

Sunsets: transformation of landscape, mind, and perception

Chad Woodward, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture

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Introduction

This essay is an analysis of a sky journal that I kept and utilised for fieldwork from 21 October to 17 November 2022. Between these dates, I observed the sky just before, during, and shortly after sunset from an apartment in Vista, California, a city north of San Diego. The viewing location is located approximately eight miles eastward from the Pacific Coast. Due to schedule constraints, sunset observations were not observed over the ocean, but rather from a high hill that overlooks a small urbanised valley in the city. The slight elevation relative to the urban landscape below allowed for an expansive view, both eastward and westward. While the observations began indoors, through a large window facing northeast, the methodology shifted to outdoor observations from a balcony to be able to draw comparisons between eastward and westward directions. This essay will analyse the data collected from the sky journal within the context of a quote from Alexandra Harris in *Weatherland: Writers and Artists Under English Skies*, which states that ‘to think is to walk among clouds’.¹ This essay will explore this quote within the relational context of thought, perception, and emotion. Three themes emerged from the fieldwork. The first is the stages of the distributed and refracted light of the sunset and how this relates to the visual transformation of the landscape. Further, the theme of transformation will be explored in its relation to the dramatic correlative change in landscape and mind. Lastly, the ‘ominous beauty’ conferred on the landscape by the setting sun will be discussed.

The sunset observations initially began looking eastward with the intention of observing the diversity of visual effects the sunset had in the opposite direction to the setting sun. The initial eastward view allowed for a clear view of an adjacent hillside, the urban landscape below, and its transformation during sunset (fig. 1). Dramatic shifts of light were observable from this vantage point as the sunset led to the casting

¹ Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland: Writers and Artists Under English Skies* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2019), p. 247.

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of shadows and a gradual yet rapid darkening of the landscape. This darkened landscape contrasted with the occasional vibrant colours refracted on distant clouds when present – brilliant neon pinks, oranges, deep purples, blues, and sometimes red were observed (fig. 2). The colours appeared and gradually dissipated within the span of approximately ten to fifteen minutes during most observations. On several occasions, I noted in my sky journal how quickly the landscape shifted from a golden/orange colour with the sun reflected in the windows of distant houses (fig. 3) to a landscape ‘suddenly alive with lights and vibrant, illuminated motion’. This described the way in which the landscape infused with a golden light became submerged in darkness, revealing another landscape entirely: the night-time urban landscape dotted with an array of streetlights, illuminated windows, and quickly moving vehicle headlights beaming through dark shadows (fig. 4). The initial stage of sunset illumination I referred to in my sky journal was the ‘golden moment’ – one that quickly gave way to a gradual darkening and bright colours refracted on distant clouds or haze. From here, the brief window of vibrant, colourful displays was overcome by a gradual darkening of the landscape which I noted in my sky journal as ‘silhouetted hills against a dark blue sky’. These transformative changes of landscape were reminiscent of Harris’ discussion of English poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850) and his sister and author Dorothy Wordsworth (1771–1855). In discussing observations they documented from their frequent walks together, Harris stated that ‘what mattered to them were very specific moments of transformation – when the sun suddenly strikes through a cloud, for example, or when a figure is glimpsed through fog’.² Harris added, ‘... sometimes they will congratulate each other on noticing a small incident – a flower lit up or the blurring of rain on a distant hill. In each case they respond to weather as an agent of revelation.’³

Similarly, it was these ‘moments of transformation’ noted in my sky journal that struck my attention most notably, such as ‘the moon hovering above the most beautiful orangish haze’ (figs 5, 6), the ‘sudden explosion of an intensely pink sky’, or ‘the sudden vividness of greens and purplish hills’. I was compelled to fixate most intensely on these sometimes-abrupt transitory happenings and contemplate their beauty, interest, or evocation of feeling. The ambience imbued into the landscape by

² Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 234.

³ Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 234.

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the setting sun was one of a shifting and ephemeral reality that was beautiful, mundane, and sometimes haunting.



Fig. 1. View facing eastward of the hillside with urban landscape below.
Photo: Chad Woodward



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(Previous page) Fig. 2. Facing northeast: Pink tinted clouds with purple shadows; the golden light of the fading sun reflecting in distant windows.

Photo: Chad Woodward



Fig. 3. Facing eastward: An example of the ‘golden moment’ just before sunset with a reflection of the setting sun in a house window on the hillside.

Photo: Chad Woodward

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Fig. 4. Facing north: The gradual illumination of the night-time urban landscape beneath neon pink clouds.

Photo: Chad Woodward



Fig. 5. Facing east: The nearly full moon rising above a layer of haze.

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Photo: Chad Woodward



Fig. 6. Facing east: The appearance of orange haze; the rising, nearly full moon above.

Photo: Chad Woodward

In observing the various sunsets and contemplating Harris' quote, a shift in thought, perception, and feeling occurred during these transformative sunset moments, particularly in response to the way in which the landscape visually and contextually changed. It is known that the setting sun leads to biological and behavioural changes in living organisms. For example, all vertebrates utilise the hormone melatonin, which is secreted by the pineal gland in response to decreasing light in the environment.⁴ This secretion, also involved in circadian regulation, and thus sleep, causes changes in wakefulness and attention. It has even been observed that certain fish species living under ice and snow, disconnected from the full influence of daily light modulations, move closer to the surface during sunrise and sunset regardless of

⁴ Rüdiger Hardeland, S.R. Pandi-Perumal, and Daniel P. Cardinali, 'Melatonin', *The International Journal of Biochemistry & Cell Biology* 38:3 (2006), p. 313.

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season.⁵ This indicates an evolutionarily ingrained biological rhythm attuned to the rising and setting sun. It is easily observed that certain flowers enclose their petals alongside the setting sun to conserve energy when photosynthesis is no longer required. These certain facts of the natural world weighed heavily during my observations; the way in which a message was being transmitted via the dissipation of sunlight, moving through the landscape in synchronicity with the shifting interplay of light and shadow. In my sky journal observations, clouds were transformed from ‘diaphanous and peaceful’ to ‘darker and more ominous’. The sky at the beginning of one observation felt ‘light and expansive’ and then suddenly ‘deep and placid’. Clouds could feel soft, light, or ‘heavier and weighty’. The visual transformation of the landscape also led to perceptual and emotional shifts. I noted on a few occasions ‘feeling suddenly drowsy and heavier’, or shifting from a feeling of optimism to one of feeling slightly withdrawn and ‘less engaged with the environment’.

This transformation of thought, perception, and feeling in response to the environment connected for me with the work of English writer and polymath John Ruskin (1819–1900), who is noted for his numerous documented observations of nature. John D. Rosenberg suggested that Ruskin was afflicted with a heightened sensitivity to stimuli, which Rosenberg labelled as hyperesthesia, and demonstrated this through several of Ruskin’s diary entries drawing relationships between certain weather phenomena and his mental condition.⁶ According to Rosenberg, ‘Even in early life Ruskin had reacted with exceptional sensitivity to variations in atmosphere, temperature, light, wind, and cloud. Indeed, if one were to plot a graph of his mental state, the curve would almost constantly parallel the weather of the moment.’⁷

Additionally, as Harris explains, Ruskin ‘thought there was something beyond measurement in the weather’, adding that ‘he could record the strength of the wind, but there was no gauge for recording its mood’.⁸ The subjective impression evoked or perceived in certain natural phenomena was, for Ruskin, beyond any physical means

⁵ Juha Jurvelius and Timo J. Marjomaki, ‘Night, Day, Sunrise, Sunset: Do Fish Under Snow and Ice Recognize the Difference’, *Freshwater Biology* 53:11 (2008), p. 2287.

⁶ John D. Rosenberg, *The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 214.

⁷ Rosenberg, *The Darkening Glass*, pp. 214-215.

⁸ Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 321.

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of examination. According to Harris, Ruskin valued his ‘emotional viewing beyond objective physical analysis’.⁹ Science was incapable of perceiving as accurately the emotional lens through which Ruskin perceived the world. In reflecting on Ruskin and my sky journal observations, I found myself attempting to peer into the deeper nature, quality, or archetype of sunset while constrained by the modern world and its worldview. Immersed, for example, in an urban landscape interspersed with a highly manicured ‘nature’, with numerous non-native tree species, it was difficult feeling the full wildness of the natural world until a dramatic moment, such as sunset, asserted itself over the landscape. While the physics of a sunset could be clearly articulated today, the feeling of a sunset is something experienced on a subtle level. In reflecting on these dramatic landscape transformations, it was impossible not to feel these changes internally as a response to the removal of light, the emergence of shadow, and the rapidly shifting colours.

In summarising the array of moods, feelings, thoughts, and reactions to the setting sun, particularly during outdoor observations in the second half of my research, I was struck by the interplay between the beauty of the unfolding moment and a sense of ominousness or anxiety that occasionally accompanied those experiences (fig. 7). The beauty was most notable in skies interspersed with intense neon pink clouds (figs 8, 9, 10), or during clearer days looking westward, when a shifting gradient of colours followed the setting sun – deep red, orange, pink, and yellow, sometimes contrasted against a blue-green to deep blue layer of sky. In looking westward, what I described as a ‘warm glow’ on the horizon would foreshadow the peak intensity of colours before a gradual fading with the sun. As the sun descended deeper below the horizon, bright oranges and reds could be discerned behind silhouetted trees and houses, something I perceived and felt as hauntingly beautiful, representing an ambivalent edge between one reality and the next (fig. 7). Yet there was also an accompanying restlessness during many of my observations, a mild anxiety to retreat and take shelter as darkness encroached. These moments of anxiousness reminded me of Norwegian painter Edvard Munch’s (1863–1944) most iconic work, *The Scream* (fig. 11). The painting depicts an abstracted, ghostlike figure standing on a bridge with hands embracing its face, mouth wide open, against a vibrantly coloured, undulating sunset. Munch painted four versions between 1893 and 1910 and wrote various

⁹ Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 322.

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narratives to accompany his works.¹⁰ In one version of the narrative, an undated English translation, it reads:

I was walking along
the road with two
friends – when the sun
went down
The Sky suddenly
turned blood-red
I paused, leaned
against the fence tired
to death – above the
blue-black fjord and city
blood in flaming tongues hovered
My friends walked
on and I stayed
behind quaking
with angst –
and I felt as though a
vast endless
scream passed through
nature¹¹

¹⁰ Fred Prata, Alan Robock, and Richard Hamblyn, 'The Sky in Edvard Munch's *The Scream*', *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society* 99:7 (2018), p. 1379.

¹¹ Edvard Munch's Writings: The English Edition, 'MM T 2367. Literary sketch. *The Scream*', Munch Museum digital archives, https://www.emunch.no/TRANS_HYBRIDMM_T2367.xhtml [accessed 25 November 2022].

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Munch describes an experience of sunset while walking on a bridge over the Oslo fjord in which the sunset evoked the sound of a scream that precipitated an internal disturbance within himself. Authors Fred Prata, Alan Robock and Richard Hamblyn suggest that, while there is a common misconception that the figure itself is screaming, ‘it is clear from Munch’s narrative that it is the sky that is screaming, and the figure is covering his or her ears in a futile attempt to smother the sound’.¹² In other translated versions, Munch suggests that he thought the scream was audible and describes the colours themselves as screaming.¹³ Munch’s experience of the blood-red Oslo fjord sunset also relates with Ruskin’s thoughts about the articulation of the moods of various natural phenomena. From my sky journal observations, I resonated with Munch’s description of the scream in my experience of a sudden change of context in the environment and the encroachment of anxiety or restlessness within myself. While I did not experience the seeming terror or dramatism of a scream, I found it interesting that, according to Prata, Robock and Hamblyn, ‘art historians recognize the motifs of red and blood associated with anxiety and often used by artists to describe pain, morbid feelings, and angst’.¹⁴ While such associations are likely culturally relative, it led me to wonder about the possibility of sensing, like Munch and Ruskin, a deeper layer behind appearances, as if some archetypal threads expressed themselves through the colours, sounds, and textures of natural phenomena. Was the anxiety merely my own projection, a programmed biological response, or something more, unknown, and mysterious? Can red skies scream, or can a wind carry a mood? Perhaps, when deeply contemplated, it was an overlapping of various subjective and objective factors.

Throughout my sky journal observations, three themes were extracted: the notable visual transformation of the environment, the relation of such transformation with changes in thought and perception, and the ominous beauty of the sunset and its impact on myself and the environment. Like the Wordsworths, it was the moments of drastic and notable transformation in the environment that caught my attention and provoked deeper thought or feeling. Ruskin’s articulation of the moods of nature resonated with my own attempts at discerning certain feelings in response to changes

¹² Prata et al., ‘The Sky in Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*’, p. 1380.

¹³ Edvard Munch’s Writings: The English Edition, ‘MM N 72. Literary sketch. *The Scream*’, Munch Museum digital archives, https://www.emunch.no/TRANS_HYBRIDMM_N0072.xhtml [accessed 25 November 2022].

¹⁴ Prata et al., ‘The Sky in Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*’, p. 1379.

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in light, colour, and shadow. Perceptual and emotional responses were noted, which likely have a biological basis, such as the well-documented release of melatonin at sunset. Yet, while I struggled to feel the sunsets as intensely as I expected, with views obscured by surrounding hills and built, cultural landscapes, I still noted subtle shifts of feeling and perception, such as mild anxiety or drowsiness. In contemplating Harris' quote, 'to think is to walk among clouds', I thought of the ways in which the sky itself, not only the clouds, can alter both subjective and objective perceptions of landscapes.¹⁵ These transformations of sky and landscape elicited by natural phenomena can touch on deeper dimensions of subjective experience, such as feelings or moods, which are difficult to articulate and impossible to measure.



Fig. 7. Facing west: An example of what I perceived as 'ominous' or 'haunting beauty' – the final glow of the sun upon clouds; a landscape submerging in darkness below.

Photo: Chad Woodward

¹⁵ Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 247.



Fig. 8. Looking up: The notable neon pink colour that was refracted onto clouds.
Photo: Chad Woodward



Fig. 9. Looking up: A lone neon pink cloud hovers above.
Photo: Chad Woodward



Fig. 10. Facing west: An expanded view of a neon pink sky contrasted with yellows, purples, and light blues.
Photo: Chad Woodward

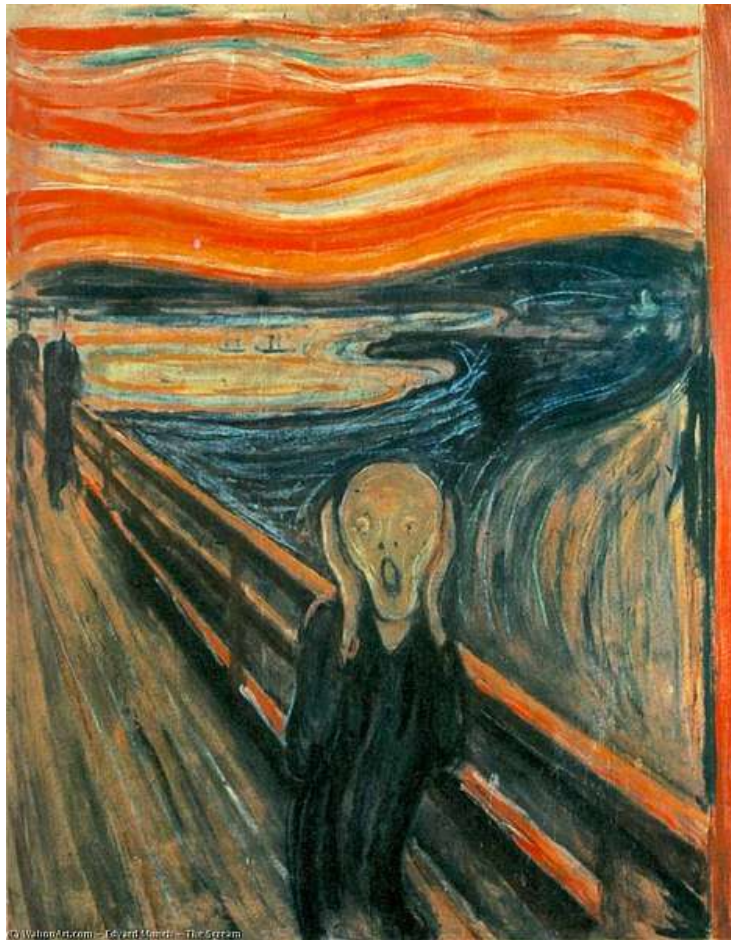


Fig. 11. Edvard Munch, *The Scream* (1893)
Tempera and casein on cardboard, 91x74cm
Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo
Image: Wikimedia Commons

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