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Essay Based on a Sky Journal

In an 1888 letter to his brother Theo, Vincent van Gogh writes of ordinary life: his diet, his painting technique, the ruinous cost of living in Arles.¹ As he signs off, his tone suddenly shifts and he counsels Theo to be 'clearly aware of the stars and infinity on high. Then life seems almost enchanted after all.'² The artist suggests that awareness through observation allows us to perceive more than everyday reality—it opens doors to the 'delight' and 'mystery' of enchantment.³ But is it truly possible to 'paint infinity' over everyday life as van Gogh counsels?⁴ In an article discussing the notions of enchantment, John Rosegrant suggests it is not. He makes a distinction between the 'traditional' societies who view the world as 'a great enchanted garden imbued with meaning and mysterious spiritual powers', and 'modern' societies whose rationalisation strips them of any enchantment.⁵ The aim of this sky journal is to test van Gogh's assertion and answer the question, 'If I observe, can I too perceive enchantment?' Through the awareness I experienced by observing our star the sun empirically, I found that I could experience sensations of enchantment, suggesting that van Gogh's advice has merit.

Methodology

For seven days between the hours of 5:00-6:00 pm, I observed the sunset as it filtered through the mango trees outside my due-west and south facing office windows. The office is located in the Red Sea city of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia at coordinates 21°,39°, in the Tropic of Cancer. Seated at my computer as I journaled my observations, I wrote without any preconceived structure. My intention was to discover which subjects, ideas, or observations came through with the greatest frequency or force. Upon completion of the journaling I used an inductive strategy of active reading to analyze my journal entries and code the themes and ideas I found, as suggested by Monique Hennink in *Qualitative Research Methods*.⁶ These codes were sorted by frequency of appearance and then grouped by type, resulting in two distinct categories: the empirical, observable world, and the transitions which mark the passage to the imagination.

The Empirical: Light, Life, and Colour

Sunlight is not distributed equally on the earth. The tropics receive the highest average daily total radiation on the planet.⁷ This sunlight is the starting point for the journal

¹ Vincent van Gogh and Ronald de Leeuwenhoek, *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*. London: Penguin, New Ed, 2003, pp. 414-417 <<https://www.vlebooks-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/Vleweb/Product/Index/662139?page=0>> [accessed 19 November 2021].

² Gogh and Leeuwenhoek, 'The Letters', p. 417.

³ 'Enchantment', *Oxford Dictionary of English*, ed. by Angus Stevenson, Third Ed., Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0980950?rkey=c1rVWN&result=1> [accessed 22 November 2021].

⁴ Gogh and Leeuwenhoek, 'The Letters', p. 415.

⁵ John Rosegrant, 'Tolkien's Dialogue between Enchantment and Loss', *Mythlore*, 33 (2015), 127-138, p. 128 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26815993>> [accessed 25 November 2021].

⁶ Monique Hennink, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*, Second edn., Los Angeles: SAGE, 2020, p. 224.

⁷ Farrington Daniels, 'Direct use of the Sun's Energy', *American Scientist*, 55 (1967), 15-47, p. 20 <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/27836715>> [accessed 25 November 2021].

and is also responsible for a moment of delight which crystallised this project for me. On the first entry (6/11/2021), I observed what resembled a tiny cosmos formed by rays of light piercing the tight foliage of the trees framing my windows: 'In the tiny gaps between the leaves twinkle little 'stars'. There is one bare spot where all the colours of the spectrum burst outwards like the corona of a miniature sun.' Those tiny stars formed a new constellation in my imagination (Fig. 1).

On the final two days of the journal it rained in Jeddah—an exceptional occurrence we see only a few days a year. On these days the decreased illumination brought by the rare cloud cover stimulates a type of alertness that feels almost uncanny, a feeling I attempt to convey on November 12th: 'There are new areas of shade and dark—the trees that sparkled now look mysterious and shaggy and press up against my windows like something watching me.' Without the bright illumination it felt as if I should stay alert for all the things that might be concealed in shadows.



Figure 1. *Mini Cosmos*, 17 November, 2021. Image: Lama Al-Saud.

The dusty mango trees host an abundance of life: birds, insects, and the cats which nap in their branches on hot afternoons. Their leaves 'look sad when the sun goes down' or 'rejoice in their rain-washed shine' (9/11/2021--13/11/2021). On the 8th I write,

Today the light is radiant and golden, reflecting dots like coins that shine on the window glass and shift with the sway of the breeze. The low angle of the setting sun bathes everything in the colour of ancient kings—the trees, the air, even my own skin. A freshly gilded bird perches on a branch looking straight at me. We share this quiet moment, this golden air, two dissimilar creatures united briefly in the fading day.

Although the spell is quickly broken, for a moment it felt as if the bird and I were communicating our quiet enjoyment to one another, and perhaps we did. Sarah Stebbins suggests, 'Humans and other species have evolved in tandem from the same primitive

creatures in response to the same environmental pressures. Their behavioral patterns have evolved in tandem, as well'.⁸ But my inclination to anthropomorphise felt less like animal behaviourism and more like the animism of enchantment; sharing that moment briefly felt like understanding.

Eric Kandel states, 'our brain processes different colors as having distinct emotional characteristics, but our reaction to the colors varies, depending upon the context in which we see them'.⁹ Culturally, we consider the golden hour of sunset one of nature's best features precisely because of the hues. The journal contains nearly thirty references to colour, chief among them gold, and spanning all the warmer frequencies between the extremes of pale yellow to crimson. For example, in successive entries: 'the light between the trees is still pale yellow and it is slowly shifting into golden' and, 'the very last traces of red are low and dark, painting a deeply saturated crimson finale that fades in time to black' (10/11/2021–11/11/2021). The shifting hues paint a sort of narrative that has a physical effect on my body and mind. I find myself releasing the tension of the day and opening a different, less analytical part of myself.

On the rainy days the journal records a different effect: the gloom feels devoid of colour. A gray day is a cause for jubilation for a desert culture, and the last two days of the journal reflect this: 'this gray is dark and strangely exciting when compared to our norm, the relentless bullying of the tropical sky' (12/11/2021). Associating emotions with colour is supported by Elliot and Maier who state, 'Color . . . communicates specific information . . . [and is] grounded in two basic sources: learned associations . . . and biologically based proclivities to respond to particular colors in particular ways in particular situations.'¹⁰ My culture has taught me to welcome a gray, cloudy sky's promise of rain, but this is a situation rare enough that it can feel eerie and strange.

The Enchantment in Transition

The analysis of the empirical led to a significant finding that appeared several times in the entries: the notion that transitions (such as in time and place) can induce the sensation of enchantment. Perhaps this is because liminality is inherently unstable; transitional spaces are gateways to elsewhere. Johnston states that many civilisations have considered liminal points such as crossroads, gates, doors, and the like, 'uncertain places requiring special rituals' because such in-between spaces serve to both 'structure the world' and exist as 'a sort of permanent chaos' simultaneously.¹¹

A sunset is neither day nor night; like a sunrise, it transitions us between the two. Islam recognizes the liminal quality of the sunrise and sunset, and assigns prayers for each. On November 10th, I write, 'I contemplate the importance of transition periods, and

⁸ Sarah Stebbins, 'Anthropomorphism', *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 69 (1993), 113-122, p. 212 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4320374>> [accessed 25 November 2021].

⁹ Eric R. Kandel, 'Color and the Brain', *Reductionism in Art and Brain Science* (Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 143-154, p. 144 <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/10.7312/kand17962.13>> [accessed 24 November 2021].

¹⁰ Andrew J. Elliot, and Markus A. Maier, 'Color and Psychological Functioning', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 16 (2007), p. 251 <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/20183210>> [accessed 23 November 2021].

¹¹ S. I. Johnston, 'Crossroads', *Zeitschrift Für Papyrologie Und Epigraphik*, 88 (1991), 217-224, pp. 217-218 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20187554>> [accessed 26 November 2021].

remember the angels of the prayers'. This reference is to the *Sahih al-Bukhari*, a Hadith that mentions the prayers of *fajr* (dawn) and *maghreb* (sunset) and the changing shifts of angels which attend them:

Angels come to you in succession by night and day . . . [when they] ascend to Heaven Allah asks them . . . "In what state did you leave my servants?" The angels reply: "When we left them they were praying and when we reached them, they were praying."¹²

Implicit in this quotation is the notion that the angels are being kind to focus on these transitional prayers and leave out all the rest. My grandmother also treated sunset as a special time, 'switch[ing] off the radio and television . . . to greet the angels and welcome the transition to evening' (10/11/2021). Indeed, the Quran describes the night as a sort of refuge from the day: *وَجَعَلْنَا اللَّيْلَ مَعَاشًا* And We have made the night a garment [to shield us from the sun] / *وَبَنَيْنَا فَوْقَكُمْ سَبْعًا شِدَادًا* And We have made the day for livelihood'.¹³ This quotation illustrates our cultural tendency to welcome nightfall as a time to rest eyes and minds from the challenges of the day.

In addition to the liminality of the sunset, the journal discusses another type of transition as well, the movement from earth to space. On November 7th I write, 'The sunset on Mars is blue, and on Uranus it's my favourite colour, turquoise. I long to see these things with my own eyes—but then, who would I be?' This question of identity is an allusion to *Overview Effect* which states: 'When our place in the universe changes, so does our world view'.¹⁴ Any significant change of place actually changes us. As White reports,

Then and now, all those who have traveled into orbit or to the Moon have been born on Earth, have reached maturity on Earth, and gone into outer space as adults. For that reason, seeing the planet from a distance was something of a shock for all of them.¹⁵

The astronauts who have made this transition are technologically sophisticated—scientists, engineers, test pilots—the sort of people Rosegrant says 'control everything by means of calculation'.¹⁶ And yet, plentiful evidence exists that they have felt a sort of enchantment in their transition to space. White tells the same story many times over: those who depart the earth share a spiritual experience, an 'awe', for which humans have not evolved language.¹⁷ For example, the first Saudi astronaut Prince Sultan Bin Salman states:

I did go up, I did practice my faith, the rituals, very simple things, whereby you resort to God and think about Him. I did think about what the Koran, our book, my religion, has told me so many times, when I was looking at the Earth, the view. It is really the

¹² Muhammad al-Bukhari, 'Superiority of the 'Asr Prayer', *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 555, Book 9, Hadith 32, translated Dr. M. Muhsin Khan <<https://sunnah.com/bukhari:555>> [accessed 19 November 2021].

¹³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Study Quran*, New York: Harper Collins, 2015, pp. 1464-1465.

¹⁴ Frank White, *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution*, Third Edition. Reston, VA: American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, 2014, p. 319.

¹⁵ White, *Overview Effect*, p. 3.

¹⁶ Rosegrant, 'Tolkien's Dialogue', p. 127.

¹⁷ White, *Overview Effect*, p. 4.

most incredible thing. . . . There are no words to describe it; it is beyond description.¹⁸

Transported to space by state-of-the-art modern technology, he finds himself entranced into silence by the 'great, enchanted garden' of stars.¹⁹

Conclusion

Despite Rosegrant's statement to the contrary, enchantment is not the unique province of traditional societies; even 'modern' people are sensitive to sensations of enchantment provided they are fully aware of the natural world. In fact, some of the most powerful testimonials to the experience of enchantment come from the most technologically advanced people among us: the astronauts who have made the transition to space. Through a seven day journal I discovered that by observing empirical phenomena such as light, life, and colour, I could also experience non-empirical phenomena of the sort van Gogh promises: 'infinity' painted over ordinary existence. The journal ultimately revealed to me that the sunset, like all liminal events, is a type of enchantment in itself.

¹⁸ White, *The Overview Effect*, p. 319.

¹⁹ Rosegrant, 'Tolkien's Dialogue', p. 128.

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