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MADALINA DIACONU, *AESTHETICS OF WEATHER*,  
BLOOMSBURY, NEW YORK, 2024.

There are books one reads with the mind—and then there are those one inhabits with the senses. *Aesthetics of Weather* by Mădălina Diaconu belongs unmistakably to the latter. As an architect attuned to the nuances of light, air, and the ever-shifting moods of the sky, I found myself instinctively drawn into Diaconu's layered inquiry—one that approaches weather not merely as a meteorological fact, but as a phenomenon that is embodied, internalized, and culturally inflected.

Reading this book feels less like following a linear philosophical argument and more like moving through a sensuous landscape. One does not simply observe the passing of clouds; one begins to sense how they modulate thought, gesture, and spatial inhabitation. Diaconu does not describe weather in the abstract—she animates it philosophically, tracing its textures through aesthetic perception, phenomenological presence, and shared cultural memory. It is a rare work that deepens atmospheric awareness with such subtlety and depth.

Structured as a collection of thirteen essays, the book unfolds a nuanced exploration of an interdisciplinary field shaped by a phenomenological framework indebted to Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It draws attention to how the “out there” of weather becomes an “in here”—a felt, lived, and interpreted part of our being-in-the-world. Throughout, the book unfolds a series of resonant themes in architecture, recognizing that buildings do not merely shield us from the elements but also mediate and amplify our experience of them—at times, even poetically.

In her introduction, Diaconu sets the stage by highlighting the omnipresence of weather in daily life that necessitates an aesthetic framework

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in order to understand it not merely as a backdrop but as a dynamic entity that both shapes and is shaped by human experience. Here she outlines the book's bridging of phenomenology, environmental studies, and cultural analysis, to offer a holistic view of atmospheric aesthetics:

To fit our times, the aesthetics of weather must “update” classical analyses of the aesthetic experience, such as the Kantian theory of sublime, and consider its socioeconomic and environmental embedment. Only then can the aesthetics of atmosphere fully deploy its social and environmental critical potential and go further than unveiling the manipulative power of staging atmospheres in the “aesthetic capitalism” [...] no matter how strong the emotional impact of ambiances may be, humans can still self-critically reflect upon their experience, disclose its sociocultural filters and restrain from para-aesthetic, environmentally noxious practices.<sup>1</sup>

The first part of the book starts with exploring the ambivalences of weather as both a phenomenon and the object of aesthetic experience and argues for a redefined aesthetics of weather that integrates ecological awareness, phenomenology, and social critique. As traditional aesthetics often dismissed weather as ephemeral, the Anthropocene demands ethical and political engagement, also because the accessibility of weather is socially conditioned, shaped by urbanization, pollution, and economic disparities.

Phenomenologically, weather is both *available*—universally present—and *accessible*, though unequally experienced. Its aesthetic qualities, such as *framelessness*, *ephemerality*, and *chromatic diversity*, interact with bodily perception while hyperphenomena, like extreme weather, evoke the Kantian sublime, oscillating between awe and existential dread.

Diaconu extends Gernot Böhme's phenomenology of atmosphere by incorporating scientific perspectives, advocating for an engaged aesthetics of weather that fosters ecological awareness and policy engagement. With the chapter *Hotness and Coldness* Diaconu integrates phenomenology, biology, and environmental aesthetics, arguing for a cultural and ecological interpretation of temperature beyond scientific abstraction. The fourth chapter examines tornadoes as hyper-phenomena that challenge perception and ontology, aligning with Kant's dynamical sublime and

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<sup>1</sup> M. Diaconu, *Aesthetics of Weather*, p.3.

Adorno's allegory of the beyond. While meteorology defines tornadoes as atmospheric vortices, phenomenology reveals them as perceptual thresholds mediating between chaos and form. Tornadoes, in their visual and existential immediacy, disrupt human perception, demonstrating how elemental forces shape human experience and the built environment.

The second book section, *Phenomenography*, traces the representation of weather in art and cultural discourse, revealing tensions between empirical and symbolic interpretations. Diaconu starts by examining weather proverbs as cognitive frameworks that blend predictive, perceptual, and imaginative knowledge. While these sayings historically guided agricultural and maritime activities, their poetic dimensions enrich contemporary environmental aesthetics. This linguistic and cultural sensitivity to weather extends to artistic depictions of landscapes and atmospheric conditions, demonstrating how weather has functioned as both a literal and metaphorical force in human history.

In *Longing for Clouds*, Diaconu challenges the assumption that fine weather is aesthetically superior, arguing that unnoticed, stable conditions contrast with the perceptual prominence of rain, fog, and snow. As the Anthropocene shifts human agency from passive observation to active weather-making, Diaconu sees a contemporary suspicion of fine weather as a direct result of climate change. The seventh chapter examines the wind's aesthetic paradox as an ungraspable, dynamic force.

The final chapter in this section, *Thermic Aesthetics: Conservation, Comfort, and Contingency in Art*, addresses temperature's neglected role in aesthetic experience. While global warming has heightened interest in thermic perception, aesthetics has traditionally ignored temperature. Unlike sound and vision, temperature thus lacks a distinct art form and has been historically associated with materiality rather than aesthetic contemplation. It is buildings that most distinctively integrate thermal comfort, from vernacular traditions adapted to climate, to modern and contemporary architecture discourses. Climatic design strategies are re-emphasized by architect Phillippe Rahm, who argues for an architectural shift from solid forms to atmospheric conditions, considering airflow, humidity, and radiation as design parameters. As thermic qualities also extend beyond direct perception—colors, materials, and scents can evoke warmth or coolness, wood and textiles can feel “warm,” while metal and glass “cold”—thermal aesthetics challenges traditional ocularcentrism, revealing temperature's sensory, environmental, and artistic significance.

Diaconu opens the third part of the book, *Collective Practices*, with an examination of the travel writings of the 19th-century scientist John Tyndall, focusing on his detailed sensory descriptions of Alpine environments, blending scientific observation with aesthetic appreciation. The next chapter, *Remembering the Air or Breathing Landscapes* explores the evolving concept of landscape, questioning its conventional associations with land and stability by tracing the historical and disciplinary expansion of landscape studies from classical aesthetic and geographical perspectives to contemporary ecocritical approaches.

The chapter *The Weather-Worlds of Urban Bodies: Summer in the City* explores the deep entanglement of urban environments, weather, and human bodies, arguing that cities, like people, are shaped by atmospheric conditions. While classical urban studies by Georg Simmel or Walter Benjamin focused on psychology and social structures, recent scholarship highlights urban *sensescapes* and the embodied experience of weather. The relationship between climatic exposure and access to controlled environments as a reflection of social hierarchies as investigated by Henri Lefebvre as well as the homogenizing effects of air-conditioning and climate-controlled urbanity are critiqued.

The chapter *Para-Aesthetic Environmental Practices: Revisiting the Kantian Sublime in the Age of Mass Tourism* explores the intersection of aesthetics, environmental ethics, and tourism. Diaconu introduces the *para-aesthetic*, referring to the spatial and temporal framing of aesthetic experiences and the collision of aesthetic enjoyment with ethical concerns. Disaster tourism exemplifies the *dynamical sublime*, where visitors observe destruction from a detached position, while astronomic tourism commodifies the *mathematical sublime*. She argues that contemporary aesthetics must recognize the ethical implications of aesthetic consumption, shifting from individualistic sublime experiences to collective environmental responsibility.

The final chapter, *Leave No Traces – Towards a Paradigm Change in the Anthropocene?*, critically examines the concept of traces in environmental philosophy, aesthetics, and waste studies, advocating for a shift from permanence to ephemerality as an ethical imperative in the Anthropocene. Traditional Western thought has long privileged durability and continuity, valuing monuments and historical inscriptions as forms of resistance against transience. In response, Diaconu critiques phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches like Levinas or Ricoeur, which have historically emphasized the past while neglecting the future consequences

of human-made residues. She argues thus that contemporary waste—ranging from CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and plastic pollution to orbital debris—functions as an involuntary trace, persisting beyond human lifetimes and challenging conventional notions of aesthetic and ethical responsibility. In light of this, she advocates for alternative frameworks such as the *temporal sublime* and *aesthetics of care*, proposing that sustainability necessitates not only the reduction of material traces but also a fundamental reimagining of aesthetic practices as transient, adaptive, and responsive.

Diaconu's call for a paradigm shift in aesthetics—one that embraces impermanence and minimizes environmental impact as an ethical imperative in art and design—resonates deeply with resilient and emotionally charged architectural practices that already engage in continual transformation, adaptive reuse, and the repurposing of existing structures and infrastructures. Yet, beyond this architectural and biopolitical framing, the book's urgent appeal for global ecological responsibility, its nuanced intersections of perception, culture, and environment, make it both an erudite and beautifully written warning and a hopeful invitation to re-imagine our relationship with nature. In this vision, *Aesthetics of Weather* emerges as a crucial lens through which to envision an “ecosophically” sounder future—one that is attuned to the ephemeral, the adaptive, and the deeply entangled nature of human and ecological time.

