

J. R. Carpenter

The Gathering Cloud

*for Jerome and Aphra,
my silver linings*

“The machine sighed, and a cloud-like shape began to appear above the rows of tubes. At first it was thin and wispy. Then it thickened and became opaque.”

—Jerome Fletcher, *Escape from the Temple of Laughter*.

First published 2017
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ISBN 978-1-910010-15-0

Uniformbooks
7 Hillhead Terrace, Axminster, Devon EX13 5JL
www.uniformbooks.co.uk

Trade distribution in the UK by Central Books
www.centralbooks.com

Printed and bound by T J International, Padstow, Cornwall

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On Media Meteorology

Every time it rains, media history soaks into our skin. Clouds and their seemingly light ephemeral nature are full of the chemical remnants of the ongoing industrial age, which some call the Anthropocene. Human science and technology have penetrated the hard geological substrates of our culture and made the air part of our chemical cultural history. Many prefer to think of the current information age as one of light, marked by the weightlessness of fibre optics and the speed of digital transactions, and yet it is also one of weight—of minerals, metals, energy consumption, and entropy.

The weather comes and goes but our enthusiasm for it persists. To speak of weather is to articulate a continuum between humans and their environment. It is what's high above our heads and what sustains life beneath our feet that should concern us most. A breath of air. We inhale the weather. We exhale it. We measure it, we paint it, we verbalise it, we speak and write poetry about it.

J. R. Carpenter's *The Gathering Cloud* is both a condensation of media history and a comment on the current environmental weight of clouds. This book reminds us that cloud computing is one of the backbones of contemporary culture. The particularly interesting thing about cloud computing is that it is so heavily about climate control: server farms are carefully managed environments that cater to the well-being of the machines that ignorantly and yet with high-speed accuracy convey the things we talk about online, from #lolcats to emails, from memes to alternative facts. Of course, clouds were technological long before cloud computing. As Carpenter writes, J. M. W. Turner's painting 'Rain, Steam and Speed' (1844) is about the meeting of a new technological world with the air of the planet: the exhaust of the steam trains and the massive factories that define the particular clouds of our era of climate change mix with air to create vast fields of waste, both visible and invisible.

Clouds are painted, engraved, and increasingly now also computed in weather simulations and forecast models that both holiday goers and the military follow keenly. Clouds and the weather have been continuously remediating through a history of visual technologies and strategies of representation, and still, as Carpenter points out,

they resist a stable ontology. They resist a lot of things: they are made of constant perturbations, micro-movements, dynamic turbulence. This struggle with representation is not just about showing what's up there, but also bringing it back down here as material for analysis: nowadays, clouds are simulated again and again, and so return to digital cloud (computing) platforms.

Carpenter evokes the Greek philosophy of the four elements (earth, air, fire and water) as part of a media and visual history. As such, her project relates to recent work in both contemporary technological art and cultural theory interested in the environment. She draws upon John Durham Peters' *The Marvellous Clouds*, which starts investigations of media from their elemental existence as nature. As Peters argues, the sky has been for a long period considered as a place of media. Read as signs by ancient Babylonians, as exhalations by ancient Greek philosophers, only in our age of technical media has the sky become the object of another sort of analysis. The sky is where visual media starts, as light filtered through the atmospheric levels. But light is not the only element of interest. The other chemical realities of clouds must also be included in this story.

The Gathering Cloud presents a series of material transformations made visible through a media history executed as digital collage and print publication, hendecasyllabic verse, and critical essay. Carpenter's methodology as a writer is closely linked to the field of media archaeology (a field interested in artistic, surprising, experimental, and sometimes imaginary ways of understanding contemporary media culture though the past). But it would be as fair to call her work a poetic media meteorology: it shows the multiplicity of ways of writing about the sky, the digital cloud, and the climate changes that we are living through, revealing gaps between our concepts of and the realities of the environment. And don't be mistaken by the airy connotations of the word—the cloud is already well deep in our lungs as well as our minds.

An Index of Objects

aerosol	gas
air	heaven
bird	honey
body	journal
bomb	language
breaker	lightning
carbon	mist
cat	mountain
catastrophe	painting
cloud	photograph
coal	rain
computer	river
country	sea
creature	seawall
dark	sky
data	smoke
earth	specimen
electricity	storm
elephant	sun
eruption	sunset
eucalyptus	thunder
evening	vapour
exhalation	war
fir	waste
fish	water
flood	wave
fog	weather
fur	wind

February 2014

It's raining. It has always rained. We are silt dwellers, tide chasers, puddles, floods, mud, streams. The river runs brown topsoil down and out to the sea. From a fir erupts a murmur of starlings. By fir I also mean fur. A pelt of needles, hackles raised. Storm force ten at the river mouth. The scale only goes up to twelve. After that the sky breaks. The fir comes down and takes two youthful eucalyptus with it.

In response to the conveyor belt of storms that battered south-western England early in 2014, resulting in catastrophic flooding in Somerset and the destruction of the seawall and rail line at Dawlish, in Devon, the Met Office's chief scientist, Dame Julia Slingo, publically stated that the prolonged spell of rain, and the intensity and height of the coastal waves was "very unusual".

She said: "We have records going back to 1766. We have seen some exceptional weather, but nothing like this. All evidence suggests a link to climate change."

