

THINKING LIKE A CLOUD

Harold Vasselin, IMeRA, Université
Marseille-Provence, France
harold.vasselin@orange.fr

Abstract

Environmental philosophy asks to develop a thinking which would not be human centered. An attempt to do so consists in plying between a subject centered mythological or spiritual view, and an object centered scientific grab. I worked this topic in a short experimental film that associates a Shitao painting and an IPCC graph of global earth warming.

This article comes from a presentation at the Leonardo's *Water is in the Air* Workshop that took place in June 2012.

Keys words : Global warming, experimental cinema, cloud, atmosphere, breathing, cloud computing.

"Only the mountain has lived enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf" [1]

This famous sentence from Aldo Leopold, extracted from his short text *Thinking like a mountain*, is often quoted when evoking the founding of environmental ethic. Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) was a scientist, and among the first ecologists. With a sharp poetical arrow, he points a direction for human behavior in accordance with ecosystems. Here, an ecosystem where wolves live: the American western mountains. But cannot this same attitude be held when dealing with, for instance, global warming? What would it be to "think like a cloud"?

Obviously, thinking like a mountain, or thinking like a cloud, is not accessible to us. People can – and people do – build up knowledge about what a cloud is, or an atmosphere, an ocean, a hurricane... We can know much about it, and more and more. And it's even possible to deduce some possible futures, some incidences of our behaviors and decisions... But it doesn't give neither mastery nor certitude. It doesn't give the practical ways for action. This will be held under another regime, political and mythological.

What is this knowledge, then? It is, let say, like the knowledge of the volcano for those who live on the slopes of the volcano. Like them, we have to know, and we also have to figure. We have to symbolize.

Scientific way of knowing is very new. The objects themselves, the objects that science names, are very new.

Nobody, a century ago, would have any idea of that thing, consider as a whole, that we today name *atmosphere*. And furthermore, nobody would have any idea that this object would be organically connected, for instance, to macro-ocean and to micro sea life. It is a very short lapse of time for such a great change of view. We have to make room for it, in our perception, and in our imaginary. Symbolic space is the one in which we do make our orientation, both individually and collectively. And this work is very slow.

How do we work out, then, this enlarged symbolic field? "Thinking like a cloud" seems to be a meaningless proposal. Nevertheless, there is an history to it. Thoughts of clouds (thoughts of air, of rain, of sky sequences) have always existed, everywhere. Abundance of figures, texts, paintings, sounds even, created by individual artists or by communities, engraves experiences of "thinking like a cloud". Displaying this palette would be much too long here. Let just think at Constable's skies, at Michelangelo's Sixtine Chapel, at Indian's rain dance, or at any Deluge in any of so many stories

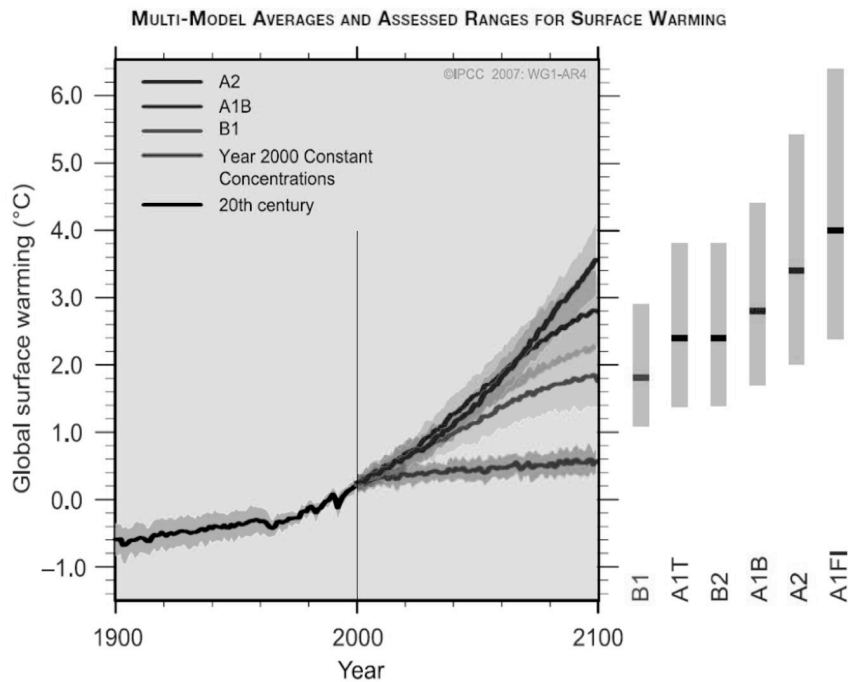
on Earth...

The idea I worked on is as follows: It is possible to awake resonances between thought-of-cloud and knowledge-of-cloud. It would be like playing together some sounds of different timbres, some different instruments, which could be far away in the distance. And precisely because of this distance, that opens space, that makes room, that enlarges us... The space opened would be emotional, conscious, and uncertain. That's what we need, I believe - We, living on the slope of the volcano.

My work takes shape as animated pictures. Movies, short and eventually long films, installations... Here my proposal takes form as a series of short films (3 to 6 minutes each). In each of those, an art representation is coupled to a scientific concept. The relationship is not illustrative. The painting, or text, or whatever... and the equation, or data, or scientific process: both are my characters. Each film build up the stage, or the situation, where they may interfere.

Actually, they probably won't. But something in-between will be tuned in order to resonate. This something is the

FIG 1 : EARTH GLOBAL WARMING - 2007 ESTIMATION
INTERGOVERNMENTAL PANEL ON CLIMATE CHANGE © IPCC2007



film material itself: its proper time, sound, narrative and pictorial form. So is the artistic proposal: to dig out the form that allows an imaginary weave between a specific thought-of-cloud and a specific knowledge-of-cloud.

I had the greatest difficulties to convince arts supporters to engage into this adventure : "Isn't it documentary?" Science people, on their side, thought a "science film" on atmosphere should be informative, and, good Lord, for sure no: not mythological! We are here in the country of Descartes, and science should not be addressed as long as subjectivity is not clearly surrounded.

So I decided to work it out, home made. I used my old DV Camera, my head lamp as lighting source... My relatives accepted to play as actors. Fred Costa [2], friendly, let me use freely extracts from two of his recent musical productions. For a zero budget film doesn't exist, this one cost less than 100 euros. The title is "*Cloud computing*". The two echoing materials are the IPCC graph of global warning (fig 1), and an ink wash painting from Shitao (fig 2).

The first drawing, issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change - IPCC - shows the evolution of average temperature on Earth, registered up to now, and estimated for the next 50 years according to various scenarios. In a sheaf of colored futures, it displays an ambit of our conditions of living in our common house, Earth. It shows also, as in any good scientific work, the various indetermination ranges, in some nice washed mists. Shitao, monk and painter in the Chinese XVIIth century, proceeded to manifest on paper, in a "single draw" of ink and water, respiratory, a connection between interiority and the world. And that's what moves me: this link between intimacy and our world, expressed in both figures as a single draw, a single breath. Atmosphere isn't yet the common breath of living creature on Earth?

A specific scientific information came about, that gave me the opportunity to build the appropriate fiction weaving. This went as an article in *Nature*, February 17, 2011 [3]. To summarize it: Exceptional rains flooded Wales

during October and November 2000, causing vast damages.

Global warming is estimated to be, in the actual period, 0,6°C.

Now: Is there any cause to effect relationship between these two facts? Calculation exceeds possibilities of even very large computers. Yet some Oxford scientists managed to give an answer to this question. To do so, they asked for contribution to thousands of volunteers, who interconnected their personal computers in a large "cloud computing" network.

Thus, does this specific tempest has any connection with global earth warming? The answer is: "The precise magnitude of the anthropogenic contribution remains uncertain, but in nine out of ten cases our model results indicate that twentieth-century anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions increased the risk of floods occurring in England and Wales in autumn 2000 by more than 20%, and in two out of three cases by more than 90%." In other words, the answer is: "Yes".

To organize these distant knowledge-of-clouds and thought-of-clouds in a single organic movie piece is the attempt of the short film *Cloud Computing*. My hope is it would enhance (in its very modest way) this symbolic working out that, according to philosophers such as Isabelle Stengers [4], is of crucial importance in the political process of giving consideration to our planet. And, as far as it is here an experimental art work, to test some coherent narrative and cinematographic form to do so.

This short film can be seen on the following link : <http://haroldvasselin.fr> then: films et videos / cloud computing.

References and notes

1. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford : University Press, 1949)
2. Fred Costa, musician and composer - <http://costarama.free.fr>
3. Pardeep Pall & all "Anthropogenic greenhouse gas contribution to flood risk in England and Wales in autumn 2000" - *Nature* 470, 382-385 (17 February 2011) - <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v470/n7334/full/nature09762.html>
4. Isabelle Stengers, *Au temps des catastrophes – Résister à la barbarie qui vient* (Paris : Editions La Découverte, 2009).

FIG. 2 : SHITAO - THE HERMIT LODGE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE TABLE - 1707 – CANTON MUSEUM

