... but the clouds...

Being a valediction permitting mourning, in three stages of decline

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**Stage 1: Dissolution**

Sugar cubes are an accretion of sucrose, formed into a solid and static lump or mass of tiny crystalline carbohydrates that hold their shape until placed in liquid. And yet it is liquid that enables sugar crystals to be formed into solid objects in the first place when subjected to heat. They are kind of like clouds. Ethereal, particulate and dissolvable, they are always already on the way to becoming nothing. The sugar cube is a *pharmakon* of sorts, an integer of opposites that in its either/or-ness can never be reconciled.

Like William Gibson’s epochal notion of cyberspace, its imminent nothingness is like the “non space of the mind”, intangible, dissolute. And like presence at a distance in telecommunications or writing it transforms and changes the conditions of the environment in which it is immersed. The dissolving sugar cube also resembles even less tangible, invisible states of cultural matter, like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s concept of the “noosphere”, a stage in the evolution of human life when the earth gets a new skin, not dissimilar to a rabbit’s kin, as we have just seen. In his singularly mind blowing *Phenomenon of Man* (1955), de Chardin describes the noosphere as “organised matter in its dispersed state”, human vibrations “resounding by the million” around the physical earth. Writing on human evolution during the 1920s and 1930s he intuitively anticipated in the concept of the noosphere something like the Internet that could garner “a whole layer of human consciousness exerting simultaneous pressure upon the future and the collected and hoarded produce of a million years of thought”. But more tellingly, he even anticipated the problems of
nomenclature under a cloud, the difficulty of giving a material name to the immaterial. “Have we ever tried to form an idea”, he asks, of the magnitude of human thought outered from the senses into a thinking layer that circumscribes the world like the atmosphere? De Chardin never uses the word information. But that is the moniker that has been given to the technological age he was imagining.

Like the tussle between communication and entropy in cybernetics, information figured as sugar dissolving is a slippery commodity, open to misinterpretation and always in danger of not arriving at its destination. And to make the point an inevitable aside is necessarily unavoidable. We need to make a deviation, to stray from the path, or, with apologies to Heidegger and his notion of philosophy itself, pursue an unanticipated way.

The notion of information as energy at odds with entropy is nowhere more revealing and appropriately delicious than in the misprision of the founder of cybernetics’ name, Norbert Wiener, in the variations on its spoken pronunciation as Weener, Winer, Veener or Viner, evidences the heightening of noise and ambiguity in the system of its utterance. Now this difference is one that can only be seen and not heard, since the rupture in orthography and phonetics is unpredictable, unavoidable and impacts upon the world with its presence and in the means with which it presents. And the particulate currency of information, the difference that makes a difference as Gregory Bateson would have it, is always, as Weener, Winer, Veener or Viner proselytised, always has a tendency to leak in transit. Like the parlour game of Chinese whispers, or Isaac Newton’s inexplicable ballistic apple that plummets at the speed of light onto Gary Oldman’s head in the film of Tom Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. Or even more distantly in the bombast of Socratic know-it-alls gate-crashing the scene of an argument with the folly of certitude to correction misinformation, cocksure fathers returning from the dead to protect their textual siblings from hermeneutic ambiguity. In all such instances of apparent control, entropy is and will always be the norm and order the aberration.
Any new concept or fashion needs its apologists. The scribblers of eighteenth century England lured the literate elite to appreciate satire, metaphor and wit. Similarly the new currency of vapour associated with “the cloud” captures a polemical and rhetorical shift in the IT industry with as much bombast and blather as Augustan pamphleteers writing of beauty, snuff or the plague in the pages of *The Spectator* or *The Tatler*. The raffish figure of the journalistic hack casts a long shadow from Augustan England. Just think of Google’s CEO Eric Schmidt proselytising a seismic new wave in the world of information, rhapsodizing the new location of data services and architecture “in a ‘cloud’ somewhere”. Re-write that as “in a ‘cloud’ or something” and you hit the right slacker note that captures the vagueness of the metaphor and its vaporous technical and lexical connotations, as if Jeff Spicoli from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* had discovered that you can actually turn the pages in a book. It’s like, totally awesome!

With such vagueness and certitude in mind, it is clear the semantic demigods of the cloud do indeed want it both ways. Compaq computer nerds George Favaloro, Ken Evans and Philip Reagan are, among others, credited with coining the term in 1996 when the Internet was being invoked as mystically ambient, invisible, all around us. But it was also grounded, physical, stored somewhere on a server, usually in the corporate headquarters of a big name in Silicon Valley or the basement of some start-up ISP in any town America. As slick and mind-fucking as it sounded it was slyly projecting into metaphor just another transit of information from one location to another: telecommunications by many other name. So with Augustan poetasters once again in mind, think of the rhetoricians of the cloud as fast-talking used car salesmen in plaid suits peddling bad faith, like the shifty character Ray in *Seinfeld* who tries to sell Kramer a battered and second-hand automatic wheel chair: “This is our best model, the Cougar 9000. It’s the Rolls-Royce of wheelchairs. This is like... you’re almost glad to be handicapped".
This grounded fixity of the infrastructure of the Internet, distinct from its otherworldly metaphors of a celestial city, theistic motifs of the pearly gates of cyberspace or an evolutionary noosphere, was writ large for me as a postgraduate student of English literature at La Trobe University in Melbourne in the mid 1980s. Something referred to as “the Internet” was being talked about in office corridors in hushed tones, like some vernacular Alpha and Omega had materialised in the suburbs. “It”, in deliberately heightened scare marks, was located in a sealed glass room in the Borchardt Library and only accessible to academics and librarians at designated booking times to coincide with global time zones (dial up of course, totally killer). When I asked our Arts librarian what “it” did, she informed me in reverential tones that it enabled researchers to access information overseas using the phone lines, as if it was delivering the reliquary of an ancient Tuscan saint from Florence to Bundoora. The forecast from then on was for fine weather, no clouds and a new name for old ways of doing things, like, and this was totally killer, like taking books off shelves, elsewhere. So *Hic lectionem finit*, or something.

*Ecce homo, ergo elk*

But borrowing the more ethereal, molecular and stratocumulus notion of the cloud from mathematics, astronomy and meteorology, the metaphor suggested dispersal and displacement, an agglomeration of points within a mass more gaseous than solid, immaterial, foggy and moving like flotsam, gossamer or fairy floss. I certainly have no recollection of hearing the term in late 1990s and it was really only a couple of years ago when I heard Stuart Moulthrop use it during a talk in Melbourne that I realised there was yet another “next big thing” on the hyper-horizon in networked computing. As Moulthrop started navigating his Prezi demonstration he announced that the text, images or movies he was showing us weren’t *here*, on his machine, in this theatre, but were being “pulled from the cloud”. The oracular way in which he described the process of information being invoked or summoned had transformed him into a North American Papa Legba, intoning some weird techno-voodoo from Melbourne and calling upon the Haitian Loa to do their worst in the name of snazzy design and information at your fingertips. I can’t remember what Stuart was actually
showing, for all I could hear in my jaded interior monologue was Mad Man Ad-
speak rhapsodizing this thing called “the cloud”, information of which had
coincidentally been filtering into my mailboxes as if out of nowhere on my
various mobile and terrestrial devices. I admire Stuart and his work, particularly
his 1996 incunabulum of hypertext fiction “The Color of Television”. That
bewildering network of crossed destinies was also like the night sky tuned to the
dead channel it surfs: complex, opaque and open to endless possibilities.

But he had lost me. Slow dissolve begins, as yet another mention of “the cloud”
takes me elsewhere. This time to a television studio in which John Cleese as the
theatre critic Gavin Millarrrrrrrrr reviews at break neck speed the latest play by
amateur dramatist and railway enthusiast Neville Shunt, entitled “It all happened
on the 11.20 from Hainault to Redhill via Horsham and Reigate, calling at
Carshalton Beeches, Malmesbury, Tooting Bec, and Croydon West”. Cleese’s
conclusion to the play’s heavy locomotive metaphysics (that the moving train is
the same, only time has altered) is the reassuring and contradictory syllogism
“Ecce Homo, ergo elk”. With this pretzel logic easing me back into Stuart’s
lecture, the world made sense again. And it was cloudy when I left the
auditorium, so go figure.

But I digress. The metaphor of the cloud does indeed want it both ways. It wants
to be ethereal and material at the same time. As illustrations of it demonstrate it
is figurative of the idea of vapour as other-thereness, but images its
groundedness in the solidity of location (not on my computer, but others
elsewhere, somewhere else). This sophistry, which is gestured to neatly in the
theme of this conference, “Cloud and Molecular Aesthetics”, marvels at a new
distributed and immaterial model of data storage that exceeds the network
metaphor that defined the age of the early Internet. And here was I all those
years ago thinking that the decentred, anti-nuclear attack model of the Internet
was particulate, cloud-like, just like the first images of ARPANET.
ARPANET project manager Larry Robert sketched this map in the late 1960s to project the routing of information flows between nodes in what would become the Internet.

As the vagaries of time would have it, his atlas of what cyberspace might look like resembles a cloud that is more meteorologically accurate than the hokey “cloud” cartoons of today.

**Stage 2: Dislimning**

One of the great wise guys in the Pantheon of Shakespeare’s *dramatis personae* is Hamlet, lugubrious heir apparent to the Danish throne famous for his funk, but not the good funk (as Larry David, or Mark Amerika might say). With the court spy Polonius he plays that time-honoured anthropomorphic optical game of seeing shapes in a cloud:

Polonius: My lord, the Queen would speak with you, and presently.
Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that’s almost in shape of a camel?
Polonius: By th’ mass, and it’s like a camel indeed.
Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.
Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.
Hamlet: Or like a whale?
Polonius: Very like a whale.
Hamlet: Then I will come to my mother by and by.

*(Hamlet, 3, 2, ll.358-365)*

Hamlet’s design for this conceit is to betray Polonius as a sycophant, a yes-man whose obsequiousness lurks hidden within his outward agreeableness (not dissimilar to the arras behind which he conveys himself to eavesdrop on Hamlet’s conversation with his mother, or indeed the sophistry of the computer network as vaporous and grounded). Such optical duplicity in *Hamlet* suits a world of court intrigue, politics and power mongering, with its connotations of
reading signs, surveillance and rhetoric that anticipates the more macabre world of Shakespeare’s Jacobean successors such as Cyril Tourneur and John Webster and the genre of revenge tragedy they perfected in his shadow. But it is in *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606), one of Shakespeare’s Jacobean tragedies, that the metaphor of clouds as bad faith, or “black vesper’s pageants”, is articulated:

The protean qualities of atmospheric vapour is for Mark Antony a metaphor of his fall from power, alienation from Rome and his own melancholy realisation of the dissolution of his sense of self. Far from being a ludic game of diversion for court wastrels, gazing upon shape-shifting clouds is a kind of metaphysical sooth-saying that gives Antony the bad news of indistinctness, disintegration and loss. Images of dissolution and saturation work throughout the play as leitmotifs of dramatic change, from Antony’s early hard-man stance as power-hungry traitor to the Empire (“Let Rome in Tiber melt”) to his mourning for the failure of his ambition (“The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct / As water is in water”). Shape-shifting here is not the ludic puzzle-play of *Hamlet*, but a confrontation with failure, with a lack of faith in metaphors of disembodiment, such as clouds “that mock our eyes with air”. Clouds are emblems of the breakdown of Antony’s sense of self on the way to disintegration (“here I am Antony, / Yet cannot hold this visible shape”). Like clouds he is vaporous, promiscuous and wanton, an adulterous traitor whose sense of self is vanishing, on the way to disappearance. Impotent at the end of the play, he can’t even fall on his own sword.

And like many of Shakespeare’s protagonists he is a philosopher of sorts, an incipient metaphysician of the passage of time as a commingling of states of mind, recognising something for what it is in the moment of its passing. Gilles Deleuze, writing on Henri Bergson on this very point, describes a “rhythm of duration”, whereby something is what it is in time. And it is Bergson’s dissolving lump of sugar that concentrates a metaphysical duration of time, in which the essence or substance of a thing is seen for what it is. So like a cloud or water within water dissolving, dislimning, becoming indistinct, the essence of a thing, or its *quidditas* after Thomas Aquinas, is seen within this moment of changing states. And as clouds are meteorologically and philosophically defined in terms
of their molecular crystallization and evaporation of moisture, such dynamic changes of state aren’t especially appropriate or reliable for defining spaces of secure storage. As Deleuze presciently notes of Bergson’s lump of sugar, it is in spite of its arbitrary form, or “carving out as a lump”, a thing with form, that it “opens out to the universe as a whole”. In other words, it dislimns, as water in water.

As if sensing the prescience of Jacobean conceits of dislimning or phenomenological metaphors of dissolution for the corporate branding of a new age of the Internet, Reuven Cohen, cofounder of the “Cloud Camp” course for computer programmers, asserted many years later that the term cloud, by “virtue of being a metaphor, [is] open to different interpretations”. Such acumen. This insight stopped my breath and almost my heartbeat. What invention and erudition is displayed here, the sublime as making something out of nothing; a negative capability no doubt honed by years of disciplined immersion in the study of literary figuration in Rosemond Tuve’s *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, or the poetry of John Keats. And so, “mutatis, mutandis”, we conclude from Cohen’s syllogistic formula that change is necessary and inevitable in corporate branding associated with the Internet and that we continually have to re-make our metaphors for understanding it. When parsed, reiterated, conjugated and even obliterated many times in the disciplines of prosody, logic and dialectical materialism, Cohen’s impeccable and humbling syllogism, I have concluded, does not offer a reassuring motif for an architecture premised on the aporia of storage and distribution. But Cohen’s *coup d’état*, that salvages the metaphor’s entanglement in hermeneutics for a corporate world that has no interest in the history of ideas, is this. Pauses for effect: “it’s worth money”.

As an aside, by the way, the cloud metaphor has actually been visually represented in non-monetary terms. In 2012 data statistician Simon Raper created a complex matrix of relations among key philosophers within Western thought, such as Plato, Husserl, Wittgenstein or Heidegger, using metadata drawn from Wikipedia.
Technologist Adam Hogan’s textual analysis of this graphic representation identifies a surprising and polemical narrative from Raper’s data set that highlights what he describes as the problem with G.W.F Hegel within the history of philosophy. Raper’s data map, it seems, inadvertently accorded far too much importance to Hegel’s place in the noosphere of reflective hard men. But in his ostensible motivation to transform the history of ideas into a social network, the graphics he visually generated represent the pantheon of great minds as a cloud, not, after Raphael, a School. Suffice to say clouds are not constituted of hot air and cloud computing is listed as a specific area of interest for Raper on his blog. Hogan’s astute critique of Raper’s exercise in data mining and visualisation unwittingly presents a potential critique of intellectual conception, influence and reception in a “neutral” who’s who of Western thinking. I have not done the meta-analysis myself, but it would be far too much to hope that the playwright Aristophanes appears in this map, even peripherally, since his satire from the 5th century BC, The Clouds, was a daring critique of the intellectual fashion of his day, including its representation of Socrates as a sophist or travelling salesman peddling ideas, that later led to Aristophanes’ trial and execution by, well, Socrates. In philosophy, then, as in the meteorology of clouds, what goes round comes around. Hóper édei deixai or, if that Greek axiom is too Greek for you, the “thing as has been shown”.

Stage 3: Dispersal

Vapourware
At the dawn of cyberspace, as we know, the “sky was the colour of television tuned to a dead channel”. When he coined that dead-pan aphorism, it’s not clear exactly where William Gibson was or what he was doing. I like to think he was sitting on a chair in Vancouver. But not just any chair, a specific one, a green brocade chair, in which he sat reading Jorge Luis Borges’ Labyrinths for the first time, gazing at its upholstered leaves that resembled clouds. And perhaps he remembered, too, watching a live video feed from Plaça Catalunya in Buenos Aires, lost in the telepresent reverie of his own virtual presence in the very spot
he had stood only days before while pursuing Borges’ absent presence throughout that city. He remembers acutely the display of Borges ephemera he had seen there, arrayed under glass treated as if to suggest the onset of Borges’ glaucoma. Simulating the waning eyesight of a blind Argentine Tiresias to come, this visual conceit captured the precarious fate of data lost in the cloud, as the American author of one otherzone strained to gaze upon the quizzical objects of another that were almost there, but indistinctly not there. Gibson struggles to make out the rhythm of Borges’ hand sloping from left to right, as if tracing a pathway through circular ruins of time in which there was no beginning or end.

In writing his “Invitation” for the 2007 reprint of the New Directions edition of *Labyrinths*, Gibson candidly reveals how he intuited something of the weird pretzel logic of cyberspace from Borges’ literary fabulations, such as reviewing books that don’t exist, or imagining such books into existence through the very force of invention. Books, Borges reminds us, need only be possible for them to exist. In Gibson’s matrix, too, “there is no there there”. The matrix is a conceptual meme that filters through Borges’ visible unrealities into the evanescent possibility that, for a short time at least, the sky *could* be the colour of television tuned to a dead channel. Or, more prosaically, what you are looking at on a screen is temporary, an invocational transcription of packets of ASCII code encrypted in the data bases of a computer somewhere. The sublime delicacy in Borges’ figuration of the virtual is the plausibility of impossible things, such as dreaming a man into existence, living a year of quotidian time in the blink of an eye or a book whose narrative paths fork in time as well as space. It was no trite conceit when Borges referred to his writings as “fictions” since he was writing code, on the way to imagining Gibson’s avatars as console cowboys punching deck in the Sprawl, opening portals to worlds of ideas out of the most austere assemblage of letters. Gibson paid his fair dues to his Latin amanuensis many years later when he described “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” as a fable of the vast construction of “utterly pure information” disguised as fiction infiltrating the fibre of quotidian experience.
Borges’ fiction “The Library of Babel”, first published in Spanish in 1941, is indicative of his interest in encountering the infinite in the minutely small. And this fable of ambiguity deliciously invites a comparison with the rhetorical ambience of cloud computing that is compelling. Its virtuosity is in fact its virtuality, as in so many of his fictions, the anticipation, after Jacques Derrida, of avenir or, that which is to come. Initially the library’s portrait is a deliriously utopian oxymoron: a built environment that is infinite, made up of hexagonal chambers that contain all books, as well as all possible books that have not yet been written. Borges allusively captures this conceptual mind fuck with an allusive nod to the formidable Blaise Pascal and his model of the universe conceived as a “fearful sphere”: the “library is a sphere whose exact centre is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible”. Subsequent translations of Pascal’s dictum, taken hostage by cyberpunk console cowboys and West Coast data dandies alike, invariably borrow from him, unwittingly or otherwise, the idea of centre and periphery as a model for thinking about the distribution of data in a network. In Neuromancer (1984) Case describes the matrix as “Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding”. Similarly, the 2007 New York Times feature on the new age of super-computing announced that IBM had “vague” plans to use data “from afar”. Unbelievable.

Initially Utopian, this idea of imagined endlessness within the visibly finite, like Borge’s “aleph”, or the computer banks of Cisco servers, increasingly becomes a Dante-esque hell as well as an ur-portrait of the databases associated with cloud computing. The most frequently used metaphor of data being in a “cloud somewhere” suggests a place that is as yet no place, dizzying, ambient, vertiginous. It is an abstraction, a metaphysical conceit or, after Borges after Shakespeare, the thought experiment of imaging a universe in a nutshell, in which Hamlet conceives of himself as a king of infinite space, or Thomas Hobbes after him with his “infinite greatness of place”. The sampling of Pascal’s “fearful sphere” in “The Library of Babel” alludes to a history of the virtual documented by Frances Yates in her sublime work of scholarship and wonder The Art of Memory (1966), an alchemical text that exhaustively documents the ars memoria
of ancient and Elizabethan cabbalistic thinkers who formulated systematic methods of storage and recall for universes of information within the mind.

**Fuck, what have I done?**

The mushroom cloud that heralded the atomic age in 1945 signified a dreadful mastery of power over matter and the capacity of one to destroy the other. Julius Robert Oppenheimer’s retrospective quote in 1960, borrowed from the *Bhagavad Gita*, infamously signified what that meant: “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds”. This was not an experience of exhilaration but of dread, of horror at the awesome nothingness of everything vanishing in a cloud of dust (in *The Waste Land* many years before Thomas Stearns Eliot had prophetically offered to show us fear “in a handful of dust”). The fear of disaster associated with the Y2K virus in 2000 was widely attributed to be yet another pestilence unleashed upon the world by the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse associated with millenarian thinking. The same wraiths, outstaying their welcome in the new century, would also seem to have been responsible for the 2012 algorithmic glitch that cost the Knight Capital Group in America $440 million in thirty minutes.

And like the fragile and pernicious fate of clouds in the atmosphere, the ever-present stress at the dissolution of the network is a cybernetic principle derived from the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the struggle to control the loss of energy in a system, as well as a deconstructionist concept of the *post*, of the terminal condition of data’s arrival at its destination by not arriving. And the infinite Jorge Luis Borges, another Time Lord who witnessed the very house demolished in which he saw the Aleph, shattered as if he was present at the conflagration of the great library of Alexandria or the vanishing of the God particle itself in a proverbial puff of dust (another Time Lord who came after him, Tom Baker in Dr Who in the 1970s, coincidentally, did one of the earliest television ads for Prime Computers). And so too, if our forecasts are not in error, the cloud will also meet with its Armageddon and, if we look closely with the rigour he demands of us, will have been announced somewhere in his premonitory fictions.
In the early days of technoculture associated with the emerging internet, *Mondo 2000* magazine was the *dernier cri* of choice for visionaries and hackers alike. One of the “what’s hot” topics that regularly featured in its pages was the notion of vapourware; new ideas talked up so much that they seem to already exist, or simply must in the name of new technology. Things such as “teledildonics” or sex at a distance, a supposed panacea to help stem the plague of sexually transmitted diseases as well as a totally killer asset to be garnered for spicing up online gaming and virtual curb crawling in message board or Internet Relay Chat. Or Ted Nelson’s mystical “Project Xanadu”, the hypertext system to end all hyper parties that, regrettably, we are still waiting for. Marcos Novak was talking up “liquid architecture”, the transformative and elastic built environment of cyberspace and its flow between built and immaterial worlds. At a time that felt like a Kuhn-ian paradigm shift, anything *seemed* possible in the name of new technology, or what Nelson had called the age of “dream machines”.

But realistically, well before the 1990s we were already indifferent to the cult of vapour, the apparent magic of phantoms manifesting on domestic screens, in the form of television and video. The cathode ray tube of television monitors rely on a process of vaporisation associated with phosphorescence in order to project images on a screen that have been broadcast from elsewhere. Such clunky “old school” technology is now pretty much obsolete, unless you take the time to scour rubbish dumps or opportunity shops for them. The images a cathode ray tube projects are the product of the interplay of vapour and the material technology of a glass screen. Accordingly if such a device had a conscience it would be comfortable in its technicity, of which vapour really is a constituent element, not a metaphor.
**En attendant, or, while waiting**

The writer Samuel Beckett is not usually regarded as a significant mixed media artist of the 20th century. But although a novelist and dramaturge of the spoken word and the stage, he also experimented with mime, radio, film and also television. Had he not died in 1989 he would, no doubt, have experimented with HTML and may have been the first poet laureate of the Benny Hill School of bathos to discourse upon the World Wide Wait. As with other media with which he worked Beckett was fascinated with the medium of the technology itself, especially television. His 1976 play “... but the clouds...” is an exemplary text that captures his formalist interest in the televisual apparatus, its specific features of manifestation as if from nowhere, the appearance of an image removed from any physical location in space or temporal placement in time. And more particularly this fascination with the medium concentrated his sharp focus on the nature of spectatorship as a way of seeing within the context of an electronically mediated event. His typically spare technical directions for the play's mise en scène are visually suggestive not only of seeing it as a televised event concentrated in one space, but they are also visually emblematic of the projection of images from a cathode ray tube.

Beckett’s meticulous practice of inhabiting the medium in which he worked, as a kind of techno-method actor becoming the technology, meant that he was always reviewing and rehearsing the history of perception and techniques of the viewer and of viewing. In “...but the clouds...” he unwittingly conceives of a global network of information that can never be seen, but only imagined. The ostensible theme of “... but the clouds ...” is the desire to grasp in memory the image of a deceased loved one who is beyond sight. But it is also a how to manual for thinking about the cloud and molecular computing as metaphors of the material illusion of immateriality.

These images represent a sample of Jonathon Crary’s “techniques of the observer” through history, a glimpse of the vanishing point that opens the world out and then re-focuses it specifically on the eyes of the viewer, in particular the
idea of material technology that creates the illusion of the immaterial, such as perspective.

There is no official video or television production of “... but the clouds ...” either approved by Samuel Beckett in his lifetime or his Estate since his death. The two available iterations of it represent non-authorised sequences by performance students in the Design, Application and Direction class at Middlesex University in 2008 and a much earlier production of the entire play for Italian television in 1976, the same year the text was published by Faber. The latter version, “... Ma le nuvole...” is a curious production and conspicuously so in the context of this talk. It figuratively suggests the accepted metaphor of data stored in cloud computing being similar to discrete droplets of crystalized moisture forming a particulate mass in the atmosphere. The term *nuvole* is also an apt, if droll one in terms of this connotation since as data it is already “cloudy” for non-Italian speakers, obscure, elusive and unreadable. In translation the English word cloud is encrypted, concealed, there but not there, inaccessible. The congruence of these metaphors presumes or at least suggests valencies of irretrievable loss and mourning for a loved one and the televisual dying of the light. “...Ma le nuvole...” resembles other Beckett plays in its repetitive circularity and tiresome rounds of activity and behaviour, and like Borges’ character Ireneo Funes, it is ultimately pointless in its dream of the persistence of memory:

“...Ma le nuvole...” can be read as a prescient, unwitting allegory for trying to understand the metaphor of the cloud, how it works, the premises of presence and absence it assumes, as well as a rumination on the anxiety of the evaporation of substance into air, presence into memory, memory into distance. Mourning the loss of love, the loss of memory as well as the loss of self, is figuratively represented in the pixilation of the image of the body of the character M into vaporous matter. Working extensively in television and video, Beckett was acutely attuned to the fragility of our confidence in screens, and what is represented on them and from where. The phosphorescent process of the cathode ray tube in Beckett captures the faith in phantoms that make distant
things appear as images on our screens. The process of energising phosphor that enables the projection of televisual images, it’s worth noting, is a chemical reaction not dissimilar to the process of cloud seeding, using silver iodide or carbon dioxide in order to stimulate rain.

M’s figure, “crouching” in his little sanctum, “in the dark”, with his back to the camera’s gaze, begs the image of a long lost love, W, appear to him. Each time he entreats this act of becoming things dissolve, literally so, as the image of M, preparing once more to set out on the road in search her, momentarily appears before this scene, too, dissolves once again into M crouching or retiring to bed. “Dissolve” is the most repeated and persistent direction in the text of “… but the clouds...” and it gestures to the temporary and fragile nature of presence as reality or memory. Begging for her appearance as a vision, or a memory trace, M waits for W to appear to him on the road, for her image to appear to his memory, for it to materialise on our television screens, to download to our terminals. When the woman’s image does arrive, superimposed on the screen in the Italian production, we see her lips move and simultaneously hear the old man’s voice repeating the lines the lips speak.

Beckett’s directions in the script of the play are typical of television directions but also suggestive of the transfer of bit rates. They mark pauses in the habitual wait for an image to appear, for data to download, to catch up with the pace of his thought. As Martin Esslin has observed of the play in this respect it is not an internal monologue of a typically bereft Beckett character, but the “voice of someone who is demonstrating a situation and providing a mode d’emploi for viewing a visual experience”. As with other texts in Beckett’s entropic world (such as *Not I* [1973] *Footfalls* [1976] or *Ghost Trio* [1977]), the script of “… but the clouds...” has become “little more than a mere technical notation of camera positions (diagrams) and indications of timing”. The specificity of Beckett’s precise understanding and choreographing of time is rigorous and unforgiving of the most minute error. There are sixty directions in all. This is number 42:
Dissolve to S empty. 2 seconds. M1 in hat and greatcoat emerges from west shadow, advances five steps and stands facing east shadow. 2 seconds. He advances five steps to disappear in east shadow. 2 seconds. He emerges in robe and skullcap from east shadow, advances five steps and stands facing west shadow. 2 seconds. He turns right and advances five steps to disappear in north shadow. 2 seconds.

The text of the play resembles strings of code, instructions punctuated by detail that suggest a possible performance in space and time: Beckett is both playwright and interface designer.

As the mischievous imps of reflexive irony would have it, "... but the clouds..." is still very much anticipated as “a play for television” in the Anglophile world, in which it has only been imagined through a glass darkly in Italian seen on computer screens outside that country. Beckett presumes the gaze of an ideal viewer familiar with the borrowing of the words “but the clouds” from another poet. But he can't presume an audience familiar with them and their sense of melancholy and loss, and especially the words that precede them that are not uttered. These unspoken words are like the clouds in the sky, melancholy, vaporous images of absence and mourning.

In tenebris
The clouds will indeed be gone in the mourning. I don't need a visual aid to underline the ambivalence of this term that can only been seen and not heard. The more we are guided by such metaphors of evanescence to imagine where data is, the less secure we are likely to feel about it ever arriving when we invoke it. We are in darkness, bereft of information, none the wiser in knowing where we are in relation to its architectures, to memory and the apparent virtuality of geography in the post-age. To appropriate the words of another Irishman appropriated by the previous one, the poet William Butler Yeats’ melancholy lines at the end of “The Tower” (1926) are a meditation on evanescence, a sermon on the slow, incremental and creeping nature of loss. They speak of
gathering darkness and in doing so evoke a time to come of entropy, system failure, viral infection, data death:

The death of friends, or death
Of every brilliant eye
That made a catch in the breath—
Seem but the clouds of the sky
When the horizon fades;
Or a bird’s sleepy cry
Among the deepening shades.