Article Side

A night with the stars and what the documentary taught me about aesthetics. by Roy Fernandez

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Since the earliest recordings the night sky has been part of our collective psyche and for the most practical of reasons. At night, if we are even mildly familiar with it, on clear nights it is an extremely reliable guide for navigation. And I'm not talking ships at sea, so much as the shepherd looking for strays that gets caught a mile or so from camp as night falls. Then there is the equally reliable correspondence of the rising and settings of various constellations with the seasons.

Since the beginning of human consciousness the stability of the stars has stood in stark contrast to the volatility of life upon earth, That, not the fluffiness of clouds and "purity" of an azure sky is the reason primitive peoples conceive the sky as the abode of supernatural beings.

Combine the evident stability of the fixed stars, the stark contrast of the light versus dark of night sky and stars and the touch of mystery in the motion of the planets and transients like comets, meteors, auroras, and novae and the night sky is tailor made as "stuff of dreams" material highly suitable for abstracting and projecting into long term "simulations" which are not immediately practical but which might become so.

There is a lot that is memorable but not beautiful, yes. Stuff that happens in real life. At which point it is memorable not as an abstraction, but as an experience. My prediction here is that "beauty" is a tag for memorable abstractions. As example, there are artists who win awards for photo essays of things like Dachau and Auschwitz, and the reviews are littered with phrases like "stark beauty" or "grim elegance".

Surely the point is clear. Most of us, fortunately have not had experiences like concentration camps, but we want, and culturally need to remember the lessons of the atrocities we have visited upon ourselves and wish not to repeat. So artists as gatekeepers for our collective moral souls go about creating and defining "beauty" by arranging imagery that is easily abstracted into iconic form and hammer home the identification of that imagery with the horror to be avoided - and declare it "beautiful". If we "buy into" the message and have any human empathy and sympathy we begin to see the imagery as something more than its immediate portrayal, but as a connection between ourselves (we have learned to consider it "beautiful" the emotion is in us) and the historical events.

The mistake is in thinking beauty is some fixed innate concept in the brain. It isn't we can choose and learn what is worthy of remembrance. I've seen Perl scripts that once I grasped the authors intent and understood how he was getting there I considered literally "breathtakingly beautiful" (I gasped and stared slack jawed for a moment) but I seriously doubt that someone who's never seen a computer would understand the beauty. Likewise machinists will ooh and ahh over some particularly clever or intricate turning or linkage, where somebody who's never cut metal will just see another gadget and shrug.

So beauty definitely is something that we can learn. It is innate to who we are, but is not transcendent of who we are. Our conceptions of beauty change and grow with us even as they are part of shaping how we change and grow.

The documentary was in the form of a lecture and was presented by Professor Brian Cox. If you missed the lecture by any chance you can watch it through the video On Demand feature offered by popular service providers like Verizon FiOS TV.

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