

John Durham Peters, **The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media**, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015, 416 pp., \$30.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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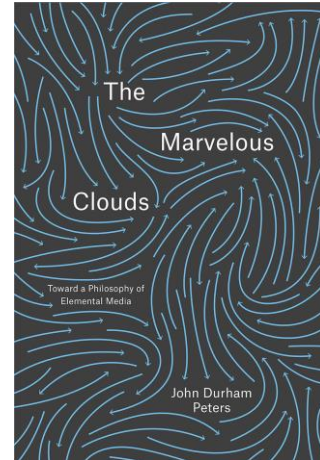
John Durham Peters describes his latest book, **The Marvelous Clouds**, as “as an experiment to see whether a single person could get a view on the anthropoid condition” (p. 9). That he concluded this objective was not possible—“at least not for this person” (p. 9)—inspires the reader’s confidence. Peters is not a system builder; instead he is an advocate for pragmatism. The clouds in the book’s title evoke, among other things, his theme that vagueness has epistemological value alongside precision.

The book’s argument is radical. It is also—like Peters’ other work—measured, subtle, and profound. Its radicalism consists not in excess, monomania, or rhetorical bomb throwing but in an empirically grounded argument for an all-encompassing conceptualization of media, given a context of exploding digital data that makes our environment increasingly technological and a changing climate that makes our technology increasingly environmental. This convergence of nature and culture motivates an understanding of media as ontological as well as semiotic, in which media are not only *about* the world, but *are* the world. At some level, Peters tells us, expression merges with existence.

Thus, while he frames his effort as part of what Elihu Katz described as the “technological” tradition of media studies, Peters considers media not only as human-made artifacts but as the entire infrastructure underwriting our existence. The structures of the universe itself are understood as recording and transmitting media. In this expansive vision, media studies encompasses theology along with science and technology, metaphysics along with physics.

Whereas Peters’ history of the idea of communication, *Speaking into the Air* (1999), dissected the dilemmas resulting from a uniquely modern subjective interiority, *The Marvelous Clouds* pursues continuities rather than gaps between subject and object. Rather than confining meaning exclusively to conscious individual minds, Peters employs an informational view of meaning, as the entropy-defying configuration of being, or “readable data.” Our conscious selves—continuations of the cosmic history, or *infrastructure*, from which they emerge—are nonessential to meaning. Our mostly unconscious “limbic” bodies, Peters declares, are the most basic media of all. Nonverbal communication is underrated.

This perspective is not new, but—inspired by Mumford, Kittler, Latour, Leroi-Gourhan, Arendt, and Borges (among others)—Peters has produced the most thorough, lucid, and imaginative discussion to date, at least in the English language, of how the *media* concept can articulate it. He is aware, as he puts it, of the “toxins” in the Western tradition in which he works, but he does not abandon the tradition. Drawing back, for example, from the “flat ontology” Latour has inspired in some, Peters insists on a “great



inequality of things" and on the continuing relevance of Kant. He uses the "dangerous" term *civilization* to evoke techno-social complexity, the evolution of which, in his view, modernity simply intensifies and accelerates.

Considering his debt to Latour, Peters might be described as pursuing a nonmodern project, one that seeks to preserve the best of modernity while eschewing its exclusionary contempt for premodernity. Thus, by way of urging upon us a "ravenous gratitude for the Earth," (p. 386) Peters suggests that a geocentric conception of the universe might deserve a "critical revival" (p. 386). Likewise, the elements evoked by the book's title are not elements from the modern periodic table; instead they are the four classical elements of water, fire, air, and earth, supplemented by ether, that ghostly element long associated with mediums. This last element corresponds with Peters' "contrarian" insistence that the most interesting thing about media is their capacity to reveal "what defies materialization" (p. 11).

The fluid elements of sea and sky—water and air—resist being shaped with any permanence. Cetaceans, our famously intelligent mammalian counterparts in the antienvironment of the ocean, allow Peters to imagine a different way of being. Evolved to inhabit a purely fluid world, cetaceans have virtually no opportunity to shape matter into durable forms. They can therefore have technique but no technology, methods but no machines, culture but no civilization. The elements of earth and fire, alien to cetaceans, are the lot of humans and emblems of technology, which seizes energy and time in matter and space. Earth, which is malleable matter, can be shaped into durable structures. Fire, which often facilitates this process, also illustrates the productive importance of deletion and dematerialization, and the continuity between human nature and technicity. Biologically, fire externalized part of the process of digestion, allowing space for larger brains and cognitive capacity. Fire has since been progressively internalized into human culture—from hearths to internal combustion engines to glowing electronic rectangles. Thus, media appear as extensions of nature into humanity, no less than extensions of humanity into nature. They are conduits, interfaces, nebulous boundaries between our internal selves and external others.

Human techniques and technologies mediate between fluid and earthy elements. Facilitating spatiotemporal navigation, these innovations evoke the central metaphor of the book: The ship is human craft or ingenuity, while the sea on which it sails is all that ingenuity makes manageable. The ship is a medium that renders the sea, otherwise a vast inhospitable void, a medium too. Via craft, the dormant intelligence of the world is made explicit. Via organization, being is sustained and meaning is made. Media are means as well as intermediaries.

Because craft is integral to human nature, Peters describes the concept of media as "amphibious" between the terra firma of technology and the sea of nature. Indeed, before the application of any conscious craft, our earthly biology is already synched up with the cycles of the sky. Nor do we need technological innovations to find ourselves suspended as subjects separate from the world of objects. Yet through our craft, Peters argues, we extend this suspension. Technological media shift our being outside the time and space given by biology. (Peters suggests "space axis manipulation" to complement Kittler's "time axis manipulation.") Thus, Peters argues that graves are among the first and most important media in human history.

The most fundamental media technology, however, is writing (the noun, not the verb). Language is the sea and writing is the ship. All media inscribe, and networked digital media bring us back to the first purpose of writing: not the recording of subjective states or the broadcasting of narrative, but the objective management and processing of data. Peters challenges both Lev Manovich and the orality-literacy tradition associated with Eric Havelock by arguing that oral speech, embedded in the flow of time, is linear, while all writing (analog no less than digital) is randomly accessible or "databased."

The card catalogue of the predigital library was a record apart from the library itself. Google makes the library (the Web) its own record, seeming to confirm a metaphysics of immanence and the epistemology of modern cosmology. Just as the Web is a record of itself, the light of stars, the fossil record, and even our own nervous systems offer us intertwined signal and channel properties by which we come to know the world by knowing our place in it. This is the crux of the argument: To understand being is to understand how it is configured or mediated.

Here is the most intriguing use of the ship metaphor: "Mind is the ship that sails through the ocean of the brain" (p. 273). Via this metaphor, mind is figured as a collective accomplishment, embodied and distributed in technique, technology, and civilization. By implication, "what defies materialization" is not so much Cartesian mind as an ethereal or theological nonexistence, the mystery or paradox by which death is necessary for life, deletion for creation, objectivity for subjectivity, and nothingness for being. The media concept is singularly important, the argument goes, because it bridges such conceptual pairs. Peters cites Ruskin describing clouds as a mixture of nothing and something. This mixture, he says, is "the heart of media" (p. 259).

The pragmatism of this book is evidently philosophical rather than administrative, and it will be of most interest to readers seeking theoretical enrichment rather than policy suggestions. The danger of its approach, of course, is that in meaning virtually everything, "media" means nothing at all. To the extent that this danger is avoided, this is accomplished through a pragmatic, ecological approach. Media are *in the middle*, but where the middle is, and thus what counts as a medium, depends on the perspective afforded by any given position. Flux is a central characteristic of Peters' universe.

An original synthesis of Anglophone, Francophone, and German scholarship, *The Marvelous Clouds* is a singular contribution to the field. Moreover, its content and form confirm Peters as a leading emissary to a broader audience. Elegantly written and jargon-free, accessible to advanced undergraduates and educated readers from any field, the book demonstrates the transdisciplinary value of the media concept in an ecological age. The real promise of the book, perhaps, is not that media scholars will go forth and master a humanly impossible range of knowledge, but that masters of other disciplines will come to appreciate, and deploy in new ways, the concepts of media and mediation.

References

Peters, J. D. (1999). *Speaking into the air: A history of the idea of communication*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.