

Aim and Methodology

This essay is based upon a phenomenological engagement with the sky, as documented in a daily journal that I kept between October 14th to November 18th, 2024. The sky, that served as the primary text, was approached not merely as an observable phenomenon but as it was perceived as a lived experience. The methodological approach was twofold. First, it employed a quantitative dimension: each observation in the journal recorded objective data such as geographic location, date, time, temperature, and prevailing weather conditions. Photographic documentation, using an iPhone camera, supplemented these records, my aim being to take at least one photograph a day as a record of the conditions I wrote about or to capture specific phenomena.

Second, and more significantly, this inquiry was grounded in the qualitative phenomenological method inspired by Edmund Husserl's (1859-1938) epoché. The epoché, or bracketing of presuppositions, enables a suspension of preconceived theoretical judgments about the sky in order for one to encounter it as a sensory experience. My focus was on the lived quality of these experiences, taking into account the interplay of visual, auditory, and olfactory impressions, and the responses they invoked in me as observer. These subjective responses were informed by the words of artist Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) in a letter written to his brother Theo as translated by Ronald de Leeuw: *"Be clearly aware of the stars and infinity on high. Then life seems almost enchanted after all."*¹

While my initial interest centered on observing the effects of sunlight filtering through cloud formations (crepuscular rays) and illuminating the Earth, the weather conditions during the period of observation shifted this focus. Twenty-one out of twenty-four days I spent in New York during the period saw a predominance of cloudless skies and directed my attention to the seemingly infinite blue. A visit to the Malvern Hills in England towards the end of my period of study, reintroduced the initial focus of sunlight shining from behind cloud and forced me to consider the two very different weather conditions as they related to the quote by Van Gogh, who felt the sky as imbuing life with a sense of enchantment.

Biases

My observations of the sky are inevitably shaped by my cultural background and personal experiences. Born and raised in the temperate maritime climate of the middle of England, my perception of the sky carries an ingrained bias: an inherent appreciation for blue skies and dry weather, conditions that have been prized as rare within English culture, even if this cultural trope has been challenged as being a myth.² Having a background and lifelong interest in the arts, visual culture is an important factor in my perceptions as is the faith and culture of Anglo-Catholicism in which I was raised. More important perhaps than all these points of bias were

¹ Van Gogh, Vincent and Ronald de Leeuw (1997) *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, Harmondsworth, Penguin. p392

² Hall, Alexander (2022) *That Fine Rain That Soaks You Through. Exploring the Role of Weather Lore, Cultural Identity, and Community Memory in Shaping Attitudes to Climate Change* in *Frontiers in Climate Vol 4* (2022) Online Journal

several experiences I have had in my life that might be placed under the term ‘mystical’ during which, amongst other things, subjective and objective become one and which have since become a reference point for my personal considerations of what I consider to be ‘real.’ Mysticism has been defined in many ways since it came into common usage in the nineteenth century. For William James it was a noetic experience, and given to ‘ineffability.’³ Evelyn Underhill described it as ‘an active life-process of the whole-self’⁴ but noted that as the term is applied to such a wide variety of ‘intoxications’ it ceases to have useful meaning. In two more recent definitions Robert Elwood defined it as ‘a direct unmediated encounter with the ultimate divine reality’⁵ and Jerome Gellman as ‘a nonsensory perception apparently of a reality of a sort that can neither be perceived by sense perception nor known by ordinary introspective self-awareness’.⁶ Touching on cross-cultural aspects Bruno Borchert defined mysticism as “the knowledge that [...] everything is interconnected, that all things have a single source”⁷ and acknowledged that though it can appear different in its external form, as a phenomenon it occurs across religions and cultures.

The word ‘culture’ has been called ‘one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.’⁸ Raymond Williams noted that the origins of the word were in the Latin *colere* with a wide range of meanings including to ‘inhabit, cultivate, protect, honour with worship’ and goes on to point out that culture was, in all its early uses, ‘a noun of process.’⁹ In 1871 Edward Tylor called culture ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society.’¹⁰ though, as John H. Bodley more recently noted ‘we can change our culture.’¹¹ More recently Terry Eagleton returned to an idea of culture as being linked to agriculture. ‘If culture originally meant husbandry, it suggests both regulation and spontaneous growth’¹² hinting that culture is not entirely a ‘natural’ process and that aspects of culture can be controlled. ‘Culture is what we can change, but the stuff to be altered has its own autonomous existence, which then lends it something of the recalcitrance of nature.’¹³ I found that it was very difficult, despite the adoption

³ James, William (1958) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York, New American Library. p371

⁴ Underhill, Evelyn (1945) *Mysticism, A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* London, Methuen. p81

⁵ Elwood, Robert (1999) *Mysticism and Religion*, London, Seven Bridges Press. p39.

⁶ Gellman, Jerome (2001) *Mystical Experience of God, a Philosophical Enquiry*. Aldershot, Ashgate. p4

⁷ Borchert, Bruno (1995) *Mysticism, Its History and Challenge*, York Beach, Weiser. p5

⁸ Williams, Raymond (1988) *Keywords*, London, Fontana, p87

⁹ Williams (1988), p87

¹⁰ Bodley, John H. (2017) *Cultural Anthropology, Tribes, States and the Global System*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, p14

¹¹ Bodley (2017), p14

¹² Eagleton, Terry (2000) *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford, Blackwells, p4

¹³ Eagleton (2000), p4

of epoché as a methodological tool, to entirely disengage from a tendency towards seeing through a lens of culture.

Results

1) Cultural References

On returning to re-read the entries in the journal, several themes emerged. One of the starkest realizations was the number of times I had made references to cultural products, painting, film, poetry, commercial postcards. For example:

17th October 2024. Hartsdale, New York. 60°. A day of interesting, fast-moving clouds. Walked around the park, which was illuminated in patches of moving sunlight, as if a door in heaven was being opened and closed. Couples sitting on the grass. Like the scene in Joseph Losey's 'Accident'.

23rd October 2024. Hartsdale, New York. 73°. Blue skies all day. Cloudless. Gorgeous day, a dream in endless blue like that of a painting by Canaletto, every tree, every building cut into deep relief by strong sunlight.

25th October 2024. New York City, New York. 63°. Blue skies all day. Deep chemical blue. Almost too much for the senses, as if the city is trapped in a garish nineteen-sixties postcard in 'glorious Technicolor.' Kennedy Plaza looked like a metaphysical cityscape of De Chirico. Unreal.

28th October 2024. New York City, New York. 58°. Baring a milky morning, blue skies all day. Walking through the city was like living Derek Jarman's 'Blue' for six hours, the juxtaposition of a myriad overheard fragments of conversation, noise, traffic sirens appearing even more transitory under the eternity of sky, as seemingly timeless as it is perfect. The leaves of the trees in Madison Park are as sharp against the sky as those in an illuminated medieval manuscript. (Figure 1)

John Brett, Claude, The Limbourg Brothers, T.S. Eliot and Salvador Dali were also mentioned when describing predominantly blue skies while Pre-Raphaelite was mentioned in relation to thin clouds of deep purple and a sense of evening “timelessness” on the evening of November 3rd.

2) Infinity

The words infinity, eternity, eternal, endless, timeless all appear several times. “A dream in endless blue”. “Seemingly timeless” with the blue skies easily intimating a sense of infinity.

30th October 2024. Hartsdale, New York. 70°. Line from Merleau-Ponty: “my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue.”¹⁴ Exactly how I feel. I reflected today on the blue sky as being a tabula rasa for whatever we wish to see in it. The horizon is merely a line between the finite and the infinite.

1st November 2024. New York City. 77°. Luminous blue skies all day. I keep looking at my watch. Time seems suspended. Does everyone else feel this? The streets hover as in a dream.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, C Smith (trans) (1962) *The Phenomenology of Perception*, London, Routledge Keegan & Paul. p262



Figure 1

3) Enchantment

The theory of ‘disenchantment’ was developed by the Romantics in the late eighteenth century. Morris Berman called disenchantment “the progressive removal of mind or spirit from

phenomenal appearances.”¹⁵ Nick Campion questioned the nature of ‘enchantment’ and wrote that “it may be synonymous with wonder.”¹⁶ He points also to Tolkien’s definition of enchantment as being when a person is “ecstatically integrated with the cosmos rather than under another’s supernatural control.”¹⁷ These definitions point to the sense of heightened emotional and sensory awareness that have some similarities with the mystical experience.



Figure 2

16th October 2024. Hartsdale, New York. 55°. Morning of pure blue skies that gave way in the afternoon to bombastic cloud. A particularly ominous one opened like the jaws of a mouth to shine with the light of the hidden sun. (Figure 2)

¹⁵ Berman, Morris quoted in Campion, Nick, *Enchantment and Awe of the Heavens* in *The Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena VI. ASP Conference Series, Vol. 441*. San Francisco: Astronomical Society of the Pacific, 2011, p3

¹⁶ Campion, Nick, *Enchantment and Awe of the Heavens*, p5

¹⁷ Tolkien quoted in Campion *Enchantment and Awe of the Heavens*. p5

8th November 2024. Somewhere over the Atlantic due west the coast of Ireland. Rippling cloud cover to the horizon. A God's eye view of the clouds, over ocean. Thoughts of a quote I recently read: "The horizon line is something visible and yet illusory."¹⁸ I am gazing at a sea of cloud, that still withhold their secrets, but not the sky. (Figure 3)



Figure 3

¹⁸ Kochetkova, E. S. *Horizon as a Symbolic Category in Contemporary in Site-Specific Art* in *Актуальные проблемы теории и истории искусства* 10 (2020) p576



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6





Figure 8

12th November 2024. Great Malvern, Worcestershire. 50°. Rain and grey skies in the morning. Walked up the hills in the afternoon. Incredible. Thick grey mist tasting of grass and minerally ozone at times obscuring the hills like a sea fog. All of a sudden, on the journey back, the clouds lifted to reveal a gift, a jewel-like landscape lit by a dying sun poured from a gap under the clouds and across the land. (Figures 4-8)

The entry for 12th November was the longest taken during the project, running to several pages of notes and associations. These included my own memories of the hills, and the memories passed down to me by my grandmother. The mythic landscapes and idealistic visions of J.R.R. Tolkien, the poetry of John Masefield and William Langland, all of whom walked here, and snatches of *Flos Campi* by Ralph Vaughan Williams. Lastly, there was my own evocation of what I had experienced as being “magical” and “beyond words”.

Conclusion

Through journaling and reflection, it became evident that the cultural products I referenced served as visual and conceptual shorthands that mediated my experiences and despite efforts to bracket cultural perceptions via Husserl’s concept of epoché, their influence underscored the link between personal perception and cultural conditioning. In these moments, I found myself moving from Husserl’s strict epoché toward Heidegger’s phenomenology, where being itself unfolds through the interplay of memory, myth, and place with the sky seemed serving as a vessel for transcendental reflections.

On several occasions during the project however, my experiences were more direct, with a sense of infinity and enchantment bordering on the ‘mystical’ and transcendent. Opposing Emile

Durkheim, in who's view sacredness of place had to be continuously maintained by a culture and a community, Eliade's hierophany emphasized that "for religious man [...] some parts of space are qualitatively different from others."¹⁹ The Malvern Hills are, for me, a sacred landscape in Eliade's sense and the moment of experiencing the taste, sight and smell of the mist, seeing it lift from the landscape to give way to the gold of the sunlight, was an experience of heightened 'enchantment' and one that went beyond, arguably, the cultural conditioning and visions of others. If these ingrained cultural artifacts can be considered, to return to Tolkien, a form of enchantment against one's conscious will disseminated by a culture over which an individual can have little control, what I experienced in briefly on October 16th, November 8th and more completely in Malvern was of a very different type. Sharing some of the qualities that have defined a 'mystical' experience, namely that of a sense of ineffability and the collapse, however brief, of the perceived subject-object relationship, it was however not, in Gellman's definition 'nonsensory'²⁰ as my senses were consciously attuned. Instead the sky became a locus for transforming, or perhaps perceiving, 'enchantment' in a way that Van Gogh may have recognized. Van Gogh, whose cultural and religious background was in Lutheran Christianity, expressed throughout his life a serious and devout faith. Cliff Edwards wrote that 'religion and spiritual transformation are central elements in van Gogh's life and work'.²¹ It is difficult to read his quote without reference to his faith in a reality beyond, in his words, "the worldly mire".²² 'Aware' derives from the Old English *wær* meaning to be wary, watchful vigilant or cautious.²³ Its potential for carrying an added dimension of meaning to an individual in touch with a sense of transcendental spirit cannot be underestimated. In his original letter however, written in French, Van Gogh uses the word *sentir*, to feel, sense or smell: *Et sentir néanmoins les étoiles et l'infini en haut clairement. Alors la vie est tout de même presque enchantée*.²⁴ His words may be seen as a call to engage the senses in the experience of the sky as a means of transcending the finite of ordinary reality to reach the infinite.

¹⁹ Eliade, Mircea (1960) *The Sacred and the Profane* New York, Harcourt, Brace. p21

²⁰ Gellman (2001) *Mystical Experience of God*. p5

²¹ Edwards, Cliff (1989) *Van Gogh and God: A Creative Spiritual Quest*, Chicago, Loyola University Press. p xv

²² Van Gogh (1997), p124

²³ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (1973) Oxford, Oxford University Press, Vol 1 p592

²⁴ <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let663/letter.html#top>

Bibliography

- Badt, Kurt (1950) *John Constable's Clouds*, London, Routledge Keegan and Paul
- Bodley, John H. (2017) *Cultural Anthropology, Tribes, States and the Global System*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield
- Borchert, Bruno (1995) *Mysticism, Its History and Challenge*, York Beach, Weiser
- Campion, Nick, *Enchantment and Awe of the Heavens in The Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena VI. ASP Conference Series, Vol. 441*. San Francisco: Astronomical Society of the Pacific, 2011
- Eagleton, Terry (2000) *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford, Blackwells
- Edwards, Cliff (1989) *Van Gogh and God: A Creative Spiritual Quest*, Chicago, Loyola University Press
- Eliade, Mircea (1960) *The Sacred and the Profane* New York, Harcourt, Brace
- Elwood, Robert (1999) *Mysticism and Religion*, London, Seven Bridges Press
- Gallagher, Shawn & Zahavi, Dan (2021) *The Phenomenological Mind*, London, Routledge
- Hall, Alexander (2022) *That Fine Rain That Soaks You Through. Exploring the Role of Weather Lore, Cultural Identity, and Community Memory in Shaping Attitudes to Climate Change in Frontiers in Climate Vol 4 (2022)*
- James, William (1958) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York, New American Library
- Kochetkova, E. S. *Horizon as a Symbolic Category in Contemporary in Site-Specific Art in Актуальные проблемы теории и истории искусства 10 (2020)*
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, C Smith (trans) (1962) *The Phenomenology of Perception*, London, Routledge Keegan & Paul
- Underhill, Evelyn (1945) *Mysticism, A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* London, Methuen.
- Van Gogh, Vincent and Ronald de Leeuw (1997) *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, Harmondsworth, Penguin
- Williams, Raymond (1988) *Keywords*, London, Fontana
- <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let663/letter.html#top>