

## Recensioni, rassegne, autopresentazioni, note

Recensione

**Mădălina Diaconu, *Aesthetics of weather***

London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, pp. 249

“Everyone talks about the weather. We don’t”. This famous claim from a 1967 poster of the Socialist German Student Union applies to the profession of aestheticians as well (albeit without the political connotation that this slogan had originally). In any case, the observation of the neglect of weather as a topic in the philosophical debate is the starting point for the new book *Aesthetics of weather* by Mădălina Diaconu. In the book, she revolves around the phenomenon of weather in thirteen independent chapters in order to uncover “the many faces of the sky” (p. 1).

Diaconu combines a broad range of different theoretical approaches such as “‘aisthetics’ (theory of perception), environmental aesthetics, the aesthetics of the atmosphere, everyday aesthetics, the aesthetics of science, urban aesthetics and the philosophy of art” (p. 2), even though environmental aesthetics and everyday aesthetics can be seen as especially important points of reference. The book is structured in three sections: the first one deals with the phenomenology of the atmosphere, in the second one, entitled “Phenomenographies” (p. 77), the author collects case studies of atmospheric phenomena. The third one takes a deeper look into collective practices like the standard of air conditioning or forms of mass tourism. Each section includes several chapters, which can be read on their own even though they do enrich each other.

In the first chapter, Diaconu lays down the foundations of the following analysis by explaining what aesthetic features are involved in experiences of the weather. For her, perceptual aspects and emotional ambiances, but also metaphysical imagination, a cognitive-driven sense of wonder as well as transaesthetic experiences come together. The second chapter discusses the historical reference points of Diaconu’s approach: She combines thoughts from the New Phenomenology as founded by German phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz with Arnold Berleant’s aesthetics of engagement. She argues that the corporeal experiences of indi-

viduals, which are central to these two approaches, should be understood as socially, culturally and historically situated and that they should be enriched by traditional and indigenous knowledge. Based on “the phenomenology of the body, the environmental aesthetics and the aesthetics of the atmosphere”, “[i]n a nutshell, the aesthetics of weather should argue in favour of a reflected aesthetic attitude on the atmospheric conditions, which would be inflected by both environmental sciences and art” (p. 46). In chapter three, Diaconu argues that the sense of temperature has so far been neglected by aesthetic theories – which she deems to be problematical, since temperature is of great importance for an aesthetic of weather. “[C]ommunication with the environment, intersensory connections, porosity, extension, depth and radiance” (p. 12) are highlighted as central characteristics of the thermic body. A case study of tornados is being developed in the fourth chapter. Thereby, the author wants to show how a medium can become a phenomenon. The topic of the wind is taken up again later in the book: the seventh chapter deals with the phenomenon of wind in order to show that Berleant’s concept of aesthetic engagement offers a useful range of conceptions by which we can describe our aesthetic experiences. In my opinion, these thematically related chapters should have been placed one after the other.

The second section starts with chapter five, where she takes a look into the implicit aesthetics of weather sayings, which show, following Diaconu, the complex experience of weather before modern science became prevalent. In the following, sixth, chapter the author problematizes the conflation of fine weather with sunshine and the absence of clouds and offers an argument for an extension of aesthetic appreciation of weather beyond this stereotype. The eighth chapter highlights the disregard for the thermic experiences in aesthetics and offers a plea for “‘warming’ aesthetic theory” (p. 117). It thus takes up again the topic of heat and cold, which has been discussed already in the third chapter, but now the significance of temperature in architecture, art works and literature are being analyzed. Nevertheless, the arrangement of the chapters again does not seem ideal – it would have made more sense, in my eyes, to have them follow on from each other in order to create synergies between the two discussions on the relationship between the thermal and aesthetics.

The third part of the book begins with the ninth chapter, which takes a closer look at John Tyndall’s travel reports from the Alps: Diaconu reads him as an early forerunner of modern spatial theories in which non-hu-

man forces and process ontologies become important. This chapter resonates with earlier thoughts on weather sayings in chapter five of the book, since both grapple with the function and importance of language for an aesthetics of weather as well as the question of what kinds of knowledge shall be taken into account. The tenth chapter deals with the concept of landscape and argues that it should be left as an open concept that is dependent on both “perceptual discrimination, but also cultural sensitivity, and fine-grained conceptual analyses” (p. 154). Diaconu is sympathetic with indigenous perspectives on landscape, which convey agency to the landscape itself and respect it as an active counterpart of human beings. Yet, she does not claim that we shall adopt this worldview: “I am only suggesting that our understanding of the landscape is culturally rooted and is indebted to specific features of the physical environment we live in” (p. 165). In chapter eleven, Diaconu then takes a look at cities and claims that their identity has a lot to do with their relation to the weather and criticizes the fact that this topic is left to natural scientists, “who translate physical atmospheres in measurable parameters” (p. 167). However, she emphasizes the importance of corporeal weather experiences using the examples of air-conditioned indoor spaces or a sudden downpour of rain. One of the most interesting chapters is the twelfth one: It deals with “para-aesthetic practices”, which Diaconu understands as “that which surrounds an aesthetic event” (p. 182) as well as the “grey zone of experiences that involve aesthetic pleasure, but inadmissibly collide with moral values” (p. 183). She uses this concept in order to criticize disaster tourism and Astro-tourism which are in her eyes representative of other forms of mass tourism. Especially the second, morally charged meaning of para-aesthetics leads to thought-provoking ideas regarding the importance of socio-economic and cultural context of aesthetic practices, a rescaling of the subject of experiences and the more. The thirteenth chapter closes the book with the request to “leave no traces” (p. 195) – which, as Diaconu mentions herself, stands in harsh contrast to the Western appreciation for leaving something behind or creating something enduring. Against this, she argues for the “value of transience” which is backed by a reflection on “ecological duties from the perspective of an intergenerational aesthetics” (p. 211).

The book offers a broad spectrum of topics discussed and includes an impressive number of practical examples from the art world and literature. Diaconu manages to provide fine-grained observations of often-overlooked phenomena and includes highly interesting case studies. Not least

because of this it is very clear and encourages the reader to combine and test the new conceptions they have learned with examples from their own lifeworlds. The structure of the book is, as has been mentioned before, not entirely convincing: In my opinion, the process of understanding could have been made easier if the thematically related chapters had been arranged together. Nevertheless, the content of this study is reason enough to read it and consider its theses in further discussions. Throughout the book, questions of the role of weather aesthetics for a more successful, non-destructive human-nature relationship keep coming up. Diaconu's thoughts on how aesthetics of weather can help to foster sustainable attitudes are especially fruitful and open up an important field of research where environmental ethics, the philosophical theory of sustainability and aesthetics meet. Whether her concept of para-aesthetic experiences, the asked-for cultivation of corporeal-sensual experiences and their precise linguistic description or the idea that the reference system used in the evaluation of weather should be limited "no longer to individual well-being but to the function of the atmosphere in enabling and preserving the environment" (p. 100): In the book, Diaconu makes the convincing argument that "[a]esthetic engagement with the sky is a way of reconnecting with an indeterminate, non-human Other which makes us rethink our position in the universe" (p. 8). With a view to the central thesis of the last chapter, it is difficult to wish the book to leave traces in the aesthetic discourse. However, if these traces were to manifest themselves as a change in the aesthetic debate in the direction of an "inter-generational aesthetic" (Diaconu) or an aesthetic of the future (Emily Brady), this would be in Diaconu's sense.

Kira Meyer

Recensione

**Lona Gaikis (ed.), *The Bloomsbury handbook of Susanne K. Langer***

London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, pp. 294

To comprehend Susanne Langer's profound influence and significance within the realms of postmodern sciences and cultural studies disciplines, *The Bloomsbury handbook of Susanne K. Langer* by Lona Gaikis is an invaluable place to start. This meticulously crafted edited book serves as both an introduction to her work and a challenge to existing philosophical discourse in these interdisciplinary fields. The text centers Langer's innovative theory of art, which intricately emerged from the principles of symbolic logic.

The book contains a collection of essays authored by European and North American scholars whose work represents a rich tapestry of perspectives and methodologies. Some of these scholars were instrumental in pioneering archival research during the 1990s and initiated the first comprehensive analyses of Langer's extensive body of work. Alongside these foundational voices are contemporary researchers who have developed their own methodologies for applying and advancing Langer's concepts. The dynamic dialogue throughout the volume cultivates in its reader a deep understanding of Langer's contributions.

Moreover, this multivocal philosophical approach takes Langer's ideas into new territories and Langer's work is notably a confluence of continental and analytic traditions, a positioning that enriches the discussions presented in this book. As such, the volume does more than simply reflect on Langer's impact; it actively engages with her work, interrogating its relevance and application in addressing contemporary cultural and scientific issues. This makes it an essential read for scholars and students alike who are interested in the intersection of art, philosophy, and cultural studies, as well as for those who aspire to critically engage with the ongoing legacy of Langer's thought.

The structure of this volume itself elucidates and encapsulates the philosophical *ethos* of the author. This unique characteristic to discussions of Langer's work is its strength within contemporary discourse. The volume mirrors Langer's transdisciplinary methodology, spanning aesthetics, the arts, and psychology, thereby fostering a rich interplay of ideas and perspectives. Gaikis' collection reinforces the conviction that this multidisciplinary

mensional aspect of Langer's philosophy is critical to understanding her import. The careful arrangement of the essays bridges her disparate ideas into a cohesive picture, implicitly illustrating the interconnectedness of her work across realms of thought.

Furthermore, the handbook encourages a dialogue that transcends traditional academic boundaries. By engaging with her ideas, scholars not only honor her legacy but also challenge themselves to think critically about how her insights can inform current debates in aesthetics, cognitive science, and cultural theory.

The book effectively demonstrates that Langer's philosophy, firmly rooted in a realist, naturalist, presentational, and non-discursive framework, derives its core from an eclectic blend of philosophical and cultural sources. These include Gestalt psychology, Wittgenstein's notion of "pictures as facts", and phenomenology as shown in Bergson's work, combined with the pragmatism of James and Dewey. Additional influences encompass the philosophies of Cassirer and Whitehead, alongside pluralistic logic, non-discursive symbolism, and intuition. Langer's philosophy notably eschews engagement with the normativity of aesthetic experience or art classification, instead focusing on themes of nature, emotion, form, expressivity, the analytical unity of action, and virtuality.

The volume is organized into 18 chapters, each addressing different facets of Langer's work. The book divides its themes into two parts, which illuminate distinct aspects of Langer's philosophical framework and intellectual heritage. Part One meticulously delineates the historical origins and continuing resonance of Langer's work through extensive and rigorous research. This section offers a comprehensive exploration of pivotal themes, including the influential Harvard school of analysis under which Langer's ideas were nurtured.

Part one further examines her nuanced relationship with the logical framework proposed by Wittgenstein (pp. 35-47) and with the work of Ernst Cassirer (pp. 121-31). The card-index system that Langer famously employed is also discussed (pp. 79-91), shedding light on her innovative approach to organizing and developing her ideas. The section further delves into her phenomenology of feeling (pp. 93-103), highlighting its pertinent insights into human experience.

Central to this exploration is Langer's theory of self-liberation through culture (pp. 105-19). This concept vitally underscores the role of art and symbolic expression in facilitating personal and societal transformation. The narrative extends to the meaning of "feeling" articulated in *Mind: an essay on human feeling* (pp. 133-47), where she posits that emotions are

not merely subjective experiences but are integral to the framework of understanding human consciousness. Additionally, the symbolic mind's psychological dimension is meticulously examined (pp. 149-64), with a focus on music as a unique form of symbolic expression that encapsulates complex emotional experiences (pp. 165-79). Through this examination, Part One contextualizes Langer's philosophical contributions while enriching our understanding of her enduring impact.

Part two instead expands Langer's ideas to offer fresh perspectives on discussions of affect, materialism, embodied cognition, virtuality, and new media. This half of the book includes voices continuing Langer's avant-garde legacy, who here engage critically with her ideas. They propel Langer's thought in novel directions, fostering innovative concepts in philosophical biology (pp. 183-99), the politics of unspeakable thought (pp. 209-22), vitality semiotics (pp. 223-38), the application of her dance theory in postcolonial Hong Kong (pp. 239-51), and virtual acts in performance art (pp. 253-62). Part Two successfully illuminates the complexities of everyday aesthetics (pp. 263-74) and paves the way for further inquiry into virtual worlds.

The *Bloomsbury handbook of Susanne K. Langer* comes at a time of already-expanded interest in Langer's ideas. An appreciation for her extraordinary endeavors, coupled with an awareness of the nature of her insights, has instigated a significant renaissance of attentiveness in Langer's ideas, which continue to resurface in waves of interest. The vivacious allure to her thought continually challenges the convolutions of contemporary aesthetic inquiry, provoking thought and dialogue among theorists and practitioners alike. Her unique perspective asserts that art holds a distinctive epistemological significance, belonging to a category of its own within philosophical discourse. While she was too often excluded from important discussions in her own time for reasons including and beyond sexism, it is evident that she was an unconventional and resolute thinker whose contributions continue to provoke scholarly dialogue and challenge established norms.

This handbook expertly enriches our understanding of Langer's philosophy and raises important questions for future research, urging us to reflect on the relevance of Langer's work in contemporary contexts. These central questions include: why do we read Langer now? What can and should we do with Langer's thought as we navigate the complexities of modern aesthetics and cultural studies? These inquiries effectively underscore the enduring significance of Langer's work by highlighting the necessity for ongoing examinations of her contributions. Such exploration

promises to deepen our comprehension of the intersections between art, culture, and philosophy.

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