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WEATHER-WORLD

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It. *Mondo meteorologico*; Fr. *Météo-Monde*; Germ. *Wetter-Welt*; Span. *Tiempo-Mundo*. The weather-world is a milieu for life born of the elemental dialogue of air, ocean and earth. We begin by reviewing the various criteria by which weather has been distinguished from climate, and how these distinctions intersect with ways of contrasting indigenous, local or traditional knowledge with modern science, as well as with different conceptions of time. Key to the weather-world is that it exists in a continuous process of becoming: it is not so much a domain of weather events as a place of weathering, consisting of earth and ocean and, above all, the sky. On land the ground, far from separating sky and earth, mediates a dialogue between them; at sea the dialogue is between sky and ocean. Either way, this emphasis on the relation between substances and medium, rather than on surface conformation, distinguishes the weather-world from landscape and seascape. Suffused by light, sound and feeling, the weather underwrites our capacities to see, hear and touch. It is not what we perceive, but what we perceive in. As the vocabulary of weather-words reveals, in the experience of weather lies the very temperament of being.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Meteorological science insists on a clear distinction between weather and climate (WMO 2023). The distinction is essentially between short-term events and long-term averages. A rainstorm, gale, blizzard or cyclone is a weather event, but climate is an average of variables such as temperature, precipitation and wind, abstracted from measurements taken over an extended period. This can range from months to millennia, though convention prescribes a period of 30 years. The distinction is important to scientists because it enables them to discern what they see as underlying trends of climate change from the surface fluctuations more apparent to lay persons. As statistical artefacts, averages cannot be witnessed in the same way as actual weather events, yet according to science, they alone can tell us what is “really”

happening. The rest is noise. Yet meteorologically speaking, even the weather event is to be described objectively, by measurable parameters, and should not be confused with any subjective perception of it. To bridge the gap between fact and experience, forecasters often have resort to the “feels like” formula. It may be a cold day, they tell us, but because of the wind and rain, our senses may deceive us into thinking that it is a lot colder than it actually is.

Anthropologists are rather more inclined than scientists to give credence to sensory experience. In a study of how Sámi people in Finnish Lapland perceive changes in their subarctic environment, Tim Ingold and Terhi Kurttila (2000: 187) define the weather as “what it feels like to be warm or cold, drenched in rain, caught in a storm and so on”. For them, the difference between weather and climate is precisely that the former is experienced, the latter recorded. Climate records add up to an archive of measurements, taken with instruments calibrated to universal standards, and preserved for future reference. Memories of weather experiences, by contrast, would be woven into the stories people tell of their own and others’ lives, of things they have done, places visited, journeys made, and so on. Carried on over generations, these stories amount to a local tradition. Comparing modern scientific meteorology with traditional knowledge of the weather in pre-modern Tibet, Toni Huber and Poul Pedersen (1997) likewise emphasise how the latter is founded in shared local experience. Where science constitutes the environment as an ecological space, defined by quantifiable parameters, for pre-modern Tibetans, say Huber and Pedersen, it is a “moral space of qualitative interconnectedness” (1997: 590).

In a recent critique, however, anthropologist Cristian Simonetti (2019) warns against mapping the weather/climate distinction too closely onto one between traditional knowledge and modern science. It is all too easy to jump to the conclusion that local or indigenous people are so bound to the here and now of ephemeral weather events, so immersed in the present, that they can have no grasp of the longer term. And conversely, we might be led to believe that scientists, in distancing themselves and their observations from proximate bodily experience, have forsaken any sense of what it “feels like”. Yet in truth, as Simonetti shows, not only do scientists habitually draw on metaphors from quotidian life to help them conceptualise stretches of time otherwise unimaginable, but indigenous or local communities are also perfectly capable of apprehending the world around them, and its variations, with a temporal depth as great as that of science. Yet a difference remains. Ultimately, it comes down to discrepant understandings of time. Do we regard time as a universal coordinate, divisible into equal intervals on a nested series of scales, ranging from the very long to the very short, or as a duration that inheres in the very flux of things?

Science, appealing to a universal perspective, from above and beyond the inhabited world, opts for the former. In this perspective, weather events, classed as short-term, appear to be nested within the longer-term events of climate change. The effect of this nesting, argues sociologist Bronislaw Szerszynski (2010: 22), is to purify the weather of its more unruly tendencies, and to bring it within the compass of a narrowly technoscientific reading. You cannot however see nesting from the inside. People who traditionally drew a living from land and sea needed to be wise to the rhythmic alternations of their surroundings – of wind and tide, vegetative growth and decay, and the comings and goings of migratory animals – and to time their activities to the most propitious conjunctions of co-varying phenomena (Ingold 2015: 71). In this sense, as

Szerszynski (2010: 24) puts it, their perception of time was not *chronological* but *kairological*. Perceived kairologically, a breath of wind or an ocean wave is no isolated event, strung along with others of its kind within its allotted interval, but a ripple in the flux of time. To catch each passing moment is to feel the pulse of a world undergoing perpetual birth (Ingold and Simonetti 2022: 17).

There is no contradiction, here, between the ephemeral and the long-lasting, nor is it necessary to jump time-scales in order to get from one to the other. On the contrary, ephemerality is the hallmark of continuity, of the “ongoingness” of things (Simonetti 2019: 258). This is to move from “the weather” as a noun to “to weather” as a verb, from weather to weathering. The weather happens, but weathering goes on. In their treatment of the life of buildings, architectural theorists Mohsen Mostafavi and David Leatherbarrow (1993: 10) show that weathering is formative, a “continuous metamorphosis” in which unending deterioration is also perpetual beginning. This, too, is how Inuit people in the small Greenlandic communities studied by anthropologist Mark Nuttall (2009) understand the ongoing formation of the world around them. It is a world of movement in which, since nothing is fixed, nothing can change. Rather, Nuttall observes, everything is perceived to be “in a constant process of *becoming*” (2009: 299, original emphasis). The Inuit term for weather, *sila*, refers more fundamentally to the breath of life and mind that animates the entire process. *Sila* is an all-pervasive, life-giving force, which binds every living being to the rhythms of the cosmos as a whole.

The Inuit cosmos, in short, is a weather-world, a world of earth and ocean and, above all, the sky. And the sky is the dominion of the air. But it is not the atmosphere as described by meteorological science. For science the atmosphere is a gaseous envelope surrounding planet Earth. As such, it is visible only from outer space. To perceive the sky, it is necessary to return to ground level. According to James Gibson (1979), in his foundational text on the ecology of perception, the ground is an interface between the substances of the earth below, and the medium of air above. The weather, for Gibson, refers to what goes on in the medium (1979: 19). Yet were medium and substances, air and earth, thus confined to their respective domains, separated by the ground surface that lies between them, nothing could live or grow. There is life only because the ground is not really an interface at all but a zone of interpenetration, in which air from above combines with moisture absorbed into the soil, in the presence of sunlight, to synthesise the glucose which fuels plant growth. To inhabit the weather-world is not therefore to be stranded upon a solid surface. It is rather to be immersed in the ongoing dialogue of earth and sky.

WEATHER WORLD, LANDSCAPE, AND TEMPERAMENT

It is in its emphasis on this dialogue between earthly substances and the aerial medium that the concept of the weather-world differs from the more familiar idea of landscape, which draws our attention, rather, to the conformations of the ground surface. Art historians have long assumed that to depict a landscape is to render on canvas a particular portion of the earth’s surface and what lies upon it, while paying scant regard to the sky. The concept of landscape, however, is far older than its painterly depictions. Literally meaning “land-shaped”, the term is indigenous to the agrarian traditions of northwestern Europe, dating back at least to early medieval times (Olwig 2008). But even the farmer, his back bent against the sky as he shapes

the land with axe and plough, has to contend with the vagaries of wind and weather. He, too, inhabits a weather-world. Still more so does the mariner. He of course is immersed in a different dialogue, where the sky meets the ocean. But here too, it is not the surface of the sea that commands the mariner's attention – as the concept of "seascape" might suggest – so much as tides and currents below, and the winds and stars above.

Indeed, mariners are the archetypal denizens of what philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2004: 524-5) call "smooth space": an atmospheric space of movement and flux, stirred up by wind and weather, and suffused with light, sound and feeling (Ingold 2011: 132-3). Where the landscape is set off over and against the sky, in the smooth space of the weather-world the surfaces of the land, as those of the sea, open up to the sky and embrace it. In their ever-changing colours, and patterns of illumination and shade, they reflect its light; they resonate in their sounds to the passing winds, and in their feel they respond to the dryness or humidity of the air, depending on heat or rainfall. These experiences of light, sound and feeling, in turn, underwrite our capacities to see, to hear and to touch. As the weather changes, so these capacities vary. It follows that the weather is not so much an *object* of perception as what we perceive *in*. We may observe the same landscape in mist, rain or brilliant sunshine, but the weather-world is never the same from moment to moment. It is at once an experience of time passing and the very temperament of being.

The philosopher Michel Serres (1995: 27) has noted that in French, in Italian and in Spanish the word for weather, respectively *temps*, *tempo*, *tiempo*, also means time. The word comes from the Latin *tempus*, from which are derived both "tempo" and "tempest". But temperament has a different Latin root, from *temperare*, "to temper". The verb, with its twin connotations of mixing or blending and fine-tuning, captures perfectly the way the fluxes of the aerial medium comprise the ever-present undercurrent for our actions as we go along in the world (Ingold 2010: S133). The fact that a whole suite of words derived from this common root – including "temper", "temperate" and "temperature" – refer interchangeably both to the characteristics of the weather and to human moods and motivations is sufficient proof that the two are not just analogous but identical. As with the Inuit *sila*, the weather is not just around us but within us. Not only does it condition how we interact with people and things; it also conditions how we know them. To conclude with the words of environmental philosopher David Macauley, "with our heads immersed in the thickness of the atmosphere or our lungs and limbs engaged with the surrounding winds, we breathe, think and dream in the regions of the air" (Macauley 2005: 307).

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