

SYMBOLS OF SPACE AND IMAGINATION

A Visual Exploration of Experiences of Space

SÍMBOLOS DEL ESPACIO Y LA IMAGINACIÓN

Una exploración visual de las experiencias espaciales

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Abstract

How do experiences of space impact one's sense of self or orientation in the world? Through a phenomenological lens, this paper explores how we experience physical spaces and how these spaces influence our imagination and understanding of self. In looking at the role of visual symbols as tools for navigating the landscape, this paper introduces a symbolic exploration of interior and exterior space and the development of a visual language surrounding individual experiences of space. The work draws on philosophical concepts such as intimate spaces and the sublime, as well as physical symbols found in the landscape, such as petroglyphs.

KEY WORDS: Imaginación, Navegación, Asombro, Paisaje, Fenomenología, Orientación, Espacio

Resumen

¿Cómo influyen las experiencias espaciales en el sentido del yo o la orientación en el mundo? A través de una lente fenomenológica, este artículo explora cómo experimentamos los espacios físicos y cómo estos espacios influyen en nuestra imaginación y comprensión del yo. Al examinar el papel de los símbolos visuales como herramientas para navegar por el paisaje, este trabajo introduce una exploración simbólica del espacio interior y exterior y el desarrollo de un lenguaje visual en torno a las experiencias individuales del espacio. El trabajo se basa en conceptos filosóficos como los espacios íntimos y lo sublime, así como en símbolos físicos encontrados en el paisaje, como los petroglifos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Imaginación, Navegación, Asombro, Paisaje, Fenomenología, Orientación, Espacio

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ARTÍCULOS

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1. Introduction

For the artist, communication with nature remains the most essential condition. The artist is human; themself nature; part of nature within natural space.

(Paul Klee, 'Paths of the Study of Natura' Bauhaus Verlag, Weimar, 1923)

What is the difference between experiencing a dark, forested setting and a vast open desert? Between being in a room with an open door and a closed one? How do experiences of space impact one's sense of self or orientation in the world? Through a phenomenological lens, this work explores how we experience physical spaces and how these spaces influence our imagination and understanding of self.

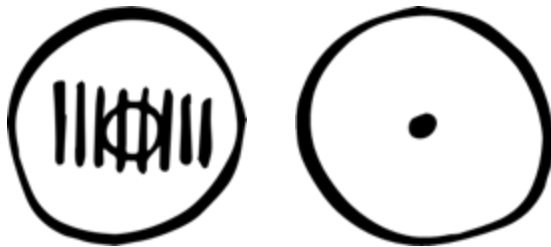


fig. 1: being in a forest.

fig. 2: being in a vast landscape.

Source: Author, 2022

For me, the concepts of imagination and orientation go hand in hand. If you do not understand what something is, it is human nature to try to understand it, thereby actively engaging with the thing and orienting yourself in relation to it. I argue that the attempt to orient oneself, or grasp the meaning of what one is experiencing, is a practice of imagination.

There were a couple of starting points for this work. First, I was interested in exploring the difference in active and passive perception and how that plays into the way we perceive things visually. The work I had been doing previous to this exploration had to do with the failures and constraints of visual perception as well as engaging with the history of visual symbols about space and landscape. Separately, I was working in the area of environmental design and wayfinding — thinking about how we interact with spaces and how designers can encourage specific movements through a space with the use of symbols and direc-

tional tools. I was also connecting this work with symbols found in the landscape, such as pictographs and petroglyphs, which I will talk about later in the paper.

1.1. The Way we Perceive

The way we perceive follows a framework that is based in our personal and cultural histories and expectations. It relies on passive perception and can cause us to expect certain things from our experiences, which opens the door to forms of implicit bias and visual stereotyping. I began looking at imagination as a tool for perceiving actively and breaking away from the framework of visual perception and meaning-making. Novelty and strangeness, in images, things, or places, encourage imagination because they prompt an act of orientation on the part of the person experiencing. Herbert Grabes describes the use of “strangeness” as a creative tool in his book, *Making Strange*: “An initial sense of strangeness is created in the reader or the viewer, meant to engender multiple attempts on [their] part to overcome this reaction, and in this way finally an expansion of one’s perceptivity and awareness.” (Grabes, Herbert. *Making Strange: Beauty, Sublimity, and the (post)modern ‘third Aesthetic’*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008. 3)

To use one’s imagination is to make one’s own connections and to expand the way one thinks and perceives. This can be practiced in interactions with novel or strange things or places.

1.2. Orientation and the Landscape

My focus on orientation is at its core an investigation of how we (as individuals and as a collective) make sense of our place in the world. Orienting ourselves is something we do constantly — we understand ourselves and the world around us by reacting to experiences and by rethinking or reorienting ourselves where necessary. I work with the landscape as a subject because it is within nature that we learn how to navigate, that we understand our outer world in relation to our self, and that we learn what it’s like to be disoriented. Furthermore, I have always found the outdoors to be especially conducive to experiences of awe or the sublime, which naturally disorient and astound the viewer.

Another reason I use the landscape as a starting point for this exploration is because very specific and strong feelings often emerge when an individual experiences a certain kind of space. Georg Simmel, a German sociologist and philosopher of the mid-to-late 1800s, calls this a “mood.” In his article *The Philosophy of Language*, he describes the landscape as something that the viewer has a hand in creating, furthering the idea of orientation and creation, and connecting the viewer to the mood of a landscape. Simmel argues that the landscape itself is formed in the mind of the viewer, in an act in which they separate the landscape from the natural environment it sits in, either by visual features or by such a “mood.” Consider a landscape painter sitting down with a blank canvas and deciding what, from all that is in front of them, they will include in the image.

For Simmel, the creation of “the mood and the coming into being of landscape, that is, the forming of individual parts into a whole, ... is one and the same act.” Thus, the viewer

creates both the landscape and its “mood.” This poses the question, then, as to how a mood can be intrinsic to a landscape and how much “reside [s]only in the emotional reflexes of the beholder.” (Georg Simmel, *Die Philosophie der Landschaft*, in *Die Gueldenkammer*, vol 3 Issue 2, 1913. 27) Does the landscape hold a mood intrinsic to itself, or does it come down to how the perceiver is perceiving the landscape? For Simmel, it all ultimately comes down to the viewer. Thus, the mood of a landscape comes to us individually.

This is why some people experience caves (or elevators) as daunting, claustrophobic, and unnerving, while others find them exciting and even comfortable. We experience things (not just landscapes) through the lens of our self, which relies on our own past and cultural experiences, comfort zones, expectations, etc.

Personally, I have experienced awe and disorientation in many natural spaces, especially when I experience the place intimately. For me, this generally means alone. Experiences I have tend to be muffled or distracted when I am experiencing alongside other people. It happens that I focus more of my energy towards reading someone else’s response to a space, or towards balancing my being in a space with an “other.” For me, then, this closes the door on real explorations of a space as long as there is an “other” present.

Thus, to do this work, I have sought out landscapes and places in which I am alone. It is in experiences of solitude that I can orient myself physically and spiritually within a space. Breathing out, I have to hear my own breath. It is only in a room with a fully closed door that I have room for imagination. This is not the same for everyone, and I have known plenty of people who can engage with their own thoughts and feelings even when surrounded with others. These are the friends who can write and read papers at a crowded café.

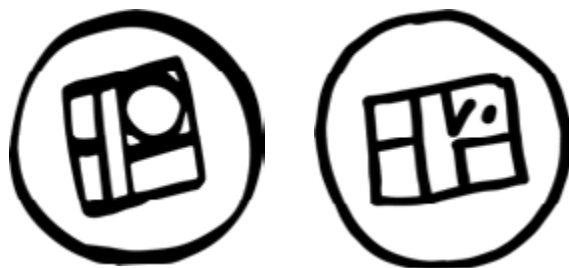


Fig. 3: being in a room with a closed door.

Fig. 4: Being in a room with an open door.

Source: Author, 2022

1.3 Awe and Sublimity in the Landscape

In a similar vein, historic imagery of awe focuses on the solitary individual within a natural environment. The classic image of the sublime shows the individual as a small force facing a large landscape — a dark ravine, a stormy ocean, or a majestic mountain range. Think of Casper David Friedrich’s painting *Wanderer over the Sea of Fog*. The immensity of the natural landscape forces the human to confront their smallness, and to orient themselves as a small being in the world. Picture gazing into the abyss, but instead of focusing on the negatives, (being lost, insignificant, or disoriented) focus on the possibility to orient yourself in spite of but aware of these feelings.

With the development of these symbols, I focus on the self and imagination in experiences of spaces. Different kinds of spaces impact imagination and the way I experience. This is the core idea of these symbols.

A few things became clear to me as I was exploring these themes. First, experiences of space are individual, and these symbols cannot and are not meant to represent everyone's specific phenomenological experience of a space.

Second, there are other factors that play into our experiences of space, and those include solitude, personal and cultural history, and state of mind (among others, probably). Taking these ideas into account helped me set aside any notions about universality and, rather, focus on this exploration through a phenomenological perspective. I decided to approach my exploration of these symbols as a deeper dive into my own experiences. Thus, even though I argue for some sense of universality, these specific symbols are based in my personal experiences and my puzzling together pieces of philosophy and theory. I don't expect that the symbols themselves represent how everyone experiences spaces.

This paper will include a brief discussion about specific visual inspiration for these symbols, the philosophy I integrated into the creation and structure of the symbols, their development, and what direction this work might go in.

Ultimately, my aim is that people will relate to these symbols as ways of experiencing and that they might be more active in the way that they engage with the spaces that they are in. Second, I hope that exploring individual relationships with spaces and landscapes will encourage people to think more deeply about their relationship to nature, other people, and how they would like to exist in such a world.

2. Helpful Definitions

Being-in-the-world

It is impossible to separate the self from the environment that it is in. We are fully tied to our context in space and time. Our world and the way we are in-the-world are inseparable.

Orientation

The method of understanding how the self relates to something (x) that is in-the-world. As humans, we have a natural urge to understand how and what things are, and we will automatically attempt to orient ourselves in relation to x .

Intentionality

The quality of being directed at something. Intentionality in regard to sight: I don't just see, I see *a rock, a bird, I see something*.

Active & Passive perception

Active perception is when you are aware that your experience of perception is tied to your being-in-the-world. It requires intentionality on the part of the perceiver — the perceiver is

perceiving *something*. Passive perception happens naturally, does not require intentionality, and relies on personal and cultural habits and patterns of perception.

Meaning making

The act of making connections and associations between things that you experience. Meaning making happens both actively and passively from an experience. You make meaning passively when you are passively perceiving, whereas active meaning making happens intentionally and when you are actively perceiving.

3. Visual Inspiration

Much of the visual inspiration for this work comes from philosophical ideas of Paul Klee as well as southwestern rock art. Klee was part of the Bauhaus tradition, one that focused on reducing imagery to the core essence and characteristics of shapes and forms. In *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, Klee outlines the natural movement of lines, planes, structures, and more. I was interested in the tradition and meaning of shapes, specifically the circle, and how they communicate. The symbolic nature of elemental shapes means something to the viewer, and I drew inspiration from his explorations. In the next section I will talk more about Geometry and its influence on this work.



Fig. 5: common symbols of orientation and movement.
Source: Author, 2022

Two secondary lines, moving around an imaginary main line



Fig. 6: Paul Klee, excerpt from *Pedagogical Sketchbook*.
Source: Klee, Frederick A Praeger Publishers, NY, 1953.

When it comes to experiencing awe and orientation in nature, the petroglyphs and pictographs of southwestern Utah are majorly meaningful for me. Pictographs are ancient symbols painted onto a surface (usually a rock face), and petroglyphs are symbols that are pecked into the rock face. Both can be found in southern Utah, an area I spent a lot of time in as I was doing this work. The Fremont people lived in the area between about 1 AD and 1301 BCE and were engaged in the carving and painting of many such symbols.

Especially interesting for me is the fact that these symbols are carved into the landscape and refer to the landscape itself. At one amazing site, the Parowan Gap petroglyph site in Parowan Utah, there are hundreds of symbols pecked into surrounding boulders. Although the exact meaning of the symbols isn't known, some are thought to refer to the gap itself (a wind gap that formed through erosion and cleared out a path through the cliffs), and some are thought to represent a migratory map of the Fremont and Paiute peoples. Throughout the day, the sun's trajectory passes over the petroglyphs and highlights some shapes and formations that seem to intentionally refer to nearby geological features. These symbols both live in their specific landscape and communicate something about peoples' experiences of that space, potentially in ways that were meant to warn or guide others, and/or as expressions of individual creativity stemming from the individual's relationship to that space.

Fig. 7: Ejemplos dibujados de petroglifos hallados en el yacimiento del desfiladero de Parowa, en el sur de Utah. Source: Author, 2022



For me, these ancient symbols relate to awe because of the layer of separation from their intended meaning — they require the viewer's imagination to try to understand them. A lot of their meaning today has to do with the way we engage with and orient ourselves in relation to them — exact meaning has been lost in time. Furthermore, they inspire awe when they are discovered in the landscape. These symbols are hidden, naturally blending into the face of the rock and requiring a pointed search (and/or luck) in order to be found. This requires navigating the environment, and, sometimes, pushing the boundaries of comfort and understanding.

One specific moment of discovery came with a sense of awe and pushed me far outside of my comfort zone. In search of a petroglyph panel in northern Colorado, my father and I, running on the excitement of the search, climbed up through boulder fields and jagged rock faces. On the way, we passed a cave-like shallow cliff face with at least 50 handprints — Fremont children's handprints. We continued and ended up climbing up a chimney formation to get to the ledge with the panel. A chimney is a tall rock formation with three or more walls that requires one to push oneself into opposing rock faces to get leverage to climb up. We did get up, and after looking around, found the symbols we were looking for. They were amazing — clear and bold, not worn, and such a reward. The strenuous climb made the discovery even more meaningful. We spent some time imagining how Fremont artists had climbed up. Had they traveled up in the same way? What about this spot was right for their symbols, or potentially the act of creating the symbols?

On the way back down, however, we quickly realized the hazards of the steep drop-off and lack of foot/handholds in the chimney. The descent needed to be precise and measured, unlike the exuberant climb up. We spent a good amount of time maneuvering our way

down the chimney and finding routes that felt safest — it took me a half hour to get the courage to finally dangle myself off the side and feel my way down to the next ledge. If I fell, we'd both be pushed off the wall. Considering that half-hour, I recognize experiences of vertigo, fear, and intense smallness in the face of overwhelming nature. The experience put me in an uncomfortable navigational setting that formed my memory of the place.

It is with extreme excitement that one can find such symbols on cliffs and boulders.



Fig. 8: drawn examples of petroglyphs found in northern Colorado (also attributed to the Fremont people).
Source: Author, 2022

4. Development

I started developing these symbols about a year and a half ago as an attempt to understand why I feel certain ways in certain spaces. I started with the circle because of the historical and mathematical importance of the shape. In Geometry, everything stems from the circle.

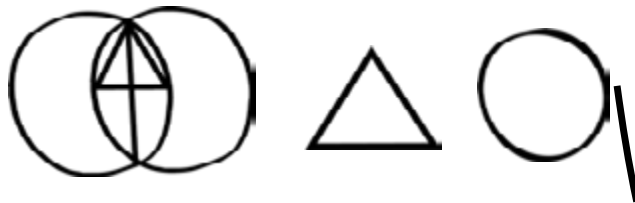


Fig. 9: everything stems from the circle.
Source: Author, 2022

4.1 The Circle

A circle represents zero dimension and at the same time implies space, which is why I use it as an important symbol for spaces that we inhabit. It is the mother of all shapes and can be found often in nature. Connecting two circles allows a line to form, a cross, a triangle. All other shapes come from the circle.



Fig. 10: ripples, bubbles, shells, tree rings, all connect to the circle.
Source: Author, 2022

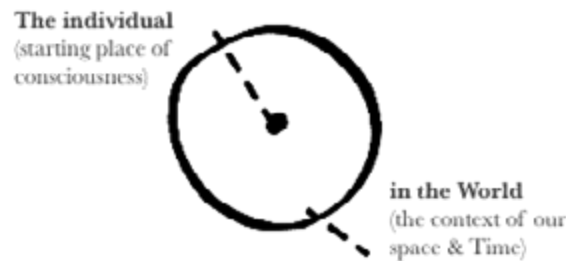
Mathematically, a circle is only “real” when it has a radius. If the radius of a circle is imaginary, then there are no real points on the circle. As we are real beings, there are real

points of experience around us. Thus, I use the real circle as the starting point for describing experiences as a being-in-the-world. Everything around our center point is our world. This represents the totality of our individual consciousnesses.

4.2 Being-in-the-world

Another concept that I used to create the symbols draws on the Heideggerian principle of *in der Welt sein*, which is translated as being-in-the-world. The root of this idea is that it is impossible to separate the self from the environment that it is in — we are tied to our context in space and time. The nature of being is completely inseparable from existence in the world. It's not that we simply *are*, it's that we are-in-the-world. There is no consciousness, neither mine nor yours, without there being *something* (a world or something in the world, or us ourselves) that we are conscious *of*. This is where the outer circle and the inner point (or circle, to be discussed) come in. In more concrete terms: we (as individuals) are in our world (Earth).

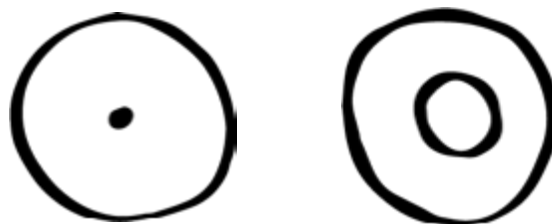
Fig. 11: This is one way to picture being-in-the-world. The self (the point at the center of the circle) is necessarily positioned at the center of its consciousness within the world. The self can only perceive what exists within the world (the circle). It cannot exist separated from the circle. Source: Author, 2022



From here, with the basis of my symbol drawn out, I began thinking about the inner circle (or point) as representative of the imaginative space that is created in response to certain experiences. I was reading French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's books, *Poetics of Reverie* and *Poetics of Space*, and was inspired by his thoughts on imagination. He saw imagination as a major power of human nature — something that separates us from the past as well as from reality; "it faces the future." (Bachelard, Gaston, and M Jolas. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994. 18)

Not only does imagination afford us a space to combine the real and the unreal, it gives us a space to unlearn and relearn, to practice the act of questioning what we know not only with questions of reality but also with questions of unreality. When it comes to expanding our expectations and pushing away from modes of passive perception, imagination is an exciting practice.

Fig. 12: Ser-en-el-mundo. Source: Author, 2022
 Fig. 13: Being expands into a space of imagination. Everything around our center point, the self, is our world. Creative spaces, enclosed spaces, wide open spaces, etc., are all experienced in unique ways. In some, the self expands into a space of imagination. Source: Author, 2022



Bachelard also wrote about certain experiences that allows the imagining self to expand. For him, viewing things that were strange or unknown, specifically things that are sublime or the immense, helps us “realize within ourselves the pure being of pure imagination.” Experiences of sublimity, immensity, or disorientation expand the self into an imaginative being, which for Bachelard meant both a physical as well as a theoretical expansion. In expanding, it is possible for us to experience things in a new way.

5. Conclusión

La práctica de ver cosas nuevas y utilizar la imaginación nos ayudará a orientarnos dentro de nuestro contexto. Nos ofrece una forma de acercarnos a la comprensión de las personas y las cosas que nos rodean. La imaginación es una forma de lograr empatía hacia el otro: te imaginas en su lugar. Aunque este artículo se centra en la imaginación, el paisaje y los espacios, en el futuro no descarto desarrollar y profundizar en algunas reflexiones sobre la imaginación y sus efectos sobre el yo y el “otro”.

La artista Teresita Fernández habla del arte y de la posición que ocupa como herramienta para la imaginación, concretamente en relación con el yo, la percepción activa y la orientación. Utiliza el paisaje como contexto para este debate, señalando las formas en que nos orientamos dentro de un paisaje. Para Fernández, “el arte funciona precisamente como una especie de *señalización*. Como seres humanos, siempre hemos intentado encontrar nuestro lugar, dónde y cómo pertenecemos. Esta es la razón por la que los humanos han mirado al cielo nocturno para orientarse, para navegar” (Fernández, y Cruz. Teresita Fernández: Elemental. 2019. p.16). En su pieza *Sin título (Plata)*, el espectador se sumerge en su propio reflejo mientras mira hacia arriba para examinar la escultura de metal colgada del techo. El movimiento de mirar hacia arriba es fundamental para el significado de la pieza - al mirar hacia arriba y darse cuenta del yo que se refleja en la pieza, el espectador se enfrenta a la cuestión de la *señalización*, o *encontrarse a sí mismo*. En lugar de mirar al cielo nocturno para orientarse o navegar, el espectador se encuentra a sí mismo en este nuevo contexto.

En el centro de esta obra está la idea de que somos responsables de “repensar y producir el espacio y sus significados”, y que “tenemos que trabajar muy duro para entender realmente dónde estamos” (Fernández, y Cruz. Teresita Fernández: Elemental, 2019. p.19). Veo esta cita como una descripción de la superposición entre este tipo de búsqueda activa y espiritual, y la participación de la imaginación. Así es como me gustaría que funcionaran mis símbolos: animar a la gente a considerar activamente cómo se orientan en los espacios y cómo éstos afectan a su propia experiencia.

En el futuro, me interesaría explorar estos símbolos fuera del contexto del paisaje y los espacios exteriores. Estoy desarrollando símbolos para las relaciones interpersonales y el trato con los demás. Lo veo como un avance hacia la empatía y la reflexión sobre la comunicación interpersonal ■

6. Los símbolos

- Fig. 14 Being, remembering
- Fig. 15 Being in a vast landscape
- Fig. 16 Being on a bright day
- Fig. 17 Being on a dark day
- Fig. 18 Being in a canyon
- Fig. 19 Being in a good mood on a dark day
- Fig. 20 Being outside at night
- Fig. 21 Being underwater
- Fig. 22 Waking up in the dark in a known place
- Fig. 23 Waking up in the dark in an unknown place
- Fig. 24 Being in a room with a closed door
- Fig. 25 Being in a room with an open door
- Fig. 26 Travelling home
- Fig. 27 Leaving a place for the last time
- Fig. 28 Moving to an unknown place
- Fig. 29 Being in a forest



Fig. 14

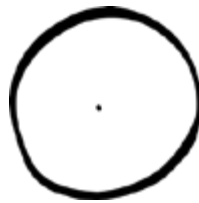


Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 20



Fig. 21



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24



Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27



Fig. 28



Fig. 29

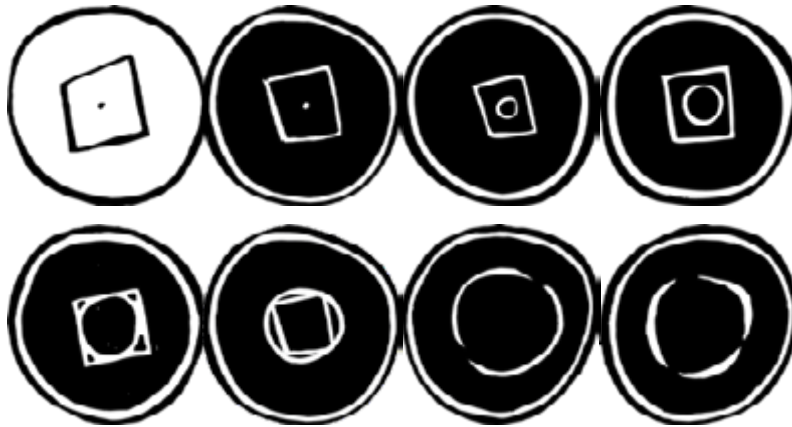


Fig 30 (Progression) Turning off the lights and beginning to dream.

Source: Author, 2022

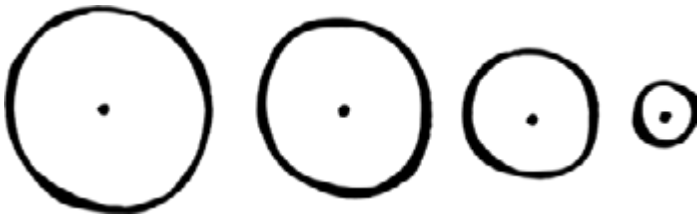


Fig 31 (progression) Getting used to a place.

Source: Author, 2022

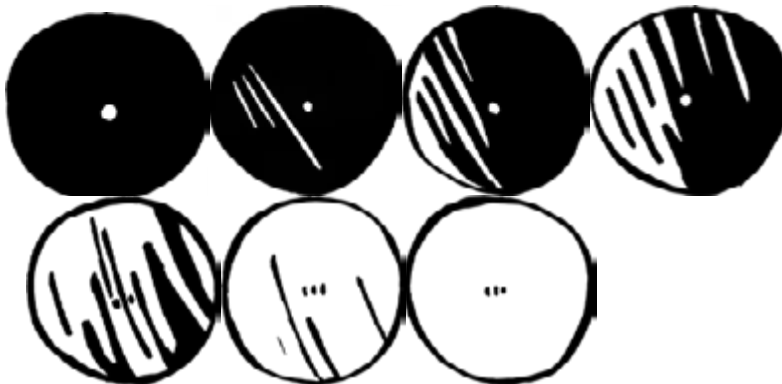


Fig. 32 (progression) Watching the sun rise.

Source: Author, 2022

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