



Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

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Student Name: Francesca Croce		
Student University Email: 2317231@student.uwtsd.ac.uk		
Module code: HPCA7015	Student ID number:	Educational support needs:
Module title: Foundations in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology	2317231	No
Assignment title:		
Sky Journal		
Assignment due date: 30/11/2023		
This assignment is for the 1 st ☒ 2 nd ☐ 3 rd ☐ 4 th ☐ 5 th ☐ 6 th ☐ module of the degree		
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Sky Journal

Word Count: 2197

This essay aims at considering Vincent Van Gogh's statement 'Be clearly aware of the stars and infinity on high. Then life seems almost enchanted after all'¹ using my Sky journal as the main reference. I shall first introduce the approach I used; subsequently, I shall reflect on Van Gogh's quotation investigating my personal sense of wonder with reference to other primary and secondary sources.

August 10th is a special night since when I was a child. I used to prepare blankets and pillows and spend some hours stargazing with my mother and other members of my family, lying down on the stone pavement outside my home, awaiting for the enchanting and ephemeral vision of a falling star. That particular night and location are the indispensable components of a family rite that occurs every year. As I was considering this, I realised that choosing a certain point of view and a specific time-frame – allowing myself some room for manoeuvre – was pivotal. I elected a small window facing South-East as my main 'sacred [...], significant space',² using Mircea Eliade words, while my 'sacred time [...] reversible and recoverable'³ by means of my daily ritual observation, was primarily 6PM-1AM.

Van Gogh maintains that the awareness of the infinity of the heavens leads to a feeling of *enchantment*. The term "enchantment" is cognate to "incantation", from Latin "incantāre", to lay under a spell (in+cantāre, to sing upon someone or something),⁴ similar to "being fascinated", from 'Latin *fascinum*, "charm, malefic spell" [...] related to *fascia*, "band, bandage"'.⁵ This magical, invisible thread seizing those who contemplate the infinite sky, reminds me of the mental bonds laid upon the enemies,⁶ who remained paralysed in fear,⁷ by Odin, 'god of the ropes'.⁸

Despite the lack of evidence on the chronology of this process,⁹ gradually the genus *Homo* was no longer a passive follower of the celestial bodies, just like other animals are;¹⁰ humans developed a deeper awareness of the sky and of themselves in relation to it, and a sense of wonder, amazement, fear, awe must have

¹ Van Gogh, V., de Leeuw, R., *The letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, Penguin Books, London 1997, p. 392.

² Eliade, M., *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion. The Significance of Religious Myth, Symbolism, and Ritual Within Life and Culture* (1957), tr. by W.R. Trask, A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York 1987, p. 20.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

⁴ Onions, C.T., with Friedrichsen, G.W.S., Burchfield, R.W. (editors), *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1966, p. 312.

⁵ Eliade, M., *Image and Symbol. Studies in Religious Symbolism* (1952), tr. by P. Mairet, Sheed & Ward, New York 1961, p. 115.

⁶ Ellis Davidson, H.R., *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, Penguin Books, London 1990, p. 147.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 63

⁸ Eliade (1952), p. 105.

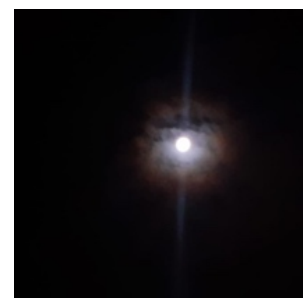
⁹ Champion, N., *A History of Western Astrology. The Ancient World. Vol. I* (2008), Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, London 2015, p. 1.

¹⁰ Foster J.J., Smolka J., Nilsson D.-E., Dacke M., 'How animals follow the stars', *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, V. 285/1871 (2018). <<http://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2017.2322>>.

appeared as they were rapt in contemplation of the heaven. This ‘creature-consciousness’, as Rudolf Otto defines it,¹¹ is probably what Van Gogh was expressing. Following Otto’s argument, the perception of the *mysterium tremendum*¹² of the starry night – and other natural events like the lightnings – is related to the *numinous*¹³ experience of the *ganz andere*, the “wholly other”,¹⁴ disclosing itself through nature. Therefore, the celestial bodies are hierophanies, manifestations of the divine creator impregnating its creation.

After the first vocal reactions to such experiences,¹⁵ the earliest human attempts to comprehend, or at least reproduce, the cosmic cycles appear in the form of animal bones marked with 28-29 notches representing plausibly the lunar cycle – the “Bilzinsleben artefacts” (350,000—250,000 BCE).¹⁶ The moon, ‘[...] appealing to a layer of man’s consciousness that the most corrosive rationalism cannot touch’,¹⁷ writes Eliade, incredibly still grabs the attention of the modern humankind despite our scientific development. I noted on my journal: ‘It doesn’t matter how many times I’ve looked at it [...]: the Moon always seizes my gaze and magically forces me to look at her’.¹⁸ In Italian the moon is feminine and my perception of it is completely influenced by my language. I maintained my native connection of the moon to the feminine principle, “yin”, since ‘Her mysterious synchronism with women’s biological cycle makes her recurring metamorphosis even more significant’.¹⁹ The moon’s variable position and mutable appearance suggested to me that same sense of unpredictability that it provokes in me might have caused the original need to trace and record its motion. I noted down my reaction thusly: ‘Where is the Moon *now*? A suitor can’t really indulge into absent-mindedness, for she does run quickly²⁰ and ‘appears under yet another guise tonight’.²¹

Not only does the moon surprise the observer with a different shape every day, but at times, depending on the weather conditions, it might look, as I commented, ‘*amaze-ing*. She’s surrounded by a multicoloured halo, as if she were using a rainbow as a shield to protect herself from the imminent bite of Rahu [the eclipse]’.²² Let us leave “Rahu’s bite” aside now, in order to consider the moon’s ‘*amaze-ing*’ beauty, its ‘daunting “awefulness” and “majesty”’²³—for these are the



27.10 22:45

¹¹ Otto, R., *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), tr. by J.W. Harvey, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1958, p. 12.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 12ff.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 25ff.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 190ff.

¹⁶ Campion (2008), pp. 7-8.

¹⁷ Eliade, M., *Patterns in Comparative Religions* (1949), tr. by R. Sheed, Sheed & Ward, New York 1958, pp. 125-126. See also Greene, L., *The Luminaries*, Weiser Books, York Beach 1992, pp. 3-5.

¹⁸ Sky journal, 27 October, 22:45.

¹⁹ Sky journal, 22 October, 00:00.

²⁰ Sky journal, 04 November, 00:35.

²¹ Sky journal, 05 November, 00:30.

²² Sky journal, 27 October, 22:45.

²³ Otto (1917), p. 31.

qualities that, according to Otto, make the numinous experience not only a *mysterium tremendum*, but a *mysterium fascinans* as well. As a student during one of this course's seminars confessed, the intrinsic beauty of the *kosmos* – “ornament”, “good order”²⁴ – might generate a longing for a deep connection with it. My observations of the moon – with Jupiter and other constellations – evoked similar feelings; thus, as the moon was waning, I called it ‘The Great Absent: I cannot see the Moon in the evening. A sense of emptiness pervades the sky as she is getting closer and closer to the Sun and cannot be seen over the horizon anymore’.²⁵

The polarity of reactions triggered by the hierophany might be understood in the light of the very nature of the *numen* manifesting itself and perceived by the *homo religiosus*.²⁶ Any body or object charged with numinosity, with that power which Melanesian people call *mana*,²⁷ are not easily approachable and a certain distance must be maintained, for they ‘are “receptacles of power”’, and ‘have a mystical sharing of life with the sacred’, Eliade explains. The perception of such a *mana* emerges in me every time I observe the moon's surface with a telescope. This was my reaction:

Breathtaking. It feels like spying over a forbidden territory. I almost don't dare looking any longer, as I feel a sense of unexplainable fear that prevents me to keep on staring. Am I entitled to nose around a land that I cannot observe with the naked eye? Am I getting too close? Am I seeing too much? I feel an inner urge to lower the “demonic” instrument and maintain a humbler position towards the Moon.²⁸

The ‘wholly other’ is so foreign to the human nature that only a living symbolic (*syn-bállein*, to put together), expression can constitute an acceptable formulation of it—an expression able to preserve an intrinsic dualism without resolving its contradiction.²⁹ As Ernst Cassirer points out, the elaboration of an intellectual analysis must have been preceded by ‘the work of *naming* [...] For it is this process which transforms the world of sense impression, which animals also possess, into a mental world, a world of ideas and meanings’.³⁰ Naming something perceived as mysterious, attractive and daunting at the same time, is the first step towards the comprehension of the phenomenon, as if the ‘knowledge of the name’ gave ‘him who knows it mastery even

²⁴ See entry “κόσμος, ὁ” in Liddell, H.G., Scott, R., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. and augm. by Sir H. Stuart Jones with R. McKenzie, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1940: < <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=ko/smos>>.

²⁵ Sky journal, 08 November, 21:00.

²⁶ Otto (1917), p. 8; Eliade (1965), especially pp. 165ff; Schleiermacher, F., *On Religion. Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799), tr. with intr. by J. Oman, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., London 1893, p. 90.

²⁷ Otto (1917), pp. 1202-121; Eliade (1949), p. 19.

²⁸ Sky journal, 28 October, 20:00 (Italy).

²⁹ For etymology: Onions (1966), p. 895. See also Jung, C.G., *Psychological Types* (1920), tr. by H.G. Baynes, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, London 1923, pp. 602 and 610.

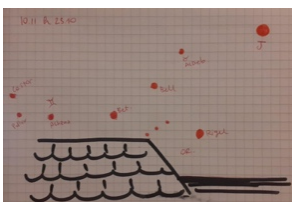
³⁰ Cassirer, E., *Language and Myth* (1925), tr. by S.K. Langer, Dover Publications Inc, New York 1953, p. 28.

over the being and will of the god'.³¹ Indeed, recognising a specific celestial body as “the moon”, “Jupiter” or “Deneb” and identifying it in the sky reduces the distance between the observer and the *numinous* object:³²

Aldebaran, no doubts, standing out due to its reddish colour. Being able to catch the red eye of the bull always gives me great excitement. [...] The more I can recognise them [stars and constellations], the more I feel a sense of fulfillment and I am profoundly moved. [...] while my deep emotion remained intact, something else occurred in me: I felt at home. Those fascinating lights were no more unfathomable; calling them by a name and imagining their mythological features made them closer, familiar, protective.³³

Jean Seznec observed, though, that the act of calling the celestial bodies with mythological and divine names encouraged the Greek to perceive them as gods.³⁴ Despite in Plato's *Timaeus* the planets are not yet identified as their “owners” – he mentions ‘the one [planet] called *sacred to Hermes*’³⁵ (the italic is mine) – the identification in Greece came about in the V century BCE.³⁶ Besides with this Greek process of nomenclature, during which celestial bodies also received titles and epithets describing their physical aspect,³⁷ a progressive fusion of astronomy and mythology took place.³⁸ This influences my view of the stars: ‘Here it is, the Great Hunter of the sky [Orion]!’³⁹ or:

Together with the Pleiads, I can see Cassiopeia, Perseus, Andromeda and Pegasus. [...] I'm pervaded by a sense of awe. The very myth of Perseus discloses itself right in front of my eyes, right above us, and yet only a few people can recognise it. I can almost envisage Pegasus galloping eternally towards Andromeda, while Perseus saves her from Cetus under the concerned gaze of her mother Cassiopeia. Their *mythos* is always there in the dark sky, guiding humans for millennia, perpetually repeating itself.⁴⁰



³¹ Cassirer (1925), p. 48.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 81.

³³ Sky journal, 24 October, 23:30.

³⁴ Seznec, J., *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* (1940), tr. by B.F. Sessions, Bollingen Series XXXVIII, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1972, p. 37.

³⁵ Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, tr., with intr. and app., by D. Lee, Penguin Books, London 1977, p. 52.

³⁶ Seznec (1940), p. 39.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

³⁹ Sky journal, 10 November, 23:10.

⁴⁰ Sky journal, 22 October, 00:00.

Not only is the sky pregnant of a sacred character due to its very qualities – of being “high”, “vertical”, “far”, “unreachable”, “ethereal”⁴¹ – and of being the domicile of the cosmos’ ‘true inhabitants’.⁴² Just like the daily return of the sun at dawn – or the arrival of the spring – is a sign of divine immortality, so the monthly cycle of the moon and the circular return of planets and constellations in the same positions are signs of a renewal which, according to Eliade, ‘re-presents the [archetypal] cosmogony’;⁴³ to me, their repetitive and recurring pattern is also felt as reassuring:

The Moon! Finally, after so many days of absence! Her appearance is comforting, as if a golden Great Mother guarding over me were back again in her throne, providing rhythm to my trivial existence.⁴⁴

In his *Patterns in Comparative Religions*, Eliade presents several examples of rituals and rites which, following the rhythm of the celestial bodies, aim at reproducing an archetypal cosmogony that also takes place and is actualised repeatedly in nature. The existence – and exactitude – of cosmological rituals reveal a deep concern to establish a meaningful connection with the heavens by means of a precise understanding of its cycles, and to partake of the divine Being;⁴⁵ the development of astrological/astronomical sciences is the immediate consequence of it; casting an astrological chart, for instance, seems to capture a snapshot of the *Being* and bring it into the world of *becoming* – Aristotelically speaking – by means of specific space-time coordinates, but there are archeological proofs of the accuracy of such sky observations much earlier than the first natal charts, as Stone Age buildings in the British islands show⁴⁶.

Similarly to the power of denomination and recognition, the ability of predicting the motion of a star would assure control over natural events. Such a skill implies the conception of a predictable cosmos based on mathematical harmony, balance, and proportion, as Pythagoras and his followers assumed. I wrote ‘using my arms as a compass to find the Moon is fulfilling and manifests the cosmic harmony that gives rhythm to our existences’.⁴⁷

Any irregularity of the cosmic pattern such as eclipses might be experienced as a threat for the cosmic harmony. In the ancient Egyptian society, from the Old Kingdom onwards, the pharaohs had to ensure the maintenance of the cosmic order (*ma’at*),⁴⁸ archetype and heavenly reflection of the social order; any

⁴¹ Eliade (1949), p. 99.

⁴² De Santillana, G., *Reflections on Men and Ideas*, The MIT Press, Massachussets 1968, pp. 320, 326, 334. The translation is mine.

⁴³ Eliade (1949), pp. 154ff, 412-413.

⁴⁴ Sky journal, 22 November. The cloudy sky made it impossible to me to catch its sight even though it was already visibile after setting.

⁴⁵ Campion (2008), p. 73.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

⁴⁷ Sky journal, 22.11.

⁴⁸ Assman, J., *The Mind of Egypt. History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs* (1996), tr. by A. Jenkins, Metropolitan Books – Henry Holt & Company LLC, New York 2002, pp. 108-109.

exception to it passed over in silence⁴⁹ in the hope to avoid the subversion of the human world's order. My recent encounter with the partial eclipse of the moon was characterised by expectation and excitement, but a slight feeling of impending menace was present in me as well:



28.10 21:0 Lunar eclipse and Jupiter

I will remain vigilant to make sure that I will grasp the *kairos*. [...] I can see Rahu slowly biting the lower part of the Moon. I can't help imagining the dragon moving towards it with its jaws wide open.⁵⁰

Mythology filled my experience again as I imagined the Hindu *Danava* that, according to the Mahabharata, 'swalloweth Surya [Sun] and Soma [Moon]'.⁵¹

The need to 'grasp the *kairos*', the opportune moment, comes from a vision of the universe as a rigorous clockwork based on 'the spindle of Necessity',⁵² as Plato narrates in the *Republic* (360 BCE), which regulates all the cosmic revolutions according to exact mathematical rules⁵³ and Pythagorean harmony. The *kairos* becomes 'experience of fate as rigorous measure'⁵⁴ of the entire cosmos. The secret of Pythagorean philosophy is the comprehension that the 'holy Number, which is the fountainhead of all things', writes Giorgio De Santillana, is 'an archetype connatural to the divine mind'.⁵⁵ The *furor mensurandi*⁵⁶ of astrologers and occultists from the Middle-Age onwards seems to demonstrate the attempt to understand, even to control the cosmos' geometrical rules. I found the manifestation of this in my journal, as I wanted to identify a star:

[...] impossible, because Jupiter is in opposition to the Sun now; since the Sun was about to rise, the Moon was slightly less than 90° apart, and the only planet positioned, astrologically speaking, between Leo and Scorpio was indeed Venus at the end of Virgo.⁵⁷



When I relate the sky with the astrological chart, I realise how deep the sense of belonging to a complex clockwork is felt in me. As Van Gogh claims, it is enchanting. I still find it difficult to understand whether I propend more for a Stoic immanentism or a Platonic idealism, but I see how the Hermetic statement "as

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 205.

⁵⁰ 28.10 h 20-20.45 (Italy).

⁵¹ *The Mahabharata of Vyasa*, Book I: *Adi Parva*, tr. K.M. Ganguli, 1883-1896, p. 61.
< <https://archive.sacred-texts.com/hin/m01/m01020.htm>>.

⁵² Plato, *The Republic*, tr. by B. Jowett, Book X, <<https://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.11.x.html>>, p. 15/17.

⁵³ De Santillana (1968), p. 326.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 333.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 334.

⁵⁷ Sky journal, 07 November, 05:55.

above so below” – the charm that cradles my sky observations’,⁵⁸ coming from the Hellenistic Egypt, has an impact on my view of a cosmos that ‘reflects my inner harmony like an immense mirror’.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Sky journal, 04 November.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

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