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'That Awful Night in October': Sensory Experiences of Britain's 1987 Hurricane

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ABSTRACT
This article explores sensory experiences of the 1987 'Hurricane' in Britain. Through mass observers' testimonies, we examine the impact of sensory disruption to domestic 'sensoria'. We examine in turn disturbing noises; the anxieties circulating around windows; the loss of power to heat and light domestic environments, and, finally, the kinetic power of the storm to threaten the bounds between interior and exterior worlds. Finally, we place observers' sensory narratives into the context of cold war fears over the contingency of domestic space and its embodied comforts. In conclusion, we argue that the 1987 storm revealed an increasing sense of sensory separation from external nature.

KEYWORDS
Storms; environment; sensation; embodiment; everyday life

Embodying weather

During the afternoon of 15 October 1987, a powerful warm front began to build in the English Channel. This cyclonic system featured unusually large temperature and pressure gradients, which baffled meteorologists' efforts to predict its development. What they were observing was a storm system strengthened by a, then still unfamiliar, 'sting jet' system: a stream of cold air descending rapidly from altitude that significantly intensified the storm's wind speeds.[1] Into the early evening the storm continued to deepen, with wind speeds averaging 75 mph, and some gusting over 100 mph, or hurricane force. Though initially expected to move eastwards up the English Channel, the deepening gale now unexpectedly started to track northwards onto the English mainland. Striking the southern counties of England first, by early evening the most intense winds were passing the coastal counties of Dorset and Hampshire. The storm then rapidly moved across Surrey, Kent, and Sussex, where the night's strongest gusts were recorded, wind speeds at Shoreham reaching a maximum of 115 mph.[2] It then moved rapidly through southeast England, traversing London, a city unused to such weather, before crossing into East Anglia. Around dawn, the storm was beginning to weaken and head away into the North Sea. In a few short hours, the 'Great Storm' or 'Hurricane' of 1987 had created a spectacular trail of destruction across the south. Thousands of homes had been damaged, and millions of trees uprooted. At least nineteen people were killed (though

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reports of numbers varied) and hundreds more injured, while power, telecommunication, and transport networks had been disrupted across a wide area of the suburban south and east.[3] The following morning, while the BBC's television news was broadcast from a hastily improvised emergency studio, the region's economic hub, the City of London, suspended business and even the Bank of England closed some operations for the day as workers found themselves unable to commute.[4] In a signal of the political significance of the hurricane, government ministers held emergency meetings throughout the day, and the Prime Minister, then at a Commonwealth conference in Vancouver, was reported to be considering returning home early.[5] In London, the *Evening Standard* issued a 'crisis edition' with the headline 'The Worst Storm Ever'.

In this article, we argue that the 1987 hurricane should be seen, first and foremost, as an embodied experience, a 'sensory event', and that its corporeal impact was central to its social and cultural significance. In making this argument, we press against-the-grain of cultural approaches to the weather. Sean Silver, for instance, examining the cultural 'making' of an earlier great storm, that of 1703, has argued for approaching the weather as 'an *effect* [emphasis added] emerging from the modern media public'.[6] His argument is that, from the Enlightenment, national narratives and media networks have shaped public understandings of the weather as a national rather than a local event, and that 'great' storms require 'a newspaper reading public to spring into existence'.[7] While we agree that media representations matter a great deal in turning the weather into what Latour might have called a 'matter of concern' (as opposed to a 'matter of fact'), it seems to us strange to approach such profoundly physical phenomena in such an intangible way. Is it sustainable to suggest that, before the media narrate it, there is no weather in the modern sense? Does this not leave out something critical from our understanding of everyday encounters with the environment? The physical characteristics of human surroundings, be they hot or cold; wet or dry; fertile or sterile; benignly comforting or profoundly threatening, are not mere constructions of networks of communication, but profoundly material and sensory experiences. Recognition of this embodied experience was a key element in the rhetorical power of Daniel Defoe's *The Storm*, the work examined by Silver for pioneering the media making of weather. Writing of the 'horror and confusion' of sailors caught in the gale, Defoe was at pains to point out that, 'no thought can conceive it, unless some of those who were in the extremity of it; and who, being touched with a due sense of the sparing mercy of their Maker, retain the deep impressions of his goodness upon their minds'.[8]

If we seek, like Defoe, to examine the weather as sensory experience, we face the problem of sources. Indeed, without the 'communication networks' of a Defoe, accessing an array of corporeal experiences 'from below', even in the modern era, remains challenging. Fortunately, recent research is transforming our understanding of the range of sources that are available for a vernacular, embodied history of the weather.[9] Digitisation projects are reminding us of the long folk memories associated with storms like the 'Night of the Big Wind' of 1839, the powerful Europe-wide storm that left a profound trace in Irish tradition.[10] Historical examination of weather diaries also suggests the power of meteorological experiences to leave marks on individual bodies and minds, as well as in the writing of the self.[11] In this article, though, we want to draw attention to the significance of one particularly rich repository of life writing about the weather, the collection of responses to the Mass Observation Project (MOP) directive

issued in the aftermath of the 1987 hurricane. For this collection, observers composed detailed accounts of unsettling, uncanny, and sometimes terrifying, experiences of the storm. In recording the sensory effects of the gale, their writings reveal a deeper embodied history of the shaping of domestic sensoria in the period, as well disclosing how readily feelings of comfort and safety in the home could be undone.[12] Their accounts, we argue, point to a process of sensory withdrawal from external nature that tells of important changes in embodied relationships to the natural environment in the post-war period.

Mass observation and the hurricane

A few weeks after the 1987 hurricane, Sussex University's MOP issued its Autumn-Winter directive of 1987 to its panel of volunteer correspondents. In Directive 24, Part 2, then director of MOP, David Pocock, asked panel members to give an account of their 'personal experiences' during the hurricane.[13] The directive received 547 responses, some 290 of which came from correspondents in the main MOP regions affected (i.e. London, the East, South-East and South-West of England). The ensuing archive of personal testimonies may be the single most extensive ensemble of personal testimony directly addressing the impact of extreme weather in modern Britain.[14]

Since its revival in 1981, MOP has evolved into a key source for the social and cultural history of modern Britain. Its emphasis on personal accounts written by volunteer panellists has enabled historians to engage in innovative explorations of everyday life tracing changing perceptions of the self and society in late twentieth-century Britain.[15] Amongst the many approaches research has taken into the wealth of material curated by mass observation, one of the most influential had been the exploration of the affective dimensions of subjective experience, examining observers' responses for what Shaw calls 'the emotional undercurrents of everyday life'.[16] Reading mass observation as an 'archive of feeling' has enabled the writing of new histories of emotion, intimacy and domesticity in everyday contexts.[17] This same emotional intimacy is also present in responses to Directive 24, which reveal how the 1987 storm provoked concern, anxiety and terror. There is, however, another dimension to these writings, closely allied to the emotional experience of the storm, and that is detailed recording of embodied sensations and sensory perceptions as the gale passed through observers' neighbourhoods. It has been argued that life writing offers 'less of a sense of the immediate, immersive, embodied and affective experience of weather' than, say, can be achieved through oral histories.[18] However, the evidence of Directive 24 suggests otherwise. In this archive, authors frequently choose to record their sensory and physical experiences of the event in great detail, including the many strange, embodied effects of the storm on homes and bodies alike. Correspondents' choices to ponder over the significance of the embodied experience reveals the significance to them of the storm's sensory effects. Moreover, these sensuous encounters are almost entirely staged from the perspective of people, the majority of them women, viewing events from within domestic environments. Directive 24 thus presents an opportunity to explored the 1987 Great Storm as a sensory event and to gauge the meaning of its impact on domestic sensoria. The research for this article was undertaken using the recently published digital collection of MOP directives,

published by Adam Matthew Digital Limited. Due to issues of accuracy, our analysis, draws primarily (though not exclusively) on the OCR transcripts of typescript responses. Our conclusions should be read in the context of the advantages and disadvantages of this, as well as the known limitations to the metadata for the MOP collection.[19]

The complete cohort of 547 responses, clearly has many of the limitations familiar to previous users of MOP, not least the unevenness of a methodology based on self-selecting volunteer panel membership.[20] According to the digital metadata, Directive 24's responses were overwhelmingly from women authors (399 responses, or 73%). Of these, at least 144 (36%) are identified as having been married or widowed, but only sixteen (4%) are definitely identified as 'single'. In many cases, there is no data to affirm ongoing partnership status. Within the 399 responses from women, 332 (83% of women) were written by women born in the 1940s or before. If we narrow this analysis to responses from the main regions affected (see above), then the overwhelming majority (223 out of 290 responses, or 77%) came from women respondents. Our analysis also suggests a significant social as well as gender leaning in the directive. While it has been noted that many observers are attracted to writing for MOP as an expression of the voice of 'ordinary people', taken as *a whole* the authorship of Directive 24 submissions appears to reflect a particular stratum of ordinariness.[21] Only fourteen (3%) of the responses submitted to Directive 24 were from observers claiming 'factory-based' or 'elementary' occupations at the time they started writing for MOP, whereas 124 (27%) respondents are classified as either 'professional' or 'associated professional'. Our analysis and arguments below need to be read in the context of these observations. It is worth underlining that, in the case of this directive in particular, the 'over-representation' of lower-middle and middle-class perspectives may also be a consequence of the fact that the hurricane struck the south and southeast of England most heavily. The most affluent region in a highly economically and socially divided country, the social structure of the responses likely reflects this social geography.

Directive 24 responses offer a remarkably detailed record of the sensory history of the 1987 storm and its impact across the diversity of urban, suburban, peri-urban, rural and small-town domestic environments of southern England in the 1980s. The embodied experiences observers recorded give a glimpse of the (lower) middle-class domestic 'sense-scapes' in this region in the eighties, as well as suggesting something of the social and cultural significance of sensory environments in everyday life. Our observations about these sensescapes may, or may not, be generalisable to the rest of the United Kingdom. But, they provoke the prospect of imagining Britain as a patchwork of sensoria, where experiences of similar events might provoke diverse reactions based on embodied differences that may in turn reflect differences of class, gender and race across space and region.

Sonic surroundings

How did MOP correspondents narrate their sensory experiences? Sometimes accounts can appear ordinary to the point of the mundane, as in the case of the eyewitness who remembered how there was 'much clattering outside' and the sound of 'dustbin lids being thrown about'.[22] There is nothing obviously extraordinary in this. However, it is precisely

the dialectic between the ordinariness of the sensory environment and perception of its subversion that MOP correspondents consistently highlight. Amongst the range of sensory disruptions induced by the storm, auditory experiences are the most ubiquitous. The unusual sounds of the wind surfacing repeatedly as, in turn, uncanny, weird, and terrifying. Here, a few examples must stand for many similar accounts.

Often, observers record how they were woken by the storm confused misrecognition of their surroundings. One woman 'woke around two-thirty on the 16th', recalling that they 'knew something' had woken them and 'took several minutes eliminating all the usual causes such as a car engine running outside' before they 'identified the noise as a high wind'. Her sleepy effort to disaggregate customary from remarkable noises is suggestive of the dislocating impact of the weather. 'It seemed odd', she wrote, 'as generally winds cause an eddy at the end of the cul-de-sac, swirling leaves and litter around . . . after thinking at least five to ten minutes the fact that the wind seemed not to be blowing in its usual manner, encouraged me to get up'.[23] Her story tracks from cognisance of uncanny, unrecognisable sounds towards consciousness that something exceptional is happening, revealing the prior existence of tacit expectations of how winds 'generally' move at the end of a cul-de-sac. In another case, a man from East Sussex, in his sixties, was woken at 4 am in the morning by his wife, who was 'concerned for the patio set'. He described the 'tremendous and terrifying wind':

> As we lay there a strange rattling, scraping sound swept in waves across the window, a window in the lee of the storm. We couldn't understand, at first, the reason for it. Then realised, with alarm, that it was caused by particles of debris from the broken roof tiles sweeping down the road. Even more alarming was the sound of our own tiles lifting and scraping and moving about.[24]

Again, we have a misrecognition of the aural environment, which quickly turns to an embodied sense of anxiety, as 'each frightening gust battered the house' and the couple 'winced at its ferocity, and kept our fingers crossed'.

The sonic impact of gusting wind was fundamental to the sensory experience of the storm. In places this was so alarming that observers were forced from beds to seek safety in other parts of the house. A Sussex woman in her forties, identifies the precise moment of the interruption: 'At about 2:30', she related, 'I was rudely awakened by the violent gusts of wind, thrashing and hurling itself at the bedroom window, which was shaking and rattling, and seemed at any moment about to cave in'.[25] Frightened, she 'called to my husband (not yet fully awake) "there's something strange going on out there"'. She then narrates how her home transformed into a place literally resonating with uncertainty and danger. The vibrations created a 'sense of foreboding', so she began to 'feel uneasy. Agitated'. The couple tried to return to sleep, but were worried as 'the gale hurled itself once again at the window, and we were in danger of being showered with glass'. Abandoning their bed, they took refuge at the rear of the house, but finding themselves uncomfortably 'squeezed into the single bed in the spare room'. Despite this, they were 'soon sitting bolt upright listening to glass being smashed in the garden below . . . followed by tiles bouncing along the roof and smashing onto the concrete below'. 'We were both feeling decidedly panicky by this time', she writes, and 'I started thinking. Is this it? The end!'. This narrative reveals the intersection of embodied experiences and

emotions. The terror of the moment is expressed in an apocalyptic mode, underlining the affective impact of the storm, overturning a sense of comfort, continuity, and security.

Undoubtedly, a key reason for the centrality of sound in observers' responses is that the hurricane was a *nocturnal* event. Darkness overturned the sensory predominance of light and vision that, as Smith writes in *Sensory History*, has so often been taken as a mark of the modern.[26] In darkness little could be visually discerned of the passage of the storm, an important factor in the fear and anxiety it provoked. One observer from the West Midlands recorded how her daughter, 'who lives in Berkshire told me that the most frightening aspect [of the storm] was that it was at night'.[27] Where the wind shut down the electrical grid it also imposed its own conditions of invisibility, suspending the infrastructure of light and vision. This night-time transit also ensured disruption of the bodily rhythms of sleep and waking. As Ekirch and others have noted, specifically modern patterns of sleep have been predicated on the making of perceptual expectations of stillness and calm.[28] Far from being a mere daily routine, then, sleep is also an embodied practice built around historically particular sensory expectations, including the making of domestic spaces that encompassed solitude, warmth, and stillness. Indeed, in the twentieth century, the comforts of the suburban bedroom were predicated on sensorial separation from the rest of the house and surrounding environment, ensuring privacy, quiet and, in the 'ideal' home, filling it with warmth and light as necessary.[29] This separation was itself embedded in a longer transatlantic history of the remaking of ideals of domestic comfort.[30]

The storm's disruption of sleep became a moment in which observers recognised some of their tacit, embodied expectations that sustained their 'normal' comforts. Similarly, the temporary loss of these sensory conditions produced considerable affective unease. One woman from the London region restaged a dialogue with her husband on the night, recalling her distress and his efforts to reassure her. On waking to find that 'the wind was decidedly noisier than usual', she writes that she 'felt very uneasy and kept my husband awake. He said, "go to sleep, we're alright – warm and dry".' Despite these reassurances, the author records that 'I knew this was something other than ordinary'.[31] It is notable how, in this account, both recognition that something was wrong, and the husband's reassurances that all is well, circulate around embodied affects: audible sounds in the author's case, a dry warm space for her husband. Both were sensory features of the home that the storm exposed to view.

Rattling windows

In her response to MOP, a woman from the London area summarised one of the commonest foci for observers' sensory concerns, 'the noise of the wind rattling windows'.[32] We have already seen several instances of this encounter above, but the presence of the window as a site of sensory anxiety is so persistent that it demands more detailed comment. Portals allowing light, heat and sound into the home, windows became a common centre for apprehension during the storm. A man from the South-East remembered 'the wind gusting down the garage drives ... Violently rattling the double glazing and producing a strange rattling noise we could not explain', which turned out to be gravel driven into the panes of glass.[33] Numerous observers' accounts exemplify the ferocity and threat of the wind in the way that it threatened to collapse

a window, showering the inhabitants with glass, and allowing the storm access to the interior. One woman, in her seventies, who on the night of the 15th of October was staying with a sister near Brighton, wrote how the windows shook with the energy of the gusts. Concerned, she 'dare not stay in bed' as 'the force being on the window side I was not taking any chances'.[34] Another noted that 'being slightly deaf' she had slept unconcerned 'until my sister came into my bedroom just before 5 am to see that the casement window was properly shut' because 'it was rattling so loudly she thought it would be blown in'.[35]

Beyond these very natural fears, however, in drawing observers' attention to windows, the storm provoked some observers to later record something of the acoustic histories of their homes.[36] Perhaps, the most common form of this are the accounts that tell how sound of the wind was mediated by glazing, and in particular by some observes' choices to instal double-glazing. With origins in the high modernism of the inter-war years, domestic double glazing had been slowly popularised in the 1960s.[37] Double-glazing presented a technological fix to some of the embodied environmental issues of changing urban surroundings, especially noise pollution. Installing double-glazing was entwined with the development of an increasingly piercing automobile society, and the political influence of the noise abatement movement.[38] Writing about this trend in the 1960s, one journalist noted that 'For families living on main highways or in central London streets where sleep is continually disturbed by the shattering din of the big wagons speeding to the freight liner depots in the early hours, double-glazing can mean the difference between life being bearable and unbearable.'[39] Following the oil crises of the 1970s, double-glazing also became popular as an energy (and money) saving home-improvement, propagated by a burgeoning new sales industry that promoted its potential to transform standards of comfort in the home by addressing issues of cold and condensation.

By 1987, double-glazed homes were an aspirational norm for many householders, but even where installed its sensory effects were, curiously, often obscure. Observers' testimonies reveal that the sonic muffling of a double-glazed home was still novel; something to which people were unconsciously adapting their bodies.[40] This is most powerfully underlined by those who wrote of their surprise at the sudden appearance of the storm. One woman from the 'East of England' recalled that on opening her door to let her cats in, 'I couldn't believe the noise of the wind (I hadn't heard it indoors because of the double-glazing and the TV). It sounded like all hell had broken loose. There was a great roaring sound and every tree in the garden was shaking and rustling'.[41] Here, the contrast between internal and external sensoria becomes stark, the storm revealing an auditory space unexpectedly insulated from an external nature that could spring unwelcome surprises. Another correspondent, a man from South-East England, recorded something similar: 'Because we have double glazing, the noise of the winds on the night in question were not so audible to me', he wrote, 'It was only when my wife called out to me from her bedroom at the rear of the bungalow that I realised that we had gale-force winds'.[42] A Surrey woman, woken by her husband at 3am, found that she was fortunate because the 'double-glazing minimized the sound and I turned over and went back to sleep'. Her husband, on the other hand, went downstairs to find that 'because the door is not double-glazed, the noise was horrendous'.[43] Such experiences put into context some of the anger, expressed in the aftermath of the storm against the meteorologists who had failed to

predict the gale. The changing technical infrastructure of some homes, bathed in the sensory exclusion of external nature, may have accentuated feelings of shock and surprise at the arrival of the storm, intensifying feelings of vulnerability and fear.

Shared experiences were, however, not necessarily uniform experiences. Some observers reported the benefits of double-glazing excluding the sound of the storm, but for others extreme winds revealed double-glazing systems to be far from perfect insulators. From the south coast of Hampshire, a man wrote to MOP that, having, 'replaced the old rusty metal framed windows with smart double glazing' he and his wife 'until the hurricane, have slept soundly in our first-floor maisonette'.[44] During the hurricane, however, he was reminded of how he had, 'forgotten the noise a rough sea can make, especially when it is only some two hundred and fifty yards away'. His narrative reflects how quickly bodied might adapt to new sensory expectations. Another woman from the South-East pointed out that 'our windows are double-glazed but even through them we could hear the violent storm'.[45] Both accounts suggest how the extremity of the storm managed to overcome a recently reduced level of external noise entering the home. In a few cases, the wind threatened the installation altogether. An observer from London reported that his daughter, who had 'uPVC double glazing fitted to her house' was nonetheless woken 'by the sound of her windows creaking loudly as the plastic frames flexed in the wind'.[46] At Dover, an observer reported that their daughter's house had 'lost a goodly portion of their roof' during the gale 'and had all the external panes of double-glazing on one elevation either blown or sucked out'.[47]

Emotional energies

Installing double-glazing was just one of several ongoing transformations to domestic infrastructures sensory comfort. Historians of consumption have shown how the spread of electrification transformed everyday expectations of domestic comfort in the mid-twentieth century.[48] Electricity enabled a remoulding of domestic spaces and bodily rhythms, contributing to changing expectations of what it meant to *feel* 'at home'. Paradoxically, it also introduced new hazards to those comforts, including the possibility of massive technical failure, which during the storm became a reality.[49] Indeed, so important had access to electricity become in the post-war era in remaking the comforts of domestic sensoria that the threat of its loss in turn, the 'blackout', had become a synecdoche for social and political crisis. Moments of interruption to supply, such as that embodied in the 'three-day week', came to stand as a symbol of generalised social and political crisis, a suspension of modernity.[50]

During the 1987 storm, tens of thousands of people lost electrical power. In most places, it was quickly restored, though in some rural areas the interruption lasted several days. This subsequent denial of light and heat was another important sensory impact of the storm, disrupting everyday practices that had come to sustain wider feelings of comfort and security. We see something of this in the way that the loss of roadside lighting disturbed one MOP correspondent's sleep:

> At 2:30 am I woke. I wasn't sure what woke me. I shuffled along the landing to the bathroom, I looked at Jupiter and her four moons on the way. Back in bed I could not sleep. The

> window was chattering. Then I did fall asleep momentarily – the street lights went out. There were flashes in the sky and I presumed it was trouble at the local electric sub-station, at Mundham. It didn't seem to be lightning for there was no thunder. I felt that things weren't as they should be for the street lamp normally stays on all night. I felt for my torch. Realised that the total darkness was what had caused me to wake. Reached to switch on my bedside light. That came on alright.[51]

This woman, in her sixties and from the South-East, uses a precise time-stamp as a marker of the moment of waking to the now familiar 'chattering' window. However, while this noise first disturbs her, it is a matter of *visual* perception that rouses her the second time. Her account is full of references to light and vision. From looking at a planetary system (presumably through a telescope?) to the failure of streetlamps and the nervous fumbling for a bedside torch, vision, and the availability of electricity, offers a source of emotional comfort. In the *Evening Standard* of 16th October, Peter Mackay similarly recorded waking to 'total darkness' and feeding his baby 'under the light of a flickering candle', asking himself 'Where was the torch. Could it be found in the darkness?'[52] In a sign of the contingent nature of such embodiments, our writer for MOP is awoken by the loss of *external* street lighting, an absence already uncanny enough to initiate the unconscious sensation of abnormality. It is a great example of the malleability and historicity of corporeal practices that might otherwise seem 'natural'. Her testimony goes on to repeatedly reinforce the affective importance of electrical energy in sustaining her domestic comforts. She got up to make sure she had turned 'all my Off-Peak Storage Heaters on to high', concerned to 'capture what little heat was to be had'. Then, heading back to bed, she turned on the radio seeking a reassuring voice but finding the usual station off air. Tuning to a commercial station that was still broadcasting, she remarked in the present tense, 'we are glad about that'. But, perhaps most revealing of all is that this woman's *domestic* electrical supply was never actually interrupted at all. 'All this time my electricity was on', she writes, 'and I was more than grateful for that'. Surely, this woman is a classic example, of what Wright calls the 'emotional energy consumer'.[53]

The affective importance by the late eighties of networks of electoral power is very apparent throughout these testimonies. So too is the ongoing adaptation of domestic spaces to electrical energy. One woman from the London area offered a brief, but fascinating, micro-history of changing patterns of domestic energy use and its unpredictable sensory impacts:

> The night of the great hurricane, my husband and I lay in bed listening to the wind moaning through the air vent at the back of our bed. We live in a house built before the First World War, so that originally, each bedroom had its own coal-fuelled fireplace. When we moved in twenty-five years ago, however, the large front bedroom had a wall electric fire put in instead. We removed the electric fires (which were everywhere) and replaced them with night storage heaters. But the problem of the chimneys and proper ventilation to protect against damp remain. Hence the air vent.[54]

Here, the wind transgresses a previously unseen sensory boundary or gateway to the home, one created as part of its energy history. Electrical heating had enabled a partial sealing-up of domestic space, paralleling the impact of double-glazing, but it had also made necessary a perforation of that domestic insulation. Other correspondents remark on similar paradoxes, as new assemblages of domestic

comfort perhaps proved less resilient to interruption than hoped. Having lost electricity, a London woman could not help reflecting with irony on how 'we had bought an electric over-blanket that very day and had stripped the bed of blankets and replaced them with the new electric one, so we were without lights, heat and a warm bed!'[55]

Yet again, though, there is diversity of experience here. Some observers encountered the loss of electrical power not as a threat to comfort, so much as an opportunity to temporarily re-experience older sensations and habits. For those with access to natural gas or 'off-grid' means of cooking, especially for making tea (perhaps the most universal practice of self-comfort in observers' testimonies), the brief loss of electrical connection might provoke a form of sensory nostalgia. During the blackout a woman from Norwich chose to visit a 'friend, who has a gas stove' , and found it, 'was rather nice walking along in the dark, with a torch and seeing people with candles in their front rooms'. It made her recall how, 'she and her husband sat by [the stove], with a hurricane lamp, playing Scrabble all evening. Innocent pleasures'.[56] A male correspondent, living in 'our Crescent' near Horsham in West Sussex, remembered:

> That evening, our power went off at 5.30 for about 1 ½ hours, and, as a family, we found great pleasure in sitting in our lounge and talking about the hurricane with some candles flickering away on the mantlepiece. It brought a feeling of cosiness, with no background noise from the T.V. I remember saying to my wife that after the floods and the hurricane, I hope that people appreciate the power of nature. It made me feel strangely humble'.[57]

This kind of 'sensory nostalgia' might provoke ideals of shared peril and feelings of common adversity, as for the woman who felt that the 'Dunkirk spirit was certainly to the fore as we ate by candlelight'.[58] Such nostalgia reveals energy transitions and sensory experiences to be embedded in personal life histories and social memory. They suggest that, despite the impact of networks of power on individual modes of perception, embodied behaviour remained remarkably contingent. Where disconnection from the grid lasted for days or even weeks, even bodily habits and everyday routine might quickly revert to older norms, as for a man in the East of England, in his seventies and without electric light, who 'found that the power of keeping awake and reading by candlelight soon failed and early to bed became the norm.[59]

Kinetic terrors

Alongside ominous noises, and the loss of warmth and light, perhaps most unsettling of the storm's effects was its kinetic power. Observers record how the storm touched bodies and animated objects *within* the home. A Sussex woman, 'a terrible insomniac', recalled that, as she lay in bed, she, 'became conscious of a howling wind' and, 'could feel air being sucked across the bed even though I have double-glazing'. Her reaction to this invasion is telling as 'I stuffed the pillow and duvet into my ears and tried to go to sleep'.[60] Another Sussex correspondent, woken by pebbles blown against her window, found that 'one made a clean hole through the window in the front porch'.[61] A man from the South-East reported a friend woken by 'the noise created by the wind in the roof' which 'sounded as though someone was playing football above her head, and she became frightened'.[62] The

pulsating energy of the storm provoked a woman correspondent to liken it to 'being in labour', as 'the pauses in between each burst of noise and energy gave you time to gather strength for the next act'.[63]

The intensity of these animations was a disturbing reminder of nature's capacity to rob domestic spaces of their homeliness. Recalling 'That awful night in October', a woman in her thirties living in the South-East of England, gave a compelling description of the kinetic power of the storm and its associated terrors:

> My husband and I lay in bed listening to the tiles shifting on the roof for several hours, and in the end decided to get up and have a cup of coffee. When we tried to switch on the light, we found that the power supply was off. Our first concern was for our birds and incubating eggs – My husband has the hobby of keeping birds, and we had baby quail in an electric brooder, and polish bantam eggs in an incubator, just two days from hatching time. (We put on the gas fire and managed to revive just one of the young quail, and sadly lost all the rest of the young and eggs.) While doing this our 10-year-old son gave up trying to sleep and joined us downstairs. We heard several crashes, and tiles from the main roof came smashing through the conservatory roof, narrowly missing the aviary-section which is partly housed at one end. Then from the other side of the house we heard breaking glass. I ventured into the dining room with a torch and saw the greenhouse flying towards the dining room windows. I fled in terror, expecting it to come right through the windows. (Happily, part of the frame snagged on our small apple tree, and it stopped a few inches short of hitting the dining room windows. The glass exploded as it landed though – it spread the length and breadth of the garden, and I'm still finding pieces when I go gardening! We sat in the dark scared by the ferocity of the wind, feeling the vibrations through the wall and watching the large panes of the secondary double-glazing flexing with each gust.[64]

This retelling draws together many of the sensory elements we have seen so far: the noise of tiles falling, loss of power, etc. Here, they are presented in the imagery of the horror genre. The power of the storm threatens the integrity of the home's interior, imperilling access to the warmth and power that sustains life. Exterior nature threatens life, violently invading domestic space and claiming the lives of the young chick. The home transmutes briefly from a place of comfort and security to one of terror.

In writing of their experiences, correspondents frequently search for appropriate analogies to convey extreme embodied and emotional experiences. For older respondents, this might be found in memories of wartime affects. A woman from Folkstone recorded how she, 'woke up with a start during the hurricane, put out my hand to switch on the light but no power, then, "shot out of bed as all I could hear was the dreadful noise of the wind and crashes and bangs".[65] Like others, she headed downstairs to make tea. "After a while" she wrote "when I was a little less frightened, I had a touch of *déjà vu*, I had done all this before when I was a child of 10 or 11 only instead of the howling of the wind it had been the screaming of bombs and the bangs and crashes had been louder". Another woman remembered the storm as, 'a bad dream and very reminiscent of the blitz'.[66] While another respondent, also born before the war, wrote how she:

> Lay awake that night listening to the wind raging round the house, wondering what the hell was going on, feeling vaguely uneasy but not really frightened'. Then a noise, a bang, very loud, very close, that rumbled a bit, and reminded me of a bomb. My husband looked out of the back window and announced, 'It's the wall – it's all down!' In amazement we stared at the back garden ... We felt it was like the Blitz and told each other so, frequently.[67]

A woman in her seventies, thought that the wind 'sounded droning like the thousand bomber raids which set out over Southern England to Dortmund, Essen, etc., during World War II'. 'I

don't want any more gales like that', she remarked, 'I was scared!'[68] Two other women, each old enough to remember the war, recorded that they had 'never experienced anything so frightening, even in the war' and that 'it was worse than the war'.[69]

For those whose memories did not stretch back to wartime raids, a common mode in which to express their fears was the apocalyptic fear of a future war. This found frequent expression in media narratives. For the *Evening Standard*, Peter Mackay wrote of a 'night to remember', awaking to the 'howling of wind on the telephone wires and the tormented thrashing of trees. The street lights flickered and died. Many must have woken today and thought: Is this what the next war will be like?'.[70] On the first anniversary, author and journalist Bob Ogley echoed these words: 'It was a night we shall never forget' he wrote, 'The screaming wind, the banging of dustbin lids, the sharp crash of breaking glass and somewhere beneath the deafening roar, the sound of crashing trees. Then, the lights went out. Dear Lord, we thought, they've done it. Some idiot's dropped the Bomb. The world's coming to an end'.[71] Such expressions were more than journalistic hyperbole. At least one respondent to MOP, a woman in the East of England, 'woke in the night to a frightening roaring sound. In my half-awake state I thought it was a nuclear attack it sounded like the sound effects in "War Games". That thought brought me quickly awake!'[72] In most cases, nuclear war provided a sensory analogy to which correspondents alluded to express the depth of the fear they had experienced. A woman from Brighton wrote: 'The hurricane was a very frightening experience, The feeling of being cut off communication wise put me in mind of how it might be if ever there should be a nuclear attack'.[73] A man in the South-East, perhaps thinking of the recent Chernobyl disaster, wrote to MOP that, turning on their radio in the morning their initial 'worry [was] of a major disaster (!) e.g. nuclear)'.[74] Another observer records a conversation with a relative in Ipswich, who reported: 'Every single tree in the road was down. There were no people about, no traffic noise', adding in emphasis that, 'IT WAS REALLY EERIE, LIKE THE AFTERMATH OF A NUCLEAR EXPLOSION'.[75]

The metonym of nuclear attack offered a means by which some observers felt they could convey how unsettling their experiences had been. It also points towards public anxieties of the 1980s, and the connection between sensory experience of the storm and popular fear of nuclear war. A period of intensification in the Cold War, as well as of anti-nuclear political activism, the 1980s saw the release in the UK of several anti-war films and television programmes.[76] Productions like *Threads* (1984) or the broadcast of Peter Watkins film *The War Game* (first shown on BBC television in 1985), drew on a combination of powerful image making and simulation of the sensorial impact of nuclear conflict. Breaking windows are a recurring feature of such filmic storytelling, gesturing towards the penetration and overturning of the integrity of the home alluded to in observers' responses to the 1987 hurricane. One particular influence on observer's tellings may have been the recent animated film *When the Wind Blows*. Released in 1986, this adaptation of the graphic novel by Raymond Briggs traces a retired couple's tragic efforts to restore a sense of comfort and normality to their home after it is devastated by a nuclear blast. The story's imagery parallels many elements of the sensory experience of the 1987 hurricane: windows are blown in; telephone connections, electricity and water supply are lost; house tiles are blown away, and a comforting domestic interior is literally turned upside-down. Much of the pathos of the film relies on the contrast of everyday domestic comforts with the likely bleak realities of a post-nuclear Britain. Coincidentally, in *Where the Wind Blows*, the couple's home is located somewhere on the South Downs. The journalist, Bog Ogley alludes to the film in his *In the Wake of the*

Hurricane.[77] Of course, the hurricane was not a nuclear blast, but these popular media certainly supplied some observers with a sensorial language in which to tell their embodied experiences. As one Rochester (the location of the events of *The War Game*) man wrote: 'The devastation was once again bomb-like and with the pouring rain and ensuing darkness seemed post-nuclear'.[78]

Everyday environments?

One of the leading historians of the senses, Mark. M. Smith, writing of another hurricane that struck the southern United States in 1969, maintains that its victims' sensory experiences brought into question their perception of inhabiting modernity:

> If we listen carefully to the words of survivors it becomes clear that the sensory experience of Hurricane Camille was, for its victims, an atavism – a moment that reminded them that despite their progress and their apparent mastery of modernity, they were, in fact, fragile creatures. For many, the sensory experience of Camille represented a throwback, no matter how temporary, to a sort of premodernity.[79]

While hardly comparable a category five hurricane, Britain's 1987 storm was undoubtedly a profoundly disruptive embodied experience for those who encountered it. It brought into question the perceptual technologies and networks of power that sustained the distinction between internal domestic comfort and the exterior world of 'nature' in the twentieth century. It provoked some to try to re-establish these sensory bounds. Observers tell of physically relocating their bodies during the storm, searching for the peace that would allow them to sleep. Abandoning their bedroom, a woman from South-East England, writes how 'after the first half hour we simply came down to the first floor, to the front of the flat, where it was slightly quieter, but sleep was impossible, the whole building vibrated with the force of the wind'. The experience was 'more frightening to me than some of the wartime air-raids, this was the unknown, nature at its more vicious'.[80] Some tried to blot out the clamour. I had 'never been so frightened in my life' writes another woman, remembering 'that amazing roaring sound that cotton wool, a pillow and the radio could not obliterate'.[81] One woman found the gale so terrifying that she 'went back to bed and sung to myself so I wouldn't hear the wind'.[82] Seeking to escape the noises in her bedroom chimney, another author found only that the 'downstairs chimney even worse than the upstairs one'. Undaunted, she looked around, and found 'an old worktop about a yard square and propped it up in the fireplace with the aid of some logs'.[83] These efforts to physically re-establish the corporeal boundary between inside and outside worlds, to remake domestic sensoria and their associated comforts in the face of the storm, reveals how terrifying a threat 'nature at its more vicious' could be.

Returning to the questions posed at the start of this article, we have tried to show here how the evidence gathered by correspondents to MOP Directive 24 underlines the importance of embodiment in environmental experience. In *Sensing Changes*, Joy Parr argued that everyday environments are experienced through embodied sensations and ingrained habits *before* they are represented.[84] Consciousness of everyday surroundings is, for Parr, a product of the *disruption* of habitual, bodily ways of knowing the world. In calling for an examination of the 'embodied histories' of everyday life, *Sensing Changes* argued for the continuing importance of 'experience' and the irreducible materiality of environmental phenomena.[85] As Parr formulates it, cognitive sense-making, i.e. the creation of experiences, is a product of the ways that

people encounter 'technologies, environments and the everyday, directly through their sensing bodies'.[86] Parr's argument, which finds broad support in our own research, is a challenge to those histories of subjectivity founded on Foucauldian approaches to the body and perception, where perceptual regimes of seeing and knowing are presented as imposed by experts and technicians in the production of the modern, self-governing, 'liberal subject'.[87] However, our conclusions depart from both Parr and the Foucauldian approach to sensory history over the extent to which people exercise agency, both representational and corporeal, over their own perceptual environments. It is not sufficient to replace the determinations of perceptual apparatuses with those of nature itself. Rather, we would suggest, along with Kate Flint, that sensual embodiments not only construct but also *disrupt* subjectivities, and these disruptions leave considerable space for free articulation in discourse.[88] The 1987 hurricane, in which what was heard and felt suddenly changed, suggested to observers the limits, contingencies, and failures of their prevailing sensoria. Their accounts of the storm, and their affective reactions to it, reveal shared *and* divergent experiences, perhaps underscoring Koole's argument for the importance of bodily 'improvisation' and personal agency in the making and unmaking of embodied experiences.[89]

Finally, it is left to ask what the wider ramifications of this history of one set of sensory experiences might be? How does it help us to understand what geographer Alex Loftus has called everyday environmentalism.[90] Two issues strike us as worthy of further consideration. The first is whether the deeper exploration of domestic sensoria and their affects might contribute to rethinking the political history of the 1980s. The suburban southeast of England was critical to Conservative Party electoral dominance in the period. What did this owe, if anything, to experiences of, and threats to, the embodied comforts of the home? Secondly, what does the observation that the 1987 hurricane was 'nature at its more vicious' suggest about changing relationships between domestic space and the natural environment? How far were embodied encounters with nature becoming the 'atavisms' that Smith describes? And, if they were, what does this suggest for our understanding of changing attitudes towards nature, climate, and the environment at the end of the twentieth century? Should we see the 'greening' of British political life and public culture in this period as the paradoxical obverse of private lives that were increasingly spent indoors, viewing nature through the muffled comfort of double glazing?[91]

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