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Nebulous Cinema

Tiago de Luca

Across the history of visual arts and media, clouds occupy a special place. And yet clouds are fugitive, hard to capture. They resist representation and meaning. To say something is nebulous, cloudy or foggy is to concede that such a thing is semiotically ill-defined, lacking clear signifying contours. Yet, perhaps for this very reason, clouds have for many centuries fascinated scientists and artists alike. They appear in perspectival representational systems, typological exercises and now serve as the metaphoric container of information and data, practices that attempt to tame the cloud and freeze its elusive, unpredictable contours.

Clouds are masses of condensed water floating in the sky. But we also find clouds on the surface of the earth in the form of fog, tiny water droplets condensed near the ground. Mist is formed through the same process as fogs, its difference being that it does not obscure visibility as much. More generally, we speak of clouds of haze, dust and smoke. Haze occurs when air enters into contact with fine, dry suspended particulates, including dust and smoke, the last resulting from the combustion of carbon or other chemical particles in the air. These substances, then, are not necessarily interchangeable with each other. Yet, as billowing masses averse to stillness and defined by perpetual variability, all clouds share common ontological properties. This article will group them together under the rubric of the “nebulous,” and probe its conceptual and aesthetic relationship with the cinema.
Thanks to its motion properties, film is uniquely suited to render and record cloud formations. Fog, smoke and mist are pervasive through the entire history of cinema and crop up in an array of genres and traditions, including, but not limited to, the “atmosphere film” of French poetic realism (Andrew, 1995), German expressionism, the horror movie and expanded cinema (Furuhashi, 2022). In fact, open many filmmaking guidebooks and you will find somewhere the maxim that fog and mist make your work more “cinematic” (Shinnick, 2019). What would film history look like if traced from the perspective of cloud forms? This article hopes to sketch out the first contours of such a history by honing in on a durational cinematic tradition, from the “landscape film” of the 1970s through to contemporary slow cinema. And it will conceive of such a history as intermedial both in the sense that it extrapolates the boundaries of the film medium and in that it treats fog, mist and clouds as elemental “media” in their own right.

As Antonio Somaini (2016: 62) describes, there is “a long, post-Aristotelian tradition” of media diaphana according to which “material, intermediary, diaphanous substances (air, vapor, smoke, clouds, water, glass…) […] with their different consistencies and their different degrees of transparency and opacity, structure the visual environment in which our experience takes place.” A medium, within this tradition, is not to be taken in today’s technical sense of a message transmitter, but as the elemental modulation of the field of perception. Understood as the breathable environment in which human and nonhuman beings are immersed, air is furthermore a medium of life, the fundamental substance upon which many life forms depend for survival on planet Earth (Ingold, 2007; Horn, 2018).

Film and media studies have recently undergone an “atmospheric turn” whereby texts are evaluated on the basis of the “atmospheres” they emanate through a variety of formal and

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1 The history of cinema is also not shorn of instances where naturally occurring fog interfered with the studio’s hermetic aspirations. See Jacobson, 2015: 182; Farmer, 2022.
technical means (Hven, 2022). As Gernot Böhme (2017: 25) writes, “The term itself, ‘atmosphere,’ derives from meteorology and, as a designation for an ambient quality, has a number of synonyms that likewise connote the airy, cloudy, or indefinite: these include climate, nimbus, aura, fluid.” I hope to contribute to this debate by focusing on the durational rendering of atmospheric phenomena in film and related media, and its implications for questions of ecology, aesthetics and experience. I suggest that it is not a coincidence that vaporous textures have an illustrious presence in the durational tradition. Drifting in real time, clouds offer a visual reclamation of the temporal. They also interrogate the legibility of the image and act as material evidence of a world in flux, thereby debunking fixed conceptions of nature and environment.

The article is divided into three sections. The first part travels to the nineteenth century in order to survey the ubiquity of clouds in both scientific and artistic enterprises. Although clouds at the time were restricted to static media such as painting and photography, some works already showed a propensity to capture their transient elusiveness in the context of new conceptions of energy and rising air pollution. The second section jumps forward in time to examine the prevalence of fog and mist in a strand of experimental cinema often categorised as “landscape film,” including Larry Gottheim’s Fog Line (1970), Takahiko Iimura’s Fog (1970) and Chris Welsby’s Drift (1994). I argue that this category is insufficient in itself to account for the elemental variations of air in such films, which latch on to the fog as a way to interrogate perception and convey a processual view of nature. The last section turns to the resurgence of cloud-like forms in slow cinema in the context of the increased toxification and weaponisation of the atmosphere, with a focus on Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s Vapour (2015) and Tsai Ming-liang’s I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone (2007), both of which are examined against Forensic Architecture’s Cloud Studies (2020). In these durational films past and present, I hope to show, the nebulous is not to be understood in the negative sense usually attributed to it, but,
on the contrary, as an aesthetic form of sensuous knowing that brings the immersive medium of air to the forefront of our perception.

Pictures of Nothing

In his incisive *Terror from the Air* (2009), Peter Sloterdijk contends that WWI marks a watershed in military battle tactics because of the militarisation of air. Sloterdijk has a specific date and place in mind: the chlorine-filled cylinders used by the Germans in April 22, 1915 in the northern Ypres Salient. These, according to him, targeted not the enemy’s body, but his immediate surroundings, that is, his environment. What was once a background given, the breathable air of the environment, was suddenly made visible, “explicated,” through a tampering with the natural conditions of the atmosphere. Sloterdijk (2009: 25) notes: “air and atmosphere – the primary media for life, in both the physical and metaphorical sense – only became an object of explicit consideration and monitoring in domains such as aero-technics, medicine, law, politics, aesthetics and cultural theory in response to their terrorist deprivation.” Sloterdijk overstates this historical timeframe, however. In fact, as John Durham Peters (2016: 257) notes, “[t]here was no more central theme in nineteenth-century British, French, and German literature, science, and art than clouds.” Although clouds had proliferated in paintings since at least the sixteenth century (see Damisch, 2002), they assumed, quite literally, new shapes and forms in the context of increased air pollution and the rise of meteorological sciences. We can discern two, sometimes overlapping, traditions of cloud picturing at the time.

On the one hand, there was the desire to parse the rebellious formlessness of clouds into definitive and domesticated forms. We may call this tendency ‘scientific’. Already in 1803, the amateur meteorologist Luke Howard, influenced by a Linnean morphological description of organisms, proposed in his illustrated *Essay on the Modification of Clouds* a classification of clouds into three main types – stratus, cumulus and cirrus – and a number of intermediary and
compound sub-types. From Goethe’s theory of colours through to John Constable’s 1820s “cloud studies,” Howard’s essay would prove influential. When the first International Atlas of Clouds and of States of the Sky was published in 1896, almost a century later, it largely adopted Howard’s nomenclature, which is still in vogue to this date. The first cloud atlas, however, consisted almost entirely of photographs rather than drawings. While clouds posed challenges for photography’s fixed stare, the medium was recruited because of its capacity to separate clouds out into recognisable types. As Lorraine Daston (2016: 66-67) explains: “Only the photographic still could […] frame the moment of typicality [of a particular cloud] before it dissolved into something else.”

On the other hand, clouds multiplied because their presence clouded certainty and meaning. We may call this tendency ‘aesthetic’ in the foundational sense proposed by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in the late eighteenth century. Against rationalism and the Cartesian motto of “clear and distinct,” Baumgarten introduced the concept of aesthetics to refer to sensuous rather than intellectual knowledge: the experience of perception as simultaneously clear and indistinct (Euron, 2019: 59-60). The transient elusiveness of clouds, in this tradition, makes it the aesthetic trope par excellence (Blaettler, 2021: 18). As Steven Connor (2010: 178) has shown, the “indistinctness of haze” manifested in phenomena like mist, smoke and fog was, “for a significant number of modernist artists” – including Dickens, Woolf, Turner and Monet – “an objective, a vocation and a provocation,” “a necessary condition of perception in the imaging of perception itself” (181).

Turner’s paintings constituted a watershed in cloud painting upon their appearance, inciting divided responses. For the critic William Hazlitt (1869: 90), writing in 1817, they were condemnable “representations not so properly of the objects of nature as of the medium through which they are seen.” As their formlessness eroded figuration and meaning, they could well be deemed “pictures of nothing.” Hazlitt’s condemnation, Somaini (2019) tells us, discloses a
contemporaneous formulation of medium as the elemental milieu in which perception takes place. For the art critic John Ruskin, the author of the multivolume *Modern Painters* (1843-1860), clouds figured as notoriously difficult subjects for painters due to their evanescence and filtering of light. On this basis alone, he, unlike Hazlitt, considered Turner a true genius. Whereas in the paintings of the “old masters,” “the blue sky [is] totally distinct in its nature, and far separated from the vapours which float in it,” something you looked at, Turner instead depicted the sky as a “trembling transparency,” “a deep, quivering, transparent body of penetrable air” *through* which you looked (Ruskin, 1848: 204). Informing both the praise and critique of Turner’s paintings was therefore the recognition of the insufficiency of the category of “landscape,” which became one with air-scapes as indistinct clouds that threatened to dissolve representation and semantics. We will see in the next section that these questions are still relevant when it comes to the “landscape film.”

More recent accounts of Turner have reappraised his work in relation to the Industrial Revolution. These studies highlight how the novelty of industrial combustion was made visible in paintings such as *The Fighting Temeraire* (1838) and *Rain, Steam, and Speed – The Great Western Railway* (1844), where smoke churning out from steam ships and trains mingles with atmospheric vapour, forming indistinct clouds. Michel Serres (1997: 10), for example, notes: “Seeming to penetrate into matter in fusion, the canvases of Turner efface the boundaries of things and make their limits tremble […] the outline is lost, on the canvas, in favor of a fuzzy edged cloud.” For Serres, Turner’s paintings revealed a nascent thermodynamic world: matter is energy and movement, and it moves, cloud-like, in time.

Although photography, as seen in the cloud atlas, was often recruited to capture clouds as objects rather than flow, some experiments did attempt to register its durational constitution in line with new conceptions of matter and energy. In 1867, a series of photographs by Eadweard Muybridge, taken in Yosemite and titled *Cloud Studies*, impressed writers and critics,
who were quick to position them as efforts comparable to Turner’s canvases (Nisbet, 2013: 133). As James Nisbet (136) has shown, Muybridge’s interest in clouds at the time extends to steam, mist and spray, often captured within the same picture and combined with other blur effects, such as waterfall streams registered in long exposure. For Nisbet, Muybridge’s cloud photographs are symptomatic of a displacement of Newton’s corpuscular mechanics in favour of an understanding of matter as energy and flux. Here, temporal blur, produced by water and vapour captured in long exposure, becomes a “vehicle for mediating the active role of light energy,” which “does not simply reflect off of objects, but is also embodied by them, or more exactly, by cloud” (142, emphasis in original). The cloud, in this sense, becomes itself an “atmospheric camera” (146), a medium that inscribes and condenses the passage of time.

When cinema emerged, it recorded rather than compressed the vagaries and clouds of airflow. As François Albera (2019: 37) shows, the first Lumière brothers’ films, by way of the fact that they were shot out in the open, introduced “the general movement of ‘life,’ of the environment in which the figures move – which only came to representation with cinema.” Early-cinema viewers and commentators were fascinated by film’s inscription of (often anthropogenic) particulate matter as these mixed with wind and ambient air. Byproducts of the steam engine and the smokestack, their cinematic expression evinced a material world in dispersive flux.

Cinema’s penchant for the diffuse motion of elemental forms, its predisposition for what Martine Beugnet (2015: 3) theorises as “the vague,” immediately aligns it with Baumgarten’s concept of aesthetics as one premised upon “the indefinite part of perception or experience.” The new medium, it soon became apparent, could not only “capture everything, the multitude and dispersion of movement recorded in its simultaneity and in duration, as it

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2 Nisbet analyses, among other examples, the stereographic plate Piwyack (Shower of Stars), Early Morning (1272), taken in Yosemite in 1872, in which all of these elemental occurrences are visible.
unfolds in time.” It could also “intensify our experience of the world’s constant transformation, its constitutive indeterminacy” (Beugnet, 2015: 3, emphasis in original). And while, as Beugnet notes, narrative cinema would swiftly ensure a Cartesian epistemology of “utmost clarity and precision – clear and distinct” (5), alternative traditions in experimental film and art cinema have preserved “the capture and expression of the ‘clear and confused’” (4). These traditions, she goes on, spring from a different aesthetic vision that advocates for “the incompleteness and constant variation of the perceived, the impossibility of a full and perfect knowledge of the world” (3). Beugnet singles out “the wave” as the trope par excellence of this aesthetic tradition. Yet the cloud is as good a contender.

The Drift of Duration

If the presence of atmospheric phenomena in early cinema was, to use Dai Vaughan’s (1999: 4) expression, to some extent “incidental” to the main action, in 1970s experimental cinema and beyond they would take centre stage. Films such as Larry Gottheim’s 1970 Fog Line, Takahiko Iimura’s 1970 Kiri (often translated as Fog), Sakumi Hagiwara’s 1972 Kiri (often translated as Mist), and practically all films by the British filmmaker Chris Welsby turned their attention to fog, mist and clouds.³ Often deploying static camerawork in conjunction with overstretched or time-lapsed shots to record elemental variations of air, these films fit into the “structural” branch of avant-garde cinema famously defined by P. Adams Sitney (2002) while also described as “landscape films” owing to their focus on natural views. In them, we note a radicalisation of early-cinema features, such as a locked-off camera recording the phenomenal world, as a strategy to denaturalise taken-for-granted properties of the medium and foreground the experience of film viewing. Their more or less synchronous appearance and attachment to cloud-forms, I want to suggest, testifies to the continuing allure of clouds as a limit-case object

³ One could also cite Peter Gidal’s 1970 Clouds. See Balsom, 2021: 76-77.
for representation and reinforces a processual conception of environments as enveloped in the fluxes of the weather.

Shot in Binghamton, upstate New York, where Gottheim lived at the time, *Fog Line* is a silent, single-take film that lasts nearly 11 minutes, the duration of the 16mm reel, and it centres on a landscape initially enshrouded by fog. At first, all we can make out as viewers is the faint outline of a tree in the middle of the screen and two sets of lines, which we later identify as power cables, that partition the image into three horizontal sections (Fig. 1). As the shot unfolds, and the fog thins out, the viewer can discern other trees in the background, as well as the undulating contours of a pasture, the image acquiring density and depth. The more alert viewer may also notice two fleeting and by now much commented-upon occurrences: horses galloping across the screen from the right to the left at the bottom part of the screen, and towards the end, birds flying from the opposite direction at the top of the image.

According to Gottheim (Macdonald, 1988: 83), *Fog Line* represents his earlier efforts to reflect on “what it means to experience something” and, more to the point, “the experience of perceiving” itself. He (85) goes on: “You can’t […] remain entirely passive […] There are moments when you may be more likely to look at one thing than another, but I wanted all those [early] films not to manipulate you or force you or push your attention in a specific direction.”

Informing this statement is the idea that unfettered duration can engender a mode of spectatorship where the phenomenological experience of viewing is brought to the fore and the viewer is freer to choose what to look at. This idea was not exactly new. It can be traced back, for example, to André Bazin’s influential reflections on the long take and the ambiguity of
reality. It did however assume specific meanings and resonances in the avant-garde film scene of the 1970s in different national contexts, where durational perception was exploited as an end in and of itself, not infrequently in conjunction with elemental phenomena.

This is proved by the existence of two identically-titled Japanese short films produced in the space of two years, Iimura’s Fog and Hagiwara’s Mist, both of which were made apparently unbeknownst of Fog Line. The former, lasting just over 3 minutes and shot on black-and-white 8mm, records a fiercely windy fog atop a mountain: for most of the time, the screen is entirely white but certainly not immobile, as the motion of the fog, which becomes indistinguishable from that of the 8mm grainy emulsion, imputes the image with a lively quality. At one point, the fog in the foreground momentarily lifts, revealing two trees, each located at the bottom edges of the frame (Fig. 2). The latter, according to Scott MacDonald (2006: 347), is “an eight-minute, single-shot film during which a misty landscape slowly clears, revealing a bit of a distant mountain.” Recalling his experience of viewing the film for the first time in 1980 and noting its resemblance to Fog Line, MacDonald (347) remarks that he found it poignant “that on opposite sides of the globe two filmmakers had had virtually the same idea at the same time and had produced two lovely, serene films.”

![PLACE FIGURE 2 HERE](image)

Caption: Trees are momentarily revealed as the fog lifts in Fog. Frame grab.

Fog, mist and wind have played an even more fundamental role in the films by British filmmaker Chris Welsby since the early 1970s. For, here, not only are elemental occurrences given indexical presence onscreen; sometimes such occurrences determine the shape of the

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4 My gratitude to Julian Ross, who lent me a copy of this film.
5 Unfortunately, I was unable to get hold of this film while researching for the present article.
film by way of their physical impact on the filming apparatus. Such is the case in *Wind Vane* (1972), an 8-minute split-screen film shot in London’s Hampstead Heath. Filmed with two cameras placed 50 feet apart from each other and mounted on tripods with wind vane attachments, the purpose of this set-up was to allow both cameras to move laterally on their axes, the movement dictated by wind currents. As can be glimpsed from titles such as *Windmill II* (1972), *Cloud Fragments* (1978), *Rainfall* (1983) and *Sky Light* (1986), Welsby’s work is defined by the imbrication of film with meteorological effects. In particular, his *Drift* (1994) is an especially fitting companion to *Fog Line, Fog* and *Mist*. Shot during winter in the waters near the Port of Vancouver, Canada, *Drift* records the variations in the atmospheric light caused by the winter fog, often through lateral panning shots. Sometimes the fog envelops everything within the image, indistinctly merging with the dark-blue waters; in other shots, where the mist is less dense, the lights of cargo ships can be made out further back in the horizon (Fig. 3), the occasional bird flying across the screen. Like the aforementioned films, *Drift* recruits the drifting medium of fog to challenge the clarity of representational content and the legibility of cinematic vision, calling attention to the experience of viewing in the process.

**PLACE FIGURE 3 HERE**

*Caption: Fog and water merge into an indistinct blur in Drift. Frame grab.*

I can see why these films are often hailed as a subset of the “landscape film.” To my mind, however, this qualification misses the point. Or, rather, it treats the fog as subordinated to the landscape that it enshrouds, when the opposite is true. These are films in which thinning fog and dissipating mist are not appendages to unveil a receding landscape awaiting deciphering. What we have here instead is an intermedial marriage between the technological medium of film and the atmospheric medium of fog. Granted, some accounts of the landscape
film do recognise the importance of weather-based manifestations in its formal and textual makeup. Whereas Sitney (1995: 113) highlights “the movement of clouds, changes in the intensity of light, the indication of breezes in the vibrations and swaying flora” in the cinematic constitution of landscape broadly speaking, Catherine Elwes (2022: 115) draws attention to “the power of elements” as formative co-creators in Welsby’s “weather-blown” films. Given its generality, the landscape moniker also makes sense as a wide-ranging category that can encompass diverse films focused on the natural world, and which in some national contexts (e.g. the United States and Japan) assume an extra layer of relevance owing to the genre’s prevalence in those countries’ cultural history (see MacDonald, 2001).

Nevertheless, as a word and a concept flaunting land in its composition, landscape brings with it its own conceptual and cultural baggage, one that is inevitably attached to tropes and figures of solidity, terrestriality and territoriality. The forms and shapes of a landscape are figurative, representational. Here, we may recall that critics were estranged by Turner’s canvases because they defied the rules governing landscape painting by melting the elements into abstract cloud-like formations. Something similar is happening in the films mentioned above. When viewing Fog Line and Fog, it is impossible to separate out the pasture and mountain from the fog that enshrouds them, whereas in Drift, the oceanic waters mesh with the wintry mist into a hazy blue. These films therefore necessitate an atmospheric theoretical intervention that can enact a figure-ground reversal and reclaim their elementary fogginess.

By fogginess I mean both the literal presence of cloud-like phenomena and nebulosity of meaning; or more specifically, the way in which the former is inextricable from the latter in such films. To invoke signifying processes is necessary not only because the interrogation of such processes was one of the main drives informing the aforementioned films and 1970s experimental cinema more broadly. It is a question that continues to be current, especially in relation to a cinema of landscape. Thus, in a compelling article titled “Theories of the Earth:
Surface and Extraction in the Landscape Film,” Leo Goldsmith (2018) appraises the landscape film as, at least in principle, complicit with contemporary “technologies for the visualization and quantification of physical space.” Exploring the “literal and metaphoric notions of surface and depth” inscribed in the genre, Goldsmith locates in it an invitation “into the metaphor of extraction” insofar as landscapes await to be decodified. In this sense, Goldsmith continues, the landscape film is not that different from mainstream films and contemporary visual culture at large, for if “images of landscapes are always surfaces to be penetrated in pursuit of extractable knowledge, then landscape film – and perhaps documentary cinema as a whole – might be conceived as part of the same alignment of optics and power” that informs corporate logics and techniques of coloniality. Significantly, Goldsmith illustrates his argument with recourse to Fog Line, in which “the fog quite literally peels back layers for the viewer, unveiling a landscape in depth.” He argues:

Even while Fog Line offers an image of landscape that is, for the most part, ‘open to interpretation,’ the film invites, even demands, that the viewer develop a probing gaze, one that looks closely to seek out the apparently hidden traces of the landscape. Its function is, at least in part, to attune the viewer to a particular type of visual attention that can in some way find meaning and value within the image, even if the particular meaning to be extracted is not determined in advance by the filmmaker or the film.

The “durational experience” of this and other landscape films, he concludes, is thus tantamount to a process whereby the spectator regards “the image as a source of data to be extracted.”

For all its intellectual sophistication and argumentative persuasiveness, I want to challenge some aspects of this argument, at least as far as Fog Line and the other films under discussion here are concerned (while potentially applicable to other landscape films). Isn’t the
relentless search for meaning that Goldsmith describes a product of the spectator/critic’s mind rather than a feature of the film itself, and one that testifies to a palpable anxiety on their part before an image whose durational content refuses to speak its own relation to signification? In deeming the recorded image a surface whose main function is the extraction of meaning, are we not forgetting the most important element in the viewing of this film, which is an acute awareness of the phenomenological experience of perception itself as it unfolds in time? Goldsmith recruits an arsenal of geological metaphors to qualify the durational cinematic experience: meanings are extracted, mined and unearthed, while the landscape is spatialised and quantified by the lenses of the medium. But perhaps we should shift the terms of this discussion to the qualitative, sensory experience this film engenders through its temporalisation of landscape via the medium of fog.

It seems to me that a more useful concept with which to explore the films in this section is what Jordan Schonig (2022: 74) terms “durational metamorphosis,” which he theorises as “slow movements of plasmatic, incremental change that result in a sense of visual transformation, and which test the threshold of motion perception.” Citing Fog Line as a precursor of this tradition, Schonig (82) likens it to a Bergsonian processual philosophy in that it “triggers an experiential encounter with the largely imperceptible unfolding of the material world,” thereby shunning “a worldview that privileges stasis over change” (86). Indeed, in their attention to continually shifting atmospheric phenomena, the films mentioned above call attention to what Tim Ingold (2007: S28) terms an open world “of formative and transformative processes.” Ingold goes on: “If such processes are of the essence of perception, then they are also of the essence of what is perceived. To understand how people can inhabit this world means attending to the dynamic processes of world-formation in which both perceivers and the phenomena they perceive are necessarily immersed.” This is not to say that meaning cannot be inferred from Fog Line. One could argue, as many have done, that it provides a commentary
on the imbrication of natural and urban domains, as seen in the power cables trisecting the image. Yet the drifting perceptual and temporal experience offered by this film by way of fog cannot be reduced to semiotic operations.

*Fog Line* (and all films mentioned above) is such an illuminating case study for this discussion because it shows the limits of an approach modelled on land-based concepts. By shifting our attention to the modulation of the fog itself, rather than the landscape it reveals, we discover a film that elicits a different mode of engagement, one that, not coincidentally, finds in cloud formations its perfect subject matter and figuration. To adopt such a cloud-inspired approach would entail eschewing an informational epistemology according to which images are data, and privilege instead the nebulous drift of sensory experience this film provides, and the continually shifting contours of meaning it may or may not assume in the process. In doing so, we can reclaim *Fog Line*’s affinities with an elemental aesthetics as the realm of sensuous knowing and the apprehension of the indeterminate.

Rather than an unquestioned faith in the superiority of (cinematic) vision, the works I have explored in this section directly interrogate it. And they do so by recruiting naturally occurring elements which, in their constitutional amorphousness, show “the incompleteness and constant variation of the perceived, the impossibility of a full and perfect knowledge of the world,” to cite Beugnet (2015: 3) again. If anything, these films are vague and nebulous, quite literally so. As such, they must be situated within a “media diaphana” tradition (Somaini, 2016), one in which airborne manifestations are not secondary to the visual fruition of landscapes, but the very means by which the visual is layered in a process that intensifies the phenomenology of perception as immersed in the fluxes and flows of air.

Toxic Clouds
Thanks to the emergence of “slow cinema,” the ontology of clouds has assumed new relevance over the last two decades, reinforcing its alignment with cinematic duration. Schonig, for example, notes the prevalence of metamorphic moments in contemporary slow cinema, and almost all of his examples – from the 5-minute long take of a sunrise in Carlos Reygadas’s *Silent Light* (2007) and the skyscapes of Benning’s *TEN SKIES* (2004) to the fog and mist in the films by Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Alexander Sokurov – are vaporous entities. For our purposes, to revisit slow cinema makes further sense in light of the fact that it precipitated a new debate around the hermeneutics of the cinematic image. While this debate underpins the history of scholarship on art cinema in terms of its ambiguity of meaning, slow cinema gave it a new impetus as detractors found the films too nebulous in that they “demand great swathes of our precious time to achieve quite fleeting and slender aesthetic and political effects,” to cite Nick James’s (2010: 5) much-debated *Sight & Sound* editorial. James’s position was emblematic of the intolerable anxiety often induced by unqualified duration. To reconsider slow cinema’s penchant for the fluidic plasticity of nebulous forms in this context might be in order. This is all the more so when we note that clouds in slow cinema are not necessarily naturally occurring ones, which would challenge the accusations of empty formalism and nostalgic escapism it also received.

Take Benning’s *TEN SKIES*, which comprises 10-minute static shots devoted to ten different skies. As Erika Balsom has shown, some of the balletic cloudscapes in this enthralling film reveal in their constitution toxic, sour clouds of smoke and fumes emanating from the ground in the Los Angeles area, known for its high concentration of smog (the combination of smoke and fog). Balsom (2021: 25) writes: “the firmament as it appears in this film is not the domain of unadulterated nature, unchanging for eternity, but a beleaguered site of human intervention”; here, “vapour and pollution” belong to “a world as artificial as it is natural” (78).
visible: J.P. Sniadecki’s *The Yellow Bank* (2010), Rahul Jain’s *Invisible Demons* (2021), Shaunak Sen’s *All That Breathes* (2022), and many films by Jia Zhangke and other Chinese directors.⁶ That these films depict major cities in India and China, newly industrialising Asian countries where deforestation, urbanisation processes and rampant use of fossil fuels have resulted in exorbitant levels of toxic particulates in the air, is not coincidental. If the visualisation of air in the nineteenth century is tied to the rise of atmospheric pollution, the seismic industrial and economic shifts these Asian countries have undergone, with the resulting toxicity in the air, explains the flurry of films in the region. In the remainder of this article, I turn to two slow-cinema examples from Southeast Asia, as well as a third work for comparison, to gain further insight into the durational treatment of airborne toxicity as a sensory aesthetics.

A revered figure in the circuits of art cinema and artists’ cinema, the Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul has built a remarkable career over the last two decades at the crossroads of film and installation art. Apichatpong is notably fond of fogs, smoke, mist and clouds, which often make appearances in his works as atmospheric enhancement for ghostly themes steeped in local traditions. His short film *Vapour* (2015) is the culmination of this fascination.⁷ Commissioned for the Busan International Film Festival, and shot in black-and-white digital format, *Vapour* was filmed in the Toongha village in Mae Ram district in Thailand, where Apichatpong himself has lived since 2007, and it features nonprofessionals from the village. As the filmmaker/artist has explained in an accompanying statement, his decision to film in the village, which in *Vapour* is engulfed in mysterious clouds of smoke at all times, was politically motivated:

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⁶ For an illuminating analysis of the smog in *The Yellow Bank*, see Solomon, 2023, in the first part of this Special Issue.
⁷ My thanks to Graiwoot Chulphongsathorn, who lent me a copy of the film, with Apichatpong’s permission.
The village is one of several areas in the country that are plagued with land management issues. It is a battleground between the people and the state. For the past sixty years, the villagers have petitioned for the ownership of the land in which their families had settled for generations. Years ago, barbed fences were erected to resist the army’s threatening evictions. During the heated confrontations, dozens of soldiers’ houses in the area were burned down. The flame rages on in the memory. Now it remains a quiet inferno. (Apichatpong, n/d)

In *Vapour*, the villagers, who in the film all appear masked, go about their daily routines – playing football on the streets, folding up clothes at home – enveloped in these plumes of smoke emanating directly from the past. In one particular scene, a possible source for these plumes is disclosed: we see a group of people in a field throwing things in a fire, which feeds the combustion and sends smoke up into the sky.

Yet, in another scene towards the end, the film discloses something else as the source for the rapidly evolving masses of fog: a fogging insecticide machine, here ejecting its plumes into a hole in the ground (Fig. 4). This object and this practice also refer to a local event: health authorities travel to the village every year during the summer, armed with such machines, in order to eradicate insects like the Dengue mosquito. The reveal of the machine, however, serves other purposes. It self-reflexively calls attention to the film’s own production process – the titular vapour was generated through these machines – and, more broadly, to the use of artificial fog in filmmaking in general, and the horror movie in particular. As Apichatpong (n/d) himself muses, tongue-in-cheek: “The clouds touch the roof tiles, the beds, the chairs, the carpets, the grass, and our bodies, as if everything is submerged in a world of dreams. Or is it a world of cheap horror movies?”
Apichatpong’s obvious reference is John Carpenter’s *The Fog* (1980), in which the titular fog becomes itself an element to be feared, concealing murderous ghosts of the past. If *Vapour* is a horror movie, though, its clouds of smoke relate to the aforementioned real issues, to which Graiwoot Chulphongsathorn adds another one: the smog crisis in Thailand, itself the tip of the iceberg of a much larger ecological breakdown in the Asian continent. As Graiwoot (2021: 545) notes, northern Thailand in particular has been severely affected by smog “every year for the last decade. Smog is one of Southeast Asia’s biggest environmental concerns, peaking in 2015 when a thick haze covered six nations.” The 2015 Southeast Asia Haze was predominantly caused by forest fires and slash-and-burn practices in Sumatra, Indonesia, the smoke spreading across Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and the Philippines. Yet such practices go further back in time. In fact, the smoke had already appeared in another slow film in 2007, Tsai Ming-liang’s *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone*, set in Kuala Lumpur and revolving around a love triangle formed by a Bangladeshi migrant worker, a homeless man and a family maid (the last two respectively played by Tsai’s regulars, Lee Kang-sheng and Chen Shiang-chyi).

In *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone* the smoke makes its first appearance over halfway into its running time in a static shot of an abandoned construction site, one of the film’s main settings. Lasting a minute, this shot features no human presence, and, for its first half, all the viewer can see is a flooded area encircled by grey pillars. A misty haze then starts wafting its way into the frame, gradually enshrouding the site and reducing visibility. Its unexplained appearance in a derelict site, allied with the extended duration of the shot, imputes this event with an eerie quality, as if the film has also become a horror movie. It is only a few scenes later,
when we see the family maid looking after a comatose man, that the viewer locates the source of the smoke, as a radio programme narrator comments on fires in Sumatra and the smoke carried over to Malaysia by winds. And as the film progresses, the smoke spreads (Fig. 5). Visibly affected by the toxic particulates, characters in the film resort as they can to makeshift masks, sometimes even a plastic bag, to stop them from inhaling the toxic air.

![PLACE FIGURE 5 HERE](image)

Caption: As the film progresses, smoke spreads in *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone*. Frame grab.

Largely focused on the underclass, *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone*, like *Vapour*, reminds us that not everyone breathes the same air, and that those living on the margins are the first to bear the brunt of atmospheric disturbances. As Jean-Thomas Tremblay (2022: 13) notes: “The uneven distribution of risk renders unconvincing any conception of the breather as a universal subject.” At the same time, however, anyone watching these two films, anywhere on the globe, cannot but be reminded of their own breathing capacities as human beings, even if the atmospheric occurrences in the film are staged rather than recorded in reality. Although they refer to historically and geographically contained events, the clouds in *Vapour* and *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone* are artificially produced through fogging machines, an aspect self-reflexively commented upon by the two films in their nod to the horror genre. Reality itself, they seem to suggest, is becoming indistinguishable from a horror movie. Yet, if fog is often merely an atmospheric enhancer in the latter, here it is on full protracted display as an experiential, sensuous and aesthetic encounter that reminds us that air is a medium of life.

By way of comparison and conclusion, I want to bring in a third work that also centres on the smoke arising from illegal fires in Indonesia, among other events. Produced by the
research agency Forensic Architecture originally as a video installation in 2020, but now freely available as a video on the agency’s website, Cloud Studies comprises a number of episodes each of which focuses on the weaponisation and pollution of air, from Israel’s bombings in occupied Gaza through to the deployment of chlorine bombs in Syria and the smoke clouds in Indonesia. Based at Goldsmiths University, UK, Forensic Architecture is an interdisciplinary investigation group that aims to denounce human rights violations in its varied forms, including environmental injustice. It recruits to that end a number of techniques and technologies – 3-D modelling, infrared cameras, photogrammetry, immersive technologies, satellite imagery and remote sensing – with the aim of making visible forms of violence that are not so easily perceptible to the human eye, whether because such forms defy human timeframes or because the substances in question resist photographic means of representation. While aware that these modes of visioning are often conceived for the very purposes of surveillance and monitoring by the military-industrial complex, Forensic Architecture aims, as Patrick Brian Smith notes (2023: 64), “to co-opt and subvert these imaging regimes, using them to create archives of accountability that work against their original purposes.”

Cloud Studies is knowingly situated within a history of cloud visualisations and ecologies. At one point, one of the narrators, over images of clouds from Howard’s taxonomy and the International Atlas of Clouds and of States of the Sky, observes that “in the nineteenth century amateur meteorologists started classifying clouds by their visible characteristics.” Then, over illustrations from Ruskin’s Modern Painters and Turner’s paintings, the narrator goes on to note that “modern painters emerged when the clouds descended from the skies to the ground, breaking the objectness of the landscape into refracting screens of atmospheric blur.” He concludes: “Clouds are always double: seen from the outside, they are measurable objects, approximated by mathematical calculations. Seen from within, they are experiential conditions
of optical blur and atmospheric obscurity. Our cloud studies, likewise, meander between shape and fog, between analysis and experience.”

A closer look at Cloud Studies, however, reveals a bias towards analysis rather than experience. Take the section on Indonesia, which lifts images from a longer, 10-minute video titled Ecocide in Indonesia produced by Forensic Architecture in collaboration with other research agencies in 2017 (see Smith, 2023). It begins with aerial footage of the smoke (sourced from Greenpeace) that is then overlaid with satellite images of Indonesia and adjacent countries where the sources of fire are visible as red pixels (Fig. 6). It then uses algorithms to interpret data from infrared satellite images, and colour to highlight, across the space of a year, the sections containing higher densities of carbon monoxide. It ends with images from NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center, which simulates the forest fires in Indonesia and Australia over the space of a year through fluid dynamics. Here, and everywhere across Cloud Studies, the dominant visual mode is the view from above, often in its satellite iteration, and used in conjunction with other techniques so as to visualise that which is invisible, both because of its insubstantial condition as atmospheric phenomena and because of the different scales and durations across which such phenomena occur.

**PLACE FIGURE 6 HERE**

Caption: Aerial footage of smoke is overlaid with satellite images in Cloud Studies. Frame grab.

Cloud Studies, as illustrative of the work pursued by Forensic Architecture, exemplifies the crisis of cinematic representation ushered in by airborne toxicity, what Karl Schoonover (2013: 492) terms “its resistance to photographic means of documentation, and its destabilisation of realist practices of representation.” The video attempts to circumvent this problem by turning images into sets of data, numbers and information, a process which, as
Sean Cubitt (2013) has argued, is urgent and pressing for the affective mobilisation of the masses. I do not wish to deny the importance and relevance of these issues, nor do I wish to dismiss Cloud Studies, which certainly has informational, factual and political relevance. I am equally aware that there are many unbridgeable differences – institutional, practical, aesthetic – between this video and the experimental and art films mentioned above, differences that make any comparative analysis between them anything but straightforward.

Nevertheless, for all its good intentions, Cloud Studies, insofar as it relies on distanced satellite views, mathematical models and techniques of datafication, risks reinforcing a conceptualisation of air that, according to Eva Horn (2018: 15), “externalizes its object by ‘objectifying’ it into a set of laws and computable mechanisms.” Going back to Howard’s foundational taxonomical enterprise and the numerous photographic cloud atlases that followed in its wake, this ‘objectifying’ tradition regards the elusiveness of clouds as a challenge to be met and something to be tamed, decomposed and parsed out. Cloud Studies updates this tradition both through novel technologies of seeing and through its categorisation of clouds according to anthropogenic components (cement, glyphosate, tear gas, etc.) rather than visible features.

For Horn (16), the rendering of air as “portentous, scientific evidence – as opposed to mere sensory experience – […] comes at a price. The abstraction of climate – in terms of scale and statistics, as well as in its understandings as a ‘global’ entity – has cut the air off from any phenomenal perceptibility.” As “a complement and a critical correction to the scientific approach” (18), Horn suggests an aesthetic approach, or an aesthetics of air, one that would not mean “to make ‘air’ or ‘climate’ into a mere aesthetic subject as in ‘climate fiction’ or certain forms of ‘Anthropocene art’”. Rather, an “aesthetics of air must first render air sensible by being an aesthesis of air” (22). As she explains, “Aisthēsis (from the Greek aisthanomai, ‘to
perceive’) is an elementary way of intimately relating to all perceptional dimensions of an object” (23).

As an audiovisual medium, cinema has its limitations when it comes to rendering all perceptional dimensions of air as a medium: we cannot sense its humidity or smell its particular scent when air becomes visible onscreen. Yet cinema, as a medium of time, is uniquely equipped to capture the experiential and processual flows of air. As the works examined in this article demonstrate, it can bring “air (back) to the foreground of our perception as both object and condition of perception,” a process that “might enable us to become sensible to our being as being in the air” (Horn, 2018: 23). In their durational attention to different atmospheric phenomena and elemental perturbations, be it a naturally occurring fog, a wintry mist or artificially generated smoke, these works help us calibrate what Ingold (2007: S31) terms our “sensitivity and responsiveness to an environment that is always in flux,” which is both urgent and necessary if we are to properly grasp our immersion in and dependence upon a breathable atmosphere. In a world where “cloud” is increasingly used in the singular and preceded by the definite article, the cinematic nebulous can open up the perceptual doors of the transformational processes that make up our dynamic world. This does not entail turning away from toxic clouds or a complete renunciation of analytical epistemologies. It means, rather, ascribing equal value to sensuous knowing and a confrontation with cloud formations as an acknowledgement of the “clear and indistinct” ways of the world from within – in the thick of it.

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