Cloud Aesthetics: An Epistemological Challenge, Aesthetics from Below, and the Question of History

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Abstract: Clouds are often appealed to when an objection is raised to the rationalist knowledge paradigm of the clear and distinct, as formulated by René Descartes. In such cases, clouds serve to establish an anti-classically oriented, non-hierarchical and non-determinative, chaos-theoretically informed counter-paradigm. Itself informed by this tendency, this essay proposes to examine clouds as an epistemological challenge, capable of exposing specific tensions in science, philosophy, and art alike. These fields negotiate questions of perception and representation, hence aesthetic problems, on the basis of which this contribution formulates an “aesthetics from below.” Such an aesthetics does not proceed from aesthetic theories, nor is it based on fuzzy concepts; rather, it begins with reflection on perception-based experience and specifically historical artifacts and seeks to lead these toward the work of theory. In this essay, this is accomplished through an examination of the significance of clouds in Siegfried Kracauer’s philosophical reflections on history.

Keywords: clouds, aesthetics, epistemology, history, Kracauer


1. No Simple Object

While French philosophy, art history, and the history of science rediscovered clouds as an object of study in the 1970s, it has only been in the past twenty years or so that German-language cultural studies has shown an increased interest in clouds. Clouds are considered peculiar objects, characterized by distinctions that undermine all distinctions, posited as a paradigm of the “half-thing” and advanced as an “ontological case apart” (Engell et al. 5). Their exceptional status is explained by the fact that, though they do give a uniform impression, clouds form a nexus of purely individual particles in constant motion. Thus they produce loose, ephemeral, and perpetually mutable structures. The scientific, technical, epistemological, and aesthetic narratives attached to clouds render this half-thing into a well-nigh ideal interdisciplinary object of study, with a history spanning from ancient Greek mythology to natural philosophy and on into the present of the digital cloud. One such narrative might tell, for instance, how the cloud, as an incalculable object, lead to epistemological annoyance and was thus theoretically foreclosed, only in effect to mightily return, by way of tremendous
computing power, as a “thermodynamic machine” (7) and mass event. This narrative “on the cloud as leitmotif” (7) celebrates its enormous quantity and hybrid multiplicity. It elevates the cloud to an anti-classical paradigm, which is as non-hierarchical as it is non-determinative, equally informed by vitalism as by chaos-theory. With its “weakly structured quantity of data” (8), the cloud functions here as a “precarious object” that leads from “boundary phenomenon,” via “classificatory knowledge,” to a “nomadic” science and thus signals an “epistemology of the scattered.” Such narratives seek to make the medial and atmospheric dimension of the present available as a “culture of fuzziness” (8): Fuzzy logics, theoretical projects about “scattering,” “multiplicity,” and “molecular becoming” would be “referred to constitutively fuzzy subject matters.” They promote the cloud as a “motif for the self-interpretation of contemporary culture.” As stimulating as these associations may be, their tendency is equally problematic. They prioritize if not valorize an irrational cloud-fuzziness, which they institute as counter-paradigm to a unilateral Enlightenment rationality that is cloudless and characterized by a blazing light. Moreover, through ascriptions like rational and irrational on the one hand, and distinct and fuzzy on the other, these narratives perpetuate the binary structure, only under inverted auspices. Viewed from a perspective of theory-dynamics, what we are dealing with here is a consolidation, even canonization, of explorative attempts and polemical ventures against modern rationality which has since become myth, absolutizing these attempts and ventures in turn. A much more promising approach would be to take into account the specifically modern tensions of a rationality that has become problematic via a “double” (Glaudes and Vasak 11) motion which considers Enlightenment and Romanticism together. Tellingly, one of the foundational texts of modern science, René Descartes’s Discourse on the Method, contains a chapter on the cloud.

2. Clear and Distinct vs. Obscure and Confused?

To this day, Descartes is not only selectively categorized as a dogmatic rationalist but is also co-opted from a number of different ideological standpoints. This founding figure of modern science is frequently made responsible for a calculative formation that reduces reason to rationalization, economization, and technicization. Accordingly, Descartes is accused of a “disenchantment of the world.” In the second part of his Discourse, he formulates the four famous rules that characterize this new method. The first methodological rule for solid knowledge is that knowledge requires evidence; thus, one is instructed to hold as true only that which is present to the mind in such a clear and distinct manner that it cannot be called into doubt. The formula “clear and distinct” already marks a decisive point here, and it will go on to become an epistemological leitmotif in the somewhat later Principia Philosophiae, where a definition is also provided: “I call a perception ‘clear’ when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind […]. I call a perception ‘distinct’ if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear” (Descartes, “Principles” 207-208).

The formula “clear and distinct” is articulated through opposition to what is obscure and confused. Now, does a cloud embody an object that, following Descartes’s criteria, is dark and muddled? Critics of rationality do insist on clouds in order to uphold an alternative paradigm against Descartes’s methodological claim. In so doing, they overlook the literary form of the Discourse. Descartes begins by describing his very personal journey—namely, how he arrived, by way of his own travels and
scientific experiences, mathematical detours and intellectual deviations, at a new method, which he then proceeds to recommend for all humans and for every science, as the groundwork for scientific knowledge. Evidently this text is not composed as a treatise but rather a dialogue in which Descartes addresses himself to the reader, chronicles for the reader his own path toward knowledge, offering the reader personal examples; he neither pontificates nor lectures. Above all, what escapes the anti-Cartesians is the fact that the Discourse that we know so well was actually inspired by the ominous matter of clouds and was conceived as the introduction to three essays in which Descartes was to demonstrate and support the methodological considerations with worldly examples. In most editions of the Discourse, these explicitly explorative texts on dioptrics, meteorology, and geometry are missing. And yet, Les Météores is a pivotal text of early modern natural philosophy.

Beginning with Aristotle’s Meteorology, and up until the 19th century, meteors have served as a collective term for all phenomena situated above the earth and in the sky, hovering somewhere in the limbo between the moon and the earth. Meteoros, literally meaning floating or suspended in Greek, thus does not only refer to weather as we understand it today but to everything occupying the space between the earth and sky. According to the ancient distinction between a supra- and a sublunar sphere, the paths of stars could be calculated and thus fell within the field of astronomy. Meteorological phenomena, though naturally caused, were considered incalculable and thus fell outside general laws, given their extremely irregular movements, their unpredictable behavior, and the complexity of their processes. In many histories of philosophy and the sciences, meteorological phenomena were deemed not only suspicious but indeed became actively “suppressed” (Serres, La naissance 85). With respect to scientific research in general, “from antiquity, long into the early modern era,” meteorology actually comprised “the experimental field for new scientific explanatory approaches and models” (Zittel 2). Even though the meteorological phenomena were not calculable, it was possible to formulate plausible hypotheses and forecasts about their formation and behavior by means of exact observations, field reports and precise descriptions. Thus meteorological phenomena confronted natural philosophers and scientists with particular theoretical and practical challenges. Moreover, they belonged to a life-worldly relevant and decidedly numinous realm.

Descartes took up the ancient terminological distinction while laying out a new meteorology that breaks with the Aristotelian approach. Instead of relying on the categories of substances and accidents, Descartes busies himself with many and exact observations. Here he consults seafarer reports, conducts experiments, and makes drawings. He explains the meteorological phenomena hypothetically on these bases, through the forms and movements of material particles. He simulates different particle combinations, transcribes his research process, describes his observations and reflections using many analogies and metaphors, and furnishes his notes with numerous illustrations. The meteor text shows us Descartes as an authentic natural scientist, who proceeds in an undogmatic, experienced and explorative manner, writing essays, appealing to his audience by way of dialogic form, and treating complex objects like clouds as epistemologically interesting ones.

Michel Serres, one of few philosophers who has even published an edition of the Discourse that includes the aforementioned essays, has not incidentally shown himself to be something of a cloud enthusiast as well. He has written an outright panegyric to clouds, in which he identifies paradigmatically the “foundational structure of the universe,” (Röttgers 36) characterized not by hierarchical or determinate but by composite multiplicities. Serres entrusts to clouds that which is
provisional, in flux, the fluctuating ground and moody weather. His love for clouds is nourished by the spectacle of their movement, their forms and colors and the fact that they require one look upward into the sky. In praise of clouds, Serres emphasizes the multiplicity of the world and accomplishes a revaluation of disorder: observing that order is the exception, he declares a real, extant disorder as the rule—but a rule which cannot be rationally extrapolated: “The real is not rational” (Serres, Hermès IV 10). For this as yet unstructured multiplicity, the clouds serve, for Serres, as the privileged model. Throughout the last quarter of the 20th century, he sings their praises like an ancient poet; his primary reference, however, is not Descartes and his particles but Lucretius and his didactic poem on nature, De rerum natura. Understanding the cloud as “the great number” (37), he is taking up an ancient Atomist reference and, at the same time, anticipating in a certain way today’s data cloud.

Descartes not only dedicates an entire chapter to clouds in his meteorological essay (chap. 5), but he continuously returns to them. The essay in fact begins with clouds:

We naturally admire those things more which are situated above us, than those at our own height or that lie below us. But the clouds very seldom rise beyond the peaks of certain mountains and very often we find they have fallen below the spires of our churches; even so, because we must lift our eyes to the heavens to contemplate them, we imagine them to be so high that poets and painters have even made God’s throne of them and painted Him there, as he single-handedly opens and closes the gates of the winds, sprinkles dew on the flowers and hurls thunderbolts at the cliffs. This gives me hope that, if I could explain here the nature of clouds in such a manner that one no longer has cause to admire anything that we see in them or that comes from them, one would easily believe that it is possible to discover in the same manner the causes of all the most wonderful things on Earth. (Descartes, Les Météores 30)

One may at first perceive phenomena as obscure and confused, but for Descartes they are by no means ontologically fixed as such; rather, their obscurity and confusion can induce knowledge processes. Leibniz distinguishes obscure or indiscernible “little perceptions,” to which he ascribes a degree of knowledge. In his aesthetic theory, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten builds decisively on the idea of sensuous perceptions (Latin “repraesentationes”) as simultaneously clear and confused. These perceptions are to be understood as distinct from others, albeit not distinct in and of themselves; to this science of sensuous knowledge he gives the name aesthetics. Baumgarten conceives of aesthetics as an independent kind of knowing, belonging to the “lower” faculty of knowledge, whereas understanding and reason belong to the “upper” faculty. An aesthetics from below, as this essay proposes, does not imply a hierarchy between the upper and lower faculties of knowledge, nor is it oriented around categories like clear and distinct, obscure and confused. Nor does it refer, despite the similarity of terms, to physiological aesthetics, as established by Gustav Theodor Fechner in his Vorschule der Aesthetik (1876) in order to create a field apart from metaphysical aesthetics. Rather, the proposed aesthetics from below takes shape around two methodological conditions: on the one hand, in a manner analogous with an “epistemology from below,” (Rheinberger 9) it holds that the processes of emergence of perception-based knowledge are epistemologically relevant and thus systematically attempts to think about questions of genesis together with questions of validity. On the other, this
aesthetic understanding is based in a philosophical method that starts out from a concrete object and then elaborates concepts through the experience, analysis, and critique of this object’s “particular shape” (Klein 95).

3. Cloud Images

When, in terms of theories of perception and art, aesthetic concepts are deemed “fuzzy” (Barck et al. X), this may have something to do with the notion of confusedness in aesthetic theories. Though it may point to something vague and indistinct, blurry and fuzzy in the aesthetic concepts themselves. Moreover, the word fuzzy itself evokes images of clouds. Since the Renaissance, artists throughout Europe found themselves confronted with the problem of clouds when wanting to paint a sky that is not numinously determined but derived instead from the observation of nature. It is hardly an accident that around 1800 a “fashion for cloud painting” (Richter-Musso 55) came into being. This “nubomania,” (Hofmann 15) which was certainly not limited to painting, is historically interesting in several respects. First, a sky without clouds would be difficult to depict. Second, during this “saddle period” (Décultot and Fulda), the painted skies themselves reveal that they do not adhere to a programmatic contrast between light and dark, as has been claimed often enough and as one might be lead to assume from the terminology in place: the brightness of Enlightenment vs. the darkness of Romanticism. Instead, what the clouds uniquely reveal is that the sky’s events consist of a dynamic process of transformation. The study of nature by way of observing the sky must have made the relationship between form and time in matter much more energetic, surprising, and dramatic and, on a cosmic scale, more perceptible, more experienceable, akin to what the ontogenesis of the organism provided for the new biology of the time. The metamorphoses of clouds may continue to inspire physiognomic interpretations that obey the episteme of “similitude” (Foucault chap. 2), allowing for one to see in them things like animal forms. But scientific and aesthetic approaches have sharpened the sense for morphological processes, indeed for a peculiar dialectic of formation and deformation.

For example, clouds excited Goethe’s morphological sense. Goethe was already working on cloud drawings as early as 1779 during his second trip to Switzerland, a period when clouds had yet to be defined and classified. It was not until pharmacist and chemist Luke Howard published his treatise On the Modification of Clouds in 1803 that clouds were rendered into sortable objects. Howard’s foundational nomenclature and classification, which are still in use today, inspired Goethe not only to compose poems about these cloud types or “cloud formations,” poems on deep stratus and cumulus, cirrus and nimbus clouds, but they also occasioned a series of “cloud diaries.” Howard’s work seemed to Goethe to promise to give “form to the formless, shape to the shapeless” (Busch 25); its author “determines the indeterminate, circumscribes it / terms it aptly!” (Goethe 350) Moreover, Howard’s typology was apparently able to constrain Goethe’s intellectual unrest concerning this perennially evasive object and, at the same time, satisfy his speculative desire for a harmonious relationship between the polymorphic and the uniform. This typology offered Goethe the possibility of sublating, in the concept of metamorphosis, the tension between the perpetually mutable cloud spectacle on the one hand and the few basic types on the other.

Painters of clouds, however, had no need for these sorts of speculations. William Turner, known for his land- and seascapes, was also a magnificent painter of skies. His paintings testify to how
the work of painting attempted to depict this difficult object. But these images also offer a glimpse of a material reality that Turner, as a “realist” (Serres, Hermès III 236), was able to picture for his viewers—notwithstanding that the painting of clouds tends toward the non-representational (Westheider 216-25). For Serres, Turner is the “first veritable genius of thermodynamics” (Serres, Hermès III 236): Turner saw how matter was transformed by fire, and he depicted this matter in his art, thus introducing “ignited matter into culture.” In Turner’s paintings one also finds expressed the change in human labor wrought by fire in the age of the steam engine and in the clouds these machines produced. Even prior to the new studies in thermodynamics, painting and philosophy were occupied with rendering this mutable reality. The particular constellation of Turner and Hegel is worth remarking. While, from the empirical study of nature, the former liquifies the landscape, the latter, in light of the new transformative dynamic of experienced reality, liquifies thought. Hegel in this way copes with the incursion of time into philosophy.

4. Ongoing Work on Metaphors

But what about images of the cloud rendered in language? How does language respond when clouds are carried over from meteorology and art into other domains? Philosophical and scientific literature traffic in more than concepts; these domains likewise deal with verbal images that raise the question of the relationship between discursive and figurative knowledge, especially that between concept and metaphor. Philosophy does not restrict itself to definitions, nor does it always have at its disposal pre-established concepts. On the contrary, philosophy is “constantly having to accommodate the unconceptualized and the preconceptualized” and, in so doing, “happens upon the means for articulating this nonconceptualizing and preconceptualizing, adopts these means and develops them further, detached from their origin” (Blumenberg, Licht” 139). With this preliminary stage or “staging ground of the concept,” Hans Blumenberg moves into view the “broad field of mythic transformations” and “the compass of metaphysical conjectures” that have “precipitated a polymorphous metaphorics” (139). This staging ground, in contrast with the “fixed forms of tradition,” he considers not only more plastic, but also more sensitive with respect to what is implicit, even “inexpressible”: “What often finds expression here is that which found no medium in the rigid architectonics of the system” (139). Describing this malleable aggregate state, Blumenberg is drawing on chemistry, the science of transformations by means of which cloud formations can be scientifically elaborated. Chemistry is also the science that crosses the boundaries between the animate and inanimate, the microscopic and macroscopic, and which Nietzsche in Human, All Too Human once attempted to mobilize with respect to other congealed dualisms. More generally, when metaphors emerge in philosophy, certain questions arise, such as: Does a metaphor enable a new interpretation of the world? Or does it only make an extant interpretation more vivid, even reinforce it? Does the metaphor serve an unlocking or orienting function? Can that which comes to expression through metaphor be conceptually recuperated, or not? Does the metaphor perform its own, independent “type of activity” (Blumenberg, “Ausblick” 87), pulling contexts together? Blumenberg specifically asks whether metaphors perhaps could even be understood as “fossils forming an archaic layer in the process of theoretical curiosity” (87) that could function as “guides” to our understanding of it.

It should be noted that a metaphor is not characterized primarily by imagery. Petra Gehring rightly
warns against a “visualism” (Gehring 15) and instead turns philosophical attention to the “textual function” (23) of a metaphor. Even when metaphors are expressed by way of an image, the usual focus on its visual and graphic character need not by any means coincide with a metaphorological reduction to the visual or, worse, to that which is visually evident. Instead, the metaphor may provide the occasion to take up and thematize the problematic of an ideal of knowledge that is based in visuality. The relationship between metaphor and concept is intricate and not unidirectional. One should always ask to what extent a metaphor marks something as “counter-coherent” (Blumenberg, Ausblick 88), even as a rupture; how tensions between metaphor and context, between fields of transmission and reception get articulated; which functions are due to this rupture in context, and which effects this rupture sets in motion. One should likewise examine to what extent a concept sheds or retains its background meaning, activates or transforms it, consciously and unconsciously. But the inverse direction also demands attention, those occasions when old meanings are mobilized and new ones sought in order to call into question or give a different charge to a presumably defined concept. The following final section, then, turns to the significance of cloud imagery in the philosophical consideration of history.

A concept of history that intertwines past, present, and future in a single temporal process is a somewhat abstract endeavor. It’s no surprise, then, that one tends to fall back on spatial and natural images in the attempt to illustrate the metaphorical shape and dynamics of the historical process. We are well aware of the image of the river of time, which illustrates the idea of a history of events unfolding in uninterrupted chronology. It is against such an idea of history that Siegfried Kracauer writes his final book, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*. Searching for an alternative concept of history, Kracauer feels his way through the analogy with photography and film and likewise touches on the domain of meteorology. In contrast with the linear development idea, he seeks to emphasize “a discontinuous, non-causal succession of situations, or worlds, or periods” (Kracauer 160) and to always bear in mind the irreconcilable tension between micro- and macro-history (163, 104-105, 122-129). Kracauer approaches history as something confused, as something that cannot be grasped by means of either the rationalistic ideal of clear and distinct or the causal connections of Newtonian mechanics, as something that can however be imagined by means of cloud formation: history is “something like clouds that gather and disperse at random” (160), “a hodge-podge of kaleidoscopic changes.”

The stuff of history—this realm of historical reality that, in light of its peculiar capacity to resist final truths, Kracauer calls the “anteroom area” (191)—demands a mode of thinking adequate to itself: namely, a mode of thinking concerned with “shades and approximations” (214). This mode of thinking would move between image and concept as between the poles of the particular and the general in a liminal space of “ambiguity” (216) and conflict. Accordingly, one would be moved to reflect upon the “traffic difficulties” (203) between micro- and macro-history. In order to hold open this “anteroom thinking” (211) of history against a firmly circumscribed concept of it, Kracauer has recourse to a Blumenbergian “staging ground of the concept” in the form of the cloud image. At the same time, he also activates the double meaning of the French word *temps*, meaning both weather and time, which admittedly did not occur to Kracauer in the U.S. but to Walter Benjamin in Paris (Benjamin V: 162). Robert Musil, too, prior to his exile in Geneva, identified and gave prominent literary expression to this homonymy in the meteorological descriptions that frame the opening passages of his *Man Without Qualities*. The atmospheric events of the sky always provide new object lessons in the “cloud-mutability
of things” (Benjamin V: 1024), which poses an epistemological challenge and allows the connection between weather and time to be posed as a question concerning the zeitgeist of an era.

In a fragment from a methodological passage planned for his book on Baudelaire, Benjamin begins with the “highly mixed” (I: 1160) character of his object, the “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire.” His chosen object is to be realized in a methodical manner and by no means determined as true or false by way of hasty distinctions. Benjamin neither scans his quasi-cloudlike object—quasi-cloudlike on account of its mixed character—for physiognomic similarities, nor does he turn away from it because it is not in itself clearly and distinctly comprehensible. And in fact, it’s at this point that he actually mentions clouds. He expects of a historical-materialist approach that it will not lose itself in the spectacle of sources and streams of tradition: “It does not seek the image of the clouds in this stream. Even less does it turn away from it in order to drink ‘at the source,’ to pursue the ‘thing itself’ behind the backs of men” (1161). Instead it asks: “Which mills drive this stream? Who exploits its gradient? Who dams its flow?” In this way, a historical-materialist approach “changes the image of the landscape by calling by name the forces that have been at work in it” (1161). Even with the “cloud form” in question here, the task still remains “certainly not ‘to enlighten’ but to thoroughly dialecticize—to, as it were, let the analogy rain.” (II: 1176)

What this means for the object of Baudelaire’s Paris, Benjamin himself remarks in his methodological fragment: he does not contort Baudelaire into a narrative of human struggle for emancipation, but instead pursues him “where without doubt he is at home: in the opposing camp. Baudelaire was,” so to speak, “a secret agent—an agent of the secret dissatisfaction of his class with their own dominance” (I: 1161). And this poet loved clouds, which was not lost on Benjamin (V: 418; Baudelaire 231, 1082). Instead of declaring Baudelaire’s cloud motif a metaphysics of the ephemeral, it would be a much more promising endeavor first to correlate, in a very concrete way, atmospheric events with the oft-cited formula: “By modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” (Baudelaire 1163). This “painter of modern life” was, so long as we do not limit ourselves to Constantin Guys, decidedly a painter of clouds, and might not works of art in this case too have triggered philosophical reflection?

5. Clouds and the Question of History

With the image of moody weather, Kracauer seeks to think about history as something that is not determined, neither by divine providence nor natural law. He looks for an understanding of history that might afford a margin of spontaneity, perhaps even freedom (Kracauer 43, 185-186, 217). By way of the weather, he is enlisting, albeit implicitly, the model of the non-linear, complex, ‘chaotic’ system par excellence, the effects of which may well be unpredictable, since they can no longer be ascribed a clear causality, but which are for all that no less determined and, moreover, irreversible. In contrast with mathematically calculated exact astronomical predictions, weather forecasting is successful only provisionally, given unpredictable winds and intricate cloud formation processes that are difficult to model in computer simulation. But whether this situation or state of not knowing—which is determined by some underlying, incidental, or at least not rationally accessible thing or event—can serve as index for a degree of freedom is doubtful, even when, time and again, this not knowing is positively valued.
Now, how does “universal weather” interact with “universal time” (Serres, Atlas 87)? Is it purely an accident when a storm emerges from clouds? Or does the storm emerge from a certain necessity that humans simply do not recognize, as Oswald Spengler claims in his morphology of universal history? While Kracauer accused Spengler’s theory of “unduly extend[ing] the realm of necessity” (Kracauer 40), in that Spengler’s view naturalizes history, Kracauer’s own meteorological comparison could also stand to be interrogated on the same grounds. His cloud image, however, first of all signals a distinction between image and reality, whereby the former facilitates thinking about the latter, and, second of all, Kracauer clearly distinguishes human history not only from natural history (35, 42-43) but likewise from a numinous fate. The latter point is particularly noteworthy, given the prevalence of a view that tends to read dramatic cloud events as a sign for destructive processes, scenarios of downfall and apocalypse. That being said, the cloud image does index a certain inaccessibility that, according to Kracauer, the historian should meet with an “active passivity” (Kracauer 86). To describe this inaccessible reality as non-rational, as Serres does, ought to be endorsed to the extent that this reality neither obeys nor is entirely evident to human understanding. But when the reality of the historical process itself is interrogated in terms of its own rationality, as its own inherent logic, things look a bit different. Then it becomes less self-evident that the dynamic and transformative character of clouds ought to be deployed as a new, positively-valued paradigm, as the negative foil of what is static, rigid, and rationally justified. The incomprehensible object of clouds must be reckoned with—without, however, valorizing or glorifying them, whether epistemologically, metaphorically or aesthetically. As the example from Kracauer’s cloud image demonstrates, whatever the nature metaphor applied to the historical process, it cannot stop at pure visuality, nor entail a naturalization of history.

The conception of history as not consciously achievable, as “unconscious production” (Kittsteiner 165), Hans Dieter Kittsteiner already recognized for the classical philosophy of history. One such conception turns up again in the idea of a historical unconscious, likewise in unconscious, preconceptual and figurative imaginations of history, and thus in weather metaphors like the cloud. Here, what is of particular interest is the extent to which, in the staging ground of the concept of history, a metaphor as verbal image may be “fearful” (Raulff 103), in the sense of arousing fear, and also equally “wishful,” both in terms of its expressive quality and in terms of its efficacy: fears and wishes can be expressed but also intensified in images. Rather than striking back at the arsenal of political imagology with iconoclasm, these images are better submitted to cultural-analytic examination and critical inquiry. Weather images of history merit particular investigation, concerning the extent to which they express desire for an efficacious providence or hope for progress and the extent to which they imagine fear into a history in which the individual is subjected to a fated process linked with downfall or decline. At this point, it is interesting to note that Kracauer’s cloud image neither expresses nor encourages fear or hope, nor does it illustrate a narrative of progress or decline. On the contrary, it serves him in countering decisively the sorts of representations of history with which he deals in the first chapter under the term “Nature,” and in the seventh under the term “General History.”

Like other intellectuals among the founding generation of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, Kracauer identified the central problem for the philosophy of history in the ways that the course of history was understood retrospectively as justified in that it carried a certain meaning. This understanding held true, so long as the goal of a better society was implied. The Institute’s milieu was
comprised of individuals with diverse scientific training, whether in sociology, economics and law, philosophy, literary studies and art history, or psychoanalysis; all of them were bound together in their respective disciplinary expertise by a set of common socio-theoretical interests. These intellectuals were concerned not with supratemporal entities but with contingent and complexly conditioned objects that demanded both discipline-spanning cooperation and historical-systematic approaches requiring methodological self-reflexivity. As was characteristic of other exponents of the “First Cultural Studies” (Müller and Schmieder 615-628), Kracauer’s thinking and theory construction were essentially motivated by the observation of quotidian things and quotidian scenes, consumer goods and their “fate,” and by an engagement with new technologies and the literary and artistic methods related to them.

It is these sensibilities and approaches that determine Kracauer’s book on history. In this rich work, the cloud image is an example of special significance, for in it we find in nuce Kracauer’s own approach. In thinking through the problem with the philosophy of history, he is also motivated by a literary work—Marcel Proust’s In Search of Lost Time and its methods—to conceive an alternative idea of history that, with the cloud image, he feeds into further, even conceptual theoretical work. In the process, he not only does not come to a stop with the image of nature, he also declines to pursue the artistic solution that would retrospectively re-instantiate a substantial temporal continuity. The question of history, he argues, knows no “reconciliation” like the “retreat into the dimension of art” presents: “[N]othing of the sort applies to history. Neither has history an end nor is it amenable to aesthetic redemption” (Kracauer 163). The same applies to an aesthetic approach (and its various ‘devices’) that has become, in the “harmonizing tendency” of General History (182), an end in itself. In light of the “refractory” materials of history, Kracauer insists on the irreconcilable elements of the historical narrative and refuses speculative sublation. His approach to the question of history is not only informed by classical texts and their critical analysis but also by his life experiences in the 20th century. It is characterized by “the diagnostician’s aesthetic sensitivities” (177) and attention to the particular in its tensions with overall contexts. Furthermore, it generates creative capacity in his methodological work toward a historiography from below. And doesn’t Kracauer herewith not least provide a philosophical model for “think[ing] through things, not above them” (192)?

(Translated from the German by Lauren K. Wolfe)

Notes
4. Astonishingly, Kracauer doesn’t explain this reference, though he often mentioned Blumenberg as a valued interlocutor and even references his Paradigms for a Metaphorology; cf. Kracauer, History, p. 95, p. 234.
Works Cited


