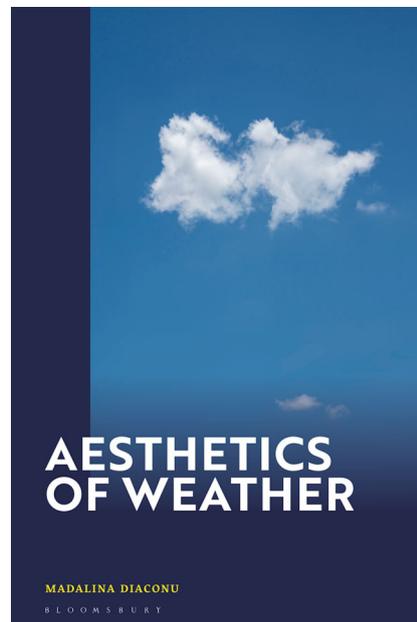


Inmidst the Weather

Wolfgang Welsch

Diaconu, M. (2024) *Aesthetics of Weather*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.



Madalina Diaconu has written a wonderful book. About a great topic: the weather. But the brilliance of the book is not simply due to the fascinating subject matter, but to the way the author presents it.

In three parts (phenomenology of the atmosphere – phenomenographies – collective practices), she unfolds an immense wealth of aspects in a total of 13 chapters (she is apparently not superstitious): sky and atmosphere, outer and inner warmth and coldness, tornadoes, weather wisdom, cloudscapes, wind, fog, the Alps, the Arctic Sea, climate change, pollution, urban climate, waste on land, in the seas, and in the sky, disaster- and astro-tourism (to name just a few aspects). She reminds us of authors from the past (Aristotle, Goethe, Bachelard), proves to be thoroughly familiar with contemporary discussions, and provides numerous examples from the visual arts (Botticelli, Monet,

de Maria, Haacke, Beuys, Chillida, Goldsworthy, Kempinas, Kapoor, Eliasson), architecture (Rahm), film (Tarr and Hranitzky), literature (Coleridge, Musil, Camus, Ransmayr), and even music (Debussy). The book is a treasure trove both for the panorama of weather phenomena as for their cultural interpretations.

Methodologically, Madalina Diaconu assumes that an aesthetics of weather (like any aesthetics) must be based on perception (aesthetics is first and foremost aesthetics). The philosophical discipline that is fundamentally based on experience, such as perceptual experience (and not on thought experiments), is phenomenology. Aesthetics and phenomenology converge in their emphasis on perception. For this reason, the aesthetics of weather must be “a phenomenological aesthetics of weather” (Diaconu, 2024, p. 1). Diaconu’s main inspirers in this regard are, from the German side, Hermann Schmitz who, in the course of his ‘New Phenomenology’, developed a transsubjective theory of affective involvement, and Gernot Böhme, who established an aesthetics of atmospheres (Diaconu, 2024, p. 24), and further, from the English-speaking world, Arnold Berleant, Yuriko Saito, and Emily Brady as the most influential figures for environmental aesthetics (Diaconu, 2024, p. 13).

Madalina Diaconu situates her undertaking in the context of recent efforts to expand aesthetics beyond its reference to art only (Diaconu, 2024, p. 2). Aesthetics has long since conquered new fields of reference such as the environment, politics, fashion, sports – and now turns to the weather. Fortunately, however, this expansion does not prevent the author from repeatedly drawing on examples from the arts. The enlargement of aesthetics beyond art should indeed not lose sight of this traditional core area.

The author takes firm positions within aesthetics. In general, she follows Arnold Berleant’s shift from disinterestedness to engagement. The weather is an exemplary case of how an object cannot be perceived neutrally and unaffectedly. Rather, the weather affects us bodily and can only be experienced in this physical way. It is not an object of independent contemplation, but of being affected: “whoever experiences the weather is *subject to it*” (Diaconu, 2024, p. 3). Furthermore, Madalina Diaconu can be uncompromising in her criticism of traditional aesthetics, for example when she rebukes Kant and Hegel for excluding the sense of temperature from the sphere of aesthetics (Diaconu, 2024, p. 118). Finally, even within environmental philosophy (which she advocates) she tracks down misleading remnants of outdated thinking, for example when she convicts the ideal of sustainability of the old desire for stability.¹ She courageously counters the traditional ideal of eternity with that of transitoriness and fleetingness. She suggests to replace the conventional motto “think like a mountain” by the Buddhist-inspired maxim “think like a cloud” (Diaconu, 2024, pp. 195–197).

In fact, the entire book is permeated by a plea for an ontology of processes rather than substances. Western thinking and Western aesthetics were,

¹ Elsewhere, however, she herself advocates “a sustainable way of life” (Diaconu, 2024, p. 192).

according to the author, for a long time bewitched by an “obsession for solid things and stable images” (Diaconu, 2024, p. 23), an “obsession with continuity and permanence” (Diaconu, 2024, p. 197). This began with the Presocratic “quest for an imperishable *archê*” (Diaconu, 2024, p. 196), was made obligatory by Aristotle, and lasted, with only a few exceptions, up to the present day. This aspiration for eternity and stability is a distinctive feature of Western culture. It goes without saying that in such a framework, the weather, which is characterized by “continual change” (Diaconu, 2024, p. 23), cannot be appreciated. The phenomenon of wind is paradigmatic of this. Wind is not a thing at all, and so it has no place in a worldview focused on substances (Diaconu, 2024, p. 106). The situation would be quite different in the context of “an ontology of processes” (Diaconu, 2024, p. 29).² In such a context, phenomena of transitoriness could not only be adequately taken into account but would even take precedence.

This recommendation is linked to another shift that the author repeatedly advocates: “the self is relational and feels at home only within a universal web of interrelations that include other living beings and inanimate forces” (Diaconu, 2024, p. 4). She thus proposes not only an aesthetic and ontological shift, but also an anthropological one. Humans are not sovereign subjects who stand in opposition to the world and the environment, but are instead interwoven in many ways: with social partners, historical influences, cultural constellations, and indeed with the entire biological and terrestrial environment, which is essential to them and includes non-human elements, namely other living beings and inorganic nature. This view of general interconnectedness is, according to the author, capable of leading out of the dilemmas of modern thinking with its subject-object dualism (“the subject-object dichotomy of modern philosophy and aesthetics,” Diaconu, 2024, p. 106).³ In the everchanging fabric of the world, we humans are fundamentally connected to myriad processes and things, and the ontology of this “universal web of interrelations” is fundamentally one of processes, change, and flow. In this worldview, aesthetics takes on a new form: it breaks away from the obsession with contemplation and becomes an undertaking of connectedness, commitment, and attentiveness.

Aesthetics has always been concerned with the development of sensitivity (Diaconu, 2024, p. 194). Today its endeavor must take a specific direction. It should no longer concern just the cultivation of individual sensitivity; from now on, aesthetic sensitivity must relate to the (technologically and medially influenced) social and natural environment. This view has considerable practical consequences. Madalina Diaconu endows the contemporary aesthetic experience with moral implications and consequences.⁴ According to her, the aesthetic subject should not only be context-sensitive, but “*behave* in a way

² Surprisingly, Alfred N. Whitehead who has extensively presented such an ontology in his *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1929) finds no mention.

³ I am more than sympathetic to this worldview, see Welsch (2025).

⁴ “The environmental experience is infused with implicit moral concerns from the outset” (Diaconu, 2024, p. 191).

that is sensitive to context” (Diaconu, 2024, p. 187). “In the case of weather, the refinement of sensitivity would enable people not only to enjoy even very slight modifications of the weather but also cause them more pain when facing the losses produced by a dysfunctional atmospheric system” (Diaconu, 2024, p. 188). The fine-tuning of sensitivity is ultimately meant to lead to action: “the cultivation of sensibility and the exertion of imagination are contrary to irresponsible reverie and escapism”; rather, they elicit realism (“a sense of realism is now more imperative than ever” (Diaconu, 2024, p. 188)). “Aesthetic theory can insist on every individual’s responsibility for making the world better” (Diaconu, 2024, p. 191).

The main direction of this contemporary amplification and orientation of sensitivity is clear: “our age urgently requires a post-anthropocentric perspective that extends empathy to non-human agents” (194). The basis for this is the aforementioned “understanding of our own relational being and the sharpened sense of universal interdependency” (Diaconu, 2024, p. 194). This gives rise to practical responsibility: “we have to care not only for our ‘neighbor,’ but also for all kinds of ‘strangers,’ not only for humans, but also for non-human others” (*Ibid.*). These moral demands culminate in the call to “develop proactive solidarity with the victims” (*Ibid.*).

As likeable as all this may sound, it remains highly appellative. Normative justification is lacking. Undoubtedly, there are interconnections between aesthetics and ethics. But aesthetic impulses still require, in order to constitute valid guidelines for action, moral evaluation and justification. With regard to art, Gottfried Benn once said that ‘well-intentioned’ is its opposite.⁵ Likewise for morality, ‘well-intentioned’ is not enough – how often do well-intentioned actions prove fatal after just a few steps! Here, one would wish for more differentiated explanations and justifications.

Madalina Diaconu has demonstrated her ability to do so on numerous occasions. I need only mention her discussion of how wind and air currents (which are not visible as such) can be represented in the visual arts (Diaconu, 2024, pp. 107–113); or her suggestion that “sentient landscapes,” familiar to indigenous cultures with an animistic view of nature, should be considered as one possibility among others for viewing the landscape (Diaconu, 2024, p. 165).⁶ This should be all the easier since such options can also be found, at least sporadically, in ‘Western’ culture: many painters, reports André Marchand, have said that while they look at things, things also look at them (his key witnesses were Klee and Cézanne).

Madalina Diaconu herself fortunately corrects sporadic oneness. For example, she once mentions as a counter-example to the Western emphasis on eternity only the Japanese culture’s appreciation of transience and impermanence (Diaconu, 2024, p. 196 f.). But she is also aware that, first

⁵ “Word has gradually spread that the opposite of art is not nature, but good intentions” (Benn, 1958, p. 161f.).

⁶ Hermann Schmitz’s New Phenomenology makes indeed a comparable move: it turns away from Husserl’s theory of intentional constitution toward a pathic view of experience, emphasising our being touched and moved by encountering things (Diaconu, 2024, cf. 24 f.).

of all, the Western tradition is not monolithic: after all, there were also Heraclitus, Hegel, Bergson, Whitehead and Deleuze (Diaconu, 2024, p. 165); and secondly, Japanese culture is not the only alternative, there exist also many indigenous cultures from North to South America and elsewhere that attune themselves to the rhythms of nature and shape their cultural life not in opposition to, but in harmony with it (Diaconu, 2024, cf. 165 f., 203).

However, there is no beauty without (minor) flaws. Many readers will regret the lack of a résumé. The absence of far too many names mentioned in the book in the index is unfortunate. As is the fact that the book would require many more illustrations – and why not in color? This monitum goes, of course, not to the author but to the publisher and is meant as advice and request for the second edition (which, in view of the outstanding quality of the book, I am sure will come soon). Saying this, I do not at all intend to advise the reader to wait for this next edition. I rather strongly recommend reading, enjoying and reflecting on this groundbreaking work at the next opportunity and to thus have a great time in intellectually and emotionally finest weather.

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