

## HARMONY AND A PHENOMENOLOGY OF LIQUID SKIES

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HARMONY IS AN ELUSIVE CONCEPT, one which I have approached by exploring the reflective quality of water, mainly from a visual perspective: water can actually bring us closer to the sky in the sense that we can see the sky reflected in water, even touch it or, more accurately, touch its reflection. I refer to such reflections as ‘liquid skies’ and in such observations of the sky, intermediated by the action of water, feelings of harmony can be evoked: receptivity, meaningfulness, wholeness, balance and integration. And, as David Cadman said when referring to harmony, ‘when we look, we see that Nature expresses qualities such as wholeness, relationship, diversity, living within limits, cooperation, wastelessness, impermanence and thriftiness’.<sup>1</sup> My research provides an example of encountering principles of harmony in nature, and in particular, in liquid skies or reflections of the sky in water. Another time I have used the term ‘water-skyscape’, assuming that ‘the sky is the ultimate focus of the experience and water becomes an affecting medium to access the skyscape vision’.<sup>2</sup>

In 2016-18 I conducted a research project into such liquid skies, keeping a journal of my observations and relating them to poetry, material culture and theories on perception. My observations were made in the United Kingdom, Italy and Greece during 2016 and 2017, and were gathered together into a sky journal in which I recorded my reflexive considerations in the form of notes, poems, drawings and photographs, aiming to bring my perceptions and unconscious feelings into focus. I recorded a description of the ecosystem around me in terms of place, time and significant phenomena, as well as of my sensations, thoughts and emotions in response to the environment. My observations were focused on the qualities and properties of the phenomenon I experienced, by exploring different layers of the relationships between land, sky, and water depending on the time, place and weather.

The Prince of Wales introduced *Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World* (his book with Tony Juniper and Ian Skelly) by stating the need to face what he described as the ‘crisis of perception’ in the current empiricist way of looking at the world.<sup>3</sup> The mechanist approach, he continued, has overwhelmed spiritual and religious dimensions of looking at nature to our detriment. The notion that there are two different ways of knowing is deeply embedded and runs throughout

Western thought. For example, Raymond Corbey looked at the division between the sciences and the humanities and quantitative and qualitative research, after then underlying assumption that the two different types of substance, mind and matter, follow different principles.<sup>4</sup> The Prince of Wales's analysis reflected Max Weber's definition of modernity as characterised by disenchantment, where 'the unity of primitive image of the world, in which everything was concrete magic, has tended to split into rational cognition and mastery of nature, on the one hand, and into "mystic" experiences, on the other'.<sup>5</sup> A series of later thinkers then developed the concept of 'enchantment' as the alternative to disenchantment. Enchantment is another elusive concept, but comes close to Lucien Lévy Bruhl's 'participation mystique', the feeling we have when we are wholly and completely a part of, and engaged with, our surroundings, rather than separate to them.<sup>6</sup> For Edward Slingerland and Mark Collard, the dichotomy between the two ways of knowing can be overcome by, in other words, trying 'to see the realm of the human as coextensive with the realm of nature', which perhaps be similar to approaching enchantment.<sup>7</sup>

Following similar assumptions, Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued that the phenomenological method can help to perceive the essence of things.<sup>8</sup> I was deeply influenced by Merleau-Ponty's view of phenomenology in which, by immersing ourselves in the natural world we can explore what he called 'beings in depth, inaccessible to a subject that would survey them from above, open to him alone that, if it be possible, would coexist with them in the same world'.<sup>9</sup> I was also drawn to Martin Heidegger's *dasein* or 'being-in-the world' in which the subject (i.e., me) is intrinsically and physically involved in the surrounding world when trying to understand it, but without being able to fully transcend it.<sup>10</sup> In other words, we are inside the world we try to study and can never be separate from our study of it. With this in mind, I set out to explore the world of water and liquid skies.

An undervalued feature of phenomenology is the extent to which we assume that elements of the natural world have 'agency', meaning that they possess power, personality and identity. Some hold the opinion that only humans can have agency. Timothy Darvill defined it as 'the proposition that human beings think about the intentional actions they perform and the resources they need to achieve their ends'.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, attempts have been made to attribute agency to nonhuman entities. For example, Alfred Gell argued that agency can be present in material culture, but he distinguished between primary agency, which is the preserve of human beings, and secondary agency found in other entities when infused by humans to materials.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Michael D. Kirchhoff highlighted the qualitative

distinction between human and nonhuman agents since, he argued, material agency can only be enacted by the agentive capacity of humans, concluding that 'agency does not reside in matter'.<sup>13</sup> One area where a different perspective has emerged is that of ecology. For example, Bjørnar Olsen, who questioned the distinction between people and environment when advocating what he called a 'return to things', stated that 'landscapes and things possess their own unique qualities and competences that they bring to our cohabitation with them'.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, people, things, spaces and places all cohabit: they live together.

However, a wide variety of opinions have been expressed about the relationship between people and place. Ralph Waldo Emerson, deeply influenced by the Platonic view in which matter emerges from consciousness, wondered whether the material world was no more than a projection of the human mind: 'Have mountains, and waves, and skies no significance but what we consciously give them,' he asked, 'when we employ them as emblems of our thoughts? The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind'.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in her study of contested meaning in landscapes, Barbara Bender looked how one place may mean different things to different people and wondered whether landscapes have boundaries, describing them as 'experimental and porous, nested and open ended'.<sup>16</sup> These perspectives may imply a never conclusive and always contested interpretation. Christopher Tilley and Kate Cameron-Daum, were not so far from Bender's position when they pointed out how the complexity and multivocality of contested landscapes meant that they might not represent any one thing, stating that 'landscapes are ... an active presence' but they produce different responses from the people who experience them.<sup>17</sup> Finally, Tim Ingold rejected the division between mind and matter, between inner and outer realities as irrelevant when considering our relationship with place, and highlighted the recognition of the temporality of the environment and its cycles, which is embodied within the individual who dwells within it by an effect of what we can call resonance.<sup>18</sup> For Ingold, 'the landscape ... is a story' and meanings are stored within a landscape and revealed through the process of being-in-the-world, to borrow from Heidegger.<sup>19</sup>

Assuming that lands, seas and skies have agency, it follows that they will have different ways to express it. Powerful expressions might include a thunderstorm, an erupting volcano, a starry sky or, in terms of my interest, a glitter path, all of which are natural entities which may prompt strong emotional effects such as awe or fear. My approach to such things embraces Ingold's statement that entities are '*possessed by the action*' (his italics): having agency, he says, does not mean that they possess intention.<sup>20</sup> In his view, agency is distributed along the

field of interweaving relations and represents a dynamic property which is prior to any distinction we can make between object and subject.<sup>21</sup> As Franz Breuer and Wolff-Michael Roth argued, ‘the knower and the known form a dialectic unit’ so that knowledge forms somewhere in the relationship between the subject and the phenomena observed.<sup>22</sup> As applied to my research, in the tension knower-known, I had to reduce myself as far as possible in a position in which I allowed land, sky, water, and all things in the natural world, to express their own power and agency in terms of the qualities of time and place.

In his final work *The Visible and the Invisible*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty introduced the idea that the ‘thickness’ of the corporality of the body is the only means of communication by which to reach the essence of things through a dialogue between the researcher and the object of study.<sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty stated that it is thanks to a coexistence between the researcher and the object of study that there is a possibility of dialogue.<sup>24</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, perception implies a dualistic movement: as the outer world is perceived by the researcher, so the perceiver sends out intention.<sup>25</sup> But this twofold action is negotiable: the researcher’s intentions, thoughts and judgments can be suspended and ‘bracketed off’ for a short time. This bracketing allows the researcher, hopefully, to experience phenomena on their own terms. As Kathy Charmaz pointed out, preconceptions can arise from the researcher’s social and cultural background which influence the research process.<sup>26</sup> Our task as researchers is to free ourselves, as far as possible, from such preconceptions. We can also talk about Edmund Husserl’s ‘reduction’, a process understood as setting aside the intention within the self so the researcher can become a silent testimony of the natural world.<sup>27</sup> In particular, I tried to emancipate myself from distractions such as the few people, cars and planes which passed by. The practitioner may allow the phenomena of the outer world to fully be experienced as an inner reality. This otherness can inhabit the body by moving it, speaking or just being there with its own qualities. Similar to the embodiment of characters in drama, a landscape can be integrated within one’s self through the distillation and assimilation of its inherent qualities and temporalities. Using this technique, at times I reached a state of full immersion into the liquid sky observed, which would have lasted for only a few seconds: my body resonated with the observed phenomenon in a status of enchantment. The problem, though, is that control by individuals over their own intention is often very limited by distractions. My own process was aided by my ten-years training in drama, Butoh performance and self-discovery. I have also practised Vipassana meditation, in order to develop self-awareness.

The phenomenological approach also requires reflexive considerations,

necessary to contextualise the product of the observations. Personally, I was already biased by having read about the topic on the symbolic role of the water and the sky within ancient Mediterranean cultures: I already had preconceptions relating to the idea of water as a sort of underworld. Once I had started my research, the systematic observation of liquid skies changed me by provoking an intense emotional response. I was deeply affected by the vision of the Sun or Moon reflected in water, as if their intangible presence on land was very near and intimate. Manifestations of sunlight in water became more and more attractive, charged with a sort of charisma and visual magnetism. I became engaged in my own participation mystique. As I wrote up my journal and reflected on my experiences, five themes emerged: receptivity, meaningfulness, wholeness, balance and the integration of opposites.

It will be considered the ways in which individual forms can be seen transformed and dissolved on the dynamic layer of the water surface, echoing the idea of wholeness. Sky and water frame the land holding the tension between the above and below in a state of balance as they mirror each other. Finally, a particularly striking effect is produced when the Sun is low on the horizon and reflections of sunlight in the form of glitter paths seem to unite the above and the below in a bridge of light.

## RECEPTIVITY

The surface of the water is a liminal space, a boundary zone which simultaneously separates and connects air and water. When I resonate with water, I am fostered to have a fluid, open and receptive inner condition. Objects floating on a water space can modify the reality of the reflected phenomenon: in Figure 2 the Sun image is distorted by the presence of algae. In a similar way, memories can affect perceptive experiences. Henri Bergson stated that 'perception is never a mere contact of the mind with the object present; it is impregnated with memory-images which complete it as they interpret it'.<sup>28</sup> Bergson implied that perception is always conditioned by memories, but he did not consider the perception of an infant who has no or little memories. For this reason, phenomenology is here understood as a return to a primordial and naïve way of looking at the world, not unlike the perspective of a child. Practicing reduction or bracketing intention is like cleaning water from algae: the researcher aims to achieve a status characterised by resonance, transparency, primordial receptivity, neutrality, participation and empathy, similar to the mirroring of a clean water surface, as evoked in Figure 1. In summary, for me, the peculiar reflective quality of clean water inspired states of transparency and receptivity which in turn foster an empathic condition.



Figure 1. Clear water may be a metaphor for neutral perception: the receptive quality of water fosters a condition of empathy. Heath Farm, Chipping Norton (UK) 30 July 2016.  
Photo by I. Cristofaro.



Figure 2. The image of the Sun reflected in a sea pool is distorted by the presence of algae, as memories distort pure perception. Pembrokeshire (UK), 1 July 2016.  
Photo by I. Cristofaro.

## MEANINGFULNESS

Since ‘observations are all made from somewhere’, as David J. Hufford pointed out in his discussion about reflexivity, I realised the extreme importance of my position in space and time in relation to the reflection observed.<sup>29</sup> For most of the time, I had to move around to find the point in space whose angle allowed me to see the phenomena I wanted to observe: a few times I felt that this was a forcing act in respect to allowing the water and the sky to let me see what they offered to me, at other times I felt as if I was driven by an instinctive force to find the right place from where to look. Therefore I noticed, when looking at small pools of water, that the size of the water space constrained what I could and could not see. In throwing a piece of wood into a small canal covered by pond scum at Oxford Christ Church Meadow, I noticed how the sky was opening up in the water as a reaction to the dispersion of the algae: my notes record that ‘it looks like a telescope image, in the sense it reflects only a small portion of the sky’ and, within that selected section ‘all seems to be embedded of meanings’. The piece of liquid sky is as much limited as the water space which contains it. This reminds me how Etruscan augurs would define a particular part of the sky called *templum* in order to limit their observations and to receive omens from the celestial deities.<sup>30</sup> Blocking off most of the sky enables the selected portion to be received as a meaningful experience: the sky vault is so vast and overwhelming that sometimes I feel lost since I do not know which clouds, stars or phenomena to observe. The fact of being able to see only a little part of the sky imposes a restriction, and yet it seems to have meaningful significance: in that precise moment in time I felt that such sky existed just for me. Figure 3 shows this idea: by reflecting the sky in a bowl of water, the Sun can be found contained within it. Small amounts of water, such as puddles or ponds, have this peculiar characteristic: by reflecting a small portion of the sky vault, they seem to reveal to the observer a meaningful and intimate celestial reality. And I am reminded that, for David Cadman, living in a meaningful and purposeful cosmos can be considered one of the conditions of harmony.<sup>31</sup>

## WHOLENESS

Sometimes I felt as if I had turned myself inside-out in such a way to allow the water to be contained in my own self. I noticed that in watery reflections nothing is itself anymore, and liquid skies dissolve the shapes and identities of celestial objects. On 20 July 2016 I wrote ‘the reflecting light of the Moon is dispersed



Figure 3. Finding the Sun in a bowl of water. Matera (IT), 28 August 2016.  
Photo by Alessandro Scillitani.

and fragmented'. Water spaces appeared as doorways to another realm where the definitions of identities are put under discussion. In my notes from 26 July 2016, I wrote:

The water, as consciousness reflected  
and blended by the collective circumstances.  
World below the sea  
Made by inconsistent changeability of form limits  
Convex, expressed, merged,  
In the clean slate  
of the wind, the painter  
master of the brush,  
of agile water of beings in motion.

A disintegrating effect on individuality can be visually seen in liquid reflections: the water surface provides a metaphor for the concept of 'wholeness'. Indeed, in the liquid world it is possible to see with eyes how, in David Cadman's words, 'the whole and its parts are always interconnected and related'.<sup>32</sup> The fluid propriety of water dissipates borders, merges shapes and dissolves identities: it can be associated with the fragmentation of the self and subsequent merging in the unity of the world. All shapes lie on the same layer, on the water surface, and they fluently interact with each other, as illustrated in Figure 4. This reminds me of Carl Jung's statement that 'the meeting between the narrowly delimited, but



Figure 4. The water surface merging shapes. River Thames. Oxford (UK), 25 July 2016.  
Photo by I. Cristofaro.

intensely clear, individual consciousness and the vast expanse of the collective unconscious is dangerous, because the unconscious has a decidedly disintegrating effect on consciousness'.<sup>33</sup> In opposite, in Jungian terms, *individuation* is the process by which 'individual beings are formed and differentiated'.<sup>34</sup> The watery surface seems to provide an ambiguous and uncertain space, inspiring a liminal status of passage. Indeed, not having a certain identity means to have freedom and a huge potentiality towards all identities, and therefore the acquisition of new power. My observations from 22 July 2016 reported on the Sun reflected in a natural tidal pool, as if the Sun itself were performing a ritual dance by disentangling itself from its spherical shape (see Figure 5).

The reflection of the Sun  
 the light is caught in this electric fluid dance:  
 Frenetic twitches of dazzles  
 Rapid movements, almost imperceptible  
 Of wind's whispers  
 ...  
 Rapid dance, deformation of the circle  
 Opening of worlds  
 Rediscovery of hidden treasures.

More insights make me understand that the sky-waterscape polarity can correspond to the binary tension between the human tendency towards individualism and towards being part of a collective whole: the water surface is comparable to the idea of collectivity, and the sky to that of individuality. In particular, Arthur Koestler defined the dual tension within a 'holon' (an element which is paradoxically both a whole and a part within different hierarchical wholes) as both self-assertive, separating itself off, and inclined to integrate.<sup>35</sup> For Koestler this essential, internal opposition of tendencies is present in every type of biological, sociological or ecological complex system.<sup>36</sup> He adds that the integrative tendency can be expressed by individuals as cooperation and altruism, attitudes central to John Fullerton's suggestions for a regenerative economy under the principles of harmony.<sup>37</sup> David Cadman also wrote about how the long history of humans damaging their environments is, in his words, based on 'the proposition that the world is made up of separate parts, ever in competition one with another'.<sup>38</sup> Observing reflections of light in water reminded me of the interconnections between all things and how the liquid world seems to be a metaphor for the unification of single identities in the layer of wholeness.

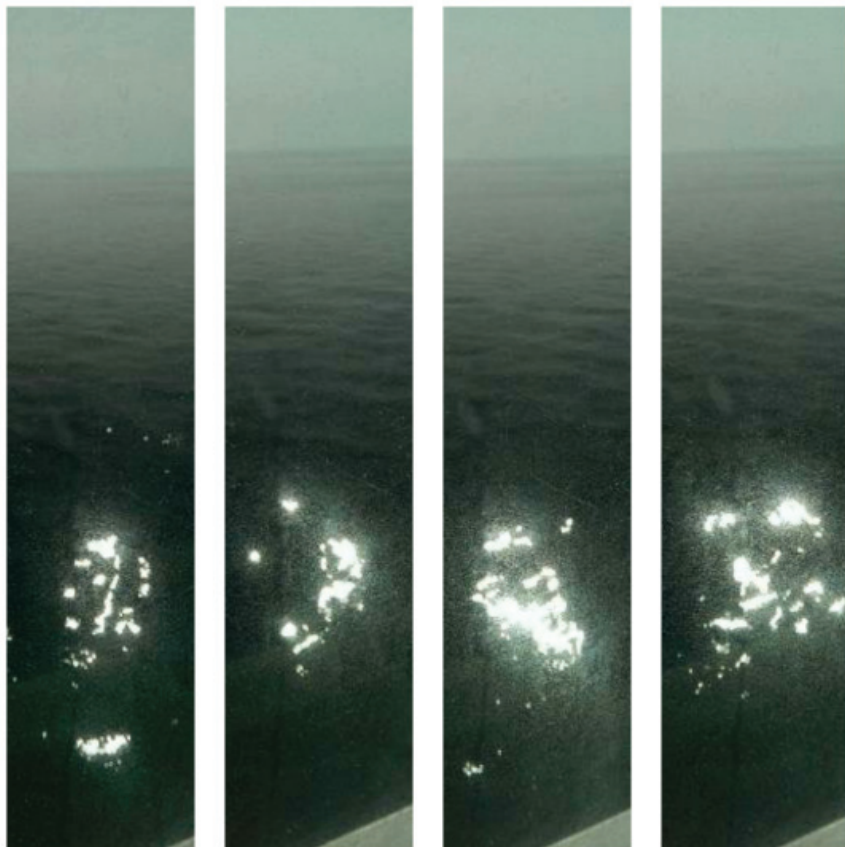


Figure 5. The deformed shape of the Sun seen from a boat in the Mediterranean Sea in four subsequent moments. 30 August 2017.

Photos by I. Cristofaro.

## BALANCE

Water spaces create a continuation of the sky on the land: waterscapes and skyscapes together constitute a dualistic reality of specular realms. In a scenery where the heaven above and the water below mirror each other, the land is framed in the line of symmetry as evoked in Figure 6. Similarly, Henry David Thoreau, who spent many months in a wooden cabin in the forest near a pond, described the watery space as ‘intermediate in its nature between land and sky’.<sup>39</sup> Visions of water and sky can inspire feelings of balance, another element of harmony in David Cadman’s analysis.<sup>40</sup> This was also the principle of the Emerald Tablet of Hermes, ‘that which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing’.<sup>41</sup> As inspired by Figures 7 and 8, the world can be seen in balance when the sky is mirrored in a water space.

## INTEGRATION OF OPPOSITES

During the phenomenological fieldwork, some qualities of the glitter path, the long reflection of the Sun in water when the Sun is low on the horizon, were observed. This phenomenon extends upon the water a luminous cloak of sunlight. At its full elongation, the glitter path gives the impression of indicating a particular direction, a path to and from the Sun, resembling a luminous bridge connecting the celestial body with the viewer on the seashore. It reaches its maximum elongation around the times of sunrise and sunset when the string of light, as reflected in the water, united the littoral with the horizon, creating a channel of integration between the above vault of the sky and the below expanse of water, as if the two worlds were connected. For me, the glitter path can resemble a road towards the Sun. On 9 July 2017, I wrote:

Dawn is the epiphany for excellence  
 Light coming out from darkness  
 Especially when the water is calm  
 The glitter path seems like a road  
 Connecting myself with the sun  
 But it is already very bright  
 And I cannot look at it for a long time  
 ... and it is already day  
 The water transports the light, the Sun towards me  
 It is connecting.



Figure 6. Above and below mirroring each other, in respect to the line of symmetry of the land. River Thames. South Stokes (UK), 10 August 2016.

Photo by I. Cristofaro.



Figure 7. A sea pool as intermediate between land and sky.  
Pembrokeshire (UK), 1 July 2016. Photo by I.Cristofaro.



Figure 8. In the stillness of the Venice lagoon, a view of above and below as one thing.  
Venice (IT), 22 December 2016. Photo by I.Cristofaro.

Similarly, on 13 August 2017, I recorded the following observations:

Like a fiery dance  
 You unwind on the waters  
 like a golden lace, you hook me  
 like a bridge of light  
 you surpass the realms  
 like an exuberant creature you manifest yourself  
 body of light  
 from the Sun you are emanated  
 from the sea you have emerged  
 unique and unrepeatable ...

Even if intangible and fluid, the impression is of a deep-rooted and consistent connection between the viewer and the Sun, manifesting itself in a dramatic way, shining as a bronze way crossing the sea. This reminds me of James B. Kaler's statement that such reflections can make us feel 'as if you could walk into space'.<sup>42</sup> In my notes, I described the glitter path as 'a bridge of light', a 'road', a 'channel'



Figure 9. The glitter path at dawn seems to connect the sky and the sea with a bridge of light. Milatos Paralia, Crete (GR), 26 July 2017. Photo by I. Cristofaro.



Figure 10. The glitter path as a road of light to reach the Sun. Milatos Paralia, Crete (GR), 9 July 2017. Photo by I. Cristofaro.

toward the Sun, as evoked in Figures 9 and 10. It suggests a sense of connection and integration: by creating an intangible luminescent roadway, the glitter path can unite the seashore with the horizon, bridging the spectacular world of sky and water in a harmonious relationship of opposites.

## CONCLUSION

At the end of the process, I realised to have found some principles of harmony by observing Nature. I felt that the clear water surface is transparent, empathic, and receptive to external influences, fostering the viewer (me in this case) to achieve a similar inner condition. Thus, clean water offered me a metaphor for describing neutral perception against distorting memories. In a reflection, the sky is visible in well-defined portions which can become meaningful experiences against the overwhelming celestial vault. Reflected on the liquid world, shapes and identities seem to be transformed, disintegrated and merged together on a layer of dynamic connections, evoking, in my experience, a dimension of wholeness and integration, versus individualism. Another principle of harmony holds that everything in the universe operates in a state of balance: sky and water frame the land in a symmetrical opposition of reversed worlds. Finally, when the Sun is low on the horizon, reflections of sunlight in water provoke a sense of merging opposites, bringing together the two worlds above and below by a road of light. By looking at the sky through reflections on water it is possible to perceive a reality where the principles of harmony manifest themselves: empathy, meaningfulness, wholeness, balance and the unity of opposites are all conditions necessary for cohabiting in harmony with the natural world. Thus, my body, as if a receptacle of water, resonated with the sky in a status of enchantment.

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