The Marvelous Clouds: Towards A Philosophy of Elemental Media (book review)

The Marvelous Clouds: Towards A Philosophy of Elemental Media

By John Durham Peters

(4th Estate)

"I get all the news I need from the weather report"

(Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel: *Only Living Boy In New York)*

Media is now environmental, like the air we breathe. It's a ubiquitous and vital fact of contemporary life, like the water from our taps. It is a condition of modernity like the fuel in our cars or the text on this screen. But what can we learn from our new relationships with these elements that are certainly material and, at least in some way, from nature?

This is one of those special books that occupies that elusive space between academic, theoretical 'discourse' and those 'ideas' books aimed at 'the General Reader'. It is written in intelligent, accessible prose that is always delightful, thoughtful and suggestive. *Marvellous Clouds* is packed full of detail drawn from the world around us – especially the natural world of earth, water, fire and air (language) – but also from a dizzying range of thinkers from an array of periods, places and positions. Peters' task here is not to define a new or definite way of thinking about 'media' but instead to ask us to think more creatively about its nature (forgive the pun).
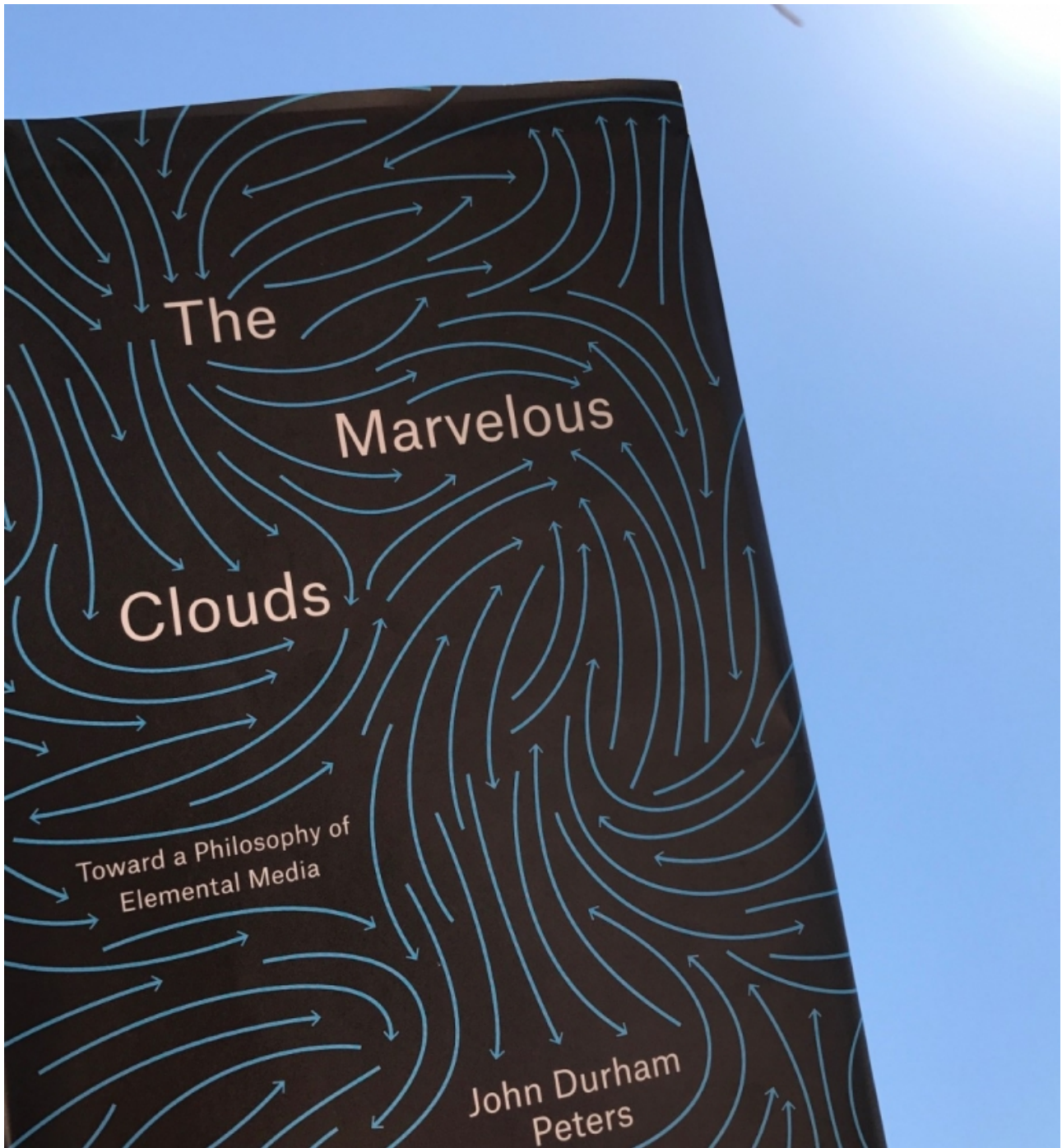
Peters says that "this book offers a philosophy of elemental media – the elements that lie at the taken-for-granted base of our habits and habitat – with special reference to the digital era." This is not a 'return to nature' book in the usual ecological sense, so much in vogue at the moment. As Peters says, media is an incredibly artificial phenomenon in practice. In fact 'media are civilizational ordering devices'.

Media as described by Peters are always grounded in material reality, but they also offer a way for us to reinvent or reimagine the world around us, albeit always imperfectly:

> *"The history of media is the history of productive impossibility of capturing what exists."*

As Peters goes through the elemental categories towards a kind of philosophy of media, he bolsters the narrative

with compelling anecdotes, detail and citations from the scattered corners of his almaniacal (sic) mind. You get dogs, dolphins, Mid-Western farmers, and Chicken McNuggets interwoven with German, French and Ancient sages. You get media history seen through things: logarithms, calendars, sundials and Google. This is not a chronological but a philosophical narrative that sees media in the stars (literally), but we humans are at least in the gutter of perception, looking up at them.

The more disciplined media theorists among you might feel frustrated at his refusal to define the parameters of this approach. He is curious rather than rigorously critical about some of the ideas that float across the narrative sky of the book. But then, who can catch or shoot down a cloud?

I am personally sympathetic to this approach. I found it helpful in thinking again about my interest in the role of emotions in new forms of social media journalism, for example.

Peters may love nature, but he is the opposite of a luddite. In fact in some ways he is rather blasé about some scare stories about digital media. But he is certain that we need a more humane understanding of the elemental technological forces:

> *"The task is to rethink technology as constitutive of the human being without thereby providing Silicon Valley with one more marketing argument…after decades in which humane voices opposed – and with good reason – the technophilia of the technicians and engineers, changes in our meteorological and technical climate invite a reorientation toward a philosophy of media that appreciates the embedment of techniques without forfeiting critical judgement"*

Instead of worrying about the over-abundance of media and data we should be admiring its variety and interested in its diverse significance. It requires a sort of global Artificial Intelligence, albeit, applied to the detail too, like Blake's grain of sand:

> *"There is a clear intelligence of some kind in planetary, physiological, and genetic feedback loops. We do not need to posit some kind of superintending mind that keeps the operation afloat, but rather should understand intelligence at all scales, as the dynamic, restless, inarticulate genius of life-forms evolving in their environments".*

But we can't know for sure (this is a good kind of 'post-truth') because media is always a process, not a final product. Perhaps it's just me but this sounds familiar:

> *"We rarely know what we mean until we say it, and often saying it reveals meanings that we didn't know we had."*

Like I said, the stricter kind of media theorist may well end up hating this book. It's too charming and allusive (and readable). For those looking to 'save' journalism or the world, there's not much in the way of practical policy ideas. Though he does have the intriguing idea of turning weather reports into something more like climate reports.

The last page ends with a simultaneously bleak and beautiful vision of the ultimate place of humans and our obsession with mediation in the wider universe and eternity. By that point in the journey of this book you will either be bewildered by Peter's lack of concrete positions and prescriptions or – like me – glowing with a refreshed sense of what media might mean in relation to our world.

This review by Charlie Beckett, professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the LSE and director of Polis, the LSE's journalism think-tank.

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For a more detailed review of the content of Marvelous Clouds try this review and for a more academic review try this.