

# Enchantment, Place and Space: Implications for Cultural Astronomy

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**Abstract.** This paper considers the experience of enchantment, especially in terms of relationality and ‘concrete magic’. It then turns to place and moment, key elements of that experience, as distinct from space and time. In these respects, enchantment cannot be captured by the modern division (with older roots) into material vs. spiritual; it is indefeasibly both. Turning to the implications for cultural astronomy, I argue that they render indefensible the assumption of the sky or cosmos as an inert, passive backdrop for human meanings to be projected onto them. Meaning, as pointed up by enchantment as an especially intense kind of meaning, is necessarily participatory and relational, which means that agency and subjectivity cannot be confined to humans alone.

## **Introduction**

I shall consider each of the three ideas in my title – enchantment, place and space – starting with enchantment and proceeding to place and space, before considering some implications for cultural astronomy. So, what is enchantment?<sup>1</sup> First and foremost, it is an experience of wonder: sheer existential wonder.<sup>2</sup> Its intensity can vary from charm, to delight, to the full-blown joy of radical enchantment. Although in theory anyone and anything can enchant, it tends to happen, being the kind of animal we are,

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<sup>1</sup> For a longer and fuller answer, see my *Enchantment: Wonder in Modern Life* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2019), and various papers on my website, at <http://www.patrickcurry.co.uk/>.

<sup>2</sup> See R.W. Hepburn, *‘Wonder’ and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984).

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in certain contexts and ways, notably love, nature, religion, art of all kinds, food and drink, learning, and sports.

Like everything that is something (not nothing, or anything), wonder has a recursively formative contrary: will and its variants, notably the will-to-power and power-over. The experience of wonder is as unlike as possible from that in which the chief desire and intention is to do something, make someone do something, or make something happen.

One evergreen authority on enchantment is Max Weber, who famously asserted, almost exactly a hundred years ago, that ‘The fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world”’. Key to that process is the belief (note, not fact) ‘that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation’.<sup>3</sup> So the will I just mentioned, combined with the belief that one can turn the world into a calculable object in a programme of mastery, is the chief engine of disenchantment. (We shall return to this point.)

### **Relationality**

Wonder is always wonder-*at*: an encounter, a meeting, across a gap of difference, with an other.<sup>4</sup> The other may be another human, another animal or plant, or a place, sight, sound, smell, taste, texture, or idea. But whatever it is, in enchantment it becomes, and is realised to already be, another person, with a distinct personality and therefore an ensemble of relatively enduring qualities. (There is no defensible reason to confine personhood and personality to human beings alone.)

So enchantment is fundamentally relational. Differences between you and the other don’t disappear; in fact, it is important that they don’t. Without that liminal gap, there can be no encounter, and without that, no enchantment. As W.H. Auden puts it, ‘For there to be one there first must be two’.<sup>5</sup> But the boundaries become highly permeable, crossable in both directions, and in that crossing something fundamental emerges as deeply shared.

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<sup>3</sup> Max Weber, in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp.155, 139.

<sup>4</sup> Gap: see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort and trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968). Encounter: see Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> W.H. Auden, *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden, Prose*, Vol. 6, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p.343.

The deeper the enchantment the more the relationship is mutual, with both or all parties apprehended as well as apprehending, affected as well as affecting. Traffic that is one-way only (paradigmatically, as in a pure master-slave relation) does not enchant. Enchantment is therefore wholly incompatible with cool hyper-separation, in which one party exercises complete control over the other and is free to manipulate them without being affected in turn. I call this mode ‘Apollonian’.<sup>6</sup>

Nor is it the opposite, however: orgasmic unity or an ecstatic merging, in which all differences are obliterated, so there are no longer two persons engaged in experiencing, relating, discovering, creating, or indeed existing as such. I call this mode ‘Dionysian’.

It follows that as an instance of true relationship – and all the more so as a particularly intense one – in enchantment, no one is in charge. In other words, it is wild, or what Anthony Thorley has called ‘unbiddable’.<sup>7</sup> It cannot be used, without changing it into something very different.

This dynamic is one that enchantment shares with the natural world, where again no one is in control; the complex concatenations of qualities and powers at work constitute their own subjects and agents, so outcomes are never certain, final, or complete. So there is an elective affinity between enchantment and wild nature or, we could say, ecology in its broadest and deepest sense. And although it’s not a point I can develop here, I would say that all the kinds of enchantment I mentioned earlier (love, etc.) are ultimately different kinds of natural enchantment.<sup>8</sup>

### Concrete magic

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<sup>6</sup> I have borrowed ‘Apollonian’ and ‘Dionysian’ from Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* but given them different meanings (as he did) (Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘The Birth of Tragedy, or Hellenism and pessimism’, trans. William A. Haussmann, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Vol. 1, ed. Oscar Levy (Edinburgh: T.N. Foulis, 1910).

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Thorley et al., ‘Clarifying Divinatory Dialogue: A Proposal for a Distinction Between Practitioner Divination and Essential Divination’, in Patrick Curry, *Divination: Perspectives for a New Millennium* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp.265–74 (p.260).

<sup>8</sup> See my ‘Afterword: The Enchantment of Nature and the Nature of Enchantment’, in Lis McLoughlin, ed., *Honoring Nature: An Anthology of Writers and Artists Festival Writers* (Wendell, MA: Human Error Publishing, 2021), pp.142–47, and a longer version forthcoming on my website (<http://www.patrickcurry.co.uk/>) in June 2021.

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Another important characteristic of enchantment is summed up in Max Weber's description of it as 'concrete' 'magic'.<sup>9</sup> What this means is that enchantment is both precisely particular, circumstantial, embodied, even carnal, and inexhaustible, mysterious and spiritual. Let's unpack this terse but rich term, starting with the 'concrete' part. It has two interlinked aspects. One concerns what we usually call 'time' and the other what we usually call 'space'. But as we shall see, those words are misleading in this context.

### Space/Place

Unlike some mystical experience, enchantment doesn't take place nowhere in particular, a cloudy, vague elsewhere. It always and only occurs in a very particular place, a here which is not only distinctive but unique. For this reason, enchantment occurs not in a space but in, and as, a place. Or, since the Greeks had names for everything, not *topos* but *chora*.

J.R.R. Tolkien defines *Faërie* – his term for enchantment – as 'the realm or state in which fairies have their being', but, he adds – and this is crucial – '*Faërie* contains many things besides elves and fays... it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves... when we are enchanted'.<sup>10</sup> *Faërie* is thus the place you find yourself when you are enchanted; it also what the place where you are becomes. (This double dynamic, of both creating and discovering, never only one or the other, is typical of enchantment.)

But we can't stay there. For it follows from the concreteness of place that, however enchanted, it is subject to the inherent contingency of this sub-lunary or fallen or *samsāric* world. It cannot stay the same completely or for long. And from our side, those who are enchanted, we remain humans, not elves. Technology is as much a part of human nature as wonder, and we can only live somewhere between the two, and – if we are lucky – visit *Faërie* betimes, or be visited by it (by invitation only).<sup>11</sup>

It follows that a healthy relationship with enchantment needs a strong ego, to let go – or not. Karen Blixen, as she watched from aboard the

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<sup>9</sup> Gerth and Mills, *From Max Weber*, p.282.

<sup>10</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', in *Tree and Leaf* (1964; London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), pp.9–73 (p.14). For a recent edition, see Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, eds, *Tolkien on Fairy-stories*, expanded edition (London: HarperCollins, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> See Jan Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); second edition published in 2010 by Gaspereau Press in Kentville, Nova Scotia.

departing ship as it sailed away from her beloved Kenya, found that, 'It was not I who was going away, I did not have it in my power to leave Africa, but it was the country that was slowly and gravely withdrawing from me, like the sea in ebb-tide'.<sup>12</sup>

### **Time/ Moment**

Let's turn to the 'time' aspect of enchantment's concreteness. Classically, the experience of enchantment takes place in a moment. Like its place, from which it is analytically distinguishable but with which, in practice, it is inseparably entangled, it is a very particular moment, often 'short but deep': a now which is also not only distinctive but unique.<sup>13</sup> Enchantment thus happens not in time but in, and as, a moment. In other words, not *chronos*, but *kairos*.

By the way, if I say, 'Such moments are *experienced* as unique', I risk being misunderstood as implying they are 'subjectively' perceived as unique but aren't really. But if I simply say they *are* unique, I risk being misunderstood as making an *ex cathedra* pronouncement on the 'objective' nature of moments. The truth – which we are not trained to apprehend – is that they are unique because they are experienced to be so, and they are experienced to be so because they are.

It is a commonplace that in moments of enchantment, time stops or stands still. In the words of Louis MacNeice's poem 'Meeting Point', 'Time was away and somewhere else./ The waiter did not come, the clock/ Forgot them.../ Time was away and somewhere else'.<sup>14</sup> But, although I'm reluctant to even qualify the spell, let alone break it, honesty compels me to point out that time doesn't actually stop so much as slow down, however drastically. At some point, the eddy, after pausing in its protected little bay, gradually rejoins the swirling stream which never ceases.

Tolkien's account of Frodo's entry into Lothlórien, the heart of enchantment in Middle-earth, includes a profound meditation on what enchantment does to time. For example, '[I]t seemed to him that he had stepped over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days, and was now walking in a world that was no more... Frodo stood still, hearing far off great seas upon beaches that had long ago been washed away, and sea-birds crying whose race had perished from the earth...'. Yet even Galadriel

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<sup>12</sup> Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa* (1937; New York: Random House, 1970), p.381.

<sup>13</sup> The artist Etel Adnan, in exhibition notes.

<sup>14</sup> Louise MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. Peter McDonald (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), pp.183–84.

admits that, in the end, ‘Lothlórien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away’.<sup>15</sup>

The upshot of this double dose of concreteness – place plus moment – is that enchantment always passes. Indeed, its passing is already inherent in the very place and moment it happens, just as ‘goodbye’ is in every ‘hello’. Sometimes, for those blessed, or cursed, with fine apperception, even the most joyful enchantment is shot through by a poignant melancholy. It doesn’t destroy the joy, but neither is it completely obscured. The wonder of childhood is continually becoming ‘grown-up’; wild nature is always falling to so-called ‘development’; the Elves, exemplars of enchantment, are forever passing over the Sea, leaving us behind on the shore of Middle-earth in the ‘Age of Men’, now known as the Anthropocene. On the other hand, we may be glad there is still, inextinguishably, at least the possibility of enchantment.

### ‘Magic’

What of the ‘magic’ part of Weber’s resonant term? Don’t be misled by the word itself. Much unnecessary confusion has resulted from confusing magic with enchantment. Tolkien pointed out the difference long ago. ‘Magic’, he said, ‘is not an art but a technique; its desire is power in this world, domination of things and wills’. Whereas ‘the primal desire at the heart of Faerie [is] the realization, of imagined wonder’.<sup>16</sup> Realisation in two senses: enchantment becoming real, and realising that it is so. And ‘independent of the conceiving mind’ is a reminder that enchantment is not primarily cognitive, or even epistemological. It involves the whole being, including its vital interdependencies.

Thus (as Tolkien well knew), the proto-Indo-European root for ‘magic’ and ‘machine’ is the same word: *\*magh*, meaning to have power. Whether the means are supposedly material or occult, the goal of mastery remains. And as the philosopher John Casey says, ‘Magic has a particular connection with the exercise of the will; it is a particularly direct and unmediated working of the will upon the world’.<sup>17</sup>

What Weber means by ‘magic’ is rather the spiritual mystery and meaning – unplumbable, inexhaustible, ineffable – of the sensuous concrete world. But this aspect of enchantment is decidedly not

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<sup>15</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Vol. 3 (London: HarperCollins), pp.349, 373.

<sup>16</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, pp.49–50 (p.18).

<sup>17</sup> John Casey, *Pagan Virtue: An Essay in Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p.122.

supernatural or transcendent and therefore essentially different from the world that can be grasped by the senses. It is not something which must therefore be added to it, or which can be withheld from it. On the contrary: enchantment's spirituality is deeply natural (as Tolkien remarks of the Elves) and wholly immanent: it is that worlds and its things' inner 'lining and depth', in the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>18</sup> It only inheres in and as this world and those things – not in or as a Heaven, or realm of Ideas, or Mind, or indeed a scientifically-determined material reality which cannot be directly experienced by an embodied mind. It's only the Platonists, whether idealist or scientific, who consider that a grievous limitation. They don't want to know, and most of us have no idea, of the body's extraordinary sensitivity and capacities.

### **Enchantment in Modernity**

Enchantment is thus both concrete and magic, and neither one alone. That's why it cannot be corralled into the modern agenda of mastery, which proceeds by splitting everything up into two competing monisms, either concrete or 'magic', each with its priestly caste: scientific materialists for one, religious supernaturalists for the other. They fight over the prize but secretly conspire in the deceit that it's possible to carry it off at all. That's why Gregory Bateson calls the 'physical'/ 'material' fetish of materialists and the 'psychological'/ 'spiritual' fetish of supernaturalists, 'two species of superstition [which] feed each other'.<sup>19</sup>

The philosophical roots of this programme lie in Platonism, which asserts a radical difference between the spiritual and physical worlds before trying to deduce the latter from, and reduce it to, the former. This distinction, and the hypervaluation of spirituality, fed directly into Pauline and Augustinian Christianity, thereby becoming massively influential. Then Cartesian dualism opened the door to science 'owning' the material world while assigning the spiritual world to God, thereby keeping alive the ambitions of representatives of each side to overcome the other. Hegel tried to organise an idealist takeover, which Marx then inverted in order to put materialism on top... and so on. Only a few modern philosophers have questioned the programme as a whole, in either variant. Any list would have to include Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, Max Weber, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, Val Plumwood, A.N. Whitehead and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

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<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, p.149.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels Fear: An Investigation into the Nature and Meaning of the Sacred* (London: Rider, 1987), p.51.

Weber identified, as the primary act of disenchantment, the splitting of concrete magic into its two named components, and valorising one of them.<sup>20</sup> Doing so generates a whole set of destructively stupid questions which disenchant, certainly not for the benefit of the enchanted. For example, ‘Is this (whatever it may be) real, or imaginary?’, ‘Is it physical, or mental?’, ‘Is it absolutely true knowledge, or utter delusion?’. And so on. No answers can be given to these questions in the terms in which they are posed without seriously distorting the nature of enchantment; it is, in the words of Henri Bortoft, ‘a “non-Cartesian” event which happens upstream before the separation into subject and object’.<sup>21</sup>

As concrete magic, enchantment therefore cannot survive the operation to separate them. But by the same token, it keeps popping up anew to defy it. For example, enchantment partly creates and partly reveals a truth about the enchanting other, namely their particular priceless and intrinsic value. So it is not only ‘subjective’. But to become real, it also requires someone particular, in that moment and place, to *be* enchanted and value accordingly. So it is not wholly ‘objective’ either.

Enchantment thus reminds us of a broader and deeper truth about life itself. Wittgenstein lays it out. Life, he says, is not merely physiological (these days, neurophysiological). Nor is it merely psychological; rather, ‘Life is the world’.<sup>22</sup>

### **Mythos/ Logos**

I may seem to have implied that time-vs-moment and space-vs-place are each pairs of opposites, but the opposition is not actually symmetrical. The reason is that no matter how ingenious we may be, up to and including the invention of binary code, digital operations and algorithms, we are and remain analogue animals: embodied, embedded, ecological. It is impossible for us to live in, let alone as, the mathematical abstractions of pure space or pure time. Proust’s masterpiece would have been more accurately entitled *In Search of Lost Moments*. But we can and do live in and as moments and places, however imperfectly. So for us, time and space are peculiar kinds of moment and place, each marked by their disenchanted impersonality.

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<sup>20</sup> Gerth and Mills, *From Max Weber*, p.282. (orig: Weber, *From MW*, p.282.)

<sup>21</sup> Henri Bortoft, *Taking Appearance Seriously. The Dynamic Way of Seeing in Goethe and European Thought* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2012), p.103.

<sup>22</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, trans. G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), p.77.

Thus, in our experience as living beings, place includes space but not the reverse, while moment includes time but not the reverse. Experience is qualitative – what we experience are just *qualia* – so we cannot experience the mathematical abstractions of time and space as such, but only as peculiar kinds of moments and places – usually ones marked by their *lack* of meaning, beginning with boredom, extending into lifelessness, and terminating in nihilism. In Kenneth Burke’s resonant phrase, they are ‘rotten with perfection’.<sup>23</sup>

The failure to be or become digital beings should not be a cause of despair. On the contrary: it means that although vulnerable, enchantment is also indestructible. Its potential is inherent in being alive. It is only possible because we are these odd, limited, finite Earthlings.

Now the four modes we have been discussing can be encompassed by just two. Place and moment together constitute *mythos*, while space and time together constitute *logos*. And these two apparent opposites are also asymmetrical. *Logos* pretends to have disposed of *mythos*, but its binary and algorithmic abstractions are philosophical cheques which, in William James’s bracingly blunt metaphor, can never be cashed in the currency of life.<sup>24</sup> They are only valid in the necromantic calculations of modernist disenchantment. And that term – necromancy – is no mere rhetorical conceit; despite its rationalist trappings, the *logos* of modernity is pervaded by the will of magic.

By the same token, *logos* should not be considered a full contrary of *mythos*, let alone its conqueror. Why? Because *logos* is itself a profoundly mythic – and specifically Apollonian – claim. In the words of the modern Irish mystic John Moriarty, ‘myth not maths is the mother tongue’. And when we are living intensely, we are *ipso facto* living mythically. That includes, although it is not limited to, enchantment. But when we are disenchanted, that does not turn us into units of pure *logos* (although that is what the transhumanists would like). No, we are simply humans oppressed by the lack of enchantment – that is, intrinsic values in our lives and worlds which do not depend on their market-value.

### **Cultural Astronomy**

Now let’s consider the implications of the preceding discussion for cultural astronomy. A founding premise of the field, as outlined by Clive Ruggles

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<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966), p.16.

<sup>24</sup> William James, *Pragmatism: The Works of William James* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 68.

and Nicholas Saunders in 1993, was that the sky and its contents are a passive and invariant set of natural objects, themselves meaningless, onto which individuals and cultures ‘project’ or ‘assign’ various meanings, thus ‘culturally constructing’ a meaningful universe.<sup>25</sup> Or in the words of an Information Handbook for the MA in Cultural Astronomy, ‘We study the many ways in which human beings have used the sky as a theatrical backdrop to tell stories and create meaning’.<sup>26</sup> The sky and everything in it are thus cast as set of resources for us clever and imaginative human beings to use however we will and can, being otherwise unconstrained.

More recently, Ruggles – building on the work of Nicholas Campion – has sought to soften and qualify this constructionism, advocating open-mindedness, respect for phenomenological experience, and reflexivity in considering one’s own theoretical commitments.<sup>27</sup> I’m afraid I remain sceptical that these rather subjective measures would suffice to meet the objection I am raising. If they are really undertaken seriously, the only honest and consistent result would be to abandon the customary privilege of modern physical science, and of the social science model it underwrites, and accept that it is no more or less than another form of life alongside those it studies – albeit one which, unlike them, has long denied and systematically obscured its own contingency. As Ruggles himself seems to acknowledge, that is a big task.

One thing that might make it easier, however, is that the cultural relativism which understandably worries him does not necessarily follow. There is no room to develop the point here, but there is some excellent intellectual support for perspectivism and pluralism which do not entail the vulgar relativism with which they are often associated (and not always by honest error).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Clive Ruggles and Nicholas Saunders, *Astronomies and Cultures* (Niwot, CO: University of Colorado Press, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> *Cultural Astronomy and Astrology, Information Handbook 2016-7*, Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture, Faculty of Humanities and the Performing Arts, Cultural Astronomy and Astrology, January 2017, p.51.

<sup>27</sup> Clive Ruggles, ‘Indigenous Astronomies and Progress in Modern Astronomy’, paper presented at the International Astronomy Union 27th General Assembly, 3-14 August 2009, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, *Proceedings of Science*, pp.11–12, at <https://pos.sissa.it/099/029/> [accessed 25 May 2021].

<sup>28</sup> E.g., Paul Feyerabend, ‘Notes of Relativism’, in *Farewell to Reason* (London: Verso, 1987), pp. 19–89; Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value. Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988) and her *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Participation in the world is already interested, passionate and inflected in particular ways from the very start. And given the power in human life of place and moment, participation, being unavoidable, takes priority over putatively neutral observation, representation, or ‘construction’, leaving the latter activities as particular kinds of the former mode. Or, we could say, ontology trumps and potentially exhausts epistemology, where the reverse is not the case.<sup>29</sup>

Thus whenever anyone experiences the sky as meaningful – and all the more so, as enchanting – they are engaging mythically and are participating, not standing outside, merely looking on in a moment and place in which ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, ‘self’ and ‘world’, and ‘mind’ and ‘matter’ are all at work. Those are distinguishable as qualities but not hierarchical values, and none alone have any foundational status. As Merleau-Ponty says, ‘The world is wholly inside, and I am wholly outside, myself’.<sup>30</sup>

To put it another way, the meaning of the sky – its meaningfulness – is not merely subjective, any more than it is purely objective. The stars’ pulse and glitter, their milky path across the sky, the ancient animals stamping in their celestial stalls, the promise of Venus, shining in the dawn or dusk, the other planetary wanderers in their courses, the creamy-white light of the Moon in all its phases, and the mutual movements, drawing close or pulling away, of the great dance: all this life, meaning and wonder inheres in them just as much as it does in our minds.

It is also instructive to consider what the language of cultural constructionism reveals about its values. One such is the idea that the natural world is merely a set of inert resources for humans to use for their own satisfaction and convenience: where has this got us today? And there is the arrogance of assuming that humans alone are not only entitled to do this, but are the only animals capable of achieving ‘meaning’ at all. Then there is the melodramatic self-pity of being uniquely able to realise that, in Richard Dawkins’s aggressively disenchanting words, ‘a constellation is of no more significance than a patch of curiously shaped damp on the bathroom ceiling’,<sup>31</sup> which he extends to our own home, the Earth, and its

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<sup>29</sup> See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, ‘Exchanging Perspectives. The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Cosmologies’, *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004): pp.463–84.

<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, p.407.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Dawkins, ‘The Real Romance of the Stars’, *Independent on Sunday* (31 December 95); and see his *Unweaving the Rainbow* (London: Allen Lane, 1998).

life. (Oh, it's lonely at the top!) Cultural astronomers should ask themselves if this is really the company they want to keep.

An essentially meaningless universe, except insofar as we deign to give it some, is a completely unscientific assertion, of course. Not only in fact but in principle; how could it ever be tested empirically? And how could the range of determining facts to be considered ever be non-arbitrarily restricted? No, it is a metaphysical and political *choice*. In which case – and given in addition that the universe itself is the ultimate source and home of the only meanings we can ever know – I would recommend choosing an intrinsically meaningful one.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, the Cartesian assumptions of cultural constructionism are based squarely on the two 'species of superstition' – scientific materialism and religious supernaturalism – we confronted earlier, the splitting apart of whose domains Weber identified as the primary act of disenchantment. As Tim Ingold pointed out in a seminal paper twenty-one years ago, a radical distinction between a material/physical 'nature' and a mental/social 'culture' is uncritically assumed by all species of cultural and social constructionism to be a valid universal methodological starting-point.

But doing so entangles cultural astronomy in a fundamental incoherence: a *prima facie* meaningless cosmos, assumed to be a universal truth, is itself a thoroughly contingent, modern and Western project which is not found in the aboriginal and indigenous societies it often studies.<sup>33</sup> So a vicious paradox sets in: what is supposed to be a 'neutral' starting-point for studying the construction of cultural cosmologies turns out to be itself a construction, and a very particular and careful one at that.

Indeed, it is a distinctly odd idea, best understood as a special or limiting case of a world more accurately and economically characterised by subjectivity, agency and participation throughout – and consequently the potential enchantment of encounter – where these are not restricted to human beings.

To retain a universalist assumption of baseline meaninglessness and a methodological assumption of 'neutral' constructionism is thus to engage in a mode which *ipso facto* destroys the integrity of indigenous and aboriginal cosmologies, and indeed our own when we are enchanted by the night sky and visible cosmic phenomena. Furthermore, that mode threatens to collaborate with the longstanding strategy of the larger project of

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<sup>32</sup> See Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.33 and *passim*.

<sup>33</sup> Tim Ingold, 'Hunting and gathering as ways of perceiving the environment', in *The Perception of the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.4–43.

Western imperialism as it has sought to destroy, or remake beyond recognition, those same societies, as well as our own.<sup>34</sup>

I therefore suggest that it is past time for cultural astronomy to abandon its modernist tenets and re-root its studies in the study of an inherently meaningful cosmos, including ourselves – scholars and lay-people alike – as we engage in the part creation, part discovery of cosmologies. In the words of Ursula Le Guin, ‘True journey is return’.<sup>35</sup>

\* This is a revised version of a talk for the Sophia Centre Alumni Association, 22 September 2020

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<sup>34</sup> On the last point, see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).