

Climates: Architecture and the Planetary Imaginary

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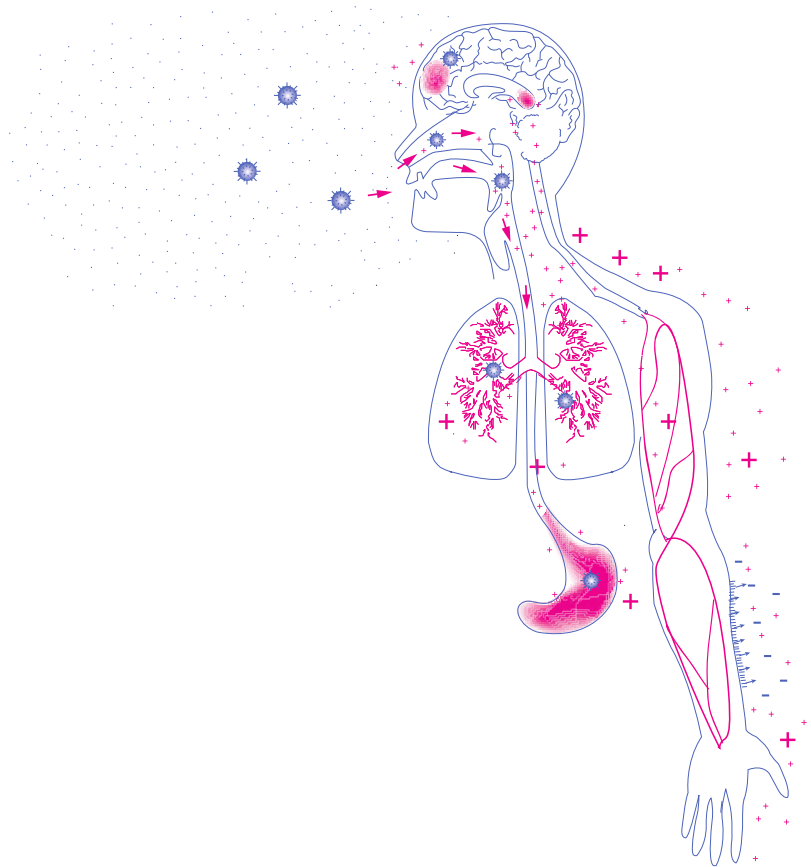
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"Bacteria and viruses could enter without resistance..." p. 213

CONDUCTION

*From Philippe Rahm's Météorologie des sentiments (Les Petit Matins, 2015),
excerpted from a forthcoming English translation by Shantel Blakely.*

The temperature in the room is glacial. A cloud of steam forms in front of my mouth at each exhalation. I must undress before retiring but, apprehensive about the cold that will surely seem even more vivid to my naked body, I lack the courage to make the first move. Staying at my friend's house, I have been ill for several days, feverish. Snug in bed, under the covers, I continue to be cold. We have turned the heater on the wall to "maximum," but it does nothing.

It is impossible to elevate the air temperature in the house above 16 degrees Celsius [60 degrees Fahrenheit]. Aside from the astronomic, seasonal reason, there is the inclination of the axis of rotation of the earth, which determines that for part of the year, in winter, the Northern Hemisphere will be farthest from the sun. Because of the lengthening of distance between the Sun and the Earth, the latter receives weaker rays. The freezing polar currents descend into more temperate latitudes and cool the ambient air below zero. At the same time, this inclination of the north-south earth axis is responsible for the reduced length of the day. The sun rises later and sets earlier, which shortens the warming period and, by the same token, diminishes the quantity of energy the earth receives during the day. The winter nights become so long that they deplete the earth of whatever feeble warmth it may have acquired in daytime. There is also an intermediate reason, proper to the mode of construction of the building and relative to its poor thermal insulation coefficient. In the absence of supplementary insulation, the walls of the house are exposed concrete (which perform this task poorly). The house is effectively plunged in a bath of freezing air that crosses the small dimension of the walls, bit by bit, to radiate negatively toward the interior and cool everything. The little radiator on the wall, whose electric resistance draws in the air to blow it out reheated, is powerless in the face of the enormous mass of cold that encircles our living space.

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I had arrived in Japan a week before, at the height of winter. I was badly dressed but nonetheless stayed outdoors for the first few days, venturing into the cold in my cotton undershirt under a fine wool pullover. My body temperature was lowered constantly during the first day and, despite an accelerated combustion of protein in my stomach to compensate for this drop in ambient temperature, I was unable to keep my body from cooling to the threshold where bacteria and viruses could enter without resistance. I nevertheless tried to rebound in the course of the two following days. I adopted the multiple, dissociated, and circumscribed modes of heating that one finds in Japan: drinking warm tea; plunging my body in a hot bath; placing in my pockets, my shoes, against my back, small tissue paper packets containing a material that warmed up when rubbed. I had bought myself a coat but at no great expense and without great results; it was wool, but the absence of a lining and the imprecise mode of closing by three buttons on the front could not really generate an air pocket impermeable to the air and thermally isolated in which my body could be protected from exterior cold. I had also bought a black woolen hat—efficacious but insufficient to compensate for the inefficiency of the rest of my gear. For two days, I intermittently entered shops to heat up, and I took taxis and subways, perpetually seeking the warmest spatial pockets where I could hope to lay down my arms for a few moments in this physiological struggle of my body against the cold. I toured the Kyoto area, visited temples in the snow, crossed dewy forests, walked on icy paths in small shoes. I was accompanied by a friend and two young Japanese women he had met in Tokyo and invited to spend a few days at his home for the New Year. He confessed that he hoped to have an adventure with one of them. I flirted with the other one without asking myself if I really liked her.

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After a day spent in bed following these two days of tourism, the fever has fallen slightly but I continue to feel the cold inside me; it is impossible to get rid of and I never invested in a better coat. My new Japanese friend invites me to spend a few days at her

PHILIPPE RAHM

home in Tokyo. Seeing a means of escaping from this refrigerated mansion, I accept with pleasure. We take the train to Tokyo in the morning. After an afternoon in the city, we arrive at her parents' small, ordinary Tokyo house. Her mother welcomes us kindly in the main space, whose dimensions she encloses around us by pulling two sliding panels. It is cold here too. The wood-and-paper walls seem ridiculously thin and totally inefficacious against the rigors of winter. I notice that there are no radiators except for a single, small, nonfunctioning space heater against the wall.

A short time later we sit on the floor, passing our legs under a low table whose feet are surrounded by a quilt. I have the pleasure of discovering that it is warm underneath: an infrared lamp, protected by a metal grille, is attached to the table's underside and radiates agreeably on our legs. My friend brings out a second infrared lamp, on feet, which she switches on and aims at our faces. Her mother serves us food. We are now in a complex climatic condition: my legs are warm, almost too warm. The left side of my face receives the infrared rays of the other lamp and is heated, while the right side of my face and body, except for my back, remains cold because the air itself in this space is not heated at all.

The only mode of heat in the room is the pair of lamps, which, by direct infrared radiation, heat only exposed skin and clothes, without elevating the temperature of the room air. For this reason, steam rises from everything that was warm: my cup of tea, my bowl of soup, my friend's mouth, reddened by infrared; her mother's mouth, and mine, from which steam passes in front of my eyes at every breath, blurring my vision. The meal appears to me clearly to be a form of complementary heating (which it is, in fact, since it provides nutrients that are burned in the stomach and transformed into energy for maintaining our homeostatic metabolism at 37 degrees Celsius [98.6 degrees Fahrenheit])—one that is distinctly tastier than an electric radiator and releases a wider variety of aromas than a wood fire.

After dinner, I am effectively warmer. I hold in my hands a cup of steaming tea that I lift regularly to my face to drink a mouthful or to feel the radiant heat once again on my jaw. We stay a moment more in this room, then my friend takes me to her room,

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which she will lend me for the night. It is colder still, but she shows me how to turn on the heated mattress of her bed and how to regulate the temperature. Here, too, the experience will be one of sleeping practically outside, in full winter, but in a bed heated from inside, and happily protected from the wind and snow by the roof and the wall cavities. It is the opposite of modern Western heating, which raises the air temperature of a room to a comfortable level at which one breathes warm air. Here, the air breathed stays icy and it is only against the body, in the body, at specific, circumscribed places, that heat is applied.

I am on my feet, hesitant to undress. It occurs to me that I must still go to the toilet, which is at the bottom of the wooden stair. I leave the room without closing the door, perhaps imagining that the heat of my cup of tea downstairs could rise to my room. At the bottom of the stairs, I open a door on the left and enter the bathroom. The window is open; I close it immediately, shivering. The toilet seat is already down. Poised to undo my trousers and lower them, I dread the moment when my rear end is in the air, where the cold will strike my newly naked skin. But I dread even more the moment when I will place my naked rear end on the toilet seat, which I can only imagine is glacial. I must hurry and do all of this quickly to not give the cold time to rise through my nerves from my skin to my brain. I unbutton my pants, lower them just to my knees, and catch my underwear and lower it onto my pants. Folding my legs, I sit on the seat. It is warm, very warm, heated by electrical resistance integrated in the plastic, and this heat is communicated throughout my entire body, by conduction, to finally reheat me entirely, fully.

*Philippe Rahm is a Swiss architect whose office, Philippe Rahm Architectes, is based in Paris. His work, which aspires to extend the domain of architecture to the physiological and meteorological planes, has been widely exhibited and nominated for numerous prizes. Recent projects include the 70-hectare Taichung Gateway Park, awarded by competition in 2011 and currently under construction. His book *Météorologie des sentiments* was published in 2015.*

You Are the Weather: Philippe Rahm's *A Sentimental Meteorology*

SHANTEL BLAKELY

Architects have historically used diagrams representing human occupants of buildings to communicate their approaches to traditional concerns of architecture, such as the proportions of bodies (Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*, Le Corbusier's *Modulor*) or the space of perception (Herbert Bayer's diagrams of the field of vision). Speaking recently about his work and declaring his preoccupation with body heat, architect Philippe Rahm showed drawings populated with his own representation of the body, a silhouette with a blurry red heart.¹ Rahm has pursued this interest through experimental installations like his "Hormonorium" at Venice in 2002 and in other projects for calibrated air. He has expanded his inquiry to other aspects of metabolism, such as light fixtures whose elements can be adjusted for human or animal vision. But the body in air—his most central and lasting obsession—is the premise of his new book, *Météorologie des sentiments*, a collection of short stories that was recently published in French by Les Petit Matins (an English translation is in the works).

The stories in *Météorologie des sentiments* (hereafter *A Sentimental Meteorology*) are mostly written from a first-person perspective. Rahm makes an impressive show of knowledge and dedication to scientific fact, and the tone of the book is largely set by his detailed descriptions of geographic locales; the physics of cold buildings; or the body's responses to cold, sun, or altitude. But the points of departure for these stories, and for their conflicts and resolutions, are almost always emotions—running the gamut from desire or well-being to dread and fear. The tone of the book hovers somewhere between a memoir and a forensic investigation, as Rahm mines his own experiences to explore different aspects of human experience in general, in a range of environmental and physiological situations.

Perhaps more important from an architectural point of view is that in these stories the mind and body—and the occupied landscape—tend to eclipse architecture as the principal human dwelling place. Architecture may be a collective social response to climate, but physical enclosures are not always sources of shelter and security.

While architecture is nowhere explicitly denounced, the book can be read as a critique of architecture and especially of the Western thermal conventions that are often called "modern." But social relationships are also at the forefront of experience in these stories, which loosely follow a sort of formula. Each vignette finds the protagonist in a situation that offers an unusual vantage point from which habitual experiences are no longer automatic or familiar. From that position we are able to see how, in these situations, personal and social apprehensions of environment can become separated, superimposed, or inadvertently set in conflict with one another. Yet the short titles of these stories imply that each one is a neat description of a property, process, or quality of climate experience, as though the book were a user's manual.

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Philippe Rahm, "Constructed Atmospheres," lecture at Harvard GSD (November 1, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NP6EBTwGcug>.

The protagonist in “Anaerobic,” for example, has drifted happily into the sea clutching an inflatable canoe, oblivious to what is about to happen. With the implacability of clockwork the story proceeds to the situation’s inevitable crisis.

If the water is gaseous in the air above me, could it be solid below me?
There would then be ice in the depths on which, should I let myself
sink in the water, I could put my feet, rest, recover my breath. I sink
now, the horizon rises above my field of vision, the blue sky darkens,
the shore disappears as I close my eyes to avoid the salt.

The protagonist’s innocence about the environment and his position on the verge of discovery are powerfully evoked in “Anaerobic,” which revives a literary trope at least as old as *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, which often start with a child heading alone into a hostile wilderness. More ordinary situations, in adult life, ground several of the other stories. There is a backpacker who chooses to spend a night outside (“Cooling”); a soldier participating in a training exercise, who falls asleep and loses track of time (“Obliqueness”); a man on a terrace reading a newspaper in the late afternoon (“Obfuscation”); a motorist driving over the Alps from France to Italy (“Altitude”). Each time, the protagonist has a problem to solve. Will he endure his present condition as a sort of prison? Instead, through informal investigation and using his imagination, he comes to terms with his plight and takes action.

In many of the situations in the book, the novel climatic condition experienced by the protagonist results from his placement in a liminal social position. But for all Rahm’s attention to the individual as distinct from the collective, he handles this distinction with a light touch. This is partly due to his excursions into meteorology and physiology that digress from the protagonist’s personal viewpoint. As the reader follows the plot of a story, the narrative may turn from relating a sequence of meaningful events to describing the timing of optical, vascular, cellular systems—or astronomical events, wavelengths, rods and cones, oxygen, degrees of temperature, lux of light, etc. Just as the climax approaches, time slows down. The story then proceeds at a curious, scaleless pace in which the astronomical impinges upon human physiology, and ultimately on thoughts and feelings. The boundary between the subject and environment is blurred.

Notwithstanding his extended meditations on scientific facts, the narrator’s tone is often wistful or warm-heartedly affectionate. Some of the stories involve solitude, but many address a protagonist among friends, classmates, or coworkers. And while all the situations involve a degree of separation from a social group, some are as joyous as others are dark—for instance, in “Greenhouse Effect,” in which two lovers find themselves in an ancient garden pavilion whose sequestered indoor air leads them to sense the presence of ghosts; or in “Diffusion,” in which a father and son contentedly walk a few blocks to a frozen yogurt shop.

Even when describing a solitary protagonist, Rahm makes liberal use of the French pronoun *on*, which translates to “we” or to the third-person “one,” depending on context. The effect is to conflate the first person with “anyone,” which softens the sense of social conflict while the meteorological and physiological descriptions underscore the generality of the protagonist’s experience. This ambiguity is especially effective in one of the most delightful moments in the book, a scene in “Radiation.” After some time

spent on a scintillating suburban hillside in the hottest hour of a midsummer day, two adolescents waiting for the protagonist's uncle, next to his hot car, give up on trying to cool off.

At some point, one of us arrives at the conclusion that there is no point in trying to be less hot because we have no means to cool off. In the end our freedom, our liberty to act is the power to choose to be even warmer. A search of the trunk yields a sort of coverlet. We get in the car. The interior air is boiling due to the greenhouse effect that bends the sun's rays to the steel and glass interior, preventing them from escaping the car after having let them in by the glazing and transforming them into heat against the fabric seats and plastic surfaces. The doors are closed, the last open windows put up, the ignition turned on, the heat turned up to maximum. We put on our sweaters, which we had left on the back seat, and bundle ourselves under the coverlet.

In conversation about the book's literary style, Rahm is liable to mention his interest in objectivity and his fondness for the *Nouveau Roman*, particularly the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet. The inspiration is evident if one looks at a story like "Obfuscation," which describes a moment on the terrace of a villa near Lake Neuchâtel. In the opening of his 1957 novel *Jealousy*, which is also set on the terrace of a villa, Robbe-Grillet lays out an extensive, detailed description of the scene, emphasizing the physical setting. Sentences telescope clause after clause in a detailed accounting of geometry, architecture, and furniture arrangement. The reader might discover, deep in one of these sentences, a human motive that has governed a whole string of preceding actions taken by Robbe-Grillet's characters.

Rahm lingers, as Robbe-Grillet does, on the relationships between a terrace and a building, the dimensions of an inhabited space, but the experience of reading Rahm's stories is much more empathetic. We always understand that the point of view belongs to someone, to the narrator.

The sun lowers, moving in the sky until it disappears behind the vertical line formed by the principal façade. This line suddenly throws a shadow that darkens the terrace's gravel surface except for a very small triangle at the southwest corner. Seated in the sun, on a bench against the house, I read the paper. The paper's white background, striated with characteristic black lines, darkens all of a sudden, attenuating the contrast between the paper and letters and makes reading more difficult, little by little; but by the time I notice it, the sun might have slipped past the southwest corner ten minutes before. I am conscious of being cold, as reading becomes more difficult. Finally there is no more sun.

Moreover, mention of weather conditions, however objective their description purports to be, tends to evoke associations of well-being or foreboding. The appearance of the sun or descent into darkness often augurs a shift in emotion for someone in the story. Weather conditions are used with forceful cumulative effect in many paragraphs of another work associated with the *Nouveau Roman*, Albert Camus's *The Stranger*. The narrator feels the sun as a source of encouragement and comfort, or as a volumetric presence—as in "a strip of sand between the sunlight and the sea"—but near the novel's end, the

doomed narrator refers to “a dark wind blowing from my future.” Arguably his responsiveness to sun, sand, and water are key to the story’s capacity to elicit sympathy for its alienated “I” and are therefore crucial to Camus’s ability to evoke the inner life of a protagonist who commits a morally unconscionable act. With a similar sense of indexicality, Rahm’s weather manifestations are often fringed with affect, however objectively they may be described.

“Meteorology of sentiments”—these words in Rahm’s title echo how his stories reflect on the “weather” of emotions, and how closely they are interleaved with shifting, or more or less ideal situations of physical climate. The last story in the collection, “Acclimatization,” presents a man at ease, in shirtsleeves, greeting his fiancée. His life has arrived at climatic and psychological resolution at the same time. But while the ostensible dramatic arc of the book is a quest for acclimatization, there is also a progression out of innocence of climate and physiology—or passive subjection to it. The source of free will, free choice, is not so much climate control as self-awareness.

This brings us back to the ambiguity of this book in relation to architecture. The body of each story’s narrator may be indoors or outdoors, but the narrative’s overarching message is that, in all cases, we “live” the moment through the same basic physiological system. In “Conduction,” the protagonist has an unshakeable chill and moves between homes in a country where people warm themselves by unfamiliar means. Normally rendered invisible by habit, these details are painfully evident to a stranger in a strange land. The situation provides the pretext for a welcome review of how architecture is organized to promote insulation, and why the occupants of a building may nonetheless feel cold. But the buildings in this story are inadequate to keep the inhabitants warm. The resolution comes from patience, experimentation, and chance discovery. In contrast to a treatise on a static ideal, *A Sentimental Meteorology* is an exploration of the body in air that aspires to rigorously confront the physiology and emotion of climate, including their contingency.



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