

## Kitap Eleştirisi

Peters, J. D. (2015). *The marvelous clouds: Toward a philosophy of elemental media*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 416 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-25397-8 [e-book].

## ON ELEMENTAL VIEWS FROM A *THOUGHT EXPERIMENT: THE MARVELOUS CLOUDS*

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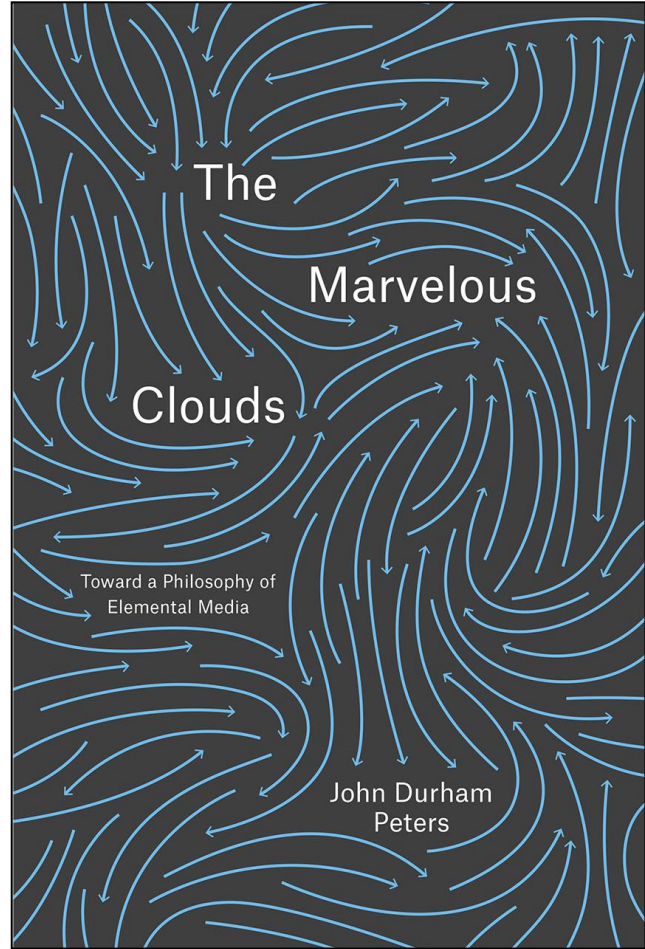
Ongoing debates on designating the discipline of communication (Levy & Gurevitch, 1994) reach almost the same conclusion that communication studies as well as media studies are interdisciplinary studies. Although there is a fruitful convergence among disciplines in the realm of communication, not every field is on the stage in order to establish a connection. Studying communication sciences and philosophy together, for instance, is still quite a rarity. If “we must build linkages between communication and other intellectual disciplines” (Shoemaker, 1994, p. 391), we should start thinking differently.

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Date of Submission: 29/11/2015 Date of Acceptance: 30/11/2015

There is no doubt that “to think differently” is an obscure expression. However, communication studies should provoke new ways of thinking in order to reach original theories and methodologies. Creative thinking is obviously risky to make “acceptable” academic studies among communication scholars as long as creativity is considered only in terms of art, not science. Philosophy will encourage scholars to turn the unthinkable into thinkable, and let them break the rigid walls of any discipline. In order to make a thoroughly interdisciplinary study, we



should build our *own sense of network among disciplines* instead of making a patchwork of theories and/or methods of two or more disciplines. In other words, we must “make a map, not a tracing” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1993, p. 12). This does not mean to ignore what has been done in the name of communication and/or media studies so far but to take the literature of communication and media studies into consideration while going thoroughly beyond them.

In light of applying “thought experiments” into communication/media studies in order to see the field in a brand-new perspective, John Durham Peters’ *The Marvelous Clouds* (2015) can be literally called an oasis. His previous work *Speaking into the Air* (1999) is also worthy of notice to make use of philosophy in order to understand what the meaning of communication is throughout its history. Philosophical *dissemination* of

Peters' dialogue digs "the history of the idea of communication" out to designate what can be said on communication at present (Peters, 1999).

In *The Marvelous Clouds* (2015), Peters reveals the "new" in what has already been known regarding media studies *to make his own map*. He is totally aware of the fact that "to study media, you cannot just study media: on this point Innis and McLuhan, Carey and Kittler all agree, being scholars with an eye for preposterous analogies and miscellaneous learning" (2015, p. 29). From this point forth, *The Marvelous Clouds* designates its own certain route by saying "look around you". In the cloudy atmosphere of "everything", Peters makes his certain contribution to media theories by revealing philosophy of media element by element.

Since *The Marvelous Clouds* is a book of "philosophy of media", how Peters makes use of philosophy deserves to be noticed. As a beginning, he considers "being", and does not let readers to see the term too philosophical (2015, p. 10). Peters describes the whole book as "a thought experiment", which I find quite liberating, and he offers "a philosophy of elemental media –the elements that lie at the taken-for-granted base of our habits and habitat-with special reference to the digital era" (2015, p. 1).

In the first chapter "Understanding Media", readers come across with Peters' elemental gaze to media. He depicts *a habitat of communication*. The basic descriptions of media in the book can be highlighted as follows: To begin with, "media (...) are vessels and environments, containers of possibility that anchor our existence and make what we are doing possible" (2015, p. 2). To relate media with "being" gives rise to the thought of understanding media in a broad sense since "media are ensembles of natural element and human craft" (2015, p. 3). Secondly, "the old idea that media are environments can be flipped: environments are also media" (2015, p. 3). Peters suggests to reverse the old ideas in order to think differently. In other words, difference may also come from what you have already known. Thirdly, "media, as things in the middle, are

often regarded as being of secondary importance to the meanings we consciously construct, but media usually harbor the deepest and greatest of meanings" (2015, pp. 6-7).

In order to grasp a new sense of media, Peters takes two "old" concepts, nature and the body as a *network*. As soon as nature becomes a scenery of Peters' elemental media, the body is there to imply "our deepest media" (2015, p. 313). Nature and the body are also defined as "infrastructures", a key concept in *The Marvelous Clouds*. Since Peters echoes from the depths of elements, infrastructural media are defined as "media that stand under" (2015, p. 33). Peters' philosophy of media is based on establishing a philosophical anthropology.

Such philosophical anthropology takes a look to the sky, and especially focuses on clouds. According to Peters, "clouds are full of meaning" (2015, p. 255). They give the perfect opportunity to grasp media theory with a word. Peters reminds readers that "[clouds] are neither icon, index, nor symbol. Gloriously, clouds pose the problem of the unrepresentable" (2015, p. 257). "The cloud metaphor has been a smashing success for the information technology business, and fluffy, benign cumulus clouds are now the standard iconography of online storage" (2015, p. 332). In *The Marvelous Clouds*, to speak about clouds means to speak about media.

Media theory which is composed of such "unrepresentable" clouds follows a certain strategy to make use of everything in a new perspective. Peters makes use of Heidegger's and Latour's views on technology, and, as "a forgotten infrastructure" (2015, p. 38), Peters' understanding of ontology is involved with how Heidegger's *Technik* reorders nature (2015, p. 39). Latour's strategy which is "not to abandon the concept of nature but to fight for it" (2015, p. 42) gives Peters an opportunity to stress the significance of nature when the subject is media. Nevertheless, "the concept of

media (...) was connected to nature long before it was connected to technology" (2015, p. 46).

Peters' another difference lies in the fact that not only philosophers but also authors such as Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman are in *The Marvelous Clouds* to disclose the relationship between "experience and nature" (2015, pp. 43-46). The subtitle "The Media and/as Nature" means a lot. Peters clearly states that his aim is not to turn back to a precritical notion of media as natural. He takes the modern human-semiotic turn as an enrichment of the concept, but it is time to graft those branches back into the natural roots in hopes of a new synthesis (2015, p. 48). The crucial point is highlighted at the end of the first chapter: "Media studies can be a form of philosophical anthropology, of asking the question with which Socrates stumped Alcibades: What is a human being? (...) I offer one answer: (...) The human is a creature sailing on many craft" (2015, p. 52).

It can be said that two elements –water (sea) and fire- are milestones of constructing Peters' elemental media. *The Marvelous Clouds* takes "being" from ontology, and sails among the marine world which invites fundamental anthropological questions (2015, p. 60). What is more, Peters makes use of Lacan who figures our being as a ship (2015, p. 114), and adds that "the ship shows us how being can be artificial" (2015, p. 109).

Second Chapter "Cetaceans and Ships" designates "the moorings of our being" (2015, p. 53). This chapter reminds us of detailed explanations on whales in *Moby Dick*. Melville is a valuable submerged source to show what lies beneath the sea in *The Marvelous Clouds*. Peters' elemental look takes "literature" (i.e. Melville's *Moby Dick*) as a source of media theory<sup>1</sup>. Peters is aware of the fact that "the reader activates the book as

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<sup>1</sup>Melville's *Moby Dick* was one of my key sources to develop my thoughts on Deleuze and Guattari's "faciality" (Canar, 2005). Seeing how Peters and I read Melville differently helped me to realize the fact

the ship activates the sea" (2015, p. 321). In order to elaborate different thoughts for media studies, he also gives reference to Shakespeare, or, when he talks about "The Face and the Book" (Chap. 6) to express how "a face can change your life", Tolstoy becomes the striking *element*: "One look at Anna Karenina, and Vronsky is lost" (2015, p. 272).

In my opinion, using literature for a "thought experiment" of media theory by itself is a marvelous idea. Peters' book proves that literature should not be seen as missing the point (communication/media) among scholars. Even the name of the book comes from one of the prose poems of Charles Baudelaire (2015, p. 387). *The Marvelous Clouds* composes interesting combinations of literature, philosophy, media, theology, zoology, biology, and so on to reveal what is going on in elemental media. After Melville, Peters quotes from Jacques-Yves Cousteau. One of the most beautiful and thought-provoking line in *The Marvelous Clouds* comes right after giving reference to Cousteau: "I sink, therefore I am" (2015, p. 74). This statement explains why one considers the sea in media theory. After sinking, Peters announces that it is time to burn, and that is how readers come across the third chapter "The Fire Sermon" (2015, pp. 115-164).

Shakespeare (2015, p. 117) and Hegel come together in *the fire sermon*, and "like Hegel's negative, fire is the great dialectician; it proves Kenneth Burke's point that human beings are "the inventor of the negative" (2015, p. 119). Media anthropology takes the fire philosophically. Peters "tries the experiment of seeing how much meaning can be wrung from a single natural element [fire] for media theory" (2015, p. 116). It is important to realize the fact that "fire is our first prohibition, says Gaston Bachelard; for him, fire was social before it was natural" (2015, p. 123). Peters also reminds us that

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that literature (i.e *Moby Dick*) can be taken as a literal spring for creating new ways of studying communication and media.

“fire is a chief metaphor for the Internet” (2015, p. 126). In addition, “information is irreducibly connected with heat and burning” (2015, p. 127). Since “fire evokes meanings that lie deeper” (2015, p. 133), it can also light a media theory.

Although, the chapters which are based on water and fire attract readers’ attention a lot with its rich thought-provoking comments on media theory, the whole book can be taken more likely as “sailing in the sky” (see Chap. 4 and Chap. 5, 2015). Peters shows us how to sail in the sky since “theory, as all our metaphors still suggest, was at first related to the sky” (2015, p. 167).

In the final chapter “God and Google”, readers realize the fact that “knowledge is not the gathering but the throwing away of information” (2015, p. 318). *The Marvelous Clouds* gets to the point that “I am tagged, therefore I am” (2015, p. 329) since “tagging is one of the most characteristic acts of communication today” (2015, p. 349). What is more, “data processing is dependent on the furnace of arts. Vulcan, not Apollo, is the lord of cyberspace” (2015, p. 333). These fragments from Peters show how today’s weather is in *the Marvelous Clouds*.

Peters encourages readers that thinking “philosophy of media” is not a difficult thing to do. After all, “you don’t always need Derrida for deconstruction; some texts come that way ready-made” (2015, p. 361). Then, *The Marvelous Clouds* goes to Einstein since his “relativity is a theory of communication -more specifically, a theory of the universe’s difficulty of communicating with itself” (2015, p. 366). Readers clearly see that Peters depicts new connections by taking communication as a habit and a habitat.

Before reaching to the conclusion, the weather report of *The Marvelous Clouds* can be summarized as follows: First of all, “media theory should be a version of philosophical anthropology” (2015, p. 372). Secondly, “the notion of elemental media advanced in this book is more than an interdisciplinary gesture. (...) To posit media of nature is to deny the human monopoly of meaning” (2015, p. 380). Thirdly, “we rarely



know what we mean until we say it, and often saying it reveals meanings that we didn't know we had. The future contains and reveals the present. The story of the disenchantment of the world as a loss needs rethinking" (2015, p. 381); and finally, "there is a gap between humans and things" (2015, p. 382). Therefore, "a central argument of this book is that human crafts reveal nature" (2015, p. 383).

*The Marvelous Clouds* ends "with one last look to the sky" (2015, p. 385). According to Peters, "the beautiful Finnish word for world, *maailma*, which combines two words, earth or land (*maa*) and atmosphere or air (*ilma*), catches the right spirit (2015, p. 386). It can be said that Peters' inquiring look to the sky by itself is a contribution to media theory. Elemental media relates with what lies beneath, and such look to the depths of media gives rise to philosophy of media. I agree with Peters that media studies have much to learn for "a different or broader understanding of meaning" (2015, p. 379). *The Marvelous Clouds* is a thought-provoking step of rethinking the significance of elements in media studies. Peters' thought experiment is mainly about revealing what is going on around us. Today's gaze to media involves the past and the future of media studies. The difference of the book lies in the weather itself. Since media studies become our weather report, *undecidability* of the sky gives rise to the thought that new theories will come to the field at any moment.

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