

# The Aesthetics of Weather

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## Introduction

IN THE MODERN Western aesthetic practice, an aesthetic object is typically identified as a work of art. The experience of art does constitute a very significant and prominent aspect of the aesthetic life for many of us. We also invest a lot of time and energy not only to creating some works of art ourselves but also to developing and improving our artistic literacy through formalized disciplines and institutionalized practices such as art history, music theory, literary criticism, as well as philosophical aesthetics. But our experience of art, facilitated by these discourses, tends to stand out from our everyday life. We go to an art museum to enjoy paintings, set aside time to immerse ourselves in a novel, and listen to a symphony at a concert.

It may appear then that our aesthetic experience is limited to these specific occasions which are isolated from our everyday life. However, the absence of formal and systematic analysis does not imply a lack of aesthetic experience in our daily lives. On the contrary, though perhaps rarely recognized nor articulated, our everyday life apart from our experience of art is brimming with all kinds of aesthetic experiences. Such aesthetic experiences are universally shared, unlike art appreciation, which is limited to those cultures with institutionalized artworld and, even within that culture, only to those who have some access to and knowledge about the artworld.

Some recent thinkers have pointed out that identifying aesthetic experience with art appreciation is rather peculiar to the modern Western aesthetics. Arnold Berleant, a philosopher, for example, in developing his environmental aesthetics, points out that “the custom of selecting an art object and isolating it from its surrounding . . . has been . . . most pronounced since the eighteenth century, with its aesthetic of disinterestedness. Yet it is at variance with the ubiquity of the aesthetic recognized at other times in the West and commonly in non-Western cultures.”<sup>1</sup> Another philosopher, Jerome Stolnitz, in his discussion of the notion

of disinterestedness, remarks how this concept was originally proposed by the eighteenth-century British aestheticians, founders of modern Western aesthetics, as a way of defining aesthetic experience in general, including nonart objects, but “this catholicity in the denotation of ‘aesthetic object’ . . . has gone strangely unremarked.”<sup>2</sup>

With regard to other cultural practices, philosophers Melvin Rader and Bertram Jessup call attention to the fact that the majority of non-Western cultures lack the equivalent notions of art, artist, and artworld, though their aesthetic life is as rich as ours. The Balinese, for example, is said to have a saying: “We have no art, we do everything the best way we can.”<sup>3</sup> Victor Papanek, himself a designer, praises the Inuit people as the world’s best designers because, as in the case of the Balinese, everybody is an artist in the sense “a man should do all things properly.”<sup>4</sup> Finally, the aestheticism regarding everyday objects, phenomena, and activities in the traditional Japanese culture has been a subject of many writings.<sup>5</sup>

In light of these observations, I believe that our modern Western aesthetics, with its almost exclusive emphasis on art appreciation is rather limiting. In the following discussion, I would like to examine this inadequacy of art-centered aesthetics. I do so with a conviction I share with Berleant:

humans along with all other things inhabit a single intraconnected realm, and . . . we must realize that our ultimate freedom lies not in diminishing or denying certain regions of our world in order to favor others but in acknowledging and understanding them all. This does not confer equal value on all. It admits rather that all activities, processes, and participants that together constitute nature have an equal claim to be taken seriously.<sup>6</sup>

I choose weather as my subject matter for investigating the everyday aesthetics because of its many dissimilarities from art. First, weather is not “an object” in the sense of a spatially or temporally enclosed entity independent of us; it is rather that which surrounds and interacts with our whole body. Second, weather affects us through many senses, not just through vision or hearing. Third, weather is intimately bound up with our various practical interests, unlike art objects that are usually regarded exclusively with aesthetic interests. Fourth, weather is not stationary; it is constantly changing. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, weather has been, is, and will be, experienced by every human being (unless one lives one’s entire life within a temperature-controlled, windowless dwelling) regardless of the geographical and cultural contexts and despite one’s familiarity with the artworld.

### **Frameless Character of Weather as an Aesthetic Object**

Let’s first examine a quintessential aesthetic object, say a painting in a museum, as a way of comparison. A painting is an object clearly framed and demarcated from

the rest of space. By conventional agreement, we almost automatically ignore or suspend from our experience the relationship between the painted canvas and the surrounding wall paper, the smell of the fresh paint, the contrast between the front and back of the painted canvas, the way in which the painted canvas looks if we look at it obliquely or upside down, *even if* these are within our experiential field and *even if* their inclusion in our experience may make it more exciting or intriguing.<sup>7</sup>

Similar restrictions apply to other art objects as well. For example, a symphony is to be appreciated through *its* sound only, disregarding the traffic noise outside the symphony hall, the coughing of the audience, and the feeling of discomfort caused by extra-strong air conditioning and awkward seat, as well as the smell of the new carpeting. In the theater, the boundary is also conventionally determined so that we know that what happens before the curtain rises, during the intermission, and after the curtain closes, is not part of the performance.<sup>8</sup>

We *can* choose to, and sometimes indeed do, experience weather in a similar way, as when we look outside from a window, focus only on the visual appeal of the cumulus cloud, or concentrate on the sound of raindrops hitting the roof. Sometimes the phenomenon itself encourages us to experience it as if it were an art object. For example, a quick, passing rainstorm can be likened to a dramatic theatrical piece, beginning with an approaching dark cloud, followed by raindrops falling one by one, gradually increasing in volume and speed, climaxing with pouring rain as if a bucket were overturned, and ending with a gradual diminuendo of rain, finally giving way to bright sunshine.

However, accounting for the aesthetic value of weather by modeling it after art, I believe, is problematic. For one, regarding and experiencing weather as a “wanna-be” art will most likely render it falling short of the artistic values, such as internal cohesion and expressive power, of a landscape painting or a piano etude. A quick glance at the history of the perceived relationship between art and nature indicates that, even in representational art or in a cultural practice respectful of nature’s beauty, art is often regarded as an improvement over untouched, raw nature.<sup>9</sup>

Of course the above concern is begging the question by presupposing at the outset that weather as an aesthetic object is not always inferior to art. But further reflections, I think, will lend credence to this claim. First, let’s examine why our experience of art is guided by so many restrictions enumerated above. The initial response is that they result from the conventional agreements, though they are for the most part tacitly adhered to rather than explicitly articulated. But why these conventional agreements?

With all the controversies surrounding the objectivity of aesthetic judgment concerning art, there is no denying that art is designed and intended to convey some message, be it a story, vision, idea, feeling, or sensuous experience, to the

recipient, regardless of whether it actually succeeds in doing so and regardless of whether the recipients will share identical responses. Some kind of (or at least an attempt at) communication underlies the creation and experience of art. As such, a minimal requirement must exist to ensure that the experience created by the art object will be relatively comparable from a person to a person. Such commonality of experience will be impossible if there is no conventional guideline as to what is and what is not a part of the art object as well as concerning how to experience the object. I could of course enjoy the relationship between the painted surface and the surrounding wallpaper, or the contrast between what happens on the theater stage and what happens in the lobby during the intermission. But such a deviation from the conventional agreement will put me at a disadvantage in regards to experiencing the artwork as it was intended and as it is shared by other people. I will miss the opportunity for joining in the common experience.

In the case of weather, however, although there is something satisfactory and special about being able to share the same feeling and experience regarding a particular phenomenon, there is no comparable, compelling reason to set the common stage for our aesthetic appreciation. Indeed, it seems to me that the experience of weather, as it affects our entire being and is bound up so integrally with our daily life, is very personal and intimate, varying in content and degree from person to person, situation to situation. Unlike art, there does not seem to be an overriding concern for inducing similar experience, perhaps partly because there is no maker or communicator behind the phenomenon. Viewed this way, the framed character of art turns out to be not so much a requirement for aesthetic experiences as a requirement for inducing a common aesthetic experience.

Thus, art and weather are different kinds of aesthetic objects and as such require different ways of appreciating. Even among art objects of the same medium, different kinds of objects require different ways of experiencing and appreciating, what Paul Ziff, an aesthetician, terms “aspection”: “relevant actions . . . that prove worthwhile in connection with the particular work.” For example, “I survey a Tintoretto, while I scan an H. Bosch. Thus I step back to look at the Tintoretto, up to look at the Bosch,” because “a different act of aspection is performed in connection with works belonging to different schools of art, which is why the classification of style is of the essence.”<sup>10</sup> If different sorts of aspection are expected of different sorts of art objects, it seems reasonable to suppose that different kinds of objects (such as art versus meteorological phenomena) require different kinds of aspection.

And indeed it is my contention that experiencing weather as if it were a landscape painting or a piece of music will be to miss the point of appreciating weather *as weather*. To experience weather as weather seems to me that we experience not just its visual or sound qualities, but the way in which it envelops and

affects our whole being, as well as our interaction with it. The experience of a hot, summer sun is not limited to the look of a round yellow disk against the cloudless sky; it includes the oppressive heat and humidity, a momentary relief from occasional wind felt on our skin, and the feeling of parched lips and dry mouth. Furthermore, it is not clear whether we ever experience weather conditions in isolation from other environmental factors. Indeed it is not even clear what it means to appreciate sunny weather by itself. Our experience of a dog day of the summer consists not only of those factors mentioned above but also the shiny glittering sunlight dancing on the lake surface, clearly delineated shadow of myself and other objects against the dry, white, sunlit surface, and the smell of freshly mown grass accompanied by the droning sound of a lawn mower.<sup>11</sup> Our experience of a fierce autumn wind is not simply the feeling of wind against our body; the way in which fallen leaves swirl around, the dynamic swaying of the tree branches, the rustling sound they make, the slightly musty smell coming from half-decaying leaves accumulated on the ground, and the rapid movement of the clouds all contribute toward our experience of this windy weather. Thus, in terms of both the range of objects and qualities comprising the aesthetic experience and the senses affected, weather as an aesthetic object is not something neatly confined into a package.

Another important difference between art and weather as an aesthetic object is the way in which we relate to the object or phenomenon. With a typical case of art appreciation, we are a beholder, spectator, listener of the object without participation or involvement. We are distanced from the object, both literally and metaphorically. Indeed most of the conventional agreements and institutional settings for art facilitate such distancing and disengagement from the object. We are not supposed to touch paintings and sculpture, and we are supposed to remain silent and sit still during a classical music concert or a theater performance. These conventional agreements determine the proper stance we should take toward the object that would induce the optimal experience.

The appreciation of weather, however, engages our whole body most directly and literally.<sup>12</sup> We sometimes experience raindrops falling on our heads as we skip and jump over puddles while “singin’ in the rain,” all the while taking note of the gray sky, water rings around raindrops falling on the puddles, and the splashing sound my jumping into puddles causes. This physical activity creates a very different experience of rain compared to the way in which I experience it under a hanging roof of a Zen temple, looking out to its attached rock garden, attending to the way in which the surface of each rock glistens with wetness, and noting the elegant movement of raindrops as they dance downward along the linked chain hanging from the gutter, appropriately called “rain chains.” One experience exudes vibrant and cheerful energy, while the other expresses gentle melancholy and quiet peacefulness.

Consider also our experience of snow. How many ways there are to engage ourselves in appreciating snow! Of course we can remain rather spectator-like and admire the snowscape. But how many of us have not experienced the fun of playing in and with the snow? As the noted seventeenth-century Japanese haiku master Basho exclaims:

now then, let's go out  
to enjoy the snow . . . until  
I slip and fall!

will you start a fire?  
I'll show you something nice:  
a giant snowball<sup>13</sup>

Even the act of urination does not escape the (male!?) aesthetic attention of another eighteenth-century haiku master, Issa:

Pissing through my doorway  
I make a clean hole  
in the snow.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike in the case of art, then, there is no one privileged stance we should take to “properly” appreciate a particular weather condition. Some experience may be more intense, pleasant, or satisfactory than others, but each individual way in which we experience weather conditions gives rise to its own character and ambience.<sup>15</sup> A storm can be experienced in a boat tossed around in the middle of the ocean, on the beach while looking at gigantic waves, or in the middle of woods and even from a treetop, as John Muir did.<sup>16</sup> Our experience of weather is thus thoroughly intertwined with and entrenched in our particular circumstances and activities, affecting and being affected by where we are and what we do.

## Weather and Everyday Concerns

One may point to this thorough integration of weather with our entire being as a detriment to our aesthetic appreciation of it. That is, weather affects us in our daily life in so many ways and these practical impacts on us detract from its status as an object of aesthetic appreciation. Although art objects can be regarded for various practical purposes, such as yielding information about the culture or the artist, being useful for therapeutic purposes, or providing a background for special events, our appreciation of art as art is primarily aesthetic. However, weather directly affects our well-being in a number of ways: it determines bodily comfort,

the possibility of outdoor activities and events; it makes or breaks many people's (such as farmers' and fishermen's) livelihoods; and it sometimes threatens our very existence (as when a hurricane, tornado, or blizzard occurs). These very practical concerns with and interests in weather conditions make us less sensitive and receptive to their aesthetic aspects. Such is the claim maintained by many, though not all, thinkers who subscribe to the theory of aesthetic formalism or the theory of disinterestedness or distancing. To put it simply, these views share the notion that the aesthetic appreciation of anything has to do with its sensuous surface, (such as color, line, shape, texture, and sound) without regard to their various practical significance (such as utility, or scientific, historical, or economical significance).

For example, Mark Twain seems to be presenting such a view in his description of the protagonist's experience of the Mississippi River before and after he learns how to navigate the riverboat. After he learned how to read the book of the river written in meteorological and riparian languages, what to the untutored eyes were "all manner of pretty pictures . . . painted by the sun and shaded by the clouds" or "the glories and the charms which the moon and the sun and the twilight wrought upon the river's face" became "the grimmest and most dead-earnest of reading-matter," so that the sunset scene will simply imply that "we are going to have wind to-morrow." "All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of the majestic river," and "the romance and the beauty were all gone from the river," describes Twain.<sup>17</sup>

In a similar vein, Jerome Stolnitz claims that a meteorologist's interest is incompatible with appreciating a cloud aesthetically and that the aesthetic appreciation of the cloud has to do merely with its looks. "A meteorologist is concerned, not with the visual appearance of a striking cloud formation, but with the causes which led to it . . . the aesthetic attitude 'isolates' the object and focuses upon it—the 'look' of the rocks, the sound of the ocean, the colors in the painting."<sup>18</sup>

However, while there is no denying that the tourist's appreciation of the sunset over the Mississippi and the layman's appreciation of the look of clouds are aesthetic appreciations, what is misleading in these claims is that these are the only aesthetic appreciation possible with respect to each phenomenon. That is, to maintain that the aesthetic appreciation must refer to the sensuous surface of the object/phenomenon does not necessarily imply that other considerations, such as practical and scientific, always nullify, interfere with, or detract from our appreciation of the sensuous surface. We cannot derive a generalized aesthetic theory from some particular cases described by Twain and Stolnitz.

On the contrary, there are a number of cases where various conceptual considerations modify, transform, or enhance our experience of the sensuous surface. For example, consider our experience of cumulus cloud. As Ronald Hepburn, a philosopher, reminds us, we can "realize the inner turbulence of the cloud, the winds sweeping up within and around it, determining its structure and visible

form.”<sup>19</sup> The violent motion of air within the cloud is expressed by the powerful, striking sensuous surface of the cloud. The appreciation of this expressive quality of the cloud (of turbulence and power), instead of being the appreciation of simply some fact about the object, can also be aptly characterized as an aesthetic appreciation of the cloud.

By now the classic description of the fog at sea by the psychologist Edward Bullough in his theory of “psychical distance” also provides a good example of how a practical aspect of a natural object can be an important ingredient in our aesthetic experience. While he claims that the aesthetic appreciation of the fog is possible only with our “distanced” attitude, he does not claim that we must ignore its practical aspect (i.e., danger) in our aesthetic experience. The aesthetic experience of the fog at sea is no doubt constituted by its perceptual qualities such as its “opaqueness as of transparent milk, blurring the outline of things and distorting their shapes into weird grotesqueness.” However, the source of our intense experience rather lies in “the uncanny mingling of repose and terror” brought about by the seemingly peaceful appearance of the phenomenon “hypocritically denying as it were any suggestion of danger” and that “contrast(s) sharply with the blind and distempered anxiety of its other aspects.” Distancing, which Bullough claims is necessary for the emergence of this kind of aesthetic experience, is not abstracting from our awareness and ignoring the imminent sense of danger and terror; distancing rather has to do with viewing and regarding this phenomenon (seemingly calm and peaceful but really a sign of danger) with the “unconcern of a mere spectator.”<sup>20</sup>

This fog example is also instructive for another reason. That is, this experience is intensely personal in the sense it is circumstance- and person-dependent. That is, in this experience of the fog at sea where we are concerned about our safety, the experience will include, and in turn be transformed by, the appreciation of the juxtaposition of calm repose and terror. A similar experience will most likely be shared by those of us flying on an airplane or driving a car. However, our aesthetic experience of the fog will take on an entirely different character if we are, for example, walking along the beach, or looking at the blurred outline of a distant mountain. The experience here will enhance the sense of quietude and solitariness without any notion of anxiety or uneasiness. Unlike our typical experience of an art object where we are encouraged to put aside or transcend any personal concern at the moment, the aesthetic appreciation of weather can be modified or intensified by integrating our very personal, practical concern with the phenomena.<sup>21</sup>

However, one may point out that many times the effect of weather looms so large in our daily living that it is often difficult to take an aesthetic interest in it, particularly if the weather condition affects us negatively. We don’t like rain on our parade; snow causes a massive headache, from school cancellations to teach-



erous driving conditions; and relentless summer sun and heat with no rain spells trouble for our lawn and shrubs, not to mention a disaster for farmers. Most of us have to deal with the inconveniences and problems caused by these weather conditions and our overwhelmingly negative reaction to these weather conditions get in the way of any possible aesthetic experience.

While it is universally true that our everyday life is sometimes negatively affected by various weather conditions, it is not clear whether it is also universally the case that such negative effects of weather always get in the way of people's aesthetic experience of it. Let me take the Japanese aesthetic tradition as one example to show how weather conditions, with their sometimes inconvenient and negative effects on our practical life, can be a very prominent aspect of people's aesthetic life.

One way in which the Japanese aesthetic tradition celebrates various weather conditions, with all their discomfort and inconveniences, is to observe and appreciate the way in which a particular season, month, or occasion is epitomized by a weather condition characteristic of each. A quick survey of Japanese literature will reveal that its subject matters are dominated by the beauty of each season and month, most notably characterized by weather condition. The association of weather and season is most explicitly formulated in the designation of *kigo*, season word, which must be included in a haiku, a 5-7-5 syllable verse established during the seventeenth century which remains a popular literary form, often gracing the front page of major newspapers today. Though not exclusively consisting of terms describing or related to weather conditions, there is no denying that *kigo* is dominated by weather conditions, sometimes making subtle distinctions between different kinds of wind, rain, or mist.

But by far the oldest and most prominent literary work featuring the aesthetic character of various seasons, months, and occasions is *The Pillow Book*, essays and anecdotes written by an eleventh-century court lady, Sei Shonagon. Behind her appreciation of various events, seasons, and times of the day lies her general observation that "each month has its own particular charm, and the entire year is a delight."<sup>22</sup> The character of winter, for example, according to her, is best expressed by early morning: "beautiful indeed when snow has fallen during the night, but splendid too when the ground is white with frost; or even when there is no snow or frost, but it is simply very cold and the attendants hurry from room to room stirring up the fires and bringing charcoal, *how well this fits the season's mood!*" Indeed, the colder the better for winter's mood, as "in the First Month when I go to a temple for a retreat I like the weather to be extremely cold; there should be snow on the ground, and everything should be frozen." March Third, the occasion for the Festival of Young Herbs, is best characterized by "the sun, shining bright and calm in the spring sky." The Kamo Festival in April is best enjoyed if "in the daytime there is no mist to hide the sky and, glancing up, one is overcome by its beauty," while the Iris Festival on May Fifth should be "cloudy." The Star Festival on July Seventh

“should also be cloudy; but in the evening it should clear, so that the moon shines brightly in the sky and one can see the outline of the stars.” This clear moon is particularly appreciated when “it is so stifling hot . . . that even at night one keeps all the doors and lattices open.” But July also welcomes a storm that gives a relief to this stifling heat “when there are fierce winds and heavy shower, it is quite cool and one does not bother to carry a fan. On such days, I find it is pleasant to take a nap, having covered myself with some clothing that gives off a faint smell of perspiration.” As for the Moon Festival on September Ninth, “there should be a drizzle from early dawn. Then there will be heavy dew on the chrysanthemums, while the floss silk that covers them will be wet through and drenched also with the precious scent of blossoms.”<sup>23</sup>

Many centuries later, we see in many haiku the same sensibility toward those objects, phenomena, and activities expressive of each season. Summer is characterized by heat, with all the accompanying discomfort:

heat waves shimmer  
on the shoulders of my  
paper robe

in a cowshed  
mosquito buzz sounds dusky . . .  
lingering summer heat

dead grass—  
imperceptibly, heat waves  
one or two inches high<sup>24</sup>

Winter is epitomized by the bone-chilling cold of its wind, rain, or snow:

first winter shower—  
the monkey also seems to want  
a small raincoat

a wintry gust—  
cheeks painfully swollen,  
the face of a man<sup>25</sup>

In all these examples, what is appreciated is not simply some aspects of various weather conditions but more importantly the way in which the essence of each season, month, or occasion is expressed by a certain weather condition. The object of appreciation is the summer-like ambience created by hot, humid air relieved

briefly by a passing shower, or the winterly atmosphere conveyed by the biting cold morning air accompanying the sound made by stepping onto the frost-ridden ground. These experiences, which may not necessarily be pleasant in and by themselves, can nevertheless be appreciated aesthetically for defining the quintessential character of the respective season. As Sei Shonagon succinctly declares, “summer is best when it is extremely hot, winter is best when it is excruciatingly bitter cold.”<sup>26</sup> Trying to find cool relief or trying to bundle up to keep warm, even if not always a pleasant experience, is nonetheless a part of our experience of each season, and it makes us become more aware of and sensitive to the characteristic of each season.<sup>27</sup>

Another way in which the traditional Japanese aesthetic sensibility celebrated positive aesthetic values of weather, regardless of its accompanying discomfort and inconveniences, is to transform the otherwise negative values into something positive through aestheticization. Again, as in other examples in Japanese aesthetics, the Japanese sensibility not only accepts experiences of frustration, disappointment, and inconvenience, but also elevates them through various means of aestheticization. For example, inconveniences caused by rain can heighten its poetic significance:

spring rain—  
down along a wasps’ nest, water  
leaking through the roof

whereabout is  
Kasashima? this rainy month,  
this muddy road<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, snow, with its cold wetness that causes various practical problems, is appreciated not only by its expression of winteriness but also for the way in which it intensifies the feeling of desolation and loneliness.

Each person I meet  
I ask the way to an inn—  
but no one replies.  
Hats against driven snow  
go down the path at a slant.  
(Shinkei, fifteenth century)

Even when snowfall began  
this morning  
I longed for a visitor from the capital.  
Desolate mountain village at dusk

buried in snow.  
 (Priest Jakuren, twelfth century)

Thinking that  
 Perhaps today you might come and visit,  
 I gaze at the garden—  
 Trackless snow.  
 (Empress Guno Daibu Toshinari, twelfth century)<sup>29</sup>

The appeal of snow here is partly due to its power to heighten the already felt loneliness experienced by one living in an isolated village or one awaiting the lover's visit. The sense of melancholy or resignation becomes an object of aesthetic contemplation through the contribution of snow.

Inaccessibility, such as caused by snow, is not limited to physical space; it can also be a perceptual obstacle. Unlike under a clear sky, where everything will be seen clearly and in its entirety, falling snow, mist, and passing clouds render a landscape obscure, the moon indistinct, and other objects hidden. In these cases, too, the Japanese sensibility cherishes, rather than laments, an obscured or concealed view because it is considered more appealing and enticing than a clear, exposed view.

In a well-known passage, Yoshida Kenko, a fourteenth-century retired Buddhist monk, illustrates this aesthetic penchant for obscurity and implication by the example of the moon. According to him, "to long for the moon while looking on the rain, to lower the blinds and be unaware of the passing of the spring—these are even more deeply moving."<sup>30</sup> The moon obscured or hidden by the mist or cloud is more pleasing than the exposed moon, because the former stimulates the imagination and increases excitement through anticipation, longing, or reminiscence. This judgment was shared by his contemporary thinkers and critics who uniformly contend that "the moon is not pleasing unless partly obscured by a cloud."<sup>31</sup> It was also inherited by haiku poets centuries later, as indicated by the following two haiku by Basho:

clouds now and then  
 give rest to people  
 viewing the moon

in the misty rain  
 Mount Fuji is veiled all day—  
 how intriguing!<sup>32</sup>

Such appreciation of weather conditions that normally affect us negatively, either by causing discomfort and inconvenience or by blocking the maximum

view of things we want to see, results from a kind of dialectic movement. At first, we may be troubled or disappointed by the negative effects these weather conditions exert on our daily life because of our wish for comfort, convenience, safety, and a certain kind of aesthetic experience facilitated by the optimal view. What is unique about the Japanese aesthetic appreciation is the way in which our initially negative response becomes transformed into a positive experience through aestheticizing what otherwise is an unpleasant, inconvenient, or not optimally satisfactory situation. This aesthetic resolution adds pathos and poignancy to the experience that would be absent if one were to simply appreciate the snow-clad landscape or half-hidden moon without any wish or expectation of viewing them unconcealed.

But due to some weather conditions' power to threaten our safety and even existence, there is a limitation to our capacity to aestheticize weather conditions with negative effects on us. As Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant remind us in their discussion of the sublime, those objects and phenomena that can overpower us can be appreciated positively *only when* we are, or regard ourselves to be, in safety. Things like "clouds piled up in the sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunder peals" or "hurricanes with their track of devastation," according to Kant, can be "the more attractive, the more fearful it is, *provided only that we are in security*."<sup>33</sup> Without such provision, all we experience will be fear, terror, and pain, which do not allow us enough composure or "distance" to have a positive experience. Depending both upon our particular situation and capacity and upon the danger of a specific weather condition, there must be a point at which an attempt at aestheticization becomes impossible.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that, with all the predominance of weather conditions in Japanese literature, there is a conspicuous lack of description of the sublime attributed to weather. For example, the well-known reference to autumnal typhoon, both in *The Pillow Book* and in *The Tale of Genji* by Lady Murasaki Shikibu written during the first decade of the eleventh century, describes the after-effect of this violent storm, but not the storm itself.<sup>34</sup> It is also noteworthy that a Japanese David Thoreau, Kamo no Chomei (1153–1216), whose *An Account of My Hut* is well known for its sensitive description of natural beauty that he found in his mountain retirement life, gives a wholly negative account of a hurricane by emphasizing only its destructive power.<sup>35</sup>

## Impermanence of Weather

The last feature that distinguishes weather from many other typical aesthetic objects such as artworks is its transient characteristic. Although there is variation among different climates, it is generally rare for the exact same weather condition to continue. The change is particularly prominent in temperate climates with dis-

tinct seasons. Cold, snowy weather gives way to warm spring, which gives way to hot, humid summer, which changes into the crisp cold air of autumn, sometimes with visits from hurricanes or typhoons in-between. Even within a short period of time such as one day, most of us in the temperate climate are familiar with the weather change, sometimes catching us off-guard because we dressed too heavily for a sudden hot spell, or we did not prepare ourselves for an unexpected shower. Furthermore, some weather condition is characterized by its very ephemerality, such as wind, rain, or snow.

A typical aesthetic object such as a work of art is expected to exist almost indefinitely with little change. As the saying goes: *Ars longa, vita brevis*. Indeed we go out of our way to ensure its permanence by preserving it under a specific condition in an art museum and to erase any mark of aging, wear, and tear by restoration work.<sup>36</sup> Even for those art objects that do not exist in space, such as music and literature, we expect some sort of unchanging continuity, despite changing interpretations and performing practices. In general, then, while our perception and interpretation of the art object may change with time, we expect that the object of our aesthetic experience stays relatively the same. Not so with weather; it exemplifies the exact opposite by constantly changing its condition. Such mutability and evanescence may appear to lessen weather's status as an aesthetic object.<sup>37</sup> On the contrary, however, transience and impermanence can be an intense source of aesthetic appreciation.

For one, transience and changeability can provide positive aesthetic experience by relieving fatigue factor. Constant movement, surprising change, or eventual extinction can stimulate our imagination and facilitate a pleasurable experience. Such is the consideration behind Joseph Addison's account of one of our pleasures of the imagination that he calls "the novel" or "the uncommon." According to him, "we are . . . so often conversant with one set of objects and tired out with so many repeated shows of the same things that whatever is new or uncommon contributes a little to vary human life and to divert our minds, for a while, with the strangeness of its appearance." His examples for "the new" include perpetually shifting and moving objects, such as "rivers, jetteaus, or falls of water," in addition to monsters, imperfections of nature, and spring landscapes.<sup>38</sup>

A similar consideration is at work behind Yoshida Kenko's claim that "if man were never to fade away like the dews of Adashino, never to vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama, but lingered on forever in the world, how things would lose their power to move us! The most precious thing in life is its uncertainty."<sup>39</sup> But the Japanese aesthetic appreciation of transience and impermanence, such as exemplified by weather conditions, is supported by a further, existential concern. It is noteworthy that the weather conditions most frequently cited for their aesthetic appeal in Japanese tradition are rain, clouds, fog, snow, wind, and mist. Consider the following figures. Of roughly one hundred poems celebrating

weather conditions in the first court-sanctioned anthology of poems, *Kokinshu* (Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems completed in 905), one poem specifically refers to sunlight; the rest deal with wind, snow, mist, clouds, fog, and frost (in order of frequency). And in a subsequent court-sanctioned anthology, *Shinkokinshu* (New Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems completed in 1205), out of approximately 350 poems referring to weather, only two poems mention sunlight while the rest sing in praise of wind, rain, clouds, snow, mist, fog, hail, and frost (in order of frequency). In contrast to sunny weather, these weather conditions are generally passing phenomena. They also symbolize impermanence and evanescence because of their perishability. Snow melts away, rain dries, and fog lifts, without leaving any trace of their existence. Furthermore, the constant movement of falling snow, rain, and wind suggests changeability.

Though accompanied by a tinge of sadness, in traditional Japanese aesthetics qualities such as transience and evanescence were celebrated aesthetic values; similarly, transience and perishability symbolized by nature provide a justification for the human condition. While transience, the universal human condition, generally gives rise to pessimism, the Japanese traditionally sought solace in finding the same condition in nature. Focusing on more permanent objects in nature would make us become more aware of and sorry for our own evanescence. In contrast, recognizing and appreciating the impermanent, evanescent aspects of nature would gently assure us that nothing that exists can escape this condition of transience. Phenomena such as rain, snow, dew, and wind eloquently express transience and impermanence, making us become aware that humans and nature exist ultimately by the same principle. Aestheticizing the impermanence in nature then leads us toward an acceptance and sympathetic appreciation of our own transience.

The wind of spring  
 Scatters the cherry flowers,  
 Here in this fleeting world of ours.  
 (Priest Saigyō, twelfth century)

Like dew they fall, these tears of mine,  
 And vanish like the dew;  
 Ah, my good days at Naniwa  
 Were nought but dreams within dreams, too.  
 (parting poem of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, 1598)<sup>40</sup>

Indeed the Japanese tradition provides an artistic genre that elevates this notion of transience to its supreme aesthetic height: the tea ceremony. The art of tea ceremony, among others, lies in the awareness and appreciation that each

occasion, constituted by various factors such as the season, weather condition, the time of the day, a particular group of guests as well as the host's preparation, happens only once, never to be repeated. This awareness is referred to as *ichigo ichie* (one time, one meeting) and lends intensity and poignancy to each event. Among various factors, weather, snow in particular, lends singularity to the occasion. Existing records show that many impromptu tea ceremonies were held when snow fell, and, as indicated by the specific instructions left by Sen no Rikyu, a sixteenth-century tea master, thorough care was taken to honor and celebrate this phenomenon by fussing over what to do with the snow on the stepping stones in the garden, the snow piled in the water basin, and the light from lanterns in the garden.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, in the Japanese aesthetic tradition, transience and impermanence not only do not detract from the aesthetic value of an object/phenomenon but rather constitute the very core of its aesthetic value. It is interesting to note that contemporary Western art genre termed land art or earth art derives part of its aesthetic appeal from its transient nature, particularly fresh and effective in the context of the traditional Western obsession with permanence in its handling of art objects. Because of its very nature of being situated outside, those earth art objects are subject to changing weather conditions all the time. Some earth art objects in fact capitalize on the changing nature of weather condition as their main appeal. Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*, Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnel*, James Turrell's *Roden Crater*, and many outdoor pieces and snowball creations by Andy Goldsworthy come to our mind.<sup>42</sup> Regarding his various snowball pieces, Goldsworthy remarks: "A snowball made in a day when the snow was good, fresh, not thawing, sunny and calm has to differ from one made in the wind, rain and dark with wet thawing snow. Each snowball is an expression of the time it was made."<sup>43</sup> The temporality of the snowball is also recorded by his photographic documentation of its melting process. Aesthetically appreciating weather, therefore, encourages us to be sensitive to the temporal aspect of this phenomenon, which in fact is the dimension shared by everything existent, including our own existence.

## Concluding Remarks

In the above discussion I tried to show the ways in which we can celebrate the positive aesthetic value of all kinds of weather, including those that affect us negatively in our management of daily affairs. I conclude my discussion on weather by suggesting further that such maximization of aesthetic appreciation of weather is beneficial to us not only from the purely aesthetic viewpoint (by enriching the content of our everyday aesthetic experience) but also from a much broader perspective. Weather, even among natural objects and phenomena, is one of the last frontiers of human cultivation, manipulation, and control. That is, we hu-



mans still have not figured out a way to control and manipulate, let alone precisely predict, the weather, while we can change the course of a river, cure a disease, or even clone animals. In this hi-tech age of manipulating most aspects of nature at our will, weather serves as a reminder that not everything around us is subject to our control. Rather than lamenting or feeling frustrated with our impotence before the force of nature, being able to aesthetically appreciate those that are beyond our power of control, I think, is particularly important today. It suggests to us that accepting and submitting ourselves to a natural force that cannot be tamed by humans does not necessarily have to be a disappointing or frustrating experience; it can be a source of aesthetic pleasure, if we learn to humble ourselves to gratefully receive and celebrate the positive aspects of its gift to us.<sup>44</sup>

### Acknowledgment

This chapter is an outgrowth of the sessions dealing with the aesthetics of snow in which I participated (American Society for Aesthetics, 1990; The International Congress of Geographers, 1992; The Kyoto Conference on Japan Studies, 1994), as well as the courses on the aesthetic appreciation of nature, the aesthetics of the everyday, and the traditional Japanese aesthetics, that I regularly teach at the Rhode Island School of Design. I particularly want to thank Barbara Sandrisser and Jo Ellen Jacobs for their insights on the aesthetics of snow that they shared in our three sessions together.

### Notes

1. Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 157.
2. Jerome Stolnitz, "Of the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness,'" originally published in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Winter 1961), included in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. George Dickie and R. J. Sclafani (New York: St. Martin's, 1977), 624, emphasis added.
3. Melvin Rader and Bertram Jessup, *Art and Human Values* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 116.
4. Victor Papanek, *The Green Imperative: Natural Design for the Real World* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 233. The whole chapter titled "The Best Designers in the World?" (223–34) is devoted to this discussion.
5. To list only a few sources: Donald Keene, "Japanese Aesthetic" in *Appreciation of Japanese Culture* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1981); Ivan Morris, "The Cult of Beauty" in *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (New York: Kodansha America, 1994); Yuriko Saito, "Aesthetic Egalitarianism" in "Japanese Aesthetics," included in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), vol. 2, 545–47.

6. Berleant, *Aesthetics of Environment*, 9.
7. For the purpose of my discussion, I give a quick generalization concerning art as an aesthetic object. Particularly among contemporary art, there are exceptions to my description here. Even among traditional art objects, there are a number of controversial and intriguing issues concerning what is and is not a part of a work of art (such as a painter's signature, chips and cracks on the surface of an old painting and sculpture, the title of a painting, sculpture or music, and so on). Or sometimes it may not be possible to ignore what we know to be outside of a work of art, such as if we are "viewing a yellow version of Josef Albers' *Hommage to the square* displayed in a yellow frame on a yellow stuccoed wall." (Paul Ziff, "Anything Viewed," originally published in 1984, included in *Oxford Readers: Aesthetics*, ed. Susan L. Feagin and Patrick Maynard (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 27.
8. Again, these are quick generalizations concerning mostly classical music and theater. Many contemporary pieces, such as John Cage's *4' 33"* and the artistic genre called happening, owe part of their effectiveness and appeal to these conventions because they shock us by breaking them.
9. For example, while the motto of classical and neoclassical art theories in the Western tradition was to "imitate" or "copy" nature, it was never to reproduce empirical nature but rather to present "Nature" in the sense of perfect or idealized nature. In a culture like Japan known for its traditional attitude of affinity to and respect for nature, various arts dealing directly with natural material, such as garden, bonsai, and flower arrangement, are designed to distill and emphasize its essential characteristics, thereby improving its articulation. I explored this aspect of Japanese garden in "Japanese Gardens: The Art of Improving Nature," *Chanoyu Quarterly*, No. 83 (1996):40–61.
10. Paul Ziff, "Reasons in Art Criticism," included in *Philosophy and Education*, ed. Israel Scheffler (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1958), 234, 235.
11. Thomas Leddy reminds us that the sun itself and its light are seldom the direct object of our aesthetic appreciation. "[N]ote that although the sun always shines literally in the sense that it emits rays of light, it is usually not considered beautiful in itself. The beauty of sunshine seems, rather, to depend on indirection: the shimmer of silver linings on clouds, the shine of dawn light on a landscape, the way a sun's ray passes through the clouds, the reflection of a winter sun on a lake. Things sparkle and shine in the sun, for example an island, a lovely pond, a new house or just a beautiful morning." "Sparkle and Shine," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 37 (July 1997):267.
12. Here I am indebted to the notion of "engagement" developed by Arnold Berleant in the following seminal works: *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); *The Aesthetics of Environment and Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997).
13. Included in *Basho and His Interpreters: Selected Hokku with Commentary*, comp. and tr. Makoto Ueda (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 151, 177.
14. Included in *Snow Falling from a Bamboo Leaf: The Art of Haiku*, tr. Hiag Akmakjian (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Capra Press, 1979), 76.
15. One discrimination we can make among various ways of experiencing weather is the degree to which our entire being is engaged. For example, viewing the outside from a

- window will give us very limited contact with the particular weather condition compared to our outdoor experience.
16. His description of a storm in the High Sierra can be found in “A Wind-storm in the Forests” in *The Mountains of California*, originally published in 1894, included in *The American Landscape: A Critical Anthology of Prose and Poetry*, ed. John Conron (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 264–270.
  17. Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, in *Mississippi Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1982), 284–85.
  18. Jerome Stolnitz, *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 35.
  19. Ronald Hepburn, “Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature,” in *Aesthetics in the Modern World*, ed. Harold Osborne (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 62, emphasis added.
  20. Edward Bullough, “‘Psychical Distance’ as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle,” *The British Journal of Psychology*, vol. 5 (1912–13), 88–89.
  21. The modification can be in the form of disillusionment, as pointed out by Cheryl Foster in her “Aesthetic Disillusionment: Environment, Ethics, Art,” *Environmental Values* 1 (1992): 205–15. As an example of aesthetic disillusionment, she describes a spectacular sunset that turns out to result from the proliferation of sulphur dioxide emitted from a factory.
  22. Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*, tr. Ivan Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), vol. 1, 1. All the subsequent references from this work are consolidated at the end of this paragraph.
  23. All the quoted passages in this paragraph are from Sei Shonagon, *ibid.* The early morning winter is from 1 (emphasis added); the First Month, 126; March Third, 4; Kamo Festival, 4; Iris Festival, 44; Star Festival, 12; the clear moon, 40; storm in July, 50; Moon Festival, 12–13. This last passage continues: “Sometimes the rain stops early in the morning, but the sky is still overcast, and it looks as if it may start raining again at any moment. This too I find very pleasant.” Another description of a morning in the Ninth Month reads as follows:
 

I remember a clear morning in the Ninth Month when it had been raining all night. Despite the bright sun, dew was still dripping from the chrysanthemums in the garden. On the bamboo fences and criss-cross hedges I saw tatters of spider webs; and where the threads were broken the raindrops hung on them like strings of white pearls. I was greatly moved and delighted. As it became sunnier, the dew gradually vanished from the clover and the other plants where it had lain so heavily; the branches began to stir, then suddenly sprang up of their own accord (135).
  24. Basho, *Basho and his Interpreters*, 225, 320, and 180.
  25. *Ibid.*, 275, 303.
  26. My translation of section 114 of *Makura no Soshi (Pillow Book)*, ed. Joji Ishida (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1980). The Morris translation has “a very cold winter scene; an unspeakably hot summer scene,” along with “Pines. Autumn fields. Mountain villages and paths. Cranes and deer” under the section titled “Things That Gain by Being Painted” (124). But two other Japanese editions, one by Iwanami Shoten, the other by Shogakukan, both have the phrase regarding summer and winter as an independent section, not as a part of things that gain by being painted.

27. This way of appreciating the quintessential nature of an object or a phenomenon is one of the unique features of Japanese aesthetic appreciation, which governs various aesthetic and artistic activities, ranging from Japanese garden and bonsai to cooking, poetry-making to painting.
28. Basho, 378, 240. An excellent discussion of the Japanese view of rain can be found in Barbara Sandrisser's "Fine Weather—the Japanese View of Rain," *Landscape* 26(1982): 42–47.
29. Shinkei's poem is included in *Traditional Japanese Poetry: An Anthology*, tr. Steven D. Carter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 290. The other two are my translation from *Shinkokinshu*, compiled by Fujiwara no Teika in 1205. I am using vol. 26 of *Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshu* (Complete Works of Classical Japanese Literature), ed. Fumito Minenura (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1974), nos. 663 and 664.
30. Yoshida Kenko, *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenko*, tr. Donald Keene, originally written between 1330 and 1332 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 115.
31. A fifteenth-century tea master Murata Shuko's statement was quoted by Komparu Zenpo and cited by Koshiro Haga in "The Wabi Aesthetic," in *Tea in Japan: Essays on the History of Chanoyu*, ed. Paul Varley and Kumakura Isao (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 197. In his discussion of the aesthetic ideal of the tea ceremony, *wabi*, Haga compiles in this essay a number of descriptions given by the tea masters and others. What is interesting for our purpose is that most of them describe this ideal by the metaphor of landscape or object, such as the moon, hidden or obscured by clouds or mist. To cite just one example, another retired monk, Kamo no Chomei (1153–1216) claims: "When looking at autumn mountains through mist, the view may be indistinct yet have great depth. Although few autumn leaves may be visible through the mist, it is alluring. The limitless vista created in imagination far surpasses anything one can see more clearly," 204.
32. Basho, 102, 137.
33. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1974), section 28, 100.
34. Sei Shonagon, *Pillow Book*, 185–86. Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, tr. Edward G. Seidensticker (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 480–90.
35. Kamo no Chomei, *An Account of My Hut*, tr. Donald Keene, included in *Anthology of Japanese Literature*, ed. Donald Keene (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 197–212.
36. For the purpose of the present discussion, I will not address various complications regarding restoration of art, such as whether it is aesthetically and historically desirable to erase the sign of aging completely from an old work of art.
37. Kevin Melchionne points out that one of the reasons that the art of home-making does not receive aestheticians' attention is because it does not result in objects which stay unchanged for a long time. "Unlike paradigmatic art forms like painting or poetry, interiors do not just sit around after their completion unaltered for the centuries. They are lived in, worked in, and worked on and so they are also transformed, if only by being worn upon daily." "Living in Glass Houses: Domesticity, Interior Decoration, and Environmental Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 2 (Spring 1998):199.
38. Joseph Addison, "Pleasures of the Imagination," 412 (June 23, 1712) included in *Essays in Criticism and Literary Theory*, ed. John Loftis (Northbrook, Ill.: AHM Publishing Corp.,

- 1975), 142–143. In contrast, Kant seems to represent the general tendency to require permanence of an aesthetic object. For him, constantly changing objects, such as “the sight of the changing shapes of a fire on the hearth or of a rippling brook,” do not have beauty, although “they bring with them a charm for the imagination because they entertain it in free play.” *Critique of Judgment*, tr. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1974), section 22, p. 81.
39. Kenko, *Essays in Idleness*, 7.
  40. Translated by Asataro Miyamori in *Masterpieces of Japanese Poetry Ancient and Modern* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970), 395, 446.
  41. See 144–45 of “A Record of Nanbo” by Nanbo Sokei (1522–91) in which he documents the instructions left by Master Soeki (Sen no Rikyū), tr. Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu in *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).
  42. These and other works are discussed in John Beardsley’s *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989). My colleague Lucretia Giese called my attention to a new piece titled “Clocktower Project” by Christina Kubisch installed in MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts, which creates different sounds of the bells depending upon the weather. “Bright sunshine . . . generates bold, sharp strokes” while “on overcast days, the bells speak in more muted, mournful tones.” *Wall Street Journal*, 1 October 1998.
  43. Andy Goldsworthy, *Hand to Earth: Andy Goldsworthy Sculpture 1976–1990* (New York: Abrams, 1993), 117.
  44. Note that I address the topic of everyday aesthetics as a general subject matter in “Everyday Aesthetics,” *Philosophy and Literature* 25(2001):87–95.

