To the Stars and Beyond: Perceptions on The Starry Night

“The earliest experience of art must have been that it was incantatory, magical; art was an instrument of ritual. The earliest theory of art, that of Greek philosophers, proposed that art was mimesis, imitation of reality...even in the modern times, when most artists and critics have discarded the theory of art as representation of an outer reality in favor of theory of art as subjective expression, the main feature of the mimetic theory persists” (Sontag 3-4)

What is it like to see the painting, in the flesh, that you have been worshipping and emulating for years? I somehow always assumed that it was bigger. The gilded frame enclosing The Starry Night at the Museum of Modern Art occupies less than a quarter of the wall it is hung upon. I had also assumed that there would be a bench from across the painting, where I could sit and gaze at the painting intently till I lost track of time and space. What I did not figure was how the painting would only occupy a tiny portion of the wall, or that there would be this many people¹, that some of those people would stare at me strangely (albeit for a fraction of a second, or maybe I imagined it) for standing in front of The Starry Night awkwardly, with a notepad, scribbling away, for so long that it became conspicuous. I also did not expect how different the actual painting would be from the reproductions of it that I was used to.

¹ A significant number of them clustering in front of The Starry Night, so much so that the Gauguin on the other side of the wall went unnoticed except by a select few.
First quarter\(^2\).

The colors have a three-dimensional appearance, as though they leap forward from the canvas, ever so slightly; the brush strokes enunciate the texture; they are not entirely flattened on the canvas as would be the case with watercolors. Although I have always been aware of the smattering of yellow in the sky, especially around the celestial objects, I never noticed the proliferation of brown strokes all over the sky—which is striking because, on the whole, the sky still appears primarily blue. In the interest of some context, I should mention that I first encountered van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* when I was less than twelve years old, on a table calendar. Despite the calendar’s compactness, the painting radiated magic. I remember being transfixed. I remember cutting it out carefully and framing it when it was time to replace the old calendar. Later, as I learned to draw, I remember trying to copy it. Since then I have spent years emulating it on different surfaces—notebooks, canvasses, rough textured walls\(^3\). I am including this somewhat extraneous prelude to clarify that my gaze, the way I look at and perceive this painting, is heavily mediated by my preexisting impression of the painting. To borrow from TJ Clark’s astute way of phrasing this impediment to disinterested/objective viewing, *The Starry Night* “bears a peculiar burden of the past for me: its meaning is over-determined” (115); overdetermined by impressions I had formed both consciously and subconsciously over the years from photographs and other reproductions of the painting; reproductions which were, however, at least twice, often more times, removed from the real thing.

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\(^2\) I have divided my observations into time zones, as reproduced from my notes. I have obviously significantly expanded on my notes since my encounter at the museum, but I haven’t changed the order of the observations made.

\(^3\) The friction created from rough textured walls were particularly conducive to reproducing the texture of the sky.
It has been a quarter of an hour since I first set my eyes on this starry landscape: I can feel that I am being drawn into it. Up close, the brush strokes look more singular than ever, as though they were painted individually in quick succession as opposed to being multiple strokes with the likes of a dry flat brush, proliferating across the sky simultaneously. Did the circular lines, the halo around each star, the turbulence, always move? The color of the sky looks more turquoise than cobalt blue if I move a few degrees to the left and peer at the painting from another angle.

The gilding and ornateness of the frame that bounds the painting is rather distracting. It obstructs my gaze, and more importantly, it obstructs the sky from stretching into infinity; we are both confined by this unsightly frame. To explicate what it is about this painting that has arrested my attention so irrevocably (both in this present moment, and more generally speaking), I first need to acknowledge what the painting is made up of: I will do so once from memory, and another time after close appraisal of the real thing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From Memory</th>
<th>From Close Scrutiny</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. One crescent moon, at the top right corner.</td>
<td>The moon is enclosed in thick brush strokes of creamy white paint. The texture is a result of multiple layers of paint, stacked on top of one another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A dark structure that eludes description.</td>
<td>There is a significant amount of sap green and warm brown brush strokes in what I had always presumed to be a predominantly black structure. The green explains why the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. A village. Not particularly distinguishable. Lots of houses, some with brightly colored tiled roofs. Hills as a backdrop for the village. Greenery surrounds these houses. The hills/mountains blend into the sky.

4. A church with a steeple. There is so much turquoise in the sky, especially above the steeple, and close to the moon. The blue of the sky alternates between cold and warm tones.

5. Stars. Lots of them. Visible angst in the turbulence around the stars.

6. The only canvas you can see is in the sky, between brush strokes, where the canvas is used as a pigment. The sides, especially the left, have frayed, so you can see the canvas. Also, the canvas can be seen because the frame starts beyond the border of the picture at some places.

I have resorted to a table to enlist the constituents of the painting instead of describing the painting as a whole, because I have realized how subjective descriptions can, and my writing would not reflect the true nature of the landscape of *The Starry Night*; it would instead be an exercise in self-indulgence, that succumbs to “the spell of the verbal” or the logocentric gaze (Clark 176). If visual art is removed from reality by one degree, then writing, even the most
realistic of descriptions, are twice removed from the reality—the difference is also not just of
degree, but also of the medium, between visual and verbal. While a skilled writer may be able to
mimic the exact details of the painting, they cannot mimic the movement, the spatiality in the
landscape—the reason why “more and more levels and passages insinuate themselves as you
look” (Clark 100). Therefore, as I do not want to attempt to reduce the painting to just words,
when the point was likely visual communication, I shall refer to sections of the painting (cropped
from a photograph of the original painting) and respond to the details.

The Village: In my
emulations, I have always
made the village look like
an indistinguishable mass.
But as I stand here, staring
long and hard, I realize
that the village has a
distinct character, that
serves as a material
representation of the
unbearable weight of life.
The Moon: The moon is bright, bordering on a citrus color, surrounded by numerous short strokes of creamy yellow that leaps forward from the canvas. The lunar cycle is either in its final or beginning stages, going by the crescent shape of the moon—indicating that the light source of the bright sky is not the moon, but the stars.
The Cypress Tree: For the longest time, I thought of the cypress tree as an obscure black structure with spikes—like grass that grows on top of mossy boulders, except a lot larger in scale. Photographs and other copies of the painting invariably show the shape to be black. Hence, my perception led me to overlook/un-see the green hues in the structure, till I finally saw the painting at the museum. I also feel that the part of the reason behind the obscure nature of the cypress is to de-familiarize the viewers to a certain extent.

It is fascinating how even tiny sections of the painting do not look cropped, but paintings, whole, individual by themselves. While my need to focus on these details is presumably mediated by what TJ Clark calls writing’s obsessive need to be attentive to details, in hope that the “details [will] lead directly, magically, to the picture’s ‘questions’” (9)—my intention is not to reductively “sum up” the painting in any way; but to point out the difference in my perception after seeing the painting up front, as opposed to visual reproductions of it. Mapping the difference between the two experiences has led me to infer that reproductions of The Starry Night are not quite capable of capturing the exact color tone nor the texture of the painting.
Before my encounter with the real thing at MoMa, I was unaware how much of the texture or colors is flattened and obscured in photographs of even the finest quality. In warm artificial lighting at MoMa, \textit{The Starry Night} from a ninety degree angle looks more Cobalt than Prussian blue, but when I angle myself forty five degrees to the right of the painting, the blue starts to border on Turquoise. It is also intriguing how the emulation of light and darkness on canvas renders a flat surface almost three dimensional—where shadows look like they are being cast instead of painted on. This three-dimensional quality also aids in implying distance and space within the landscape. For example, there is an implication of space between the village and the mountains behind. The objects in the distance are rendered out of focus, slightly blurry compared to other objects in the foreground, which are much sharper.

\textbf{Third Quarter.}

The more I look at this painting, the more I submit myself to the painting, a narrative emerges—which is testament to the fact that art is not stagnant or frozen in time: instead, it transcends temporal boundaries, creating new meaning for each and every individual looking at it, across space and time, surpassing boundaries of generations and cultures and other such barriers. As Clark notes, “painting shows us several different implied spaces or passages of time” (173). Of course, this “new” meaning is mediated by the interpretive community (Stanley Fish) the gazer belongs to. Interpretation through association is imminent even for the most self-aware viewer; for example, while I am aware of the religious interpretations of \textit{The Starry Night}, for me

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\footnote{I am extremely curious to see the painting in daylight just to be able to see the colors on the canvas as they are, as opposed to how they look in indoor lighting or through photographic lenses; I am aware that such an opportunity is virtually impossible.}

\footnote{I shall be referring to analyzers of the painting as ‘gazers’ as opposed to readers, to avoid succumbing to a logocentric approach (Clark 176) of looking at visual works.}
personally, religious symbolism does not make itself apparent at all when I look at the painting. However, I am inclined to believe that paintings (like most other forms of art) are capable of constraining the gazer’s imagination enough that the meaning the gazer produces is still somewhat mediated by the original intention of the painting. In simpler words, gazers cannot project what is not present at all. They can extrapolate up to a certain extent—but extrapolation, by virtue of the act, does not take away entirely from the fundamental properties of the original painting and its premise. Unlike theorists such as Holland who believe that a viewer/reader “in effect, re-creates the work in terms of [their] own identity theme” (126), I do not believe that everyone makes their own Starry Night. On the contrary, I think of varied responses as each viewer re-interpreting what the work means to them. The aim of associations and reader-responses must be to make a work relatable, topical, not to obliterate it.

At the Museum of Modern Arts, there is a placard next to the painting that reads:

“This morning I saw the country from my window a long time before sunrise, with nothing but the morning star, which looked very big,” van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo, from France. Rooted in imagination and memory, The Starry Night embodies an inner, subjective expression of van Gogh’s response to nature. In thick, sweeping brushstrokes, a flamelike cypress unites the churning sky and the quiet village below. The village was partly invented, and the church spire evokes van Gogh’s native land, the Netherlands.

This snippet makes me wonder how art can be considered mimetic. Although it is a landscape of a hilly village on a starlit night—it is hardly a copy of van Gogh’s view from his room at the St Paul asylum in southern France. I will take the liberty to presume that the view his window
afforded did not comprise a sky lit by burning halos in a sea of whirling blue—that celestial bodies had not assumed the form of mellow fireballs on the night he painted the sky outside. Instead, what he put down on canvas, was his interpretation of the view he saw from his window, heavily mediated by his state of mind, his circumstances, memories\textsuperscript{6}, et al. There are so many ways to understand why van Gogh depicted the stars as fireballs—the most obvious being that, stars shine or light up because they are hot, as does fire. Recently, it has also been suggested that the stars and its turbulent structure is a representation of “the concept of turbulent flow in fluid dynamics” and how “why the brain’s perception of light and motion makes us see Impressionist works as flickering” (Natalya St Clair, Brainpickings). By the rationale, van Gogh is not imitating nature on canvas, but representing how nature works, which makes his art non-mimetic.

Apart from my existing impression of \textit{The Starry Night}, the way I am looking at, or analyzing, the painting is also mediated by what I picked up from reading TJ Clark’s \textit{The Sight of Death}. Clark’s attention to detail taught me how to look, how to appraise a visual work. It is strange because I have been looking at pictures all my life, but the intensity with which he looks was missing all along. In the \textit{Landscape with a Calm}, Clark enlists multiple moments from different human lives taking place simultaneously. Remembering this, I urged myself to look for juxtaposition of multiple events in \textit{The Starry Night}; sure enough, I found them, each occupying their own temporal reality despite being situated against one common backdrop: the waning moon in its final phases of the lunar cycle, the inactivity the village exudes, or the perennial-ness of the cypress tree. However, one of the major differences in the painting Clark was seeing

\textsuperscript{6} Some scholars have argued that the kind of church Van Gogh depicted in \textit{The Starry Night} was unlikely to be found in France; that it is drawn from his memory from his childhood in Holland.
(Poussin’s) and van Gogh’s is that the latter is bereft of direct signs of human life. Unlike impressionistic paintings during (or somewhat before) his time, that “conspires to articulate human message” (Clark 111), the post-impressionist landscape of The Starry Night decidedly refrains from being just a backdrop for human activity. Instead, the landscape, i.e. nature, takes precedence over humans in this work—which makes me wonder if van Gogh was consciously trying to subvert the anthropocentric tradition of humans occupying the central position even in pastoral art, long before such concerns were given a voice by eco-critics of the 21st century. In this sense, the painting creates a “viewing position” (Clark 141)—a position that is not just purely visual, but also eco-centric. Perhaps I lack adequate articulation skills, but I feel that The Starry Night resists verbal description in a way that most human-centric paintings (such as the ones by Poussin that Clark was able to describe down to their last details by commenting on the treatment of human action and expression) do not. In The Starry Night, human action is replaced by celestial action, which renders it verbally ineffable. Whereas in other artistic works, there is a tendency for skies to be still, while the land is usually full of movement, in van Gogh’s landscape the sky is where the action is, where signs of life are.

60 minutes in.

Having spent over an hour immersed in the nuances of this painting and having made many notes of its individual moments, without being able to uncover “the meaning” of the painting, I am starting to think that one way to demystify the scene before me is to try to find the unifying theme of the painting. The most obvious option is the turbulence in the sky. It could be that my gaze is directed by the title of the painting, but I strongly feel that the landscape urges my gaze toward the stars first and foremost. The stars are also the source of the light that illuminates the rest of the landscape. It is almost like the village is present only as an afterthought—to serve as a
contrast to the turbulence, so that the calm of the village can accentuate the movement of the skies.

70 minutes in.

From in front, the most common position from where one views any work of two-dimensional art, the sky is indisputably the primary subject. However, if I kneel below (not exactly below, but at a forty-five-degree angle, which causes the MoMa attendant present to hastily tell me to get up) the painting, my eyes are directed first to the steeple of the church and the village; the sky then becomes the backdrop. Clark mentions that “a picture’s perspective construction really ‘direct’ us, imaginatively, to a single point of viewing” (90)—this point of viewing in The Starry Night is the celestial action, further stressing the non-anthropocentric approach that van Gogh takes. The turbulence around the stars particularly makes me wonder if it was his way of hinting at the infinitesimal scale of human civilization in the face of cosmic events.
The turbulence is not just on the canvas, but also palpably in the brush strokes blurring the distinction between the art and the artist. While modern critics are critical of deriving from the artist’s life to aid one’s explication of an artwork, I think the signs in this particular painting might be too obvious to overlook. For instance, I find visible angst in the texture around the moon in the turbulence. van Gogh not only indicates his state of mind by means of the celestial turbulence, but he also represents his mental state through nature instead of through human expression/action, as has traditionally been the case.

While the landscape as a whole exudes a sense of tranquility, if you look closely at each component, especially the celestial bodies and their contours, the angst, the anxiety, the tormented state of mind of the artist, are made apparent in the rough but deliberate brush strokes. I am also left wondering if this torment is the reason why the turbulence takes precedence over other elements of the landscape. It is possible that I emphasize and notice the turbulence because it is my punctum (Barthes). It is the detail in *The Starry Night*, that arrests my attention so
captivatingly that it pricks and bruises (Barthes). It is also intriguing that our literal position in relation to the painting affects/alters our point of viewing, just as the way we look is somewhat mediated by who is looking and their belief systems. If I move, it is as though the landscape moves with me. If I stare too long at the same spot, the circular brush strokes around the stars set the painting in motion. On a more philosophical level, our impression of the painting and the painting itself are two different realities, although the former is inflected and informed by the latter—which brings me to the self-reflection part of my essay where I try to evaluate how much of what I have written thus far is truly about van Gogh’s painting, and how much of it is my projection, i.e., how much of it is *The Starry Night* itself and how much of it is what I want it to mean/do for me.

One way to find a balance between valuing viewer response and also preserving the sanctity or artistic value of the actual painting, is to view artworks as Poulet describes literary texts as “magical objects that allows the interiority of one human being to play host to the interiority of another” (qtd. in Tompkins xiv). Looking at the exchange in this manner does not detract from the original work, nor does it claim to ‘create’ a new *Starry Night* through viewer interpretations that “override the literal or normative meanings” (Fish 306) of the first.

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7 As Holland claims that viewers do that I mentioned earlier.
Furthermore, in my opinion, interpretations and appropriations are guided by the original artwork regardless of the amount of creative freedom viewers take. So, in effect, viewers cannot legitimately project something that is not at all present on the canvas. As Clark points out, “associations come freely and convincingly” (221); only when it is forced inappropriately, the crisis of over-interpretation and projection comes into being. While I am slightly embarrassed at having incorporated so much of myself into this writing, I also think it is fascinating how a painting from another century is able to evoke deep feelings in another being who inhabits a completely different time and space. It is a testament to the timelessness of art. According Paul Valery, “Artness is the capacity to invite repeated response” (115), and I think therein lies the magic of art—in its ability to not exhaust itself despite repeated viewing.

**Conclusion:**

On one hand, I am more viscerally affected by images than I am by words; but on the other hand, I am wont to find stories in visual works, instead of going for a more formal analysis of the visual aspects of the painting. This approach of looking at and understanding a painting through narratives is reflective of TJ Clark’s theory that people tend to “read” paintings instead of “seeing” them, as well as Sontag’s point about the lack of transparency in viewing art. Clark further contends that “our present means of image production strike [him] as still utterly under the spell of the verbal” (176)—thus, pointing out a need for form of interpretation of visuality that are independent of the verbal. We attempt to understand visual works predominantly through narratives.

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8 Where one experiences “the luminous-ness of the thing itself, of things being what they are” as opposed to viewing the artwork through interpretations of it (Sontag 4).
words, using word-ly analysis, using techniques that should be reserved for verbal texts—which relegates art to figurative representation of reality or the fundamentally mimetic. The content of art, as Sontag argues, then takes precedence over its form. This “overemphasis” on content, in turn leads to “the perennial, never consummated project of interpretation” (Sontag 5). This tendency to interpret content is born out of a need to “tame the work of art” (8), to make the process of comprehending art “manageable, conformable” (8)—so that one is no longer nervous in the face of an unfamiliar visuality. I need to unlearn my training, to learn to be able to prioritize my sensory reaction to the artwork. In any case, my sensory reaction is greater, or at least, more intense, than my intellectual reaction to *The Starry Night*. It not only precedes my intellectual reaction, but also informs the latter. Therefore, of the many things I have learned from this assignment about looking, the primary one is that we need to develop a vocabulary for understanding art that centers around the visual, instead of the literary/verbal. More than meaning, maybe we need to focus on the significance of art. Susan Sontag had famously said that “in the place of hermeneutics, we need erotics of art” (14), and I find myself inclined to concur.

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The museum is now about to close, and I must go. The painting looks much bigger than when I had walked in.

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Once I stepped outside the museum, I made it a point to look up at the late evening sky. The problem with New Yorkers is not that their sky is turbulent like van Gogh’s, but that their sky is bereft of stars altogether. We live in a city where the stars are outshined by human activity.
Works Cited:


