

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky.

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Published Online: 24 February 2025

Introduction

The theme of my sky journal is to qualitatively explore ways of observing clouds in the sky. Consequently, my aim is to observe and describe the sky and the clouds, so as to journey into the perceptions that a phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky can provide. Such an engagement with the sky and my surroundings encompasses the different aspects of skylscapes embedded within the various physical environments and weather conditions pertaining to the month of July 2015 in the Maltese Islands in the Mediterranean Sea. While seeking to discuss my research findings, this essay also rests upon theoretical models drawn from a variety of disciplines such as anthropology, phenomenology, and religion. Such a holistic approach aims to look closely into the symbolic aspects that this July sky embodied, conveyed and revealed, while bringing to the fore the amorphous relationship between the observed nature and its observer.

Methodology

During the month of July 2015, equipped with a pencil and notepad to record my observations, and my mobile phone to take photographs, I visited a number of places which I believed were appropriate for cloud watching. My sky journal research project is primarily phenomenological, whereby Edmund Husserl's (1859–1938) concept of *Einfühlung*, closely translated as 'empathy', is applied, hence choosing description over explanation.¹ Moreover, by adopting the qualitative method I practised the reflexive approach, a process that Kathryn Haynes identified as one that allows the researcher to 'come to know ourselves and others, the positions from which we speak, and the political and social

¹ Edmund Husserl, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology: From the Lectures, Winter Semester, 1910–1911*, Vol. 12, trans. Ingo Farin and James G. Hart (Springer Science & Business Media, 2006), p. xxvi.

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky

context in which these conversations take place.² Some excerpts have been grouped to allow a discussion that can thematically explore how the targeted observation of clouds can provide an upward engagement as much as an inner one.

Sky journal – excerpts from my notebook

3rd July 2015, 7:47 p.m.

The lure today brought me to the south east which I always relate to the beautiful prehistoric temples that have survived the last seven millennia. I cannot see them from where I am sitting, but it makes me smile to know I am in the vicinity of such an architectural and symbolic wonder. While scouring the sky for some clouds, I spare some thoughts to the first Neolithic settlers who successfully reached the Maltese Islands from Sicily, aided by orographic clouds which typically accumulate on a mass of land.

9th July 2015, 6:38 p.m.

I am lying on my back on smooth clay rocks, sky-bathing; I would say cloud watching if there were any! Watching the sky from this horizontal position alters my manner of observation. I realise I cannot see the horizon as I am only looking upward, seemingly deeper. Thoughts of distance and journeying cross my mind. The clouds seem to have evaporated. Is it the heat? There is a thick haze, it must be the humidity. I wait and take some photos, soak up the beauty.

18th July 2015, 12:07 p.m.

I drove to the silent city, Mdina. Having walked through the winding roads that break the strong north-westerly winds in winter makes me appreciate the light breeze. I am on the lookout for clouds from these narrow streets that feel like sky-light corridors making the sky look even brighter against this bright honey-coloured sandstone (figs. 1, 2). I look up while walking, hopeful of spotting a cloud oriented with one of these curving lanes. I realise that the sky today is a medieval one, because as I gaze upward, I cannot help but notice the fourteenth- and fifteenth century palazzos that dot this limestone town. I'm walking head up. It is silent and the walls are oozing heat. It dawns on me that I am reading the sky through my cultural background, contextualising and assigning meaning through my culturally filtered perceptions.

² Kathryn Haynes, 'Reflexivity in Qualitative Research' in *The Practice of Qualitative Organizational Research: Core methods and current challenges*, eds C. Cassell and G. Symon (SAGE, 2012), p. 87.

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky

22nd July 2015, 5:55 a.m.

Another day, another edge. Today I think positively of living on an island for most of the coastline is approachable, and watching sunrise and sunset from sea level fills me with a sense of merging with the rocks and sand, the splashing waves. The sky cannot be separated from the land or sea. The shoreline connects me, metaphorically and literally, to this grand unfolding of nature, watching the sky resting on the horizon. I think of my roots and routes. I do not doubt that being an islander impacts heavily on how I view the sky.

A phenomenology of land- and skylscapes

Summer and July. Summer *is* July! The sky seems to welcome its arrival with wide open arms. A cloudless sky (fig. 3). Actually, I was not prepared for this, but I am glad to notice the different layers of blue. They all dovetail into each other, gradually, smoothly. Devoid of clouds, the sky feels pure and timeless, grounding me to a peaceful now. It is special to be here. The moment is infinite.'

Such a 'pure and timeless' feeling is explored by Belden Lane in his investigations concerning the religious experience of sacred space, where he notes the 'spiritual significance that people attribute to a place' and how experiencing the spirit of place develops into a 'phenomenological reality'.³ Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn also proposed that applying phenomenology entails 'a humanist approach which puts people and the manner in which they perceive and relate to the world at the centre of research'.⁴ In like manner, in his in-depth analysis of the engagement of sacred space and *homo religiosus*, Mircea Eliade's (1907–1986) interpretation of phenomenology focused exclusively on the 'unique and irreducible element of the sacred'.⁵ His theoretical model on sacredness incorporated aspects of transcendence as reflected in his terminology of 'hierophany', namely the 'irruption of the sacred', that place where an opening into the sacred is revealed.⁶ Congruently, such a

³ Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. ix.

⁴ Colin Renfrew and Paul G. Bahn, *Archaeology: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 151.

⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996 [1958]), p. xvii.

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, 1959), pp. 24-26, 30.

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky

revelation can be read within D.H. Lawrence's (1885–1930) thoughts on experiencing the New Mexico landscape, as cited by Britta Benke: 'The moment I saw the brilliant, proud morning shine high up over the deserts of Santa Fe, something stood still in my soul, and I started to attend.'⁷ Like Lawrence and many others, Benke's studies showed that American artist Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986) was equally transfixed by the mysterious beauty of the Southwest.⁸ O'Keeffe's own observations also highlighted the same blue timelessness I had observed and recorded in my sky journal. In O'Keeffe's case it was when she was handling the pelvic bones for her painting *Pelvis III* (fig. 4). As Benke cited, O'Keeffe observed 'that Blue that will always be there as it is now after all man's destruction is finished'.⁹ Benke proposed that, at the heart of O'Keeffe's artwork is a desire to make the 'unknown known', to portray the experience of the mysterious residing within what Lane termed 'landscapes of the sacred'.¹⁰

To summarise this part of the essay which deals with the phenomenology of the land- and skiescapes, I noted in my sky journal the following realisations: first, that a cloudless sky is full of different layers of blue; second, that the sky feels pure and timeless, and infinite; and third, that this timelessness grounded me to a peaceful now. In seeking secondary support for these realisations in the works of Lane, Renfrew and Bahn, Eliade, Lawrence, Benke, and the artworks of O'Keeffe, I become aware that, while anticipating clouds, I was actually 'attending' to what Lane described as a 'phenomenological reality' of the here and now.¹¹

⁷ Britta Benke, *O'Keeffe, 1887–1986: Flowers in the Desert* (Cologne: Taschen, 2006 [1995]), p. 55.

⁸ Benke, *O'Keeffe*, p. 55.

⁹ Benke, *O'Keeffe*, p. 73.

¹⁰ Benke, *O'Keeffe*, p. 70; Lane, *Landscapes*.

¹¹ Benke, *O'Keeffe*, p. 55; Lane, *Landscapes*, p. ix.

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky

The power of colour

8th July 2015, 5:38 a.m. (fig. 5)

Such beauty! I just ran the last few metres to the shore. The birth of a brand-new day – I feel excited, enchanted by this silent spectacle! A stout and uneven fence of clouds sits on the horizon. Will these clouds hide the first sliver of sun? It's all happening so quickly – I can see the colours changing as I write. Hues of blue, pink, lilac, yellow, and peach; my thoughts veer towards Jimmy Hendrix's (1942–1970) purple haze kissing the sky, and Turner's (1775–1851) and Monet's (1840–1926) respective expressionist and impressionist paintings, such as in figures 6 and 7, and I realise how moving these dawn colours are.¹² Their reflection on this still sea magnifies the colours. Their subtlety feels light, like weightless; look light, as in pale, and bear light within their shades.

15th July 2015, 5:22 p.m. (fig. 8)

At the tip of a beach across Valletta.

The sky is not merely above me, but around me. It is enveloping. I am looking everywhere. I should really appreciate the different nuances of blues, but instead I am searching and scouring the sky for Aratus' 'fleece-like clouds'; the sky is an open palette. I make a note that I should learn more about all the variations of the colour blue. Excited, I take a quadruple photograph of the blue sky.

Such attention to the phenomena of colours was discussed in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749–1832) treatise on the theory of colours in 1810.¹³ In his analysis and explanation of the physical, functional, and psychological qualities of colours, Goethe also argued that the observer, through the act of perceiving, becomes 'the investigator of nature'.¹⁴ Arthur G. Zajonc's studies pinpointed how the act of perception initiates 'a continual dialog between the senses and the sensible', namely an engagement with nature, similar to the observations in my sky journal.¹⁵ As Michael Bockemühl noted, Goethe's theory of colours was

¹² Jimi Hendrix, *Purple Haze*, <https://youtu.be/fjwWjx7Cw8I> [accessed August 1, 2015].

¹³ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (London: John Murray, 1840).

¹⁴ Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, p.284.

¹⁵ Arthur G. Zajonc, 'Goethe's theory of color and scientific intuition', *American Journal of Physics* 44:4 (1976), p. 328.

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky

adopted by the English landscape artist J.M.W. Turner to highlight the aesthetic and psychological interrelationship between light and colour, as seen in figure 9.¹⁶ Furthermore, John D. Barrow's studies highlight the symbolic uses of colour in modern art and society.¹⁷ As Barrow observed, Art is 'the universal human activity' where colours carry meanings.¹⁸ Barrow's discussion on 'when the day comes', like the above-described dawn, draws attention to how 'light and life combine in ways that enable us to understand our perceptions of colour and some of its deep psychological influences upon us'.¹⁹ As Barrow indicated, the end of the nineteenth century saw a large number of abstract painters, such as Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), who recognised the deep-seated responses humans bear towards particular colours, such as blue, as witnessed in Picasso's 'Blue Period' paintings, seen in particular in figure 10.²⁰ While Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) pointed out that colour was that expressive medium which 'gives concrete shape to sensations and perceptions', Kandinsky, in his 1911 treatise on the spiritual value in art attributed the following meaning to colour: 'Colour is a power which directly influences the soul. Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the band which plays, touching one key or another to cause vibration in the soul.'²¹

Kandinsky's analogy, thus, serves to emphasise the human instinctive reaction to colour. In reviewing the themes of the above discussion on the profound impact of colour, therefore, I consider how the coloured sky can be understood as a source and a primary conveyor of meaning. Effectively, as noted in my sky journal, my qualitative experience of the sky enabled me to step beyond my

¹⁶ Michael Bockemühl, *J.M.W. Turner, 1775–1851: The World of Light and Colour* (Cologne: Taschen, 2007 [1991]), p. 84.

¹⁷ John D. Barrow, *The Artful Universe: The Cosmic Source of Human Creativity* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1995).

¹⁸ Barrow, *The Artful Universe*, p. 122.

¹⁹ Barrow, *The Artful Universe*, p. 4.

²⁰ Barrow, *The Artful Universe*, p. 217.

²¹ Wassily Kandinsky, 'Concerning the Spiritual', in *Art in Theory, 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), p. 89.

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky

expectations of clouds and reflect on the significance of the language of colour. Thus, my viewing the sky as an emotional canvas finds support in literary and artistic oeuvres of Goethe, Cézanne, Kandinsky, Picasso, and Turner, and Barrow's in-depth investigations on nature and science. Altogether, these diverse perceptual encounters with a coloured sky, akin to mine, evidence how engaging with nature awakens a direct resonance within our innate emotions.

Light – assigning meaning

26th July 2015, 10:26 a.m. (fig. 11)

Light all around and above, an embrace of blue. The world comes alive with the intensity of light. Do we realise the gift of sight? I wear my sunglasses. The blinding brightness seems to make me squint, almost smile. Today I decided to travel to Malta's sister island to visit a Gozitan friend.

26th July 2015, 4:39 p.m. (fig. 12)

Having just been on a short boat trip around one of the landmarks of Gozo, what strikes me is the sharp contrast of the bright blue sky against the darkness of the cave through which we reach back into the inland sea.

29th July 2015, 8:03 p.m. (figs. 13, 14)

Another crystal-clear evening. I decide to observe the sky from the pontoon of a yacht marina. I look up and scour the sky; I see nothing that resembles feathers or tufts of curls. I seem to be focusing on what is missing rather than what is. I take a deep breath and take in the sight of the boats and the reflection of squiggle-curved masts floating on the blue of sky and sea.

In her explorative journey on the role of light and sacred landscapes, geographer Barbara A. Weightman (1939–2012) stated that 'the phenomenon of light clarifies sacred space [for] it is expressed and understood in religions and belief systems in innumerable ways.'²² In a parallel fashion, in his book *Being Alive*, Tim Ingold explained that it is through the experience of light that 'the relation between visual perception and the weather' comes alive, creating an opportunity 'to be caught up in the substantial flows and aerial fluxes' which he

²² Barbara A. Weightman, 'Sacred Landscapes and the Phenomenon of Light', *Geographical Review* 86:1 (1996), pp. 59-71.

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky

called ‘the *weather-world*’.²³ Light, therefore, as masterfully expressed in Abbot Suger’s twelfth century Saint-Denis, is that most vital ingredient; as pointed out by Ingold, ‘though we do not see light, we do see *in light*’.²⁴ In his investigation of Space and Light, Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) underscored the significance of the ‘dominant power’ between ‘*day and night, light and darkness*’, a power that resulted in the mythical narrations, such as found in the Bible in the first chapter of Genesis: ‘and God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness’.²⁵ When applying Weightman’s and Ingold’s theoretical models, in my allowing this visual experience to seep into my being, I become aware that my receptive body is the ‘body-subject’ that Maurice Merleau-Ponty speaks of, as cited by David Abram, emphasising the notion of lived experience.²⁶ Just like the body sees and is seen, the body for Merleau-Ponty is an instrument that opens you to the world because ‘after all, the world is all around me, not in front of me’.²⁷ According to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of phenomenology, the viewer and the perceived are not distinct entities but merging ones, such as my own lived experience on the shore, sensing the Whole, engrossed in the horizon and the infinite sky. This aspect of light can thus be braided in with what theologian Rudolph Otto (1869–1937) attributed to the quality of *numen*, meaning ‘divine’, to those places, he argued, that are imbued with a sense of spirit of place that are endowed with *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* [fearful and fascinating mystery], namely how the divine can be

²³ Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 96.

²⁴ Ingold, *Being Alive*, p. 96.

²⁵ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol. 2: Mythical Thought*, trans. Ralph Manheim, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 104; ‘The Book of Genesis’, http://www.vatican.va/archive/bible/genesis/documents/bible_genesis_en.html [accessed August 11, 2015].

²⁶ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (Random House Digital, 1997), p. 46.

²⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 178.

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky

‘reflected in the mind in terms of feeling’.²⁸ In parallel manner, in his letters discussing nature and art Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869) wrote that landscape paintings ‘testify to the inner affinity between man and the world spirit’.²⁹ In like manner, my experience of close affinity with my surroundings allows me to comprehend my body as a medium, forming part of Husserl’s *Lebenswelt*, the constantly unfolding ‘life-world’.³⁰

Sacredscapes and animism – a further discussion

Upon considering the above-discussed themes, the underlying thread that runs through my qualitative research on observing and experiencing the sky within the scapes of the sea and land has provided me with a feeling of enchantment. The word ‘enchantment’ is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as containing ‘a quality that attracts and holds your attention by being interesting, pretty, etc.; a magic spell’.³¹ Indeed, I felt this sense of enchantment, what Lane also called an ‘engagement with life’, when I was drawn to these particular places for my sky journal observations. In their totality, my annotations effectively revealed a feeling of charm and delight, as well as one of unity with nature. Hence, while sensing an interconnectedness with all my surroundings, akin to Husserl’s *Lebenswelt*, it appears that the changes happening in the sky-world granted me the opportunity to feel caught up within what Ingold called ‘that multisensory experience of being out in the open’.³² Within the anthropological discourse such a dynamic interrelationship between the senses and the mind is known as animism.³³ Participating with nature as recounted in

²⁸ Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), pp. 5, 12-14.

²⁹ Carl Gustav Carus, ‘Nine Letters on Landscape Painting’, in *Art in Theory, 1815–1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 103.

³⁰ Husserl, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, p. 119.

³¹ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, ‘Enchantment’, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enchantment> [accessed August 11, 2015].

³² Tim Ingold, ‘Comments on Christopher Tilley: *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*. Oxford: Berg, 2004’, *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 38:2 (2005), p. 122.

³³ Ingold, *Being Alive*, p. 63.

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky

my research is close to what Abram recognised as a ‘bi-directional sensitivity’, namely that ‘not only are we sentient beings observing the sensible “outside” but that we are also sensible beings observed by the sentient world out there’.³⁴ Additionally, as noted in my journal, sitting on the edge of a cliff or rock by the sea creates the possibility of a powerful sensory moment, where standing between earth and sky, facing the sea where the horizon meets the sky, results in the revelation of an emotional and animistic spirit. Hence, it can be argued that if my research sky can be equated to a painting, then it too is a testimony to the inner affinity between man and the world of spirit. As Paul Devereux noted, ‘sacred geography is where the physical world and the “otherworlds” of spirit and mind meet.’³⁵

Sensing the transcendental on the one hand, and the animate on the other, the analyses brought forward in my primary annotations and secondary sources point towards a dialogue with nature, where engaging with the sky yielded an animistic and spiritual experience. Day after day, the cloudless July-sky became a place where a feeling of reverence towards nature occurred, as conveyed in Walt Whitman’s (1819–1892) 1855 poem ‘Song of Myself’.³⁶ In considering all of the above, it is necessary to remember that, as Lane advised, ‘we continually walk through terrain manufactured by the human imagination, dwelling as much in our interpretation of the place as in the place itself’.³⁷ Similarly, while Simon Schama and Barrow cautioned that ‘no mind is a *tabula rasa*’, Terry Eagleton argued that ‘culture is a form of universal subjectivity at work within each of us’, thus linking again with the phenomenological field.³⁸ This research,

³⁴ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 38.

³⁵ Paul Devereux, *Sacred Geography: Deciphering Hidden Codes in the Landscape* (London: GAIA, 2010), p. 6.

³⁶ Walt Whitman, ‘Song of Myself’, <http://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/27> [accessed August 11, 2015].

³⁷ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, p.239

³⁸ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995) p. 61; Barrow, *The Artful Universe*, p. 285; Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), p. 8.

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky

therefore, offers what Yi-Fu Tuan termed ‘an experiential perspective’, namely a qualitative interpretation of my sky-watching.³⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, in bringing together the diverse strands of my sky journal reflections on a clear July sky, I recognise that the boundaries between what I perceive to be the outer world and those that shape me are less solid and more indistinct than I had imagined, thus confirming what Lane called a ‘web of mutual interconnectedness’.⁴⁰ My experience of observing the sky became an exchange of senses and colours which, when weaved together, provided unexpected times where the subject of my research, namely the clouds, not only did not materialise, but also made me aware of the animistic and spiritual nature of the sky-, sea- and landscape. In their totality, these cloudless skies provided me with an unexpected journey into the world of colours and their inherent symbolic meanings, particularly as expressed by some painters in the last two centuries. In my anticipation of clouds, the wide-open expanse of the sky became a path that led me to cultivate a space where a sense of merging took place, a place that is perhaps best described by Lane as a place of ‘transition from “knowing” to “living”’.⁴¹

³⁹ Yi-Fu Tuan, ‘Place: An Experiential Perspective’, *Geographical Review* 65:2 (1975), p. 151.

⁴⁰ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, p. 232

⁴¹ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, p. 236.

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky



Fig. 1. A road in Mdina, the silent city, 18th July 2015.

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky



Fig. 2. Upward sky-watching, 18th July 2015.

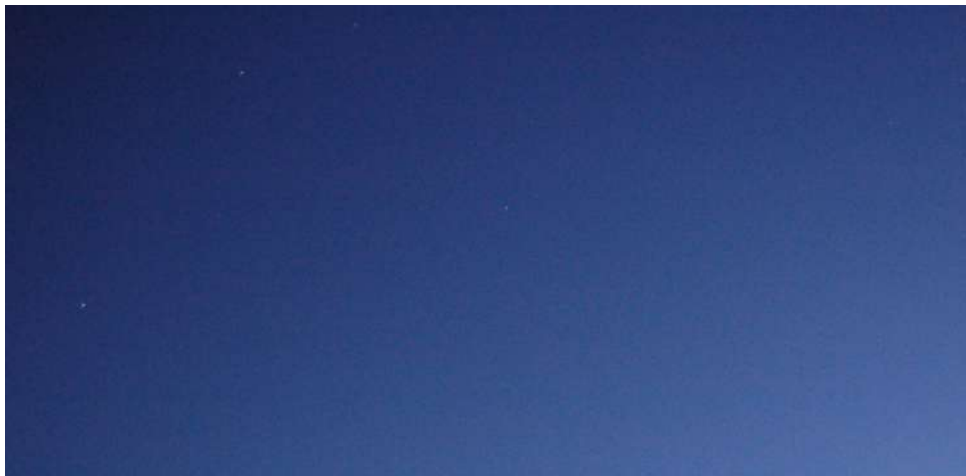


Fig. 3. The cloudless sky, 1st July 2015, 6:27 p.m.



Fig. 4. Georgia O'Keefe, *Pelvis III*, 1944.

Oil on canvas, 121.9 x 101.6cm

Image: The Collection of Calvin Klein.



Fig. 5. The hues of dawn, 8th July 2015, 5:38 a.m.

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky



Fig. 6. J.M.W. Turner, *Rain, Steam, and Speed—The Great Western Railway*, 1844

Oil on canvas, 90.8 x 121.9cm

The National Gallery, London

© http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/trnr/hd_trnr.htm#slideshow4



7

© http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/23/arts/international/paris-exhibition-traces-origins-of-monets-impression-sunrise.html?_r=0

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky

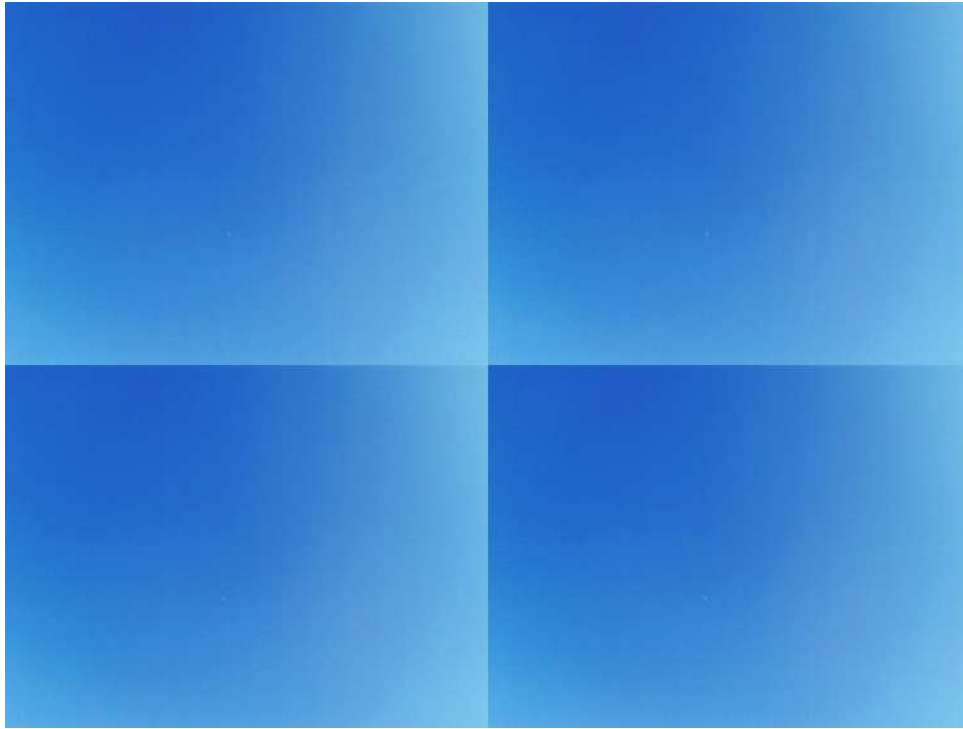


Fig. 8. Experiencing the blue. 15th July 2015, 5:22 p.m.



9Turner, canvas, London

© <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-light-and-colour-goethes-theory-the-morning-after-the-deluge-moses-writing-the-book-n00532>

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky



Fig.10. Pablo Picasso *The Blind Man's Meal*, 1903

Oil on canvas, 95.3 x 94.6 cm

Image: Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

© <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/50.188>



Fig. 11. Bright light at Xlendi Beach, Gozo, 26th July 2015, 10:26 a.m.

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky



Fig. 12. Duality – from darkness into the light. Dwejra inland sea, 26th July 2015, 4:39 p.m.



Fig. 13. Yacht marina blues, 29th July 2015, 7:53 p.m.

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky



Fig. 14. Reflections, 29th July 2015, 7:55 p.m.



Fig. 15. My last sky journal photograph, Valletta, 31st July 2015

A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky

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A phenomenological and sensory experience of the sky

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