



## **.copy 31 - 2.1 a blinding force**

What the growth of our cities could mean for our emotional life

Planetary growth – with the spread of electricity – is causing a new phenomenon: light pollution. The glow of the sprawl – spreading from cities, suburbs, and subdivisions – is diminishing the night sky. As a result, the stars and Milky Way are less visible each year, whether seen from our backyards or through the zoom lenses of the great telescopes.

Death Valley National Park in Northern California is known as one of the darkest skies in the United States – until recently. The “Night Sky Team” at the National Park Service has for years been measuring the night-time visibility of stars, galaxies, and the Milky Way, and the team is sounding the alarm that visibility is decreasing every year. Measurements show – and the naked eye confirms – that light pumping into the sky from distant cities reduces the darkness in Death Valley. As light extends from Las Vegas across the horizon, the night sky in Death Valley shrinks.

City lights reduce the visibility of stars, planets, and other celestial objects. With its casinos, skyscrapers, and spectacular fountains, Las Vegas pollutes the night of Northern California. As Las Vegas wins new growth, Death Valley loses its naturally awesome sky. Sky-watchers must now seek farther sites like Utah’s Bryce Canyon or Zion National Park where Olivier Messiaen wrote his music of awe and wonder in “Des Canyons aux Etoiles.”

In Southern California, Mount Palomar Observatory enjoyed for 60 years the darkest sky in the United States. Its location at 5,500 feet above sea level and 80 miles north of San Diego was perfect for the 200-inch giant reflecting telescope, which was for 45 years the largest astronomical tool in the world. Light pollution began on Mount Palomar in the 1980s with the growth of San Diego.

More recently from 100 miles to the northwest, Los Angeles shines its parking lots, street lights, and ball parks into the pristine sky. The Mount Palomar telescope is slowly going blind from the light emissions of car dealerships, casinos, and the subdivisions of Temecula, Escondido, Valley View, Riverside, and even Palm Springs. For decades, the California light-and-space artist, James Turrell, has placed the phenomenon of light at the center of his art work. His major environmental piece – the Roden Crater– is located in the Painted Desert of Northern Arizona, 50 miles from Flagstaff, Arizona. Since 1972, Turrell has been shaping the huge Crater into an observational dome where from within a dozen people can experience pure starlight in the pitch blackness of the naturally dark sky of the desert.

The size and scope of the project have stimulated many books and articles. In 2007, it appears very unlikely that the ambitious project will ever reach completion. The growth of surrounding population disrupts the phenomenon at the center of the project. The more viewers learn the location, the more the project is in jeopardy. More population means less darkness.

Is light pollution reversing the mythic symbolism on which our culture is based? The first

creative act in Genesis fuses the words of language with visibility, as in “Let there be light!” Intelligible meaning and value are welded into the power of illumination. Revealing things through speech and seeing them in light have been identified in our evolutionary brains. Our primal human myths support the torch of Prometheus, not the dark Underworld. When Tolkien in his “Silmarillion” imagines the birth of the first Elves under the night sky, he describes their first utterance as a pointing gesture accompanied by the sound “ele” indicating “stars” and starlight. The Elvish language from its inception points to light. A long list of similar cosmogonies link light with divinity: Zeus and Apollo, etc. The imperative of human myth and language is to spread illumination to the ends of the universe. But is growth now a blinding force? Is darkness a necessary condition for appreciating light? The creation story also says: “Darkness was on the face of the deep.” Does the animal luciferens threaten the balance of the intelligible universe?

The prophetic voice of the California coast, Robinson Jeffers, imagined the growth of American cities as a rotten, decadent fruit. From his hand-made secluded Hawk Tower on the Big Sur shoreline, Jeffers studied astronomy and lamented in his poems the oversize growth of humanity. The cities of mid-century America appeared to the poet as “mortal splendor,” meteors rushing to decay like any natural growth. His 1939 poem “Shine, Perishing Republic” sardonically praises the glowing lights of cities as natural phenomenon about to explode: “Meteors are not needed less than mountains: shine, perishing republic.”

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