

*Baby, it's cold ~~outside~~ inside*

Clouds are those objects that remain only partially accessible to the sight. When I am with my feet on the ground, I can only see them from below. When I am with my feet above the ground, I can either see them from atop or I can fly through them, cutting them, and what I see is that which is around me, but not the clouds' overall shape—I am inside them, and I lose their sight.

The knowledge that those points of view can produce is, by definition, situated and thus biased. That applies also to the visual representation of such knowledge, for those points of view select as relevant only the portion of reality which is visible to them.

In the history of European art, a Renaissance painter using Leon Battista Alberti's veil would consider clouds as nightmare objects: clouds, in fact, cannot be rendered realistically without fogging their observable contours, while trying to report them on a linear grid. They are semiotic objects for they are only visible in their meaning, inasmuch as aggregates of droplets. A Romantic painter like John Constable, instead, would consider the pictorial representation of clouds as a strategy to get rid of representation's purpose altogether. In his paintings, the sky is transformed into an extension of the mind, thus it is projected with a vast spectrum of emotional tonalities, from wonder to dread.

The Nineteenth-century was also the moment when clouds' taxonomy was established and meteorology was consolidated as a discipline. Clouds started to be classified according to their altitude in the troposphere, to their physical forms, as well as to their formation, transformation, and movements across the planet. When the circulation of volcanic dust caused by a rapid series of eruptions in the Azores, Indonesia and Italy intensified the colour of the sunset in London, landscape painters found themselves to register on canvas the global scale of airborne phenomena for the first time.

Praised by Constable, the smokiness of London's air was an object of fascination for many other artists. Claude Monet, among them, travelled to London later in the century when pollutants generated by the burning of fossil fuels dramatically changed the colour of the sky. Monet enthusiastically painted the effects of smogs (a word to describe a hydrometeor made of smoke and fog) on natural light, such as black, brown, yellow, green, purple hazes, thus providing data about the particles contained in the Victorian fogs. As it has been suggested, smoking domestic and industrial chimneys with inefficient coal combustion may have vomited low-quality soot (high in tar) and created, for example, a pungent yellow fog or a brownish-black fog, which had the further effect of darkening the day earlier.

Those changes were celebrated as natural consequences of London's industrial and imperialistic powers, which were reinforced by the creation of terrible enemies against who those same powers had to be legitimated, even needed. Therefore, when the same smogs happened to swallow up most part of the visibility altogether, they contributed to establish the ghostly character of the Victorian period, with deaths by invisible diseases, by carts' and coaches' crashes, as well as by drownings into canals and rivers. The thick materiality of those low clouds meant that, in some capacity, they were involved as more or less

metaphorical agents of mysterious events, and as the backdrop of suspected criminal activities. For instance, Alfred Hitchcock's *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* (1927) is a movie inspired to Jack the Ripper's murders, where the sinister presence or absence of the fog suggests a correspondence with the psychological presence or absence of the protagonist as if his consciousness was not always embodied.

The current skyscape in London is rather bleak, and it is not because it is dark, because rain is pouring heavily, or because the surveillance lights of the building across the street seem more blinding than ever. I am watching a commentary of the general election's result on a live news channel whose weather forecasts usually captivate me more for the way in which clouds and winds are animated rather than for the information they represent. These apparently anonymous, computer-generated meteorological representations push further clouds' transcendental traits while regulating, at the same time, my gaze and behaviours. On the one hand, the point of view I am offered is from above so that my gaze is made to coincide with the supposedly scientific and omniscient instrument that is tracking and representing those clouds—I am asked to embody the surveillance state. On the other, the summary digital space where these clouds move blurs any precise point of reference (a fundamental trait of reconnaissance aerial photography), which is a strategy to efface their mediated and artificial nature. Basically, I am administered with the symptom and the diagnosis: my eyes are not mine, but I can wear a disembodied version so that I can change my behaviour according to the climate these digitally animated clouds, or better this shape-shifting aggregate of data, represent.

If droplets are data, perhaps, the digital realm is where Monet's acid clouds will forever be dissipating and aggregating again.

Bianca Stoppani