
John Durham Peters says in the introduction to The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media that it is addressed to specialists and general readers alike. Between this introductory heads-up and concluding reflections 377 pages later, he walks us through a maze of research and thinking that—to take one daring example—sketches a theory of human culture based in part on the study of dolphins. The book is risky, ambitious, and original. It is also difficult and there may not be many readers of either kind who will grasp it on first reading. It takes work.

The book’s subject, considered very broadly, is how the web of civilization is spun out of elements bearing the combined signatures of human invention and natural creation. Peters declares confidently at the outset that “humans and their crafts have entered into nature and have altered every system on earth and sea, and many in the sky, to the point that ‘nature,’ understood as something untouched by humans, only exists on earth where humans have chosen to set it apart as natural” (p. 1).

The current occasion for such a declaration is the transformation of the world of communications caused by the introduction of digital media. Their incorporation into the operations of so many of society’s systems has been exciting and, to borrow a word Peters likes, marvelous. But, as anyone in the newspaper and communication businesses will attest, it has also been confusing. So with this world and its digitalized gadgets providing a backdrop, Peters starts his explorations by foraging in an intellectual toolbox stocked by such writers as the American Pragmatists (notably William James and Charles Peirce), Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, and Friedrich Kittler for ideas to guide an understanding of what is going on.

The payoff is a blueprint and a set of methods for constructing a general theory that, on the one hand, synthesizes the ideas of these major 20th-century thinkers and, on the other, places the ideas in a pragmatic and moral frame of reference. In this respect, his vision is a catholic—that is to say, comprehensive and multi-dimensional—meditation on the formation of civilization. He calls it a “philosophical anthropology” (p. 12).

In a sense, Peters has written a creation story that calls for, amongst other things, a reconsideration of the habits of mind and language that mark the study of media. This reconsideration includes, first and foremost, the meaning we attach to the word “medium” or in its plural form, “media.” Medium, in Peters’ lexicon, is a broad and flexible term that applies not only to print and broadcast networks, as it has in the past, but to all “vehicles that carry and communicate meaning” (p. 1). Media, he says, should no longer point narrowly to data processors or sources of content that circumscribe and are presumed to affect human behavior. They should more properly be un-
derstood as “vessels and environments, containers of possibility that anchor our existence and make what we are doing possible” (p. 3). In short, media are ensembles of natural elements and human invention—techniques, crafts, and technologies—that facilitate meaning and make the world. They are not only “about the world … they are the world” (p. 3). As it pertains to technology, considered independently of other crafts and techniques, we are not wired and deformed by versions of it as some writers would have us believe. Rather, Peters argues that we constitute ourselves—constitute our very Being—through techniques and technology of one kind or another.

Peters’ point of departure is that media are not only “devices of information,” although they certainly are that, but they are “also sources of order” (p. 1). He is arguing that the social and cultural order, also considered broadly and generously, is born in media, both artificial and natural, and he is proposing through a series of “thought experiments” to unmask the core of elements that comprise the order we call civilization. He thereby conceives of a philosophy of media and a corresponding philosophy of nature—in which the elements of earth, air, water, and fire are fundamental—that together give birth to his “philosophical anthropology.” It is as if the elements comprise an originating palette from which human evolution and development is designed.

To illustrate his method, Peters engages in what he calls a “thought experiment” in which he compares dolphins and humans, both creatures with large brains and high intelligence. He describes ways in which dolphins are clever enough to do errands for the U.S. Navy, but how, at the same time, they lack appendages or media that might promote the creation of tools.

Humans, too, are smart. They are uniquely capable of cognition, which is a “fecund interface between a variety of action-oriented internal resources and a larger web of linguistic competence and cultural tools and practices” (p. 79). The action-oriented internal resources confer on humans an ability to fashion complex symbols and tools that extend and steer the body’s faculties—binoculars enable us to see great distances, microscopes tiny objects—so that we can connect with others, create a common culture (in which we all can participate more or less equally), speak to one another, design tools, build ships, and sail them. Our techniques, crafts, and especially our technologies permeate our habitat and natural elements, and symbolic systems in due course become fundamental components of a creation humans have designed.

In Peters’ view of the development and maintenance of civilization, language is an infrastructural medium. He means that it constitutes a foundation that sets in motion the transmission of meanings driving the evolutionary process. He says that “if there is an ocean all humans swim in, it is language” (p. 261). In his system of classification, speech is a technique and writing is a technology. Peters remarks that the birth of the alphabet and the emergence of written language were cosmic events, so important in fact that the writing to which they gave birth utterly transformed human societies. “Without writing, speech would have remained as uncharted as the deep and open sea” (p. 302), he writes.

In a characteristic aside consisting mainly of a list (of which there are many), Peters says that “[n]ext to the domestication of fire, peanuts, animals, and of humans themselves, the invention of writing constitutes probably the greatest technical trans-
formation in human history” (p. 278). In a similar vein, Peters devotes attention to fire, which he classifies as an elemental medium. Like all elemental media, fire is an ensemble of natural elements and cultural techniques. “It is an enabling environment for ash and smoke,” he says, “and metals, chemicals, and ceramics” (p. 31). He says elsewhere fire turns ores into tools.

So culture or, more ambitiously, civilization comprises media or ensembles of elements, natural and artificial, happily articulated to one another. What Peters is saying looks something like the items in the following list:

1. fundamental infrastructural media (Peters says, in a typically off-hand manner, that “the body, a mix of sea, fire, earth, and sky, is now our most fundamental infrastructural medium” (p. 266)) conceptualize sponsoring agencies or the foundations of imagined evolutionary paths to civilization;

2. elemental media comprising intelligence and imagination or action-oriented internal resources and other natural media including speech represent a second conceptual step;

3. elemental media comprising physical capacities—arms, fingers or other natural media facilitating the creation of experience-based arts, crafts, and techniques conceptualize yet another step;

4. infrastructural media comprising common written languages lead to mathematics, complex tools and other technologies that link up with a “larger web of linguistic competence and cultural tools and practices” (p. 79).

Peters says a lot of interesting things—about the organization of knowledge and the emerging role of Google, the future of media scholarship and media theory, the relationship between science and the humanities (this especially), infrastructural media, clouds as elemental media, the human condition, and the environment. The incorporation of natural and infrastructural elements in the vision of “media” may reflect a concern for the environment as much as a concern for scholarship and truth. The references to marvelous clouds and their meaning provide a visionary cadence.

Peters’ ambitious modelling and system of classification presupposes a world in motion and, in this respect, the vision he creates is as much about world making as world maintaining. The anthropological view Peters expresses, in contrast with other broad theories like political-economy inspired or alternative systems of thought, is not fixed or finished; it shines a light on a dynamic process of creation, growth, and change while it accounts for the “taken-for-granted base of our habits and habitat” (p. 1). It points to the action and order marking the here and now and to the infrastructure comprising the tools, techniques, and methods that sustain it.

So what does the situation precipitated by digital phenomena call for? What is the anthropoid condition? Peters borrows from sociologist Norbert Elias to frame a response to these questions. Elias, Peters writes, says that “[c]ivilization consists of a varying array of regimes for controlling psychic, social, and biological resources” (p. 5). Put differently, civilization consists in a range of strategies for promoting our sanity and rationality, managing relations with our fellow beings, and for managing our relations to the environment. How to manage these three lines of tension—psychological, social, and environmental—is an ongoing challenge humans continue to wrestle with.
“I follow Elias in seeing civilization as our great trouble and task” (p. 5), and so Peters urges us to engage in the tasks inspired by Baudelaire’s “marvelous clouds” and the wonder of creation. Peters is urging us to return to the drawing board equipped with old goals and new specs in hand.

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