

An Examination of Art and Science in Cultural Astronomy

Nicholas Campion, Associate Professor in Cosmology and Culture, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, UK. (<https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/staff/nicholas-campion/n.campion@uwtsd.ac.uk>)

The sky constitutes half our natural environment in spatial terms. In any culture which lacks artificial light, the stars and the Moon's monthly cycle are a powerful and unavoidable presence. For agricultural workers the day-time sky is the source of all weather conditions, and the Sun a determinant of time and temperature. Yet, historical and cultural studies almost completely ignores the role of the sky in human culture. In part this may be due to the demonisation of astrology by western intellectuals, especially scientists, as a dangerous superstition.

This paper documents the emergence of the study of cultural astronomy as an attempt to counter academic neglect of the sky. Cultural astronomy encompasses disciplines from the mathematical (the measurement of astronomical alignments to the built and natural environment in archaeoastronomy, or skyscape archaeology) through to the social sciences and humanities. The study of culture includes history, anthropology and sociology, along with such sub-disciplines as the study of religions and the history of art. It is also impossible to draw boundaries between the time periods or geographical regions, and can include the study of modern astronomers or astronomy in cinema or literature, or the ethics of space tourism. This presentation will argue that cultural astronomy is cross-disciplinary, and must respect and include all academic approaches in order to gain a full picture of the significance of the sky for human culture.

I will briefly present two examples. One on skyscape archaeology reports on recent work on the alignment of medieval monastic churches in Wales. The other, on art history, looks at the work of the Spanish painter Joan Miro.

Overall, the presentation argues that the academic world is impoverished by ignoring the role of the sky in culture.