

Air: A Cultural Theory of Climate

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My project as a fellow of the RCC aims at a cultural theory of climate. Current conceptualizations of climate and climate change are dominated by an abstract meteorological idea of climate as “the average weather.” I believe that this scientific understanding must be complemented by a cultural concept of climate which has a long tradition from Antiquity to the Enlightenment. My project is to reconstruct elements of this cultural understanding of climate in the occidental tradition. ‘Climate’ was initially a term used to designate the relation of a given population to its location and the ways this location forms cultures, bodies and societies. At the same time, it is also understood as a system of flows and as a medium of transport for seeds, animals, dust, water etc.

My project aims at writing an intellectual history of climate and the ways in which climate is a figure of thought for the relations between humans – their bodies, their societies, cultures, and art - and their natural environments. It will highlight the different functions climate has had for human cultures: as a model for the ways humans situate themselves in a given location, but also as a form of thinking the relation (and tension) between the temporalities of humans and of nature. In times of man-made climate change, we also have to think about the cultural history of altered climates – from the creation of deserts through deforestation to modern air conditioning. Creating artificial climates has always been one of the most basic social practices.

Eventually, my project will look at contemporary art and literature and the ways in which they reflect on the symbolic, social and aesthetic dimensions of climate. I see my cultural and aesthetic approach to climate as complementary to today’s primarily scientific approach, which reduces climate to a research object which can be externalized and objectified. My project aims at showing how deeply human existence is rooted in climate. In times of climate change, I believe, it may help to retrieve the long history of human thinking about the air they breathe and they dwell in.