Observing Clouds in Toronto, Canada

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Introduction

In Weatherland: Writers and Artists Under English Skies, Alexandra Harris examined how writers and painters engaged with meteorological and climate phenomena in England. In a chapter on clouds, Harris says that for the German landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich, and the English poet John Keats, mist was 'an accurate figuration of all mental life', leading Harris to conclude that 'to think is to walk among clouds'.1

This essay will reflect on Harris' statement within the context of my personal sky journal observations between October 17 and November 17, 2022. Viewing clouds daily between approximately 9:45 a.m. and 10:15 a.m. local time in Toronto, Canada, a combination of paintings, photographs and written descriptions will be used to consider Harris' statement. In contemplating the relationship between thought and clouds, this essay will discuss three themes: the language of cloud observation, the concept of the sky as an 'organ of sentiment', and the extent to which different media can accurately depict the observer's experience.

The Language of Cloud Observation

Harris posited that the 'provisionality' of clouds, lacking a 'single authoritative version', allowed them to serve as creative inspiration for writers and artists.[2] 'Clouds give out the merest hint of shape', wrote Harris, arguing that observers add details to 'fill out' whatever they believe they see.[3] This may be one reason that definitions of the word 'cloud' appear to avoid referring to a specific visual appearance. An 1823

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[1] Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland: Writers and Artists Under English Skies* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016), p. 247.

[2] Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 237.

[3] Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 237.

definition by Thomas Forster considered a cloud to be 'a visible aggregate of minute particles of water suspended in the atmosphere', while a more recent definition by John Durham Peters considered it 'an agglomeration or amassing of materials, whether of stone, water vapor, or data'.[4]

The seeming fluidity of clouds reflects my own observations. Despite expressing anxiety around an 'embarrassing lack of knowledge' of various cloud types (October 21), my entries often communicated what I saw through language, including metaphor and simile. According to my observations, clouds were 'cotton candy swirls' (October 25, fig. 1), a 'sea of cotton balls' (November 6), 'billowy tufts' (October 27), 'celestial wave[s] on which Zeus might "hang ten"' (October 30), and 'bursts of silky, cascading ribbons [...] ascending like jellyfish from the depths of the ocean' (October 28, fig. 2). This language reflects Lorraine Daston's conclusion that 'cloud description is drenched in metaphor'– a metaphor that, she argued, was 'deliberately deadened' when scientific description was first applied to clouds.[5]

[4] Thomas Forster, *Researches about Atmospheric Phaenomena*, 3rd edn (London: Harding, Mavor and Lepard, 1823), p. B.; John Durham Peters, 'Cloud', in *Digital Keywords: A Vocabulary of Information Society and Culture*, ed. by Benjamin Peters (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 55, https://www.jstor.org/ stable/j.ctvct0023.9 [accessed November 8, 2022].

[5] Lorraine Daston, 'Cloud Physiognomy', *Representation* 135 (Summer 2016), p. 50, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26520565 [accessed November 9, 2022].

Fig. 1. Krystyna Cap Sky Journal, 'Cotton Candy Swirls, 314°N' (October 25, 2022)

Oil pastel on paper, 9x5.4cm

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Fig. 2. Krystyna Cap Sky Journal, 'Jellyfish Clouds, 260°W' (October 28, 2022)

Oil pastel on paper, 9x5.4cm

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Evidence for Daston's position may be sought in Luke Howard's seminal text on cloud taxonomy written in 1803. Howard posited that clouds could be categorised according to their 'various forms' or 'modifications' in the atmosphere, thereby introducing a 'methodological nomenclature', which, he hoped, would ensure that cloud viewing would no longer be 'consigned only to the memory of the possessor, in a confused mass of simple aphorisms'.[6]

It is, however, the 'memory of the possessor' and the 'simple aphorisms' that appear to have inspired poetic imagination. For Harris, the intersection between thoughts and clouds was confined to literary and artistic realms where images were 'created from [...] imagination and language'.[7] An entry from my sky journal is worth quoting at length, demonstrating how, in Harris' estimation, the perceiver adds detail according to what they imagine they see, and communicates imagination through language:

> The clouds are extremely slow-moving today – if we can measure speed by rolls and drifts and creeps and crawls, then this, by far, is the most languid crawl the sky has yet to produce. These clouds are also gauzy, but thinner, more transparent, like little shreds of tulle scattered across the atmosphere.
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> In the western corner [of my field of vision] is a different kind of cloud – a complex sea-foamy mass with tendrils emerging, almost like indecisive curlicues, yet very decisive atmospheric agents scooping backwards in the sky. Then, towards the north side, there is an expanse of white, not unlike the product of a thick paint-laden brush being dragged across the sky in one long stroke. (November 9)

While my descriptions lack the 'order' that Howard's typology first introduced, they demonstrate the metaphor that Daston contended scientific language supplanted, and capture the provisionality that Harris argued made clouds 'so fertile a creative

[6] Luke Howard, *Essay on the Modifications of Clouds*, 3rd edn (London: John Churchill & Sons, 1865), pp. 1-2.

[7] Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 239.

source'.[8] These examples also illustrate how the mind fashions images from nature – a question that Harris posed rhetorically when she asked, 'how much is "there" [...] and how much is made by our shape-imposing minds?'[9]

For the untrained observer, it appears that the mind cannot help but perceive shapes and attempt to translate them into descriptive language. Language, however, is only one mode through which an observer might communicate thoughts about and perceptions of clouds. The next section will consider how perception and language can ally with feeling to produce evocative experiences of cloud observation.

Mind, Sky, and Feeling

Harris wrote that the English painter John Constable appeared most concerned with learning 'the mood-language of weather', citing a letter in which he called the sky an 'organ of sentiment'.[10] Although Harris believed that Constable may have '[imagined] the landscape as a living being', she nevertheless ascribed 'sentiments' as belonging to 'the perceiver'.[11] This conclusion may overlook an opportunity to make stronger connections between the observer and the natural world – a world that David Abram has argued is 'an open and dynamic landscape subject to its own moods and metamorphoses'.[12]

Influenced by the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Abram argued that our engagement with the world is not only 'charged with subjective, emotional, and intuitive content', but also commingles and communicates

[8] Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 237.

[9] Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 239.

[10] Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 245.

[11] Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 245.

[12] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More Than Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 29, https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/retreat/files/abram_the_spell_of_the_sensuous_perception.pdf [accessed November 18, 2022].

with natural phenomena.[13] Paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, Abram wrote that when we 'immobilize or objectify the phenomenon', we '[forget] or [repress] our sensuous involvement with it'.[14] However, a 'reciprocal encounter' may be achieved when we view the phenomenon 'as an active, animate entity'.[15]

A 'reciprocal encounter' with the natural world may provide greater context for Constable's remark concerning the sky as 'an organ of sentiment'. In my own observations, feelings were as much a part of my entries as the perceived shape and qualities of the clouds themselves. For example, a stretch of rain brought 'heaviness' and 'disappointment' (October 18), while a particularly dark day allowed for a more 'intimate' encounter with the sky as the clouds felt 'like they [were] enveloping me' (October 19, fig. 3). In the presence of better weather, my sky journal reflects shifts in mood. On a cloudless day, I remarked that 'there is something that feels very lovely, light and untroubled about a blue sky' (October 22), and its 'worry-free' quality makes clear why the phrase 'blue skies ahead' conveys a positive outlook for the future (October 23).

[13] Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous, pp. 30, 43.

[14] Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous, p. 43.

[15] Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous, p. 43.

Fig. 3. Krystyna Cap Sky Journal, 'Monolith, 260˚W' (October 19, 2022)

Oil pastel on paper, 9x5.4cm

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

In lacking a competent meteorological vocabulary, I was able to avoid a certain degree of objectification of clouds that could have repressed my more 'sensuous involvement' with them. The closest I came to appreciating fully their own active animism occurred on November 4, when I contemplated what 'the secret life of clouds' might be like. In all these excerpts, I was emotionally moved by the changing sky, appreciated its agency, and engaged with clouds on a level outside of the more 'deliberately [deadening]' effects of scientific language, as Daston had argued.[16]

Harris identified one instance where Constable, despite achieving considerable meteorological accuracy in cloud painting, allowed 'the expression of mood [to usurp] the precise recording of nature', leading meteorologist John Thornes to remark, 'The sky is wrong … But it is magnificent'.[17] This anecdote underscores an important

[16] Daston, 'Cloud Physiognomy', p. 50.

[17] Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 246.

opportunity to consider what observers can feel when permitted to step beyond objective frameworks. Simultaneously, the depiction of clouds on canvas raises questions that will be discussed in the following section on whether specific media impact the accuracy of cloud images and what is intended by accuracy in an observational context.

Mind, Clouds, and the Medium

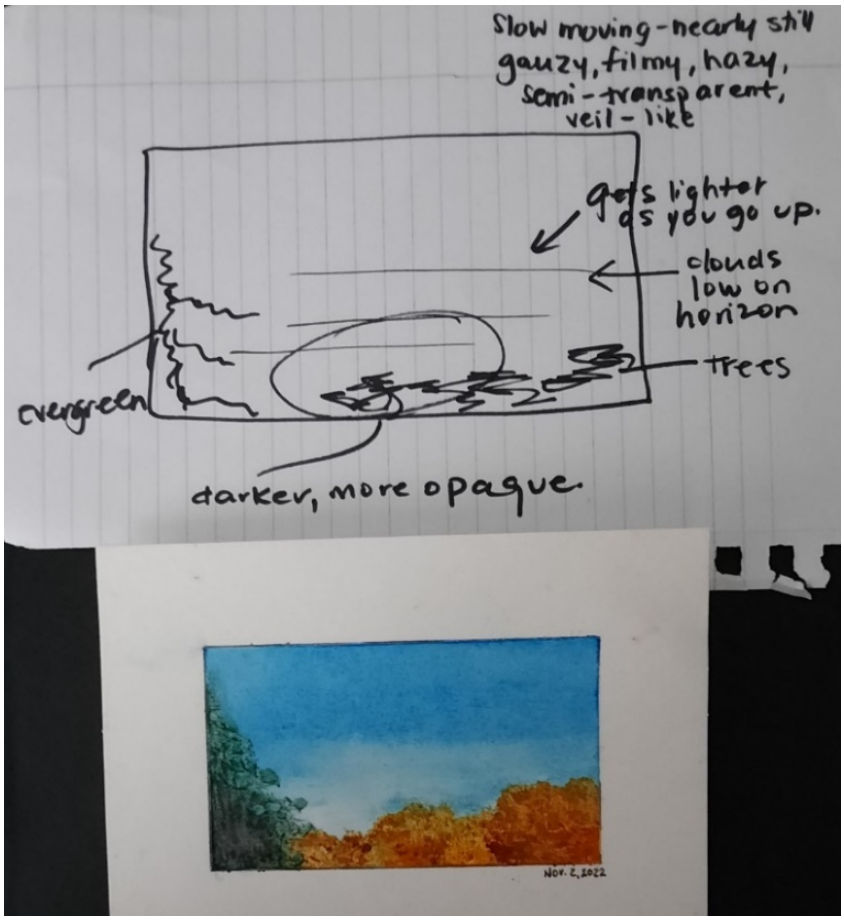
Harris observed that accurate cloud-painting posed certain challenges for artists. 'For one thing, the cloud-model kept moving', she wrote, and for artists like Constable, painting clouds required committing the cloud to memory so that they 'could keep painting after it had changed beyond recognition'.[18] In my own attempts to capture clouds, I encountered similar problems. When clouds were 'creeping at a snail's pace' (October 26), I was able to make crude sketches to produce handmade pictures after the clouds had dissipated (fig. 4); however, when clouds were swift-moving, I took digital photographs to capture what I saw. Upon inspection, the latter often revealed a misalignment between the image as I perceived it and what I had noted during my observations. In an addendum on November 9, I commented, 'This [photograph] is not how I saw it. These clouds appear to be dissipating … but the cluster at the bottom-right was definitely converging' (fig. 5). This raises a question about what is more accurate: a photograph or a handmade picture?

While Harris noted Constable's achievement of a high degree of technical accuracy, Daston has shown that the first scientific atlas of clouds, published in 1896, used photographs as one of its leading contributors 'considered drawings to be "too inexact"' and subject to 'human intervention'.[19] The tension between human intervention and representational accuracy has been taken up by scholars of film and photography. For example, Robert Hopkins has argued that, in contrast to handmade pictures which are subject to the artist's perception, photographs are 'factive': they

[18] Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 243.

[19] Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 243; Daston, 'Cloud Physiognomy', p. 57.

are 'guaranteed to reflect the facts'.[20] By contrast, Jiri Benovsky has suggested that '*no* depiction of the world is ever totally realist', not even visual perception.[21] Benovsky's critique rests on the argument that photographers make various 'necessary decisions' whenever they take a photograph, modifying aperture, shutter speed and focal length to capture their subjects based on their own 'intentions, beliefs, and decisions'.[22]



[20] Robert Hopkins, 'Factive Pictorial Experience: What's Special About Photographs?', *Noûs* 46:4 (December 2012), p. 710, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41682693 [accessed November 18, 2022].

[21] Jiri Benovsky, 'Three Kinds of Realism About Photographs', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 25:4 (2011), p. 376, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jspecphil.25.4.0375 [accessed November 17, 2022].

[22] Benovsky, 'Three Kinds of Realism about Photographs', pp. 383, 388.

(Previous page) Fig. 4. Krystyna Cap Sky Journal, 'Morning Mist, 260°W' pictured with rough sketch (November 2, 2022)

Oil pastel on paper, 9x5.4cm

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Fig. 5. Krystyna Cap Sky Journal, Digital camera phone photograph 260°W (November 9, 2022)

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

While my photographs were taken with a digital camera phone, the device made certain 'necessary decisions' for me, such as autofocusing to compensate for inferior lighting conditions; thus, my photographs may not be factive according to Hopkins' definition, given the 'intervention' of the device's technology. While Hopkins has argued that digital and traditional photographs are equally factive, he has also acknowledged criticism from those contending that digital photographs are 'closer to handmade pictures' as they can be manipulated by the photographer or by the device's technology.[23]

[23] Hopkins, 'Factive Pictorial Experience', pp. 709-10, 722-724.

My own experiences indicate that photographs only appeared accurate under certain conditions, such as when 'the morning sun [was] unobstructed' (November 3). During a patch of fog on November 4, photographs 'failed to distinguish variations in the sky' that I observed with the naked eye. By contrast, while my handmade pictures would not be considered factive according to Hopkins' definition, they nevertheless appeared characteristically accurate of my perceived experience, closely mirroring my thoughts and emotions. This could approach a middle ground that Benovsky proposed: paintings and photographs '*can* communicate to us *some* features' of their subjects, making both 'at least partially realist, to a degree'.[24]

Merleau-Ponty concluded that the aim of landscape painters is 'to recapture the feel of perceptual experience itself'.[25] In my own journal, the feelings associated with perceptual experience seemed almost more important to achieve than technical accuracy. The factivity of the image resided in the extent to which the handmade picture or photograph most closely reflected the totality of my recorded perceptual experience.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to contextualise personal sky journal observations within Harris' statement, 'to think is to walk among clouds'.[26] In doing so, it has considered language, emotion, and the factivity of various media to capture cloud images as extensions of this relationship. This essay has demonstrated that, for the untrained observer, language is often an important avenue for considering clouds, sometimes involving highly descriptive literary devices to communicate what the perceiver imagines they see. In considering the role of feelings, this essay identified an opportunity for going beyond simply 'thinking' about clouds to the potential for a 'reciprocal encounter' with them, in which they are regarded as animate and active, evoking feelings within the observer. Finally, this essay sought to query the extent to

[24] Benovsky, 'Three Kinds of Realism about Photographs', p. 377.

[25] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 54.

[26] Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 247.

which representations of clouds can be accurate reflections of what an observer believes they see, questioning what is intended by 'accuracy' and the kind of accuracy that is sought through photographic and handmade pictorial representations. As Harris wrote, the poet William Wordsworth believed that 'clouds, in the end, could only guide [the] imagination so far'.[27] This essay has attempted to show that it is possible to go beyond imagination, engaging simultaneously with clouds through thought, feeling and critical analysis as part of the totality of the observational experience.

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[27] Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 249.