

Book Review: Cloud and Molecular Aesthetics by Lanfranco Aceti

Across the collection *Cloud and Molecular Aesthetics*, edited by Lanfranco Aceti, contributors draw upon meteorological terminology in order to explore the forms, shapes and affectivities of the cloud, challenging immaterial or disembodied understandings of the distribution of online data. Sander Hölsgens praises its eloquent, experimental and imaginative readings as well as its manner of publication, being freely accessible [here](#).

***Cloud and Molecular Aesthetics*. Lanfranco Aceti (ed.). MIT Press with Goldsmiths. 2017.**

Cloud and Molecular Aesthetics sets out to explore the forms, shapes and affectivities of the cloud. This open access volume (available online [here](#)) embraces a partly meteorological terminology to work towards an understanding of the distribution and dissemination of online data. In so doing, the contributors cover and veil the seemingly transparent cloud with that which is foggy, obscure and secretive, if only to unveil and uncover its ambivalent energy and intensity. The volume orients the arts and sciences towards each other rather than suggesting a contradistinction between them, whilst its proposed molecular aesthetics open up a space to rethink the measureless cloud by focusing on its atomic and infinitesimal dimensions.



Cloud and Molecular Aesthetics is a primarily discursive reflection of a couple of small events, a conference and an exhibition, all of which have scrutinised the construction, inner workings and faltering of globalised societies through the ambivalent and constantly evolving concept of the cloud. The 25 contributions range from continental philosophy and critical theory to architectural design and poetics, bringing together a primarily Australian and Northern American cohort of researchers, artists and curators.

In the volume's opening chapter, 'Wet Me', editor Lanfranco Aceti points to the fracture between the so-called clouded-human and grounded-human so as to disclose what a digital existence looks and feels like. Its limitations are clear and well-outlined:

the idea that the cloud is an innovative, all-enveloping, and all-encompassing system is an absurdity, insofar as it is impossible to upload, at this stage of current scientific and technical knowledge, a human being into the cloud.

In other words: however important our online, cloud-based reality may seem, the physicality of our earthly existence prevails in a number of ways. This duality appears to be straightforward, yet Aceti suggests that the grounded-human appears to be 'enslaved to the creation, curation, and maintenance of the clouded-human'. This hierarchy is complex but fascinating, and Aceti's careful and conscientious research into it is one of the many highlights of *Cloud and Molecular Aesthetics*.

For instance, Aceti argues that the cloud is subject to both personhood and its psychological deviancies and pathological behaviours, implying that the cloud is embodied and materialised in a significant manner: 'the cloud could be an expulsion of gas, materials, verbiage, and/or bodily fluids of the rotten bodies of contemporary digital media and hyper-surveillance of post-societies and pre-dictatorships'. Moreover, Aceti defines the cloud as the result of the methane that is expelled by the (human) body; as an archaeology of personal behaviours and facts that has a molecular structure; as a materialist and tangible phenomenon that is always wet or at least slightly moist; as a corporation of sorts, in which discrimination and violence seem to be hierarchically approved, whilst sexuality is either instantly censored or at least frowned upon. Aceti's interpretations of the diverse experiences of the cloud allow him to suggest that it is simultaneously ethereal and material, transparent and fascist, veiling and unveiling, utopian and dystopian, to the point of overcoming such binary oppositions.



Image Credit: ([Kevin Dooley CC BY 2.0](#))

Aceti's layered and evocative understanding of the cloud is indicative of the volume's plentiful, wonderful, exciting and poignant contributions. The cloud as a focal point for scholarly inquiry appears to especially highlight the extent to which contemporary practice-led artistic research builds upon scientific findings. The contributions are culturally dense, timely and interdisciplinary, and Edward Colless's chapter 'Black Noise' is no exception.

Colless examines whether the cloud is affected by noise, similar to how the modern media of photography, radio, cinema and telephony were also haunted by the grainy, ghostly sounds at the heart of the analogue era. In this not too distant past: 'those means of connection or information transport suffered interruption, intermission, noise, blur, blotting, dispersal, degradation, or disaggregation: interference by distortion or by misdirection in transit.' Such noisy interferences seem haunted, yet the cloud is subject to ghouls of a different nature: 'viruses and bugs, to be sure, but also worms, seeders, hosts, leeches, trolls, zombies; a taxonomy of threats distinct from the ghosts of modernity.'

Interestingly, Colless argues that such ghouls only appear or come into view when the cloud darkens. Affected by these demons of sorts, this is no longer the white cloud of 'boundless storage space, inestimably dynamic in its continuous uploading and downloading of data, an endless cycle of remote data storage and access'. Rather, it is a darkened cloud, which is threatening and vaporous, a reminder of the type of cloud amateur scientist Luke Haward calls nimbus: 'a sort of goop, an almost-formless admixture of the defined cloud types that possesses an ominous surcharge.' Nimbus clouds move towards obscurity and hallucinatory experiences, not unlike the manner in which computers and other types of hardware tend to respond to being infected by well-programmed viruses and Trojan horses.

Indeed, the cloud produces a noise that is unlike the interferences that transformed modern media. It is a type of noise Colless calls 'black noise', which is analogous to dark, enigmatic and seemingly formless clouds. The cloud, or so this argument goes, is not as secular as we are made to believe, for it presents us with unforeseen yet remarkably emotive and sensory demons to cope with: 'they gather and emerge from realms of viscerally morbid horror; from vermiculate rot and phage-like, leprous infection.' Colless therefore suggests that the cloud is filled with worms, seeders, leeches, trolls, zombies and bugs, darkening and infecting the 'blank whiteness' of online data.

Strong-willed, eloquent readings and critiques like these are manifest throughout *Cloud and Molecular Aesthetics*, and it seems to me to be worth mentioning that all of the work is uploaded to the cloud, if only to find out how it moves through this partly demonic, or at least obscure, nimbus. The collected volume also makes room for *inter alia* a topography of the artist's studio, a poetics of gas, a cloudy and water-based sound installation and a speculative and multi-medial form of telepathy and telekinesis. The contributions are pointed, experimental and tender, and I appreciate [the manner of publication](#): in the cloud, freely accessible, diligently edited and carefully structured.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.