

Our Night Sky in November 2016

Venus, brilliant in the low southwest will be setting by about 1900, followed by Mars by 2200. Jupiter will be making a welcome reappearance in the East, but only for the early risers! Orion, rising on his side from his summer sleep can be seen throughout the night from 2200 onwards, and from earlier as the year progresses.

The final moments of Rosetta, the spacecraft that has been orbiting the comet 67P for the past year, have been followed with mixed emotions by those who have been associated with this brilliant experiment for the last 10 years. Not for Rosetta the fiery ending planned for Juno, the spacecraft orbiting Jupiter at the moment, who will end her days hurtling into Jupiter's upper atmosphere; rather, an almost gentle balletic spiral orchestrated from 500 million miles away by the space engineers, for her to land at walking pace on the quarry she has studied for so long, sending images and data back to her team on Earth in the last few moments from as little as a few feet away from the surface. As she landed, she died quietly, and the streams of information she has been sending back every day, ceased.

Does all this sound overly sentimental? We are, after all, talking about an assembly of metal, engines computers, cameras, antennae, and wires galore connecting them all. But put yourself in the place of those scientists and engineers who have been associated with this project for over ten years. Their feelings for Rosetta must be very much like those of a mother to a new born baby. Both need constant nurturing if they are to survive, and both reward their mother/science team – the one with gurgles of pleasure and smiles, and the other with astonishing images and streams of data which will keep the team employed for many years to come. Withhold the nurture, and the results become screams of fury from the one, and a sullen silence from the other.

Witnessing the scenes from the control centre in Darmstadt, the mixed emotions were obvious to even the most hard-hearted observer. I do not think my comments are very wide of the mark, but my readers might think otherwise!

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