

Can observing the skies be a source of enchantment?

Tiger-Lily Mileto, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture

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This essay discusses a month-long project in which the sky was treated as a primary source. It focuses primarily on the observation that the project itself changed significantly as the month progressed. Therefore it first describes the originally planned methodology, and then explores the deviations, their reasons, and impacts. To do so, it uses a quote from a letter that Vincent van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo van Gogh in 1888: ‘Be clearly aware of the stars and infinity on high. Then life seems almost enchanted after all.’¹ Specifically, the changes in the project are examined through the themes of ‘clear awareness’, ‘enchantment’, and ‘infinity on high’.

Methodology

The journal process was intended as a reflexive approach, defined by Charlotte Aull Davies as ‘a process of self-reference’.² In this way both the sky and I became the subjects of study, captured in written notes that describe the sky’s appearance and my subjective inner responses. Originally these notes were to be taken during observations of the Moon for a month between the October and November new moons (17 October to 15 November 2020) as it passed due south from my perspective at my home in Shrewsbury, Shropshire. This was chosen because the house from which I conducted the project has a large, south-facing attic window that provided me with a good view and an opportunity for photography using a Canon bridge camera. I hoped it would allow me to witness changing phases, height, timing, and brightness of the Moon, as well as various weather conditions, inviting the possibility of different personal responses. However, the actual process deviated significantly from this intended methodology. While I made the effort to observe the Moon in this way throughout, I also began to record wider observations at other times and places.

¹ Vincent van Gogh and Ronald de Leeuw, *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 392.

² Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*. (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 4.

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It is primarily this change, and the observations in the sky and in myself that led to it and resulted from it, that will be discussed in the remainder of this essay.

'Be clearly aware'

According to historical data collected by Weather Spark, the number of overcast or mostly cloudy days in Shrewsbury ranges from 57% to 71% from the beginning of October to the end of November.³ This is supported by my sky journal, which recorded that, during the 30 days in which I observed the sky, 63% were too cloudy to see the Moon. At first this presented an obstacle to journaling. Entries from an early stretch of three days (19–21 October) demonstrated the frustration this caused, simply reading 'cloudy', 'clouds', and 'clouds again!'. The bluntness of these notes demonstrates that I was concerned with a narrow interpretation of 'clear awareness'. Where the Moon was not visible, further observations were not initially forthcoming. The issue of clouds obscuring celestial bodies has long been a concern in sky observations. In *Epinomis*, commonly attributed to Plato though possibly written by his student Philip of Opus, an unnamed Athenian character stated that Egyptian and Syrian observers were the first to record the planets because their climate allowed them to view the sky 'continually without obstruction of clouds and rains'.⁴ Though this claim may be contestable, it nonetheless demonstrates the perceived importance of unimpeded celestial observation to the Athenian character. In the early entries of my sky journal, that same perception was demonstrated.

³ Weather Spark, Average Weather in October in Shrewsbury (online webpage), <https://weatherspark.com/m/39651/10/Average-Weather-in-October-in-Shrewsbury-United-Kingdom> [accessed 20 November 2020];

Weather Spark, *Average Weather in November in Shrewsbury*, online webpage, <https://weatherspark.com/m/39651/11/Average-Weather-in-November-in-Shrewsbury-United-Kingdom> [accessed 20 November 2020].

⁴ Plato, *Epinomis*, trans. by W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), p. 987a.

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However, as the month progressed, this perception changed. The first sign of this can be seen on 21 October, the third in the aforementioned stretch of cloudy days. After making my frustrated note ‘clouds again!’ at approximately 5:30 p.m., as the Moon passed south as per my original methodology, I returned to the window just after 7:00 p.m. having noticed the effect of sunset. This was the first deviation in methodology. Though I did not make any further observations in my sky journal, I took a photograph (fig. 1). The image depicts the clouds at sunset looking southwest, rather than south, to better capture the colours that were concentrated towards the west, and to get a clearer image as a birch tree obscures part of the southerly sky. In hindsight, these changes were the beginnings of a shift from a perceived importance of ‘clear awareness’ to a greater perceived importance of ‘enchantment’. Therefore the next section will explore definitions of enchantment and its effect on my sky journal project.



Fig. 1. Sunset clouds to the southwest of my home in Shrewsbury, 7:09 p.m. (October 21, 2020)

Photo: Tiger-Lily Mileto

‘Life seems almost enchanted’

Many scholars have written on enchantment, particularly in response to Max Weber’s argument that the modern West is a period of disenchantment. For example, Richard Jenkins argued that while disenchantment is a measurable historical process,

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enchantment nonetheless remains ‘distinctively modern and a response to modernity’.⁵ However, he invited further discussion on a precise definition. In dictionaries, the term enchantment typically combines two aspects: senses of joy and magic – for instance in Merriam-Webster: ‘made to feel delightfully pleased’ and ‘having or seeming to have a magical quality’.⁶ However magic itself is difficult to define and Merriam-Webster is here illustrative in its circularity, indicating it as ‘a feeling of enchantment’.⁷ Indeed, the Van Gogh Museum’s translation has made the original French ‘*enchantée*’ of Van Gogh’s letter into ‘magical’.⁸ Nonetheless, Jenkins argues against this conflation, writing ‘magic and enchantment ... are clearly not the same thing’.⁹ Thus the difficulty of an unassailable definition is demonstrated. However, it also makes clear that a feeling of enchantment is subjective, based on the internal world of the observer. Given this, especially for the purposes of this reflexive essay, the following descriptions most closely reflect my experiences during the journaling process. Firstly, Jenkins’ ‘tentative’ definition reads in part ‘experiences of the world ... in which the quotidian norms and routines of linear time and space are only part of the story’.¹⁰ Secondly, Rita Felski describes enchantment as ‘a sense of being so entirely caught up in an aesthetic object that nothing else seems to matter’.¹¹ As stated, a sense of absorption and therefore a lack of concern for strict temporal and spatial methodology were the primary ways in which I observed enchantment in my own experiences. Therefore, while they may not constitute a firm definition, they are elements that are useful to focus on the remainder of this essay.

⁵ Richard Jenkins, ‘Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium’, *Max Weber Studies*, 1:1 (2000), p. 11.

⁶ ‘enchanted’, *Merriam-Webster.com* (2020), <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enchanted> [accessed 20 November 2020].

⁷ ‘magic’, *Merriam-Webster.com* (2020) <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/magic> [accessed 20 November 2020].

⁸ Vincent van Gogh, *The Letters: The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition*, ed. by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2009), <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let663/letter.html> [accessed 26 November 2020].

⁹ Jenkins, ‘Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment’, p. 29.

¹⁰ Jenkins, ‘Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment’, p. 29.

¹¹ Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), p. 54.

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Figure 1 demonstrates the first time a sense of enchantment encouraged me to broaden my methodology in keeping a sky journal. Though I did not make note of it, I recall being absorbed by a sense of delight, which evidently mattered more than sticking to the original plan. This did not strictly override the earlier assumption about the sky journal that clear awareness was a requirement for enchantment. Instead, it expanded the definition of what clear awareness might be. This is the next theme that will be explored.

‘Infinity on high’

In another letter to Theo, Van Gogh wrote: ‘A single small pink cloud indicates that the sun will come up in a while. A stillness and calm and peace that enchants one.’¹² Clearly his subjective experience of enchantment could come not only from the stars, but also from the clouds. In other words, to Van Gogh, ‘infinity on high’ could have included meteorological as well as celestial aspects. This is also reflected in ancient sky observations. Contrary to *Epinomis*’ Athenian character’s assertion that Assyrians could ‘continually’ witness the sky unclouded, clouds were in fact important aspects of the sky to Assyrian diviners. For example, one diviner wrote: ‘If a cloudbank lies in front of the sun: the king of the world’s reign will be long-lasting.’¹³ Therefore it has not always been necessary to draw a distinction between the atmospheric and the stellar when considering ‘infinity on high’. This was what I was observing when taking the image shown in figure 1.

Once this shift had occurred it began to grow to encompass other aspects of the ‘infinity’ of the sky, causing other changes in methodology. On 22 October, the day after taking the image shown in figure 1, I again deviated from my original plan, this time in two ways. First, I made a note about the Moon in my sky journal at 5:17 p.m., hours before it was due to pass south: ‘Saw the Moon by luck while walking by the river – the clouds cleared for just a moment and it was just high enough over the trees.’ The serendipity provoked excitement, and again the sense of joy mattered more than the linear time or location of the observation. It was, per the description set out above, a moment of enchantment. My intention with the sky journal’s

¹² Vincent van Gogh, *The Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let246/letter.html> [accessed 20 November 2020].

¹³ Wilfred van Soldt, *Solar Omens of Enuma anu Enil: Tablets 23(24)–29(30)* (Leiden: Netherlands Historisch-archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1995), Tablet 29 III, p. 18, cited in Nicholas Campion, *A History of Western Astrology Volume 1: The Ancient World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p. 73.

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photography was to take close images, like figure 2, primarily demonstrating the Moon's phases. However, the second deviation occurred about two-and-a-half hours later, at 7.44 p.m., prompted by the location of Jupiter when I was observing the Moon passing the southerly point as planned (fig. 3). As with the several previous examples, this spontaneous decision came from a moment of enchantment at the unexpected configuration of celestial bodies, even though planets had not factored into my original methodology. These two deviations show a broadening of both temporal and logistical approach, a wider appreciation of 'infinity on high' caused by moments of enchantment. This continued throughout the journal process.

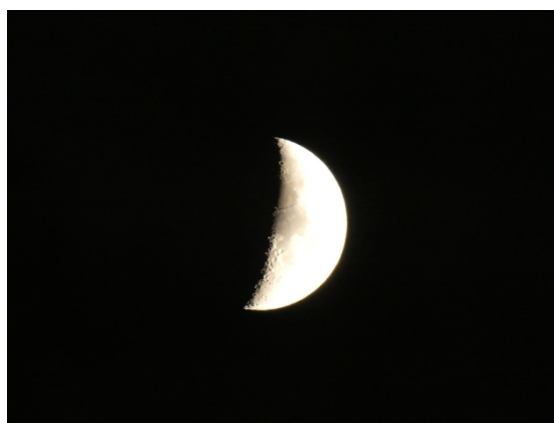


Fig. 2. Close capture of the Moon, 7.44 p.m. (October 22, 2020)
Photo: Tiger-Lily Mileto



Fig. 3. Moon, Jupiter conjunction looking south from my home in Shrewsbury, 7:44 p.m.
(October 22, 2020)
Photo: Tiger-Lily Mileto

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The Starry Night

As my awareness expanded, I observed clouds more closely – for example, ‘flat darkness’ at the Full Moon on 31 October, versus ‘ragged and moonlit cloud’ on 2 November. However, the descriptions were mainly only descriptive, or mentioned negative emotions. ‘Disappointing’ I wrote on Halloween. I therefore observed that, when it came to my own experience, enchantment required something out of the ordinary. Clouds were the norm and so did not contain the necessary element, unless accompanied by an additional surprise, as in the example of the sunset colours on 21 October.

This observation, however, combined with the daily routine of the sky journal, highlighted the inherent extraordinariness of clear skies and the potential for enchantment in them. ‘Weather forecast is poor from here’ I wrote on 6 November, indicating the judgement with which I still considered overcast days non-ideal. ‘Given that this may be the last day of observation, I plan to make the most of it.’ As with earlier mentions of the necessity of hindsight, the personal shift of my relationship to the sky into something to ‘make the most’ of experiencing was difficult to express at the time. However, it can be demonstrated through the three themes used throughout this essay. For ‘clear awareness’ and for the chance to observe a range of sky phenomena under the concept of ‘infinity on high’, I drove several miles from my home to Nesscliffe Hills, known locally for excellent sunset views, and then some 30 miles further south to the Shropshire Hills, a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Dark Sky Discovery Site from where I could witness the stars along with Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, and moonrise.¹⁴ It also meant adding a personal touch for maximum ‘enchantment’. While there are many suitable sites in the Shropshire Hills area, I chose to visit Mitchell’s Fold, a Bronze Age stone circle that offered no practical advantage but that I find personally significant. This was clearly a complete break with my planned methodology, but in the sky journal entry I recorded events with enchantment-like descriptors such as ‘breathtaking’ and ‘awe-inspiring’. I wrote that ‘I would not say that I got any “good” pictures’ (referring to objective quality), ‘but I did get some joyful ones’, emphasising the personal subjectivity of enchantment. In sum, it was the time at which Van Gogh’s statement most closely matched my observations of myself while carrying out the sky journal project. In this way, the

¹⁴ Dark Sky Discovery (2020), <https://www.darkskydiscovery.org.uk/dark-sky-discovery-sites/map.html> [accessed 20 November 2020].

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statement provided a framework for understanding and discussing the otherwise nebulous personal shift visible in the changing methodology.

Conclusion

This essay discussed how my perception of the words of Van Gogh made sense of a month-long project of sky- and self-observation. A narrow methodology that required a cloudless view for ‘clear awareness’ gave way to a wider observation of ‘infinity on high’ due to moments of spontaneous and, later, planned ‘enchantment’. This shift was an expression of a reflexively observed changing personal relationship to the sky.

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