The Seasons of History

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In recent years, artists, art historians, critics and curators have revised the epistemologies of elements that rely on perspectives taken from the environmental humanities, stimulated by the debates surrounding the Anthropocene. We have known for decades, but are now increasingly experiencing, that the climate is changing. This also concerns the metaphorology of the elements, and in particular their underlying metaphysical foundations (equilibrium, harmonia, eucrasia). To structurally understand this change of paradigm, it would be helpful to focus on one particular trope: seasons.

For centuries, “our” seasons were taken as a given, dividing the year in characteristic phases mostly based on the weather and daylight. As such, the seasons provided, or so it seemed, an eternal inspiration for the arts. The definition Hans Blumenberg gave of the moon, the “last placeholder of anthropocentrism”, could in this sense be transposed to Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter as well. In poetizing the seasons, we still desire to confirm our subsumed centrality within the eternal return of being and meaning.

And while there are surely others models with two or three seasons, in tropical regions for example, the main hegemonical model (since capitalism, e.g. in fashion culture) has been the mid-European, “Western” reckoning of the four seasons. This model of seasons, it is well-known, has been a classical subject in the history of painting. Consider Nicolas Poussin’s famous Les Quatre Saisons (1660-1664) which associated Spring to “The Earthly Paradise”, Summer to “Ruth and Boaz”, Autumn to “The Spies with the Grapes of the Promised Land” and Winter to “The Flood”. Poussin’s landscape allegories conceal biblical references, which are readable for the scholarly eye, but its figural language arises, from a painterly perspective, “according to the local climate”.

A contemporary reading of this cycle is thus confronted with a double aporia: one the one hand, “the auto-deconstruction of Christianity” or the “auto-deconstructive image” as a processual self-oblivion of Western thought (e.g. the teleological nature of the cycle from Paradise to Apocalypse), and on the other as a change in the transcendental structure of this iconographical conjunction of cultural (biblical) and environmental (seasonal) representation.
Let us focus on the change in the transcendental conjunction from the side of the seasons, namely from their underlying concept of equilibrium. In the first chapter of *Saturn and Melancholy* (1964), Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl famously introduce an illuminating genealogy, from the emergence of the theory of the four elements (air, fire, earth, water) in antiquity, to the teachings of the Quattuor Humores of the early modern period. In a short side note the authors also point to an insightful metonymical transition from the four elements, ages of life and temperaments to the four seasons. The cosmological mixture of the fourfold elements/seasons is linked to a moralism of equilibrium: moral in the sense of a principle of reason that connotes balance as appropriateness; medical, insofar as the equilibrium is set at an early stage as the basis for hygiene and an ideal state of health; and finally legally in the sense of isonomia (“equal of political rights”) or an orderly mixture that ultimately eliminates the dissonances: eukrasis. If Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl thereby provide the hegemonical model of the group of four elements, another dogma of the eternal given needs to be foregrounded. In *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade analyzes what he calls the “regeneration of time” alongside the rhythm and relation of the year to cosmogony. Even though the Romanian historian of religion investigates a variety of cultures and environments on earth, he nevertheless argues less for difference, but rather for a recurring pattern of “biocosmic rhythms”. One of his predecessors in the field of ethnological studies, the Dutch historian of Islam and Syrian mystical theology Arent Jan Wensinck, aptly insisted that the yearly recurrences in environmental and cultural history is shown in the reappearance of vegetation. This model of regeneration and reappearance was, in a similar way, elaborated later in Fernand Braudel’s seminal study on the *Mediterranean World* as the environmental substratum of its respective cultural history.

Towards a historiography of the Anthropocene, Dipesh Chakrabarty has shown that this model needs to be read foremost with an attention to its limitations, since it cannot include drastic change and radical contingency. In fact, the Mediterranean, the Tropical, the Antarctic, or the Mid-European are not eternal and not even slowly changing environments. Rather, they are now seen as fragile and rapidly changing ecosystems. As Chakrabarty clearly sums it up: “Fernand Braudel [...] rebelled mainly against historians who treated the environment simply as a silent and passive backdrop to their historical narratives [...] as if, as Braudel put it, ‘the flowers did not come back every spring, the flocks of sheep migrate every year, or the ships sail on a real sea that changes with the seasons.’ In composing *The Mediterranean*, Braudel wanted to write a history in which the seasons—‘a history of constant repetition, every-recurring cycles’—and other recurrences in nature played an active role in molding human actions. The environment, in that sense, had an agentive presence in Braudel’s pages, but the idea that nature was mainly repetitive had a long and ancient history in European thought [...].”

The awareness of global warming and climate change—in their intertwine of local affects and a planetary embeddedness—has to break with certain foundations of European thought, especially its hegemonical ideas of order, equilibrium and stability. Samantha A. Noël’s *Tropical Aesthetics of Black Modernism* is an important study in this direction, widening our perspective on landscapes and terrains, not as ideal constructions, but as “geographies in motion”. Changing seasons, environments and landscapes in fact structured the work of modernist artists such as Maya Angelou,
Josephine Baker, Aaron Douglas and Wifredo Lam. However, Noël mainly tells the story of an underrepresented past, which aims at giving the Tropical a place in modernity, and in this respect, it is similar to other endeavors to revise the canon of modernism towards alter-modern narratives.

6 The impressive 1000-page volume of essays and documentation of artistic research and archives, *Antarctic Resolution*[^2], edited by Giulia Foscari, presents in this sense a more radical picture of the past and present geographies of a marginal region on earth. The volume brings different perspectives together: the media history and construction of the Antarctic through cartography, photography, film, literature and climate models; political claims and hybrid warfare environments of the Antarctica; views on environmental protection, biodiversity, on fishing and the marine lifeforms; comparison of Gramsci’s “Southern Question” to the “Question of Antarctica”; and an impressive appendix of a 250-page archive of Antarctic architecture.

7 Besides the art historical literature such as *Tropical Aesthetics of Black Modernism* and research-based volumes such as *Antarctic Resolution*, another complex of recent criticism consists in the theory-informed speculation to be found in the work of single artists focusing on metaphorologies of the elements and meteorological politics. In a recent conversation with Kodwo Eshun (The Otolith Group) and Fatima Wegmann, the artist Chino Amobi presented his last project *Zero Seasons* (2021). In this work, Amobi, who works as a visual artist, musician and fashion designer, deconstructs the ecology of fashion industry, namely the four seasons of Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter collections by introducing anachronic temporalities and ruptures within its chronologico-cyclical timeline. Amobi proposes “a time that interrupts the *chronos* or invocates itself upon that [chronological timeline], in a way that is not completely dependent on the seasonal shifts”[^13]. While Amobi thinks of *Zero Seasons* primarily as a project against the hegemony of the Mid-European seasonal fashion culture, “not locating the primary season in one location”, he indirectly points to an ecological perspective of seasonal change as part of climate change. In fact, Amobi calls his method “apophatic”, recalling the defense of a “negative universal history”[^14] in Chakrabarty’s recent book, cited above. To think of contemporary aesthetics via the epistemologies and metaphorologies of elements, a meteorological politics and the seasons of history leads us to reflect on the entanglement of different spheres: the four seasons in classical painting, the radical one-season-ness of the growing deserts in global warming or the White deserts of Antarctica, the shifting and floating atmospheres of Tropical zones and Islands up to the (auto-)deconstruction of the seasons in the history of representation and its contemporary specters, informed, for instance, by the “Black Radical Tradition”[^15] and literatures of Afrofuturism. Overseen and understood as such, *seasons of history* point to a vibrant contemporary state of art criticism with an open future, where little seems certain but nothing will stagnate or insist on eternal returns anymore.
NOTES

7. Eliade, Mircea. Ibid., p. 52
14. Chakrabarty, Dipesh. Ibid. ibid., p. 45

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