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NEBULOUS LANDSCAPES AND THE AESTHETICS OF INDETERMINACY

The concept of landscape is commonly associated with the distribution of solid items on solid or liquid surfaces. Although no landscape would ever be possible without its atmospheric counterpart and landscape painting includes skyscapes, the interdependency between the aspect, perceivability and even physical constitution of the landscape, on one hand, and the atmospheric condition, on the other hand, tends to be overlooked due to the focusing of human practices on the ground. The typical landscape is hard and firm; watery surfaces with no land in sight are at best tolerated as 'landscapes'. Subaquatic life-worlds challenge even more the concept of landscape, while gaseous landscapes resemble a *contradictio in adjecto* due to their subtle and metamorphic materiality.

This paper examines the liminal case of a landscape in fog and of fog as one of the «meteorological landscapes» (Reichler, in Becker-Leplatre 2014, 31). Nebulosity affects the standard understanding of landscape as a representation which is constituted by the subject as a unity in diversity, ideally from a vantage point that opens a panorama (Simmel 2008, Smuda 1986), preserving only the *Stimmung* from Simmel's theory. The landscape covered with a thick blanket of fog suspends the taxonomy of landscapes as contemplative, explorative, lived or sentient as well (Diaconu 2024). After examining the perceptual, spatiotemporal and emotional features of fog, the fundamental ambivalence of this phenomenon will be emphasized: while being caught in fog is repelled as an oppressive and distressing experience, the derealization and transfiguration of reality produced by fog may also produce enjoyment and trigger a sense of wonder. Therefore, the last part of the paper clarifies the aesthetics of haziness or nebulosity, a specific quality which derives its name from the Latin *nebula*, related to *nubes* ('cloud') and meaning 'mist, vapor, fog, smoke, exhalation' and, figuratively, 'darkness' or 'obscurity' (Online Etymology Dictionary).

Correspondingly, nebulosity is plainly rejected as a deficit in epistemic issues, yet its 'atmospheric' and poetic dimension has a strong aesthetic expressivity that challenges visual and literary representation.

1. The thickened presence of air

Since antiquity, fog has been mostly considered a mixture of air and water (Möller 2014). At present, the *International Cloud Atlas* defines fog as «a suspension of very small, usually microscopic water droplets in the air, reducing visibility at the Earth's surface» (WMO). As such, fog belongs to the hydrometeors, like also mist, precipitation or spouts. However, mist is lighter than fog and, as smog, may be caused by air pollution. Moreover, fog covers the landscape with a whitish veil, whereas mist wraps it into a thin, greyish one. Nevertheless, fog becomes faintly colored when it is mixed with smoke or dust, like the famous yellow London fog¹. Last, but not least, mist is not felt, like fog, as damp and obstructs visibility less than the latter.

Although a unitary international classification of fog is still missing, the atmospheric sciences distinguish between fog resulting from freezing processes, from radiation, advection, and evaporation². From an orographic perspective, fog is formed upslope, on hill or frontal; the upslope fog and the hill fog can be viewed also from below or above and appear as a stratus cloud. Fog is indeed a low cloud, namely one that touches the surface of earth or water; therefore, being in the fog suggests how it would feel like to walk *in* the clouds. It is precisely this *immersive experience* of fog which is relevant to the aesthetics of nebulosity.

The most prominent feature of fog is that it severely affects the visibility of the landscape; *ad liminem*, the image of environment withdraws into invisibility. The filter deposited by haze and, even more, fog on reality interrogates the privilege of vision and the sovereignty of the seeing subject; its veil unveils our vulnerability and bodily entanglement with the world. At the same time, fog

¹ London fog was repeatedly denounced since the 17th century and could be finally eliminated only after the adoption of the Clean Air Act. Throughout the 19th century, the *Great Stinking Fogs* became a social problem not only because they affected public health, but also because the lack of visibility was considered propitious for social disorder and crime (Corton 2015).

² The evaporation fog is called in German also *Rauchen* (smoke).

causes (or, better said, *is*) a special kind of invisibility that differs from the darkness of the night. According to Michel Serres, both envelop the body, yet while night «exalts» the fineness of the skin, the haze (*la brume*) «attacks» it, «crawls» and «creeps», it «numbs the body, soaks it, anaesthetizes it» (Serres 1985, 69). Further differences concern scale, movement and materiality. Shadows and darkness are global, haze and fog are local; night empties volumes, fog thickens them; finally, the tenebrous is airy, while haze oscillates between the aggregate states of matter, from gaseous to viscous and sticky.

Therefore, fog descriptions unavoidably mention its thickness. As an old saying goes, a fog may be so compact that one could cut it with a knife. And Joseph Haydn was complaining in London in November 1791: «There was a fog so thick that one might have spread it on bread. In order to write I had to light a candle as early as eleven o'clock» (Haydn, in Corton 2015, 4). Obscurity and thickness build a symmetrical binomial to absence and presence. «Quite literally, fog could be said to make present air» (Martin 2011, 459), its strong felt presence pushing away everything else into absence. This thickened presence of air produces an ambivalent feeling of weight: in Karin Becker's words, «the fog has the opaline lightness of air, but it also seems to weigh down with a crushing heaviness, sinking reality into a nauseating, sticky density» (Becker-Leplatre 2014, 17).

The dimmed vision in the fog challenges several presumptions regarding both the features of the aerial space and our patterns of perception. First, fog blurs the distinction between the medium of sight and its objects, pushing the air into the foreground: the medium is converted into a phenomenon. The thickness of fog makes us aware of the materiality of air and of the plenitude of the physical atmosphere. We see not only things *in* fog, but the fog itself. Moreover, fog descriptions often resort to textile metaphors, from a cover to a «fluffy blanket» and even a shroud (Becker-Leplatre 2014, 17 f.): the 'touch' of fog makes one freeze literally and metaphorically. Sometimes, fog appears as a ceiling that forms an enclosed space. In this shrunken world, the feeling of moving lightly in space vanishes: fog contradicts the imaginary of the air as medium of free movement (Bachelard 1943). Quite contrary, a dense fog feels like pressing and squeezing the body.

Secondly, the commonly unquestioned scopic regime shows its limits. Blurred contours, cuts and edges transform things into

confuse presences; the horizon comes closer and may vanish and, along with it, the «layout» of the landscape (Gibson 1986); vision is robbed from reference points. Fog makes us not only see less and differently, but also look differently at the remainders of the world. Thick fog reduces the spectacle of the world to one pervasive quality, which explains why the eyes can hardly *focus* on individual items anymore³. At the same time, this diverges from the typical non-focused view with which we embrace a panorama: instead of losing herself in the vast outer space, the subject defends herself from being engulfed in the quasi-oceanic space that invades both sight and body.

2. A bubble outside time and space

The loss of horizon and anchoring points renders impossible the appreciation of distances and the constitution spatial depth, as interpreted by Merleau-Ponty (1945, 294-309), given that it is impossible, so to speak, to step aside in fog⁴. If vision enables one to be simultaneously 'here' and 'there', fog nails the subject in an indeterminate 'somewhere here'. Once visual inspection becomes impossible, the individual must count on hearing and smell for orientation, although sounds appear muffled and deformed, as if they could hardly pierce the thickness of space, and smells are suffused with humidity. The inhibited vision alerts other senses: the sound of others' voices and of the ground under one's feet conveys a sense of safety, distant sounds provide hints for what may be concealed in fog, and so on. The loss of space is compensated by an intensive awareness of the moment.

Regarded from outside (for example, from above), fog resembles a bubble; from within, it is perceived as a one-dimensional space devoid of boundaries, axes and directions. We may *know* that this atmospheric condition is local and temporary, yet still cannot leave it. Fog makes us realize our bodily situatedness and vulnerability. Moreover, fog has an enveloping

³ In this respect, Tonino Griffero (2017, 108) emphasizes the «unitary totality given to the optical field at the expense of the details».

⁴ Craig Martin's (2011, 456) analysis of the «condition of the fogbound» was meant precisely to better understand the reciprocal constitution of the body and the (aerial) space.

quality; contrary to the 'bubble theory' of fog⁵, it is 'the full' *par excellence*, filling noses and lungs, permeating clothes and insidiously creeping in the eyes and under the skin. If fog never remains *outside* us, who might ever expect an objective knowledge of it? The fog is in us and transforms us into phantomatic bodies; the others hidden in fog *are* fog to us just as we are fog to them. There is no perception without guessing, hence the disorientation regarding space and time.

It is well-known that valleys, lakes, and seashores are foggier than other places and that fog occurs more frequently during the autumn and winter months. As for the time of the day, fog typically manifests itself at dawn and dusk. This spatiotemporal contextualization is likely to be more relevant to fog than to other weather phenomena, no wonder that writers often describe fog as a special place: instead of being spread in a place, fog *constitutes* a place in itself, a bubble or a hole. In meteorological terms, fog represents as a local phenomenon with limited duration, although its boundaries in time and space cannot be precisely determined. The lived fog, however, installs a specific spatiality and temporality that suspends geography and chronology and builds a spatiotemporal enclave. Obviously, fog interferes with the humans' activities, disturbing plans and disrupting the familiar sequences of everydayness. Also fog distorts temporality; whoever is trapped in fog loses the sense of time and despairs over the eternity of her captivity. Moreover, compared to darkness, which remained for Serres related to the Euclidian geometry of the optical space, haze and fog build a topological space of vicinity that recalls tactility: identities are converted into equivalences, correspondences and homeomorphisms (Serres 1985, 70). Movement itself suffers changes in this dis-figured world.

3. Stage of dramas and maleficent character

For the sake of clarity, one must differentiate from the outset between the subject's movement and the movement of the atmosphere itself. Paul Virilio (1995) praised the sky that lies open before us, inviting us to cross it. His optimism about the

⁵ According to the *Bläschentheorie*, fog consists of bubbles of water filled with air; this explanation was invalidated only in 1885 after a microscopical analysis of the fog droplets.

empowering effects of technology that would allow a pilot to fly blindly «amid the wintriest of fogs» only grace to the remote control video panel (Virilio 2000, 26) has turned out to be exaggerated. Particularly fog is feared for increasing the risk of accidents, from mountaineers falling into a precipice to car and ship collisions or even plane crashes. As a result, people slow down and are alerted: the fear of making a lethal mistake and crashing with whatever is hidden in the opaque air bubble brings about deceleration and ultimately stagnation (which applies to wanderers moving blindly in a circle, too). The subject feels immobilized and prostrated; losing sight of the landscape means losing control.

Therefore, foggy conditions develop propitious conditions for dramas, in literature no less than in reality. Nevertheless, it never *causes*, but only *gives rise* to destruction; it does not make us tumble or bump into something, yet 'arranges' such accidents; it does not hit, but creeps, does not kill, but 'merely' exposes to mortal perils. The fog's negative agency is indirect and perfidious, which explains why as a literary character it is mostly maleficent and somehow sneaky⁶. From a phenomenological perspective, fog can be considered a typical «quasi-thing», to use Hermann Schmitz' concept, whose status vacillates between being a quality and a thing. Commonly, it needs time to unfold its negativity and corrode the subject's self-confidence both with respect to practical tasks and her personal identity.

The subject trapped in the fog struggles to maintain the distinction between herself and the environment. Being-in-the-fog does not simply instantiate the transcendental structure of being-in-the-world, but places the subject in the situation of having to decide between being 'against-the-fog' and 'being-(one-)with-the-fog' or 'becoming-fog'. Such circumstances impede the subject to constitute the landscape, additionally to the withdrawal of visibility, and distinguish once more the experience of fog from watching a landscape under average weather conditions. Schmitz characterized the latter, in line with the Romantic tradition, as an excorporation (*Ausleibung*): a felt-bodily communication engaging with a «formless, measureless vastness» that involves feelings of

⁶ For example, 19th century literature presented London fog «as a looming presence, alive and malignant» (Corton 2015, 1).

dilatation and expansion (*Schwellung, Ausweitung*) (Schmitz 2023, 105). In contrast to the subject's positive ec(-)stasis and fusion with Mother Nature in German Romanticism, the carceral space of fog menaces the subject to be engulfed by an alien Other. The exposure to the elements is felt as an identity-stealing absorption, and the movement of fog itself lets emerge troubling epiphanies that make the subject fear of becoming insane.

Despite the common stress on its persistence, fog partakes in the dynamic of the physical atmosphere: it sinks or gathers, thickens or lifts, rarefies or dissipates⁷. This restiveness of meteorological fog, combined with its disquieting loss of orientation, affects the disposition: fog is an ambiance and a state of mind, hence its strong presence in literature and art⁸. A literary example helps better grasp this emotional atmosphere. Eugene O'Neill begins his short play *Fog* (1914) by description the nebulosity in the Northwestern part of the Atlantic:

The life-boat of a passenger steamer is drifting helplessly off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. A dense fog lies heavily upon the still sea. There is no wind and the long swells of the ocean are barely perceptible. The surface of the water is shadowy and unreal in its perfect calmness. A menacing silence, like the genius of the fog, broods over everything.

Three figures in the boat are darkly outlined against the gray background of vapor. Two are seated close together on the thwarts in the middle. The other is huddled stiffly at one end. None of their faces can be distinguished.

Day is just about to break and as the action progresses the vague twilight of dawn creeps over the sea. This, in turn, is succeeded by as bright a semblance of daylight as can sift through the thick screen of fog. (O'Neill 1914: 1)

The ambiance is profoundly gloomy. Heaviness has been traditionally associated with melancholy, and people suffering from depression report of feeling separated by reality as through a screen; their life slows down and 'drifts'. From the three survivors in the boat, only two are alive, «a poet» and «a man of

⁷ The French *brouillard*, derived from the German *brod*, 'Brühe', has kept this representation of movement, yet rather metaphorically, in the sense of restlessness, disorder and confusion (Becker-Leplatre 2014, 22).

⁸ On the representation of fog in literature see Dufour (1978), Vignes (2005), Eco-Ceserani (2009), the studies in Becker-Leplatre (2014), Becker (2017), Becker (2018), etc.

business»; the person sitting «stiffly» at the end of the boat is a mother who keeps her dead baby in her arms and who died herself of grief. Moreover, when the life-boat is almost miraculously discovered by a steamer passing by (and this only because the crew heard a child screaming), the poet – who had tried to commit suicide shortly before the shipwreck – decides to remain on the boat. While one survivor fights for survival, the other surrenders to fog.

The landscape itself is ghostly and strangely quiet, as quiet as death. Nothing moves in the air or on the water's surface, yet this «calmness» is too «perfect» not to be treacherous. The lurking «genius of fog» prepares a further catastrophe indeed: the drifting life-boat will collide with an iceberg. Can this image still be called a landscape? Like the spectral boat passengers wavering between life and death, the 'landscape', too, resembles a *sfumato*. Fog constitutes an indeterminate space of transition, transfiguring the environment and transforming the humans into bodiless ghosts⁹. Fog's constitutive agency ultimately consists in derealization: the denser the fog, the more unreal appears the world.

While night temporarily only withdraws the environment to sight, haze and fog transform them into a vibrating space in which everything becomes possible. This fact «troubles the ontology» (Serres 1985, 71) by blurring the distinction not only between objects, but also between being and appearing: «Thing or veil, being or non-being, that is the question» (Serres 1985, 71). Fog furnishes the space with merely potential things, whose ontic status remains undecidable, and populates the world with phantoms and phantasms: real presence turns ghostly, while inexistence or amputated existence manifests itself as painfully present¹⁰.

It therefore cannot wonder if the atmosphere of fog (in the phenomenological meaning of ambiance) is commonly negative. The oppressive quality of fog (cf. Hellpach 1939, 21) is not confined to meteosensitivity; more generally, fog is associated with uncertainty and anxiety, uneasiness and trepidation. «A feeling of oppression that is both unlocalized and omnipresent»

⁹ Symbolically, O'Neill assigns the first speeches of the play to anonymous voices.

¹⁰ Hence Serres' mention of «phantom neighbours» and «phantom limbs» (Serres 1985, 70).

(Griffero 2017, 107) rules in the fog regime. In this uncanny world, sounds become «menacingly autonomous», like O'Neill's voices, and things turn into «dark, looming masses» that briskly come out from nothing (Griffero 2017, 107). This sudden unfamiliarity of the world, along with its uncertain ontic status, are distressing and scary; fog makes evidence problematic and uproots the subject from her everydayness.

Fog is a 'troublemaker' also by letting archaic fears revive. Not only that, as mentioned before, its invasion causes the terror of losing identity and submerging into what appears as an instantiation of the primordial formless chaos. In addition to this, the individual feels abandoned and helpless; the fog screen interposed between the subject and the world, as well as other people, converts the being-with (*Mitsein*) (Heidegger 1927, §26) into a being-without (*Ohne-sein*). Finally, fog may confront us with deeply buried fears and monsters lurking within ourselves, serving as a screen for unconscious fears and expectations. Writers let disquieting 'apparitions' emerge in fog; the reader deciphers them as projections of a tormented soul, yet the anxious protagonist herself dreads not only losing control over her life, but also losing her mind. This wild play of imagination escapes control through comparison with reality. Fog's nebulosity is the opposite of lucidity – which makes it akin to the indeterminacy of the poetical state.

4. Epistemic and aesthetic nebulosity

However, the experience of fog is not necessarily troubling. Based on literary examples, Karin Becker (2017, 286) remarked the «fundamental ambiguity of fog», which may also explain its fascination. This ambivalence may take on three forms: aestheticization through psychical distance, the paradoxical comforting effect of fog, and finally the sense of wonder.

In his seminal study from 1912, Edward Bullough explained the psychical distance as condition of aesthetic experience and aesthetic principle on the example of experiencing fog on a ship. This commonly causes «acute unpleasantness» and a «special, expectant, tacit anxiety and nervousness», yet may also reward with «intense relish and enjoyment», provided the subject can abstract from practical dangers and concentrate on the phenomenal features of fog (Bullough 1984, 459). The result – an «uncanny mingling of repose and terror» (Bullough 1984, 459) –

emerges briskly as a switch of attitude that presents the world in a new light.

The second situation is epitomized by Emil Cioran. The skeptical and nihilist struggled during the cold season in Paris with the winter blues and the «fog which gets down on his brain» (Cioran 1997, 66). At the same time, he confessed he had always been fond of bad weather and enjoyed long walks amidst the fog in the country, praising fog as «the most beautiful achievement on the surface of the earth» (Cioran 1997, 66)¹¹. The solitude in fog could not better serve his (at least declared) misanthropy. Prone to excesses in his writings and an apologist of lucidity in combating the inner 'demons', Cioran welcomed the liminal experience of fog. Yet his enthusiasm raises another suspicion, namely that it was precisely fog that temporarily appeased his incurable torments, possibly precisely through the destabilization of identity mentioned before. Fog may hide one from the world in a protective cocoon.

And thirdly, fog may unleash the feeling of the marvelous. Some descriptions evoke the almost unreal beauty of fog which, in combination with a blinding luminosity, appears to reveal a higher, transcendent reality. Fog's imprecision and intensity of the moment are particularly suited for suggesting «the vacillating threshold between the familiar environment and unknown worlds» (Becker-Leplat 2014, 19). The idea that the sacred can be encountered only 'in the cloud' (and fog is one) also represents a *topos* of spiritual literature, from Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* as paradigm of mystic knowledge in the 4th century to the anonymous Christian treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing* (14th century). God can be met only after leaving behind the physical senses and the perception of the created world – which in its specific way a thick fog compels us to.

Apart from such contexts, the impossibility of perceptually or conceptually *grasping* the 'object' tends to be considered an epistemic deficit. Nebulosity in general evokes unclarity, imprecision, vagueness, and therefore uncertainty. Throughout its history, Western philosophy has constantly attacked the 'fog regime' of nebulous concepts and inconsistent arguments, think of

¹¹ More extensively on Cioran's meteorology of feelings see Diaconu (2014, 322-324).

Descartes' exigency of evidence or of Locke's distinction between «clear and obscure, distinct and confused ideas» (Locke 1999, 345 f.). Incorrect words, as well as their inappropriate or inconsistent use betray «obscurity and disorder», which «do not seldom cast a mist before our eyes, and impose upon our understandings» (Locke 1999, 478). More recently, the discussion about fuzziness has spread into various disciplines, raising the question of how reliable «fuzzy reasoning» (as opposed to evidence reasoning) may be and whether fuzzy knowledge may enable generalizations. Indeterminacy has been accepted as characteristic of the real related to randomness and contingency and the focus has shifted from eliminating fuzziness to fuzzy optimization. Whether it is motivated by cognitive weakness or is rooted in reality, 'fog' continues to serve as metaphor for indistinction¹².

This epistemic negativity of nebulosity contrasts with its aesthetic expressivity; fog and its meteorological relatives have richly inspired art and literature. This applies not only to the Western modern culture, where haze, fog, and rain were «the atmospheric phenomena that were most examined and described by scientists, writers and artists» (Becker-Leplatre 2014, 11), but to other cultures as well. In the Chinese and Japanese art, the preference for haziness underlies an understanding of nature that privileges an active void over material substance and invisible energetic flows over 'congealed' visible things. Takao Aoki (2019) even suggested the concepts of «pictorial 'landscape'» and «skyscape» for a reversed landscape that replaces the depiction of stable natural items through «psycho-temporal depth» (that is, the spectator's moods). Fog – as quintessence of a blurred view – creates pictorial, poetical and ultimately atmospheric landscapes.

If nebulosity is atmospheric, is it also beautiful? In Far-Eastern traditions haziness and fogginess can undoubtedly be qualified as such; in the Western world, however, nebulosity cannot accommodate any of the historical definitions of beauty as proportionality, unity in diversity, *aglaia* or *claritas*, *decorum*, convenience, grace, order and stability etc. Vaporosity may probably best correspond to a metaphysical interpretation of

¹² For example, in a critical essay on 19th century culture and ideology, Franco Moretti requires to «dispel the fog» produced through «refusals of precision», «clouds of mystification», «symbolic camouflage» and the «rhetoric of vagueness» (Moretti 2013).

beauty as emanation, as in Neoplatonism; however, even so, the transcendental principle irradiated light and not nebulosity. Therefore, two entwined questions arise: What explains the poetic-atmospheric force of fog and which are the features of the aesthetics of nebulosity in general?

First, the instability, indeterminacy and vagueness of perceptual haziness construe a multilayered semantics of an irreducible ambiguity. Fog inspires a poetics of *flou*, *grisaille* and *sfumato*, its space is vibrating. The depiction of nebulosity challenges the rhetoric and stylistic devices of art and literature: fog escapes both mimesis and direct naming. Indexicality recedes in favor of allusions, suggestions and indirect approximation. In cultural-historic terms, the fondness of modern art and literature for nebulosity gives away a more general 'crisis of representation' (Vigne 2005). In a way, 'fog' is a symptom of our age, in which decisions must be made in extremely complex situations on a narrow and unstable cognitive basis.

Finally, outside artistic settings fog projects a new light on familiar environments and may unleash a positive aesthetic experience *if* this remains an exceptional and temporary episode. In general, the aesthetic experience resembles an island within the flow of everydayness. According to Thomas Leddy (2012, 127-150), this special experience casts an aura (in a phenomenological and not esoteric meaning) on common environments and actions¹³. In Leddy's words: «Aura is not a release from the everyday. However, it *is* a release from the mundane or boring aspects of the everyday» (Leddy 2012, 140). Fog, too, lets us experience the extraordinary in the ordinary, activating awareness and a sense of wonder, as if it would invite the subject to guess a hidden message behind this outstanding event. In other words, fog produces the defamiliarization of the familiar as a powerful, albeit limited strategy of aestheticizing the everyday¹⁴.

In sum, the aesthetics of nebulosity subverts the commonly unquestioned aesthetic and epistemic ideal of precise discrimination, opposing the suggestive-evocative power of hints, connotations, and ambiance to the sharp light of reason and

¹³ In his account of aura, Leddy explicitly refers to Bullough's analogy between switching to an aesthetic attitude and learning to appreciate fog at sea.

¹⁴ On the defamiliarization strategy of aestheticizing the everyday life and its deficits see Saito (2017, 12-23).

sylogistic argumentation. Nebulosity destabilizes reality, being a propitious medium for flowing forms and evanescent metamorphoses. While it blurs the border between truth and illusion, perception and projection, it nevertheless conveys pictorial qualities to the dematerialized real and poetically 'thickens' (in German: *ver-dichtet*) the 'immaterial' air. Fog is definitely suspect – and fascinating.

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