delivered—or, as Marshall McLuhan famously suggested, the messages themselves—they are also the ways in which beings are disclosed. Thinking of media as such, Peters argues, frees the reader from the limitations of studying communication as only a matter of clarifying signals. *The Marvelous Clouds* is explicitly not a book that speculates about the future of digital technologies (e.g., “the cloud”), nor is it a book about the environmental crises that confront humanity. Rather, Peters invites the reader in explicit terms to “consider” the typically unnoticed elements of our lives as the infrastructure that forms and supports our existence—the prefix *con-* meaning “with,” the author points out, and *sidera* meaning “stars.” Every thing, then, is an object appropriate for the revelations that arise from media studies. Although the book is replete with scholarly apparatus, Peters states that he wrote it for both the general reader interested in the human condition and the academic seeking an account of contemporary media theory, and that it presents media studies as “the task of exposing the unthought environments in which we live.”

The book’s chapters concern the technical management and navigation of environments and elements. To support his claim that “media studies is a general meditation on conditions,” Peters presents an overview of research concerning, among other things, dolphin and whale communication in the ocean, as an illustration of techniques for communication that must necessarily differ from those developed by humans on dry land. Crucial to this book is the recognition that the environments in which humans find themselves predisposes or necessitates the development of techniques for continued existence. Peters draws heavily from the work of André

Leroi-Gourhan and Friedrich Kittler in order to resituate the reader’s perception of fire, for example, as both a medium (that enables ceramics and chemicals to interact) and a technique (for negating the properties of other materials). As anyone familiar with these last two media scholars might surmise, this book is concerned with human “technicity,” which means that it is about how humans understand objects and subjects.

With great accessibility, Peters presents an overview of media philosophy since the mid-20th century. Figures notorious for their opaque philosophical ruminations, such as Martin Heidegger and Marshall McLuhan, are introduced with an inviting blend of humor and clarity. Throughout his thorough discussions of contemporary German media theory, Peters blends in unexpected literary allusions and offers comparisons to American thinkers such as Thoreau or Emerson. Peters’ ability to turn a good phrase is welcome in the thick of what is, at heart, a book about ontology and metaphysics. In a chapter devoted to articulating the performance of indexicality and the mystery of language—it’s truly less tedious than it sounds—Peters offers an illuminating simile: “A book is like the sea: perfectly happy to exist without meddling, but fully inaccessible without some technical labor.” It is this technical labor that marks a book as a craft: both an object upon which we assert our creative energies (our craftwork) and a tool for navigating language (like an aircraft). A book is a network; it makes reference to the worlds outside of itself and implicitly hearkens to all books ever written, à la Borges’ “The Library of Babel.”

The Marvelous Clouds is topical for anyone in contemporary art circles, given the recent ascendancy of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology after relational aesthetics lost its primacy in artspeak. (*ArtReview* magazine has deemed object-oriented ontologists Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, and Iain Hamilton Grant, collectively ranked 68 in 2014, as more powerful than relational aesthetics’ Nicholas Bourriaud, ranked 76 in 2014, for the last two years of its popular “Power 100” list.) Peters takes pains to distinguish his work from certain trends in cultural theory: perhaps sensing a likelihood for comparison, he lashes out at Ian Bogost—a critic, video game designer,

and media studies and interactive computing professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology—as an exemplar of “hipster media theory.” Yet he never states what it is that he finds objectionable about Bogost’s work; surrounding himself with existing research instead, Peters rightly suggests the necessity for critical response to trends in art theoretical discourse, without ever connecting the punch. Andrew Cole’s “Those Obscure Objects of Desire,” a recent attack on Harman published in *Artforum*, is another example of the generally thinly sourced scholarship that supports arguments made against object-oriented ontology. Peters singles out Bogost twice in the 400-plus page *Marvelous Clouds*—seemingly minor moments that, like the proverbial splinter, do linger. What is this anxiety about critical theory? Left unsaid here is that while “philosophy” may not in itself be an obvious thing or activity, historically and intellectually it has authority.

At times, *The Marvelous Clouds*, though written very well, begins to bludgeon the reader with literature reviews of other scholars’ epistemologically grounded work. There is a rhetorical value in assembling so many pages of studies about cetacean communication research, popular neuroscience, and contemporary German media philosophy: the heft of the book contributes to its authority. There are several instances in the work wherein the study of media is put forward as a replacement for philosophy: Peters positions his “weird media theory” (itself a parroting of Harman’s “weird realism”) as a “successor to metaphysics” that might aid us in more fully understanding ontology, which is “just forgotten infrastructure.” The stated aim of supplanting philosophy in this manner is to enact “a new synthesis.” I greatly enjoyed the presentation of a breadth of topics, and appreciated the masterly transmission and translation of ways of thinking about media that are not easily communicated; amid these readings, however, no such new synthesis became clear.

—Paul Boshears