book review

McCormack, Derek P. **Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment**. Duke University Press, 2018

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A strong first installment in the new "Elements" series edited by Stacy Alaimo and Nicole Starosielski, Derek P. McCormack's *Atmospheric Things* offers a bold new intervention in the study of media infrastructures with incredible lucidity. Beyond traditional infrastructure studies, he considers the affective dimensions of material infrastructures and the particular affordances of the atmospheric and elemental in articulating the two. Perhaps the first thing that will strike readers of *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment* are the chapter headings. Structuring the book with sections such as "Sensing" and "Allure," McCormack succinctly signposts an important conceit of his main argument—that atmospheric media should be considered not just in terms of the meteorological, but also as affective and sensuous. The volume carefully analyzes the limits of atmospheric perception and experience, suggesting that part of the allure of the atmospheric is that which "remains beyond cognition or tangibility," or a spectral quality of the vaporous (McCormack 2018, 10). By skillfully intertwining Kathleen Stewart's theories of atmospheric attunement and allure with Luce Irigaray's critique of envelopment along the lines of bodily difference, McCormack pushes readers to think beyond Irigaray's accounts of being-in-the-air and instead offers atmosphere and the elemental as more theoretically expansive terms. In doing so, he moreover highlights the different ways and magnitudes that forces and variations of atmosphere are felt in different bodies, for different ends.

At the heart of *Atmospheric Things* is an engagement with the politics and ethics of atmospheres, examining how the infrastructures and technologies that condition it are differentially mobilized and can displace, agitate, or destroy bodies, as in the case of pollutants. To address such issues, McCormack engages with archives of visual and textual material pertaining to balloons, deploying the balloon as a philosophical device that can disclose conditions of envelopment and renew greater atmospheric awareness. He begins with three evocative case studies in particular that neatly demonstrate these thematic interests—the failed balloon drop at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Christopher and Marc Brauder's art installment *Lichtgrenze* (*Border of Light*), and Google's Project Loon. These examples, along with many other cases, enable a deeper understanding of how atmospheres are conceptualized in different contexts.

McCormack's clever application of the balloon to discuss the overlapping ethico-political, aesthetic, and technological approaches to thinking about atmosphere is a valuable methodological intervention. Situated in a broader scheme of stratospheric infrastructure, McCormack singles out the balloon as a speculative device for better understanding how certain modes of envelopment allow us to palpably sense atmosphere, and the balloon

functions as an incisive case study to more deeply consider elemental infrastructures and atmospheric media along the lines of the affective. He also thoughtfully builds on the work of Michel Serres and Peter Sloterdijk by reconsidering the political concerns when atmospheres are disclosed and felt differently across different bodies. He draws, for instance, from Sloterdijk's formalist theory of bubbles and the volumetric in order to consider how inhabitable worlds depend upon the mediation of infrastructures and governmental decisions that shape the development of forms of life.

Atmospheric Things develops its arguments across nine chapters: "Envelopment," "Sensing," "Allure," "Release," "Volume," "Sounding," "Tensions," "Hail," and "Elements." McCormack deftly populates each chapter with germane case studies that effectively organize and frame his thoughts with clarity and even humor. Real-world examples like militarized balloons that distribute propagandistic leaflets or function as surveilling sensors in tandem with other geopolitical assemblages serve, like literary or artistic representations, as an "imaginative lure" that enables readers to clearly think through the more abstruse theorizations (McCormack 2018, 18).

Chapter 1 establishes envelopment as a theoretical foundation that fosters two lines of thought, atmospheric materialism and entity-centered ontology, in which atmospheres can be disclosed. *Atmospheric Things* also represents an important rethinking of envelopment along two lines: as a condition of atmospheric immersion, and as a relational process of sensing variation. This bifurcation frames, in generative tension, the elemental conditions and material relations that determine atmosphere. Ultimately, McCormack's reorientation of envelopment functions as an ontological project in developing an expanded vocabulary of atmospheres and affective spacetimes. Chapter 2 investigates how the balloon affords different kinds of aerostatic sensing and immersion in an atmospheric milieu, while Chapter 3 examines how allure is fabricated materially and infrastructurally. McCormack then moves into thinking about how balloons can assuage grief and loss through acts of release in Chapter 4, while Chapters 5 and 6 unpack the term "volume" to avoid reducing atmospheres as mere three-dimensional, calculable entities that would undercut the allure of its intangibility. Later chapters address the political and ethical dimensions of atmosphere, including questions of how atmospheres can serve as mediums for ideological dispersal and address. McCormack ends by locating parallels between the atmospheric and elemental, examining stratospheric experiments including solar and telecom balloons before turning to the figure of the angel to make sense of how balloons mediate and transmit through atmosphere.

Throughout, McCormack avoids simply framing atmosphere as some affirmative category of authentic experience, instead opting for more complex and detailed arguments that refuse reducing the atmospheric to purely representational terms. Rather—and this is where *Atmospheric Things* really shines—McCormack continually raises questions about how envelopes of sensing function and for what reasons, channeling the work of John Durham Peters in seeking widened parameters for media studies and media geography to better grasp the elemental intangibles of atmospheres. In other words, McCormack is disinterested in producing fixed categories of experience for atmosphere, but instead locates how human and nonhuman entities are enveloped differently, and at times, intangibly. This imaginative and interdisciplinary approach to studying atmospheres resists the trappings of defining it as stable or purely in the realm of human experience, as he notes how even paper wrinkles in high humidity. These methodical theorizations will be invaluable to those interested in coupling the affective with the meteorological, as McCormack does here.

Ultimately, McCormack offers a lucid and comprehensive analysis of balloons as a device for doing atmospheric things, meticulously weaving together disparate strands of ethico-political, aesthetic, and technological concerns that shape atmospheres. This book will be instrumental to media scholars interested in new ways of thinking about the intersecting lines of infrastructure, affect, meteorology, envelopment, and even trauma and objecthood, where both human and nonhuman agencies from bodies to balloons are theorized in terms of the atmospheric. By inviting scholars to consider that the allure of atmospheres rests in its resistance to full perception and sense, and that the free-floating dirigibility of balloons offers productive ways to imagine and experience atmospheres, McCormack lays the groundwork for future work in atmospheric infrastructures and opens room for the enchanting, generative possibilities of simply letting go.