

The relationship between clouds and mind

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Introduction

This essay is based on a sky journal I kept when I observed clouds in a day sky from the 1st to the 10th of November 2021, placing my observations within the context of Alexandra Harris' statement: 'To think is to walk among clouds.'¹ According to Christopher Tilley, phenomenological research such as sky journaling is a valuable tool to better our understanding of the world and our connection to it.² Phenomenology aims to analyse one's own conscious experience as viewed from a first-person perspective, and this was the approach I utilised for this research.³ This essay will explore the relationship between cloud and mind by first analysing the connection between clouds, thought and imagination, and secondly, reflecting on the emotional influence that clouds have on mood and thought patterns. I will be drawing from my own sky observations throughout, reflecting on how my personal experiences shaped my understanding of how the process of thought was comparable to 'walking among clouds'.⁴

Clouds, Thought and Imagination

Harris observed that the ever-changing nature of the weather has made it a significant means for humanity to discover the most incorporeal and dynamic parts of ourselves – our thoughts and feelings.⁵ The symbolic relationship between the human mind and clouds is so deeply ingrained as to go unnoticed; for example, it is

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

² Christopher Y. Tilley, *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology 1* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), p. 2.

³ David Woodruff Smith, 'Consciousness with Reflexive Content', in *Phenomenology and Philosophy of Mind*, ed. by David Woodruff Smith and Amie L. Thomasson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 95.

⁴ Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 247.

⁵ Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 13.

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not surprising to have one's 'head in the clouds' or 'a cloud hanging over one's head'. As Harris pointed out, even in cartoons and comic books, thought bubbles take on the shape of clouds.⁶ This connection between mind and cloud has seemingly persevered for millennia.⁷ In a branch of early Christian mythology, Adam's 'unstable mind' was said to have been made with 'a pound of cloud', alluding to the innate mutability of both cloud and thought.⁸ A similar association can also be seen in the play *Clouds* by the Classical dramatist Aristophanes of Athens (c. 446–385 BCE), as C.W. Marshall observed, during which the clouds change form at will to reflect the inner nature of whoever was looking at them.⁹ The clouds in this particular narrative are deities in themselves and are considered the source of inspiration for philosophers and poets alike.¹⁰ For renowned playwright William Shakespeare (c. 1564–1616), this relationship between clouds and mind became a way of conveying the creative power of poetic-artistic imagination.¹¹ In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare has Antony reflect on the protean nature of clouds, stating that 'Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish, A vapour sometime like a bear or lion'.¹² Meanwhile in *Hamlet*, Hamlet too points out shapes of animals in the clouds: 'Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?... Methinks it is like a weasel ... Or like a whale.'¹³ Scholars such as Harold Clarke Goddard, Roger J. Trienens, David R. Cheney, and Rhodri Lewis have interpreted the symbolism in Shakespeare's clouds

⁶ Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 13.

⁷ Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 239.

⁸ James Cross and Thomas Hill, *The Prose Solomon and Saturn and Adrian and Ritheus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), pp. 67-68.

⁹ C.W. Marshall, 'Aristophanes', in *Aristophanes: Frogs*, ed. by C.W. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), p. 9; Aristophanes, *Clouds. Wasps. Peace.*, ed. and trans. by Jeffrey Henderson. Loeb Classical Library 488 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 56-59.

¹⁰ Aristophanes, *Clouds*, pp. 50-51; Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 17-18, 21.

¹¹ Anthony Holden, *William Shakespeare: His Life and Work* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1999), pp. 8, 320; Rhodri Lewis, 'Shakespeare's Clouds and the Image Made by Chance', *Essays in Criticism*, 62:1 (2012), p. 1.

¹² William Shakespeare, Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, *The Complete Oxford Shakespeare: Histories, Comedies, Tragedies*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), III, p. 1366 (Act 4, Scene 15, 2-11).

¹³ Shakespeare, Wells and Taylor, *Complete Oxford Shakespeare*, III, p. 1144 (Act 3, Scene 2, 364-370).

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in different ways, showing that even metaphorical clouds are imbued with subjective meaning and symbolic power in the imagination and thoughts of the perceiver.¹⁴ This theme of seeing animals and other earthly objects in cloud formations – a phenomenon often referred to as pareidolia – was something I personally experienced during the process of keeping my sky journal.

Pareidolia is the experience of seeing patterns and shapes, such as animals, faces, and objects, when viewing certain textures, backgrounds, and other stimuli.¹⁵ During my sky observations, I experienced this phenomenon first-hand when, on multiple occasions, I noted seeing ‘life reflected in the clouds’.¹⁶ Some recurring themes were animals, including a seahorse (fig. 1), a lemur (fig. 2), a vulture (fig. 3), and a peacock (fig. 4). The cloudscape often morphed and shifted more than I could keep up with, but I consciously tried to stay present in the moment and morph my thoughts in harmony with the sky. I also noted the variance of apparent cloud textures, likening some to rippling sand dunes (fig. 5), cotton (fig. 6) and ice sheets (fig. 7).¹⁷ In my accounts on these particular ‘textural’ clouds, I often stated my imaginings of what they would feel like to touch, wishing I could ‘feel the soft plushness’ of the cotton clouds or the ‘course, graininess’ of the sweeping sandy clouds.¹⁸ To witness the clouds in the daytime sky and to allow myself to be fully immersed in the experience, provided me with a profound sense of childlike wonder. I was reminded of times in my childhood when I would sit in my garden and try to make out different shapes and animals in the clouds, creating stories for myself to help pass the time. Just as Charlotte Aull Davies had observed, keeping a sky journal allowed me to recognise and reflect on my own past experiences and enter an authentic dialogue with the

¹⁴ Harold Clarke Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 357; Roger J. Trienens, ‘The Symbolic Cloud in Hamlet’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 5:2 (1954), pp. 211-212; David R. Cheney, ‘The Meaning of the Cloud in Hamlet’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 10:3 (1959), p. 447; Lewis, ‘Shakespeare’s Clouds’, p. 8.

¹⁵ Lorenzo Diana et al., ‘A Divergent Approach to Pareidolias—Exploring Creativity in a Novel Way’, *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 15:2 (2021), p. 314.

¹⁶ Holly McNiven, Sky Journal (entry: November 2, 2021, 12:00 p.m.).

¹⁷ McNiven, Sky Journal (entries: November 5, 2021, 12:00–2:00 p.m.; November 7, 2021, 2:00 p.m.; November 8, 2021, 12:00 p.m.).

¹⁸ McNiven, Sky Journal (entries: November 5, 2021, 2:00 p.m.; November 7, 2021, 2:00 p.m.; November 8, 2021, 12:00 p.m.).

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sky.¹⁹ This nostalgic fondness for clouds had an influence on my thinking and perception during my research. During the process of cloud gazing, I often found myself losing track of time and daydreaming as I did in my youth, letting my mind and my thoughts, as Alexandra Harris asserted, ‘walk among clouds’.²⁰ As Gavin Pretor-Pinney, author and founder of the Cloud Appreciation Society, recounted at the end of his 2013 TED Talk, this presence of mind and imagination inherent to cloud watching is ‘good for the way you feel ... your ideas ... your creativity. It’s good for your soul’.²¹ In this sense, the variability of clouds is seen to be not only intrinsically linked to the fluctuating nature of thought and imagination, but also to the fluidity of mood and feeling.



Fig. 1. *Left:* Cloud observation from my back garden, 12:55 p.m. (November 2, 2021)
Carlton, Nottingham, UK
Right: My drawing of what I saw in the cloud shape: Seahorse
Photo and Artwork: Holly McNiven

¹⁹ Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography a Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 4, 7.

²⁰ Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 247.

²¹ Gavin Pretor-Pinney, *Cloudy with a chance of joy* [video] (2013), https://www.ted.com/talks/gavin_pretor_pinney_cloudy_with_a_chance_of_joy/transcript [accessed November 23, 2021].

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Fig. 2. *Left:* Cloud observation taken from the high street, 1:51 p.m. (November 4, 2021)
West Bridgford, Nottingham, UK
Right: My drawing of what I saw in the cloud shape: Lemur
Photo and Artwork: Holly McNiven



Fig. 3. *Left:* Cloud observation from my back garden, 12:33 p.m. (November 7, 2021)
Carlton, Nottingham, UK
Right: My drawing of what I saw in the cloud shape: Vulture
Photo and Artwork: Holly McNiven

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Fig. 1. *Left:* Cloud observation from my back garden, 12:32 p.m. (November 7, 2021)

Carlton, Nottingham, UK

Right: My drawing of what I saw in the cloud shape: Peacock

Photo and Artwork: Holly McNiven



Fig. 5. Cloud observation from my back garden: 'Rippling sand dunes', 2:19 p.m.

(November 5, 2021)

Carlton, Nottingham, UK

Photo: Holly McNiven

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Fig. 6. Cloud observation from my back garden: ‘Cotton’, 12:39 p.m. (November 5, 2021)
Carlton, Nottingham, UK; Photo: Holly McNiven



Fig. 7. Cloud observation from my back garden: ‘Ice sheets’, 12:39 p.m. (November 5, 2021)
Carlton, Nottingham, UK; Photo: Holly McNiven

Clouds, Mood and Feelings

Harris introduced the idea that, just as our thoughts are influenced by the kind of weather we are in, so too are our moods and feelings.²² The sky is experienced, belonging to a phenomenal order of reality that transcends the physical.²³ As British anthropologist Tim Ingold remarked, “Though no less real than the physical world,

²² Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 14.

²³ Tim Ingold, ‘Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather’, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13.S1 (2007), S25.

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the environment is not a reality of objects or bodies in space but reality for the beings that make a living there.’²⁴ Through this sentiment, as Christopher Tilley has asserted, human beings are seen to be interconnected with the surrounding world; as we are part of it, it is part of us.²⁵ By engaging in the phenomenological fieldwork of sky journaling, I was able to experience for myself this interconnection with the environment and allow my mind and my senses to be open to the world around me. As I wrote at midday on 8th November: ‘The sky is mostly clear, and I have a sense that the blue above goes on indefinitely. A cold breeze passes through me, yet my elation is not dampened. I feel I could fly up there and touch the blue somehow.’²⁶ As my imagination took me flying ever upward into the blue, this positive experience with the sky directly evoked an emotional response in me and uplifted my mood. As Ingold wrote, ‘in opening our eyes and ears to the sky, vision and hearing effectively become one. And they merge with feeling, too, as we bare ourselves to the wind.’²⁷ This ‘feeling’ for me was not only a physical reaction to the cool wind or the warm rays of the sun, but also an emotional reaction to the sky.²⁸ Sensory perception is experienced in totality alongside one’s thoughts and feelings, and I found during my observations that I could never *fully* recount the complex interaction I was experiencing with the clouds in the moment.²⁹ It was difficult to describe on paper, yet refreshingly simple to experience. That being said, not all of my encounters with the sky were positive ones, and in some notable cases I was left feeling frustrated and, to use my own words, ‘smothered’ by the clouds.³⁰

This frustration at the obscuring quality of certain clouds and mist is an experience shared by Romantic poet John Keats (1795–1821), who in 1818 ascended Ben Nevis

²⁴ Ingold, ‘Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather’, S25.

²⁵ Tilley, *The Materiality of Stone*, p. 2.

²⁶ McNiven, Sky Journal (entry: November 8, 2021, 12:00 p.m.).

²⁷ Tim Ingold, ‘Reach for the Stars! Light, Vision and the Atmosphere’, in *The Imagined Sky: Cultural Perspectives*, ed. by Darrelyn Gunzburg (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2016), p. 231.

²⁸ Tim Ingold, ‘The Eye of the Storm: Visual Perception and the Weather’, *Visual Studies*, 20:2 (2005), p. 103.

²⁹ Tilley, *Materiality of Stone*, p. 15.

³⁰ McNiven, Sky Journal (entries: November 1, 2021, 12:00 p.m.; November 8, 2021, 2:00 p.m.; November 9, 2021, 12:00–4:00 p.m.; November 10, 2021, 2:00 p.m.).

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only to have his view obstructed by mist.³¹ He remarked, ‘that all my eye doth meet /Is mist and crag, not only on this height, /But in the world of thought and mental might!’.³² As Harris examined, Keats likened the obscuration of cloud and mist as a symbol of the occluded mind itself.³³ The German painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) also made this symbolic connection between mind and cloud, stating that when our view of the sky is ‘narrowed down, constrained, and obscured by clouds ... the mind is proportionately constrained and oppressed’.³⁴ This idea of oppression of mind caused by an overcast sky was something I also experienced during my observations. As I noted in my sky journal in the afternoon of 8th November, ‘I feel trapped under the grey. I no longer feel I can fly up into the infinite blue. Now there is a ceiling.’³⁵ Ingold proposed that, because people normally write and think indoors, the world described in writing is often imaginatively reconstructed as if one was already within an interior environment.³⁶ This certainly seems to be the case in this particular entry, where I likened the experience of being under stratus clouds to having a physical ceiling over my head. On the following day, 9th November, the overcast sky persisted (fig. 8), and I noted feeling ‘caged by the mass of it’ and ‘trapped under the grey’.³⁷ During these overcast periods, my mood and my thoughts turned overwhelmingly negative, reflecting the dreariness of the clouds.³⁸ It was as if

³¹ Sidney Colvin, *Life of John Keats: His Life and Poetry, His Friends, Critics and After-Fame* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1917), pp. 3, 293-294, 519.

³² John Keats and John Barnard, *John Keats, the Complete Poems* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 270.

³³ Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 246.

³⁴ Matthias Alfeld, Kristina Mösl and Ina Reiche, ‘Sunset and moonshine: Variable blue and yellow pigments used by Caspar David Friedrich in different creative periods revealed by in situ XRF imaging’, *X-Ray Spectrometry*, 50:4 (2021), p. 342; Oskar Bätschmann, ‘Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869): Physician, Naturalist, Painter, and Theoretician of Landscape Painting’, in *Nine Letters on Landscape Painting: Written in the Years 1815–1824; with a Letter from Goethe by Way of Introduction*, trans. by David Britt (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2002), p. 36.

³⁵ McNiven, Sky Journal (entry: November 8, 2021, 2:00 p.m.).

³⁶ Ingold, ‘Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather’, S32.

³⁷ McNiven, Sky Journal (entry: November 9, 2021, 12:00–4:00 p.m.).

³⁸ McNiven, Sky Journal (entries: November 1, 2021, 12:00 p.m.; November 8, 2021, 2:00 p.m.; November 9, 2021, 12:00–4:00 p.m.; November 10, 2021, 2:00 p.m.).

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the sky was trying to shut me out, letting me know it too was in no mood to play. However, as seen previously, in those moments when the sky was clearer and not obscured, my interaction with the sky was richer and more open.³⁹ Friedrich described this feeling of upliftment from a break in the clouds as the ‘infinite’ prevailing over the ‘finite’, as if the clear sky went on forever and the ever-changing clouds were as fickle and shifting as one’s own day-to-day thoughts and feelings.⁴⁰ This seemingly inherent connection between weather and mood as explored by Harris was something I observed in myself in my sky journal, and through this active phenomenological process I gained a profound realisation of my own place in nature and the outside world.



Fig. 8. Cloud observation from my back garden, 12:02 p.m. (November 9, 2021)
Carlton, Nottingham, UK
Photo: Holly McNiven

Conclusion

This essay has examined the relationship between cloud and psyche through the medium of a sky journal, which I kept for a 10-day period in November 2021, first analysing the phenomenological data in the context of the symbolic connection

³⁹ McNiven, *Sky Journal* (entries: November 2, 2021, 12:00–4:00 p.m.; November 3, 2021, 2:00 p.m.; November 4, 2021, 2:00 p.m.; November 5, 2021, 12:00–2:00 p.m.; November 7, 2021, 12:00–2:00 p.m.; November 8, 2021, 12:00 p.m.).

⁴⁰ Bättschmann, ‘Carl Gustav Carus’, p. 36.

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between cloud, thought, and imagination, and secondly reflecting on the emotional influence that clouds have on mood and feeling. These themes were explored within the context of Harris' statement: 'To think is to walk among clouds.' Having observed the clouds for my sky journal, I would like to make a slight amendment to Harris' words and assert that 'To think and to feel is to walk among clouds.' The acts of thinking and feeling are ever-changing and often intrinsically linked to our experience with the weather and the sky we are under. From the overwhelming feeling of being 'smothered' by the bleakness of an overcast sky, to the childlike joy caused by seeing pareidolic images of animals and shapes in the clouds, I have personally found that the sky and clouds have a profound impact on one's mind. The symbolic connection between cloud and mind has been considered for millennia, from Classical writers like Aristophanes to Romantics such as Keats and Friedrich. Shakespeare used this symbolic relationship as a means of illustrating the limitless creative power of poetic-artistic imagination. The human mind is like a theatre; entire worlds can be created and destroyed in a single thought, just as the sky is a perpetual canvas of endless possibilities. Clouds have an uncanny ability to capture our imagination and sway our moods, having one's 'head in the clouds' one moment to being on 'cloud nine' the next. In this sense, the variable nature of clouds can in themselves be seen as reflections of our own inner environment, where thoughts and feelings change at whim like clouds in a day sky.

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