

Haze: On Nebular Modernism

[Steven Connor](#)

A paper given at Modernism and Beyond: Interdisciplinary Seminar in Art Theory and Literary Theory, Trinity College, Oxford, 12 May 2006.

Culture and the Weather

In *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie has Gibreel Farishta reflect on the ways in which 'the moral fuzziness of the English was meteorologically induced', and enumerates the benefits that might arise from a metamorphosis of London into a tropical city:

increased moral definition, institution of a national siesta, development of vivid and expansive patterns of behaviour among the populace, higher-quality popular music, new birds in trees (macaws, peacocks, cockatoos), new trees under the birds (coco-palms,, tamarind, banyans with hanging beards). Improved street-life, outrageously coloured flowers (magenta, vermilion, neon-green), spider-monkeys in the oaks... better cricketers; higher emphasis on ball-control among professional footballers, the traditional and soulless commitment to 'high workrate' having been rendered obsolete by the heat. Religious fervour, political ferment, renewal of interest in the intelligentsia...Spicier food; the use of water as well as paper in English toilets; the joy of running fully dressed through the first rains of the monsoon. (Rushdie 1988, 354-5)

In general, we find this kind of parallel between culture and weather either pleasantly absurd, or true only in so general or folkish a sense as to lack any real interest or utility. It is not that there are no intelligible parallels between conditions of weather and conditions of the soul - the many climatic terms we have to designate the vicissitudes of personal and national character see to that.). It is that the parallels are too well-established. Culture and the weather seem to run on parallel tracks, each a metaphor for the other, that only rarely, and gratuitously intersect as effects rather than images of each other. Culture and weather are different orders, connected only by mediations so vast and complex that no nontrivial determinations can really be established. The

weather has temporality - we might say it is all tempestuous temporality - but no history. The time of the weather is a time without retention. It is pure fluctuation, without pattern, memory or history, movement without duration or direction or progression. Human affairs are historical in the sense that its time is bound in protention and retention: the past is actively involved in the present, and the future is an active production of the present. One may chronicle the weather to be sure; but weather has no history in this sense.

One of the rare attempts to offer something like a meteorological history is Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. At the end of chapter 4, Woolf gives us an historical transition rendered in meteorological terms. Orlando, now a female inhabitant of the eighteenth century, looks back on the 'huddle and conglomeration' of the previous century:

A white haze lay over the town, for it was a frosty night in midwinter and a magnificent vista lay all round her. She could see St Paul's, the Tower, Westminster Abbey, with all the spires and domes of the city churches, the smooth bulk of its banks, the opulent and ample curves of its halls and meeting-places. On the north rose the smooth, shorn heights of Hampstead, and in the west the streets and squares of Mayfair shone out in one clear radiance. Upon this serene and orderly prospect the stars looked down, glittering, positive, hard, from a cloudless sky. In the extreme clearness of the atmosphere the line of every roof, the cowl of every chimney, was perceptible; even the cobbles in the streets showed distinct one from another, and Orlando could not help comparing this orderly scene with the irregular and huddled purlieu which had been the city of London in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. (Woolf 1972, 157)

Her retrospect anticipates a cinematic move that announces the arrival of a new century. On the stroke of midnight, a small cloud appears behind St Paul's and begins to spread across the sky:

the cloud spread north. Height upon height above the city was engulfed by it. Only Mayfair, with all its lights shining, burnt more brilliantly than ever by contrast. With the eighth stroke, some hurrying tatters of cloud sprawled over Piccadilly. They seemed to mass themselves and to advance with extraordinary rapidity towards the west end. As the ninth, tenth, and eleventh strokes struck, a huge blackness sprawled over the whole of London.

With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete.
A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city.

All was darkness; all was doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun. (Woolf 1972, 158-9)

Here, it is the very legibility of cultural-historical and meteorological parallels that make them instances of pathetic fallacy. And yet, even to put it this way suggests that we may be entering a different order, one in which, as Michel Serres has put it in *The Natural Contract*, nature has for the first time entered history and history has entered nature, thereby changing the means of nature and history, and giving a new meaning to the term 'natural history'. Is the fact of nature entering history a natural fact, or an historical fact?

I want to sift through some instances of the engagement among modernist artists with a particular meteorological phenomenon. The naming of weather phenomena is always approximate, but I have given my subject the term 'haze', though I mean this designation it to spread, hazily enough, over other phenomena like mist, fog and smog. As indistinction itself, it is not possible to distinguish absolutely the features and functions of haze - to draw the line between mist, haze, fog. I mean nevertheless to try to make out the terms of a general affinity between modernism and the nebular. I will try to show that modernist haze was a phenomenon not just of ambivalence, but, more exactly, of interference, an accidental mixing of registers and channels. It is a kind of visual noise, which implicates the conditions of perception and registration in its nature. While modernist painters and writers sought to capture the effects of haze, to make visible the forms and effects of indiscernibility and compromised vision, it was never clear what it would mean to get a fix on that shifting dimness, to get the unfocussed in perspective. In one sense, haze was the residue of the past, which threatened to dissolve all distinctions, thwarting the subject's attempts to achieve clarity and distinctness. But the very indistinctness of haze was also, for a significant number of modernist artists, an objective, a vocation and a provocation.

Traditions of the Air

Modernism inherits two traditions or sets of associations with regard to haze. First of all, there is Romantic haze, which does not belong entirely or securely to the period we know as Romanticism. This is the haze of glamour, or diffused radiance. It is governed by what, in my *Book of Skin* (Connor 2004,

159)I characterised as the logic of the aura. The logic of the aura is that what spills out from the body of persons or entities of particular sanctity or spiritual power is also retained by it; the aura forms a second skin, or series of such skins, which remains held in by and obedient to the contours of the first. The aura is an emanation which, like the logos, goes forth from and yet also remains, and remains in, itself; as the Kabbalistic Zohar says, it breaks out and yet does not depart. It also sets that origin apart, keeps it, as Benjamin would later say in 'The Work of Art In An Age of Mechanical Reproduction', at a reverent distance. The idea of a shining mist is a magical compromise between two principles - the scattering or diffraction of light, and the gathering or lingering of that light in a visible form. A mist both diffuses and detains radiance.

In Matthew Arnold's 'The Youth of Nature', haze is imbued with this kind of richness, which keeps the diffused spirit of Wordsworth intact:

The mountains stand at its head
 Clear in the pure June-night,
 But the valleys are flooded with haze.
 Rydal and Fairfield are there;
 In the shadow Wordsworth lies dead.
 So it is, so it will be for aye. (Arnold 1979, 259-60)

There is another tradition of the vaporous, which accounts for traditions of will o' the wisps, and other such atmospheric mirages. According to this tradition, perception is endangered by the exhalations from the ground, just as bodily health is. Dreams and delusions are contaminations of the pure, crystalline transparency of eye and mind. Britain was notorious for the haziness of its atmosphere, though Swift thought Ireland even worse, and the prospect of living there prompted in him an unusual sense of the word 'atmospherical', as meaning subject to atmospheric influences: 'If I lived in Ireland, I fear the wet climate would endanger...my humour, and health; I am so atmospherical a creature.'

This tradition of hostility towards the corrupt and corrupting nether air reemerges in the concerns about fog, smog and other airborne emanations in urban environments. There was little mellowness in the season of mists that affected urban environments in the nineteenth century. These depictions of fog, the most extended and uncompromising of which is, of course, Dickens's at the beginning of *Bleak House*, inherit the vaporous sensibility of the medieval and late modern world, for whom mists and fogs are held to be unhealthy

exhalations from the ground, constituting a funerary air, full of infection, as opposed to the ethereal lucidity of the upper air. The radiant haze broke out from objects and persons of unusual vitality, and marked off their singularity. Dickens's fog does not allow for distinctions, but creates a kind of universal association in non-identity:

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon and hanging in the misty clouds. (Dickens 1971, 49)

Fog is the undoing of place and spatial differentiation. The fog creeps in and out of every crevice, and turns the earthly into the airborne.

Vaguer in the Air, More Soluble

Many modernist artists defined their impulses and ambitions in terms of a desire for hard edges and a hostility towards the gaseous. To make it new was to burn off the dim mists of faerie. Ezra Pound memorably counselled an art of crystalline hard edges and outlines, counselling in 1913, 'Don't use such an expression as 'dim lands of peace'. It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the adequate symbol.' If the cloud that spreads over London in chapter four of *Orlando* suggests that the nineteenth century could be seen as one long, clammy unremitting Brumaire, then the urban glamour of the fogs and mists that multiplied at the end of the nineteenth century - the Celtic twilight, the suffocating hothouse of symbolism - were a more dangerous, because more alluring form of this fog. Another anathematising of the

atmospheric is to be found in the manifesto appended to the first number of Wyndham Lewis's *Blast!* in 1914. Before getting on to what we might regard as the serious acts of commination (Parisians, sport, Victorianism, the 'purgatory of Putney'), the manifesto blasts the English climate:

BLAST First (from politeness) ENGLAND CURSE ITS
CLIMATE FOR ITS SINS AND INFECTIONS DISMAL
SYMBOL, SET round our bodies, of effeminate lout
within. VICTORIAN VAMPIRE, the LONDON cloud suck the
TOWN's heart (Lewis 1914, 899)

Pausing only to inveigh against the mildness of the Gulf Stream, which is responsible for various nauseating sins of mildness and temperateness in the English character, the manifesto returns to its atmospheric theme:

CURSE the flabby sky that can manufacture no snow, but can only
drop the sea on us in a drizzle like a poem by Mr. Robert
Bridges. CURSE the lazy air that cannot stiffen the back of the
SERPENTINE, or put Aquatic steel half way down the
MANCHESTER CANAL But ten years ago we saw distinctly
both snow and ice here. May some vulgarly inventive, but useful
person arise and restore us to the necessary BLIZZARDS. LET US
ONCE MORE WEAR THE ERMINE OF THE NORTH.
(Lewis 1914, 900)

If this form of modernism attempts to dispel the mists of glamour and of stupor; another had already begun to recognise in haze a particular compartment towards the in-between, to the background noise constituted by atmospheric. Increasingly, haze becomes a necessary condition of perception, the imaging of perception itself.

An important ingredient in the cultural atmospheric of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the hazes of tobacco associated with esoteric and Bohemian culture. Eugene Umberger (2004) has charted the large number of works in praise of tobacco and smoking that appeared in the late nineteenth century, such as Arthur Machen's *The Anatomy of Tobacco* (1884), and J.M. Barrie's *My Lady Nicotine* (1890), later subtitled *A Study in Smoke*. The blue haze of the smoker's atmosphere was often presented as an externalised image of cerebration. For Sherlock Holmes, the solving of problems seems to require a more literal dissolution, in the conversion of large quantities of tobacco into smoke, a process which seems to transform the corporeal into the cerebral, as

in this description of an all-night exercise in problem-solving from 'The Man With the Twisted Lip':

[H]e constructed a sort of Eastern divan, upon which he perched himself cross-legged, with an ounce of shag tobacco and a box of matches laid out in front of him. In the dim light of the lamp I saw him sitting there, an old briar pipe between his lips, his eyes fixed vacantly upon the corner of the ceiling, the blue smoke curling up from him, silent, motionless, with the light shining upon his strong-set aquiline features. So he sat as I dropped off to sleep, and so he sat when a sudden ejaculation caused me to wake up, and I found the summer sun shining into the apartment. The pipe was still between his lips, the smoke still curled upward, and the room was full of a dense tobacco haze, but nothing remained of the heap of shag which I had seen upon the previous night. (Doyle 1981, 240)

Smoking was also closely associated with psychoanalysis, and not only because of the well-known attachment to cigars of its founder. According to Lydia Marinelli, 'an unbreakable connection is posited between psychoanalysis, tobacco, and the disappearance of metaphysics' in Wilhelm Stekel's account of the early days of psychoanalysis in his 'Conversations on Smoking' of 1903 (Marinelli 2004, 35). Others, like T.S. Eliot, were less enamoured of the 'tobacco trance', and presented smoke as an image of a thought that had lost its grounds or definition, as in the early poem 'Interlude in a Bar': 'Across the room the shifting smoke/Settles around the forms that pass/Pass through or clog the brain' (Eliot 1996, 51). Another early poetic fragment by Eliot makes out from the inertia of smoke an image of matter sullenly persisting in defiance of human vigour:

The smoke that gathers blue and sinks
 The torpid smoke of rich cigars
 The torpid after-dinner drinks
 The overpowering immense
 After-dinner insolence
 Of matter going "by itself"
 Existence just about to die
 Stifled with glutinous liqueurs (Eliot 1996, 70)

One surprising philosophical resource for what we might call 'nebular modernism' is to be found in the work of Nietzsche. Surprising, because, of

course, Nietzsche, described aptly by Bachelard as the philosopher of eminence, also provides modernism with much of its rhetoric of eagle-eyed lucidity. The alpine *Übermensch* looks down imperiously and disdainfully on the huddled, timorous, mist-saturated lowlands of cowardice and resentment. But, in *On The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* (1874), Nietzsche is to be found arguing for the necessity of a certain obnubilation. The historical sense is a 'vivid flash of light' [*ein heller, blitzender Lichtschein*] that breaks out of the 'encompassing cloud' [*umschliessenden Dunstwolke*] of unhistorical existence. Although, says Nietzsche, this makes a man out of a man, it carries severe penalties. For life requires forgetfulness, illusion:

The unhistorical is like an atmosphere with which alone life can germinate and with the destruction of which it must vanish...When the historical senses reigns *without restraint*, and all its consequences are realized, it uproots the future because it destroys illusions and robs things of the atmosphere in which alone they can live...All living things require an atmosphere around them, a mysterious misty vapour; if they are deprived of this envelope, if a religion, an art, a genius is condemned to revolve as a star without atmosphere, we should no longer be surprised if they quickly wither and grow hard and unfruitful. (Nietzsche 1983, 64-5, 95, 97)

Even more surprisingly, Nietzsche thinks that this atmosphere of illusion is so necessary and nutritive, that it can actually help one to attain a 'suprahistorical' perspective: 'If...one could scent out and retrospectively breathe this unhistorical atmosphere with which every great historical event has taken place, he might, as a percipient being, raise himself to a *suprahistorical* vantage point' (Nietzsche 1983, 94-5)

The affinity for mists and clouds in the late nineteenth century is represented in painting by the remarkable works of Monet and Whistler. Where the mist, fog and steam of many of Turner's canvases were dynamic, funnelling down into vortices of indistinctness, as though one were looking down from a thunderhead into a cyclone, the fogs of Monet and Whistler represent a kind of collision of the principles of incandescence and obscurity. This is a difficulty for the eye formed from dim dazzle, rather than from darkness. Here, light has become thickened into matter, as though captured like an insect in the slow ooze of resin. Haze is the complication of light: light made obscuringly visible. In haze, light is both magnified and congealed, in dense, yet ethereal detention.

These paintings have often been seen as harbingers of abstraction, since they seem to show the recession of their apparent objects away from the eye. We seem to be being taught to be content with the daubed approximations of the paint itself. It is unclear whether we are supposed to be trying to look through the pigment to what it seems both to present and obscure, or look at the obscuring effect itself. The medium of the painting is supposed to come between us and its spectral subject, even as it makes visible that betweenness.

Haze is particulate. The characteristics of haze, fog and mist derive from their scattering of light. Haze instances and anticipates what might be called the particulate dream of modernism, the dream of being able to register and merge with the infinite multiplicity of the atomic constitution of matter. Fidelity to what Woolf called a 'luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end' (Woolf 1984, 150) is associated with the idea of 'an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old' (Woolf 1984, 150). The cloud or the haze, 'vague in the air, more soluble' ('plus vague et plus soluble dans l'air') in Verlaine's phrase from his 1874 poem 'Art poétique' (Verlaine 1962, 362), is the precipitated compromise between the conjoined but contradictory impulses towards the integral and the disintegrated to be found both in Woolf and in other modernists. It is not clear what is the correct focal length for the viewing of such scenes, not clear where its viewer is supposed to be. As in pointillisme, we can only see the painting when we can no longer see the elements of which it is composed. We can only see the painting when we have advanced close enough upon it for our vision to be decomposed or atomised.

If there is no privileged or prescribed place to occupy in order to make out the *Gestell* or disposition of the scene for the eye, similarly, there is no punctual moment of seeing. If mist or haze seems to suspend time, it also testifies to the fascinating, incessant drift of duration. Hence, perhaps, Monet's strange obsession with painting and repainting the same or similar scenes - the renderings of Charing Cross Bridge, or Waterloo Bridge, or the Houses of Parliament. They seem to suggest, not only a series of compositions, but also a composite viewing, an overlaying of filters, which themselves approximate more and more closely to the subject, which is obscurity itself. Michel Serres has often returned in his writings to the contrast between what he calls 'scenography' and 'ichnography'. In scenography, one sees singular appearances, made available at a particular moment, from a particular perspective. An ichnography is 'the ensemble of possible profiles, the sum of horizons. Ichnography is what is possible or knowable, or producible, it is the

phenomenological well-spring, the pit. It is the complete chain of metamorphoses of the sea god Proteus, it is Proteus itself' (Serres 1995, 19). This distinction arises from Serres's reflections on Balzac's story 'Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu' which constitute a large part of his book *Genesis*. At the climax of the story, the old painter Frenhofer shows his two friends his masterpiece, in which they can see '[a] mass of confused colours, hemmed by a multitude of bizarre lines forming a wall of paint' (Balzac 1979, 436; my translation). And yet he insists that the very dissolution of the subject is what he has sought: the essence of the woman he has painting is airy, cloudy:

'There is such depth in that canvas, its air is so true, that you cannot distinguish it from the air that is your element. Where is art? Lost, vanished! These are the very forms of a young girl. Have I not captured the colour, the life of the line that seems to complete the body? Is this not the same phenomenon as that presented to us by objects that are in their atmosphere like fish are in water?' (Balzac 1979, 435; my translation).

Serres takes this story, on which Henry James drew for 'The Figure in the Carpet', and which Picasso also greatly admired, as an allegory for the idea of an art that would be able not only to redouble the visual information that perception picks out from background noise, but the background noise itself, the formlessness that is a constitutive part of every perception, every sign:

The work, through profiles, snapshots, Protean shapes, emerges from the perturbation, from the noisy turbulent sea around the island of Pharos, flashes, occultations, of the protophare. Without this pile-up, without this unknowable ichnography, there are no profiles, no work. It is necessary to dare to unveil the ichnography, at times, the one we always carry with us, in the dark, and as though secreted, in a receded nook, under a veil. Like a palette. (Serres 1995, 18-19)

One can find the same oscillation between radiance and fog, signal and noise, emergence and immersion, in the work of Joseph Conrad. Conrad of course insisted that the job of the writer is to 'make you *see*' (Conrad 1984, xlii), but often what he wanted his reader to see was the effect of dimming and dazzling provided by haze. The meaning of the seaman-narrator's yarns, Conrad informs us in a much-quoted and requoted passage, 'was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze'. This is usually read to mean that Marlow's stories, like Conrad's, have

their meaning as a result of the lights cast across it, necessarily obliquely, by some exterior source of illumination - the listener, or reader, perhaps. As has often been noticed, one can track the appearances of haze and mist within Conrad's writing too - and Wendy B. Faris (1989) has drawn some extremely suggestive parallels between the rendering of haziness in the painting of Turner and Conrad's writing. Conrad's work oscillates between different meanings of the mist. Mist will sometimes represent a clarifying background, from which details may suddenly, precisely, be picked out, as in this passage from the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*:

The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance. The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist on the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. (Conrad 1971, 4)

But, later on in the story, the white mist that descends on the boat that makes its way up the Congo river, embodies disembodiment.

When the sun rose there was a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night. It did not shift or drive; it was just there, standing all round you like something solid. At eight or nine, perhaps, it lifted as a shutter lifts. We had a glimpse of the towering multitude of trees, of the immense matted jungle, with the blazing little ball of the sun hanging over it — all perfectly still — and then the white shutter came down again, smoothly, as if sliding in greased grooves. (Conrad 1971, 40)

The associations between photography and spiritualism at the end of the nineteenth century may have been at work somewhere behind that image of the fog lifting and coming down again like a vast eyelid or the shutter of a camera. Photographers of mediums and séances not only sought to capture the spectral masses of spirit-bodies, or the billowing cumulus of ectoplasm, they also seemed to see an analogy between the actual apparatus of the photograph, so given to producing silvered mistiness, and this gelling of light or spirit-energy into indeterminate form. Conrad's interest in undulatory and radiation theories may also have helped him appreciate the effects of X-ray radiation, discovered only four years before the writing of *Heart of Darkness*. On the one hand, X-rays penetrated the flabbily obscuring veils of the flesh, to reveal the bony essence of what lay within. But X-rays also left visible traces of that pervaded flesh,

dissolving it to a spectral haze or plasma, which, as Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère suggests (2004), seems close to the hollow, insubstantial bodies found in *Heart of Darkness* (the figure of Kurtz, for example, whose form will appear 'unsteady, long, pale, indistinct, like a vapour exhaled by the earth' (Conrad 1971, 66).

Rather than picking things out of the background, it is a bringing forward of the background itself, as an infigurable, defiguring figure without ground:

What we could see was just the steamer we were on, her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving, and a misty strip of water, perhaps two feet broad, around her--and that was all. The rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind. (Conrad 1971, 40-1)

Interference

The change in signification of haze during the nineteenth century is accompanied and in some part enabled by the rapid development of atmospheric and meteorological sciences.. One of the most important conduits of scientific ideas into literary and artistic life were the writings of John Tyndall. Tyndall had a particular interest in atmospheric phenomena, especially in relation to their optical effects. Tyndall took a strong interest in the question of how to make lighthouses effective in different atmospheric conditions, contributing a series of letters to *The Times* on the subject. But his interest in enhancing the clarity of visual signals cooperated with a highly-developed sensitivity to the saturation of space - to the cooperations, compoundings and contaminations of space. For Tyndall, not just the physical atmosphere, but the whole of cosmic space was continuously traversed, in all directions, by different kinds of impulse and radiation. He proposed that the sum total of these radiations be called 'the temperature of space'. The atmosphere became 'a vehicle of universal intercommunication' (Tyndall 1881, xiii). Among Tyndall's more significant achievements was work to explain the coloration of the sky. In later years, he became interested in atmospheric pollution, and an adherent of a theory of airborne infection that was tending to lose ground with the advent of the bacterial theory of disease. Tyndall was a significant contributor to the sense of the density and noisiness of space, permeated and perturbed by radiations of all kinds - of heat, light, and electro-magnetic force.

What the atmospheric science of the nineteenth century began to display was that the atmosphere is not just affected by contamination and irregularity - it is constituted of it. The atmosphere is the ultimate 'mixed body', made of up of distributions, communications and interferences. Inbetweenness becomes the normative condition of the atmospheric.

Tyndall's work would not have been possible without the confirmation of the wave theory of light at the beginning of the century, through the elegant experiment conducted by Thomas Young at the Royal Society that became known as the 'double-slit' experiment. This involved splitting a beam of light into two, and then allowing the two beams to come together again. Just as a wave that recoils upon itself when hitting an obstruction creates patterns of irregular amplification where peaks and troughs of waves coincide, so there were characteristic bars of lightness where periods of high light intensity coincided and patches of darkness where a peak and a trough coincided and cancelled each other out. The ether theories that flourished through the nineteenth century developed more and more complex accounts of physical phenomena, including matter itself, as due to the effect of various kinds of torsion or interference in the ether (Connor 2004).

Haze is itself an interference phenomenon, in several senses. First of all, its optical effects come about because of the scattering of light rays by minute droplets of water suspended in the air. But it also embodies what might be called an interference of registers, a compounding of light and matter. Haze represents the interchange between the palpable and the impalpable, light made semi-solid. The population of the air with electronic impulses and radiations of all kinds vitiated the imaginary lucidity of the air, making for a new alertness to impediment and interference. Haze is a pervasive, versatile image of the signifying resistance - a resistance out of which signification comes - of the atmosphere. And, of course, interference became a new experience and a new metaphor for the unpredictable relations of things. If symbolism shifted into a poetic register the scientific apprehension of immateriality - the dissolution of solid matter into particles and forces in late nineteenth-century physics - then modernism began to see that a world of energies would be a world without permanent forms or distinctions.

Modernist haze brings the sky down to earth, or dissolves the grounds of the earth, dissolving the relations of between sky and earth, creating interference patterns between high and low, frontality and immersion. The meaning of modernist haze is the loss of the sky - or, at least, the loss of its distance - its aura of unapproachability. We have begun to see the emergence of an

architecture of the mid-air. In 2002, the New York based architectural firm Diller + Scofidio created an ephemeral structure as part of the Swiss expo 2000 in the waters of lake Neuchatel. Their [*Blur Pavilion*](#) was a suspended platform 300 feet long covered in an artificially-produced cloud or fog, produced from 31400 jets spraying tiny drops of lake water into the air (Diller and Scofidio 2002).

Atmospherics

There is another form of interference involved in the modernist atmosphere, namely that between eye and ear. Increasingly, the space of the sky is an aural space. Even its visible occupants and obstructions present themselves in terms of aural correlatives. Indeed, one might say that the concept of interference auralises the space of the air. This kind of transcoding occurs in the white mist on the Congo river:

I ordered the chain, which we had begun to heave in, to be paid out again. Before it stopped running with a muffled rattle, a cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation, soared slowly in the opaque air. It ceased. A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears. The sheer unexpectedness of it made my hair stir under my cap. I don't know how it struck the others: to me it seemed as though the mist itself had screamed, so suddenly, and apparently from all sides at once, did this tumultuous and mournful uproar arise. (Conrad 1971, 40)

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the air acquired a new accent. Users of telephones had for many years become inured to the annoyance of fizzing, crackling and other strange noises of electrical interference, and familiar with the haphazard of 'bad lines' and 'good lines'. Even before the appearance of telephone wires, telegraph wires looped across the landscape from what are still in Britain called 'telegraph poles' seemed to suggest a kind of exposure to the air, and the possibility that the air might become implicated in the messages transmitted. But the development of radio, which was transmitted through the air, made for a new vulnerability of transmitted sound (and, later on, television images) to the vicissitudes of the air. What came through the air was the sound of what had broken through into the signal carried 'on the air':

now even a plain nor'wester can't howl a bit without getting tangled in a most amazing assortment of saxophone blues, stock quotations, tenor grace notes, hints on how to hold a husband, and what to do when your partner bids three hearts - all pushing relentlessly to keep a rendezvous with the peepul.

Nor are these the sum of strange things that the plain nor'wester encounters. Sometimes it runs into a play being broadcast over the radio. A voice cries, "Stand back, you bully!" and the nor'wester, amazed, asks, "Who-oo-ooo?" (Augsburg 1927, 4)

Where previously the air had been audible only in the relatively familiar and recognisable forms of the sighing and howlings of wind, electrification gave the air a new, more diffuse, unpredictable and illegible sonority, a new, more anguished music of the spheres. Atmospheric became the sphere in which a new conception of mixed and mutually pervasive bodies was worked out. The fortunes of the word 'atmosphere' itself express this. On the one hand, the word 'atmosphere' came to be used more and more to express the qualities of specific places or environments, according to the logic of the aura whereby a figure might be thought to exhale or extrude its own ground. But 'atmospherics' in general, came more and more to mean the effects of interference, suggesting the confusions, interpenetrations, unpredictable mutations and compoundings of those places.

The specialised interest in the haze of modernism gives way to arts and protocols of the atmospheric, a generalised occupation of the spaces of traversal and passage provided by the air. The air that had previously been the outside or the stabilising background of thought has become a populous inbetween, a milieu of the mid-air. The calm, lucid infinitude of the sky has given way, as Richard Hamblyn, biographer of Luke Howard, the inventor of the system of cloud-classifications used universally today, puts it, to 'skies vibrating, day and night, with an invisible topography of disturbance' (Hamblyn 2005, 90). As an example of the engagement of contemporary art, Hamblyn describes Usman Haque's remarkable sound installation of 2004, *Sky Ear*, which involved launching a cloud of 1000 helium filled balloons, each provided with a mobile phone, set to answer automatically. Once the balloons had ascended into the troposphere, the balloons could be dialled, and would answer with the electrosynaesthetic clamour of the middle air.

The work itself not only picks up interference, it is itself, like so much contemporary art, an effect of interference. As Haque explains, the original

conception for the piece was simply to create airborne sensors with LEDs that would respond by changing colour as they encountered fluctuations in electromagnetic fields, thereby making the invisible visible. The effect of adding the mobile phones to the structure was to create the possibility of interfering with that process. The effect of listening to the sounds is actually to 'change the local electromagnetic topography and cause disturbances in the EMF inside the cloud that alters the glow intensity and colour of that part of the balloon cloud' (Haque 2004, 1).

But Usman Haque has also sought to imagine new forms of enclosure or privacy, amid this exposed, universally permeated condition. Another of his projects is to build a series of jellyfish-like structures he has called 'Floatables' that could provide ephemeral spaces of quarantine from data-exchange, in which individuals could take recuperative shelter. As far as I know, these floatables have not in fact been constructed. '*For many people the vessels are nothing more than a rumour.* Floating around urban environments, in the tradition of architecture that tries to break free from the confines of gravity, the vessels provide fleeting moments of private visual space, auditory space and olfactory space'. Powered by sunlight and wind, the floatables fluctuate between the condition of actuality and dream, embodiments, perhaps of Woolf's 'luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end' (Woolf 1984, 150). They 'have no particular destinations and drift like flotsam around the city. However, they must keep moving because to be discovered by the authorities means almost certain destruction' (Haque 2006b).

Romantic and nineteenth century writers were still able to keep the mists, fogs and hazes that were their subject in focus. For modernist artists, haze was part of the atmosphere of thought and perception, the very factor which inhibited artists from getting a fix on things. The enlivening problem for modernist artists was how to write, paint, photograph, compose, from within the condition of the atmosphere. The modernist topos of haze has become a topography, an environment, a locale, the hovering, indistinct space we are making our occupation.

References

Arnold, Matthew (1979). *Poems*. Ed. Kenneth Allott. 2nd edn. ed Miriam Allott. London: Longman.

Augsburg, Paul Deresco (1927). *On The Air*. New York: D. Appleton and Co.

Balzac, Honoré de (1979). 'Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu.' *La Comédie humaine*. Vol 10. Paris: Gallimard, 413-38

Barrie, J.M. (1890). *My Lady Nicotine*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Connor, Steven (2004). *The Book of Skin*. London: Reaktion.

----- (2004). ' "Transported Shiver of Bodies": Weighing the Victorian Ether.' <<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/english/skc/ether/>>

Conrad, Joseph (1971). *Heart of Darkness*. 2nd edn. Ed. Robert Kimbrough. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co.

----- (1984). *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus': A Tale of the Sea*. Ed. Jacques Berthoud. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Dickens, Charles (1971). *Bleak House*. Ed. Norman Page. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Diller, Elizabeth and Scofidio, Ricardo (2002). *Blur: The Making of Nothing*. New York: H.N. Abrams.

Doyle, Arthur Conan (1981). *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes*. London: Penguin.

Eliot, T.S. (1996). *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917*. Ed. Christopher Ricks. London: Faber.

Faris, Wendy B. (1989). 'The "Dehumanization" of the Arts: J.M.W. Turner, Conrad, and the Advent of Modernism.' *Comparative Literature*, 41, 305-26.

Hamblyn, Richard (2005). 'A Celestial Journey', *Tate Etc*, 5, 84-91.

Haque, Usman (2006b). 'Floatables.'

<<http://www.haque.co.uk/floatables.php>>

----- (2006a). 'Sky Ear.' <<http://www.haque.co.uk/skyear/>>

----- (2004). 'Sky Ear: Concepts and Final Design.'

<<http://www.haque.co.uk/skyear/skyearconceptsanddesign.pdf>>

Lewis, Percy Wyndham, et. al. (1914). 'Manifesto.' *Blast: Review of the Great English Vortex*, 1, 899-920.

Machen, Arthur [as 'Leolinus Siluriensis'] (1884). *The Anatomy of Tobacco: or, Smoking Methodised, Divided, and Considered After a New Fashion*. London: G. Redway.

Marinelli, Lydia (2004). 'Smoking, Laughing, and the Compulsion to Film: On the Beginnings of Psychoanalytic Documentaries.' *American Imago*, 61, 35-58.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1983). 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life'. In *Untimely Meditations*, ed. R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 57-123.

Rochère, Martine Hennard Dutheil de la (2004). 'Body Politics: Conrad's Anatomy of Empire in Heart of Darkness.' *Conradiana*, 36, 185-205.

Rushdie, Salman (1988). *The Satanic Verses*. London: Viking.

Serres, Michel (1995). *Genesis*. Trans. Geneviève James and James Nielson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Tyndall, John (1881). *Essays on the Floating Matter of the Air, In Relation to Putrefaction and Infection*. London: Longmans Green and Co.

Umberger, Eugene (2004). 'In Praise of Lady Nicotine: A Bygone Era of Prose, Poetry ... and Presentation.' In *Smoke: A Global History of Smoking*, ed. Sander L. Gilman and Zhou Xun. London: Reaktion, 236-47.

Verlaine, Paul (1962). *Oeuvres poétiques complètes*. Ed. Y.G. Le Dantec and Jacques Borel. Paris: Gallimard.

Woolf, Virginia (1984). 'Modern Fiction.' *The Common Reader: First Series*. London: Harcourt, 146-154.

----- (1972). *Orlando: A Biography*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.