

From Weather to Climate:

A Note

Fortuitously but quite appropriately, I am writing this short for text an issue 'On Climate' that hasn't appeared yet, whose future is still to come. In an important sense, this is exactly as it should be, since climate is nether something we can see nor hold; its presence is always virtual, on the move, elsewhere. And yet, like the promiscuous play of any climatological event, my essay collides with and veers into many other issues of *Performance Research* discussed in this special volume, including (in no particular order) 'On Ecology', 'On Turbulence', 'On Ice', 'On Fire', 'On Time', and perhaps most closely, as I will go on to demonstrate, David William's entry on 'Weather' in the 'A Lexicon' issue of 2006.

Theatre and Weather

On account of its engrained and longstanding humanism, theatre is not generally seen as a medium conducive to meteorology, unlike, say, painting, poetry or even music. But this does not mean that theatre forgets the climate altogether, as someone like Michel Serres might claim (Serres 1995: 3). On those occasions when theatre has dealt with the weather, the temptation – the logic – is generally of two orders.ⁱ The first is to seek to *represent* it either in language or as a kind of real-time simulation. In the short-lived flurry of climate change plays that were staged in the UK between 2009-11 (*The Contingency Plan* (2009), *Earthquakes in London* (2010), *Greenland* (2011), *The Heretic* (2011), etc.), the weather was largely debated, imagined, and transformed into what the climate theorist Mike Hulme calls 'a

cultural idea' (2009: xxv). Similarly, but this time with a very different mode of representation in mind, directors such as Robert Wilson, Mike Pearson and Pina Bausch (to name but a few) have attempted to represent the weather on stage through the production of simulated wind and rain that streams and steams over the performers' bodies. While there were no performers to speak of, perhaps the clearest example of this technological mode of representing the weather is found in Fevered Sleep's 2010 production for National Theatre of Wales, the *Weather Factory*. In this performance, spectators were invited to pick up the house keys of a small cottage from a local pub in Penyrgoes, Snowdonia, and to enter the modest dwelling, situated on the high street of the village, in groups of eight. Once inside, the audience were given instructions to explore the house within a fixed time-period of 45 minutes, and what they saw as they walked through the empty property was a series of rooms that sought to bring the local climate indoors. The basement was full of dripping rain; the living room a skyscape; the kitchen a wind tunnel; the bathroom filled with damp moss. Unlike Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, an installation in which a huge simulated sun illuminated the vast, anonymous space of the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in the late Autumn and early Winter of 2003-4, *The Weather Factory* was all Snowdonia, all place: a climatological map of flint, cloud cover, low pressure systems, humidity and dampness

So much for the first option.

Theatre's second and alternative attempt to engage with the weather makes a call on the medium-specificity of the art form, basing its rationale on the fact that theatre is always an art of bodies, a vehicle of presence. Only now theatre is to

discover its true relationship with weather in leaving the black box or artificial enclosure of the theatre behind. When site-specific practitioners and scholars speak of the weather in performance, they generally do so in phenomenological terms, implying that the move beyond the theatre building allows for some kind of authentic contact with the real. Consider, for instance, how Stuart Grant describes choreographer Tess de Quincey's practice of 'body weathering' in the *TripleAlice Project* (1999-2001), a decidedly somatic way of performing that attempted to allow performers to encounter (and become with) the arid, harsh climatology of the desert in Hamilton Downs, Central Australia:

This group of tentative investigators looked for a place where the question of belonging might be asked in safety, away from the danger of their own questionings, on a baked earth hiding its gifts under a hard sky, scratching quick little meaning out of the play of mortality and infinity into the surface of old slow rocks and sand, in search of ways to dwell. (2003: 79)

In site-specific theatre, the experience of the real is a kind of embodied lodesta, a way of dwelling that affirms the weather existing beyond the boundaries of a distorting theatricality that would deny the vitality of authentic, platial experience. This reiteration of a longstanding prejudice against theatre which goes back, ultimately, to Plato's admonishment of those poor souls, tethered in shackles in a dark cave watching only the flickering of shadows on a wall, while the real light – the blue, transparent light - of the sky lies behind them, finds its most sophisticated iteration in anthropologist Tim Ingold's critique of Inigo Jones and Ben Johnson's masques plays of the early seventeenth century (2015: 69-78).

As Ingold has it, Jones' and Johnson's indoor simulation of sea and wind by mechanical devices in the *Masque of Blackness* (1605) transformed the weather into something to look at, to be kept at bay: 'The overwhelming ambition of the post-Renaissance history of architecture has been to keep the weather out' (2015: 71). Such a move was disastrous for environmental experience, Ingold claims, since, in the manner of landscape painting, it theatricalised the actual world beyond the walls of the auditorium, too. As a consequence of this 'double movement', weather was no longer something we were in, a matter of embodied knowledge. Rather it became an object of aesthetic representation and, then later, an object of/for scientific investigation, as Vladimir Janković (2000) and Jan Golinski (2007) have pointed out in their cultural histories of meteorology and forecasting in the UK.

The theatricalisation of the weather, Ingold argues, denatures the proper relationship that human subjects ought to have with the 'weather-world' (2015: 68). Instead of living exposed to the elements, and recognising ourselves as fragile creatures of skin and bone, we came to believe that we could measure, model and maybe even modulate the climate, like the US government who used B-52 bombers to cloud seed rain over the Ho-Chi Minh trail in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s in a futile attempt to disrupt the Vietcong's supply lines. To theatricalise the weather, Ingold proposes, is to produce a new epistemic and anthropocentric paradigm predicated on the abstract concepts of 'Cartesian knowledge' and 'Newtonian physics'. Ingold's solution to this catastrophic and disenchanting worldview, the terrible logic of which has resulted in anthropogenically induced

climate change, is to ask performance makers to step outside, to put their work in the environment:

To reinstate the union [between humans and meteorology] requires...an inversion that in turning the theatrical black box inside out would restore the world's inhabitants to the fullness of earth and sky. (2015: 77)

Ingold's concern with the real, with phenomenology, doubtless explains his popularity with many theatre and performance scholars who seek to make and champion site-based performance. But I am not one of them. Unlike Ingold, I want to argue for a different kind of theatre making that would not seek to go outdoors to penetrate the secret of the weather but, on the contrary, would look to the very thing that Ingold rejects – black box theatricality- as a way of bringing us closer to climate. In this oblique and counter-intuitive move, I want to propose that a theatrical theatre, a theatre that takes place inside is, paradoxically, the mode of performance that best discloses the affective and disturbing ways in which climate works. Ultimately, my argument is based on a different aesthetic and philosophical logic to both Ingold's as well as those playwrights and practitioners who attempt to represent the weather through textual and simulated means. For me, and here I am closer to Walter Benjamin (1979), Michael Taussig (1993) and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), mimesis is not about epistemology but ontology. The point is not to know the 'thing', to see it adequately represented in the pervasive Aristotelian ratio that continues to dominate the stage, especially in the UK. Rather, the motivation is to *become* climate, and, in that becoming, to experiment with new, maybe impossible, ways of existing with it. The music critic Marjorie Perloff

expresses this difference well, when, in a discussion of John Cage's 1989 performance *Lecture on the Weather* at the University of Maryland, she notes that, for Cage, 'performance is not *about* weather, it *is* weather' (1991: 25; original italics). As Perloff intimates, there is something about specific modes of performance, in terms of their modes of operating, their dispositions, and production of percepts and affects that are homologous or even isotropic to the play of climate. Indeed, and somewhat ironically, I would say that the more theatre tries to represent weather as a discrete thing (wind, rain, sun, etc.), the more it misses its appointment with climate. This is because climate is not an isolated object to see or hold, but rather a series of interlinking, unliveable processes that owe more to virtuality than actuality, as understood by Deleuze after Bergson (2014).ⁱⁱ And here I depart from Mike Hulme's recent comments in *Weathered: Cultures of Climate* that climate is, on the one hand, an abstract idea that needs to be made sensate as an object *qua* weather, 'as something seen, heard and felt' (2017: 5) and, on the other, a concept 'stabilising cultural relationships between people and their weather' (ibid.). On the contrary, for me, the capacity to intuit and be affected by the abstractions or indiscernibilities of climate has greater political and ethical urgency than approaching it as simply weather or as a thing that establishes stability. As part of this project, I am interested in how theatre that becomes climate might unfold, through the transmission of affect and sensation, the etymological *seme* that links climate with the action of the *clinamen*, an atomistic collision or swerve that, in the materialist philosophy of Epicurus and Lucretius, produces the possibility of the new. Tellingly, in Greek, the noun *klima* that inheres in the English climate is also found in the word *clinamen*, which suggests that to experience the climate is to assent to mutability and

transformation. The hope – and it is just that, nothing more – of this affirmation of climatological swerving is to provide us with the resources to exist differently in the world, to trouble our contours, to de-phase and undo us. For the sake of clarity, I am basing my understanding of climate in this text on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) largely abstract and processual definition as 'a description of the state and dynamics of a global system, consisting of five major components: the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, the cryosphere, the lithosphere and the biosphere, and the evolving interactions between them' (in Hulme, 2017: 2). So what type of theatre could engage with climate in the ways I want to? What would it look like? How might it operate?

Dramaturgy and Climate

Since I do not have the space in this article to provide close readings of specific performances, I will seek to answer these questions by making two moves. First, I refer to David Williams's notion of dramaturgy as weather, before going on to list a number of performances that express what I mean by theatrical climatology. It goes without saying that such performances do not stage the climate directly, as Lone Twin did with the hydrosphere in the series *The Days of the Sledgehammer Have Gone* (2000-5), but rather allow us to intuit how climate functions and interacts as a series of interconnected processes, constantly moving and affecting each other in a typology of vortexes and folds.

Although David Williams's short entry in the 'A Lexicon' issue of *Performance Research* in 2006 is on 'Weather', he could just as easily be speaking about climate. Williams, for instance, defines weather as 'an environment in process, a "field"

rather than an “object” as well as something atmospheric, ‘characterized by complexity, disturbance, ephemerality, unfinishability’ (2006: 142). The climatological aspects of Williams’s understanding of weather are further revealed when he talk of its production through the interplay of ‘temperature, wind speed/direction, humidity, pressure, atmosphere, resultant phenomena of various kinds (e.g. optical)’ (ibid.). For Williams, then, weather is a local phenomenon created through the interaction of planetary and cosmic forces that make up the global climate. And in his definition of dramaturgy it is no coincidence that these are the very forces – climatological forces, essentially – which come to the fore: ‘As a most pervasive, protean and powerful force, perhaps weather suggests a dramaturgy of unfolding through a logic of intensities, an ecologic’ (ibid.)

Approaching Williams’s generative understanding of dramaturgy as climate rather than weather highlights the hidden and oblique ecological significance of a host of postdramatic theatre and dance practitioners whose work, on the surface at least, would appear to have little in common with environmentalism. One thinks here, quite randomly, of the Wooster Group, Forced Entertainment, TG Stan, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, Jérôme Bel, Kris Verdonck , Xavier Le Roy, Ivana Müller, Gob Squad, Richard Maxwell, etc. Despite their differences (and they are legion), these practitioners are not interested in telling climate change stories or presenting us with fictional activists and scientist. On the contrary, their concern, amongst others, is to produce a dramaturgy of surfaces, one in which the zero degree of the medium itself is foregrounded and where we are, to recycle a resonant word from Williams, ‘implicated’ in the unfolding movement of the performance itself. In these

unfoldings, we are buffeted, touched and disrupted by the sticky impress of matter and the turbulence of bodies, the way in which through their movements and gestures, they transform space and time, creating speeds, rhythms, and pockets of intensity. We get lost in these dramaturgies and start to wander, to err. And what we discover in this erring is that the cosmos, the great, climatological outside, has entered the theatrical black box as a haecceity, a 'thisness', a forcefield.

Regardless of whether they are accelerated or decelerated, saturated or subtractive, these dramaturgies are properly temporalising - by which I mean that they do not produce fictional or historical time but rather immerse us, spectators and actors alike, in a shared temporality, a time of repetition and difference without definitive pulse or sequential tense. This is time abstracted, made thick, unliveable. We cannot grasp or understand it. It is here and elsewhere, transient and eternal, always already and still forever. This is time that comes before and after you. It knows no measure. This impossible, inhuman temporality is perhaps best imagined as some endless wave, a perpetual movement of flux and reflux, turbulence and resonance, a sloping time, a climatology of the *clinamen*.

If I have said so much about temporality here it is because, as Michel Serres insists, the French word *temps*, as in the expression 'il fait un beau temps', translates as both time *and* climate (1995: 27). To affirm climate, then, is to exist as 'a comrade of time', someone who is willing to wager on becoming rather than being, to embrace an ontology without essence. This explains why, as I have suggested, postdramatic dramaturgies have the capacity to articulate such profound things about climate. Like time, climate is not something that can be understood or

actualised as an object. We do not see it. The pronoun 'il' in the phrase 'il fait un beau temps' is suitably and tellingly vague. It points to a something – an 'it' - that is not there, an index of a trace, a phantom signifier that is always too early and too late for self-coincidence. Climate is not weather. It is a mutable and elemental force, an excess, a 'too much'. Elusive. Mobile. Chaotic.

Although it expresses biosemiotic information, climate does not seek to inform us, to discourse about the world; it is the world. Its function is to move and change us, to disclose the inhuman at the very of the human, to afford new becomings. And here, at this key point in the argument, another important etymological connection discloses itself. In Greek, the word for weather is *kairos*. As in the Latinate *temps* or *tempus*, *kairos* is polysemous: it, too, translates as both weather *and* time. Only on this occasion, the temporality in question is an ethical temporality, a temporality of the event, of being ready and willing to become other than self, someone who would be more open to the capacious play of the world and the things in it.

Whereas many commentators in the Environmental Humanities seek to create a representational space where art and climate can meet in order to show how climate is something that can be read culturally, my climatological reading of postdramatic dramaturgy – and this could be extended to other art forms, too – shows that direct representation is not, necessarily, the way to heighten our awareness of climate. Rather, I want to propose that it might be more efficacious to explain how the theatrical medium points to and participates in impersonal forces that radiate beyond mere form or content. To mediate climate, in other words, is to

realise that the medium can never quite capture the thing because it always part of the thing. Paradoxically, this aesthetic of obliquity, this embrace of limitation is what, I want to advance, gets us closest to experiencing the virtual movement, the shapes and pulses of climate. For in a non-representational theatre, the point is not to look for meaning in climate but to find a way of letting it wash over you and, most importantly, of inventing new creative ways of being with it. In this respect, the isomorphism that I have drawn between climate and dramaturgy takes on a very pertinent significance. Not only because aesthetics, like climate, is an inorganic force that can never be fully lived or actualised, but because it holds out the possibility of a different kind of ecological ethics, an ethics that, as Elizabeth Grosz points out in *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics and The Limits of Materialism* (2017), seeks to base itself on a becoming that remains, always, generative but nevertheless enigmatic, out of our reach. This is the type of climate theatre that interests me, an oblique, objectless theatre that de-phases spectators spatially and temporally, a *kairotic* climatology, then, a dramaturgy of the *clinamen*.

NOTES

ⁱ I am not, of course, taking into account here how theatre has historically engaged with climate as part of the 'pathetic fallacy', a discursive practice that posits the weather as refracted mind. Think of how the image of the storm exists in so many plays as an anthropocentric trope for representing inner turmoil. The examples in Shakespeare are multiple.

ⁱⁱ For both Bergson and Deleuze, the virtual is an event whose totality can never be realized. It is an instance of the multiple, the play of pure difference that gives birth

to forms and ideas. In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze interestingly compares the virtual – which he also calls the ‘incorporeal’ – to something meteorological: namely mist or fog (2004: 12).

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