

Remarks upon the Aesthetics of the Night Sky

Endre Szécsényi

This essay begins with some observations on the main features and availability of the aesthetic experience of the night sky to us. In the second part, the aesthetics of the starry sky is interpreted in terms of time experience, complementing the usual approach in terms of immense space. These remarks on this broad and abundant subject can partly be linked to the intellectual historical interpretation of the birth of modern aesthetics, and partly to the vital discourse of environmental aesthetics, which proves that these two approaches can work together and bring to the fore the aesthetic relevance and fruitfulness of this subject. | Keywords: *Environmental Aesthetics, Aesthetics of Nature, Sublimity, Night Sky, Time Experience*

Introduction

In this essay I deal with some aesthetic aspects of *the experience of the night sky* (ENS, hereafter), more exactly, of *the live prospect of the starry vault seen from the Earth through the naked eye*. In the first part, I re-consider some general features of the availability of this type of experience to us, as well as some theoretical questions which immediately arise from the aesthetic reflections upon the starry heaven as the scene and occasion of natural sublime. In the second part, I offer my own approach to this experience, by focusing on its temporal – and not spatial – dimensions, and claim that the sublime in the ENS can be explained as a reverberation of the cosmic time into the personal life-time, suggesting that the existential relevance of ENS can be thus grasped in a novel manner. My remarks – which, due to the limited space here and the complexity of the subject, inevitably remain somewhat impressionistic – can partly be linked to the intellectual historical interpretation of the birth of modern aesthetics, and partly to the vital discourse of environmental aesthetics, which I am inclined to understand as a replay of the great Enlightenment project of aesthetics.¹ My aim is to suggest that these two approaches – roughly, the historical and the theoretical – can work together, and to highlight the aesthetic relevance and fruitfulness of the discussed topic.

By aesthetics in the title of this essay I mean modern, so to speak, *philosophical* aesthetics, thus the most conspicuous starting point could be Immanuel Kant's oft-cited lines from the "Conclusion" of his Second Critique: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence [*Bewunderung und Ehrfurcht*], the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.*" (Kant, 2015, p. 129) Although Kant just fleetingly mentions the word *sublimity* [*Erhabenheit*] in this section, it is also evident, retrospectively from his Third Critique (e.g. annex to §29), that the night sky is one of the eminent examples of modern (natural) sublime besides bare mountains, deserts, wide and open landscapes, ocean, volcanos, waterfalls, storms, vast dark forests and the like²; and that the foundations of the aesthetic experience of the sublime are laid in *moral feeling*. Thus, it may seem that the *aesthetic* reflections on the ENS must be conceived in the framework of the sublime, or at least some strong references to the tradition of the sublime seem inevitable. If it is true, it also means that the theoretical problems with the sublime³ – whether it is up-to-date or obsolete, whether a thick or thin notion, whether its experience elevates/emancipates or rather astonishes/overwhelms us, etc.⁴ – may simultaneously concern the aesthetic ENS. Meanwhile there can be further particular issues with the aesthetic ENS, too: for instance, whether it is considered as an eventually and fundamentally *positive*, awe-inspiring experience that touches and strengthens the awareness of our moral dignity like in Kant, or an essentially *negative*, dreadful experience which is associated with the despotic and oppressive power of a rigid cosmical system like in William Blake; whether it is still relevant as a live and vivid experience or whether its transformation into digital images of deep space has already overshadowed it⁵; whether it has preserved something of its earlier metaphysical significance or whether it has become the mere indication of physical space (full of sinister or hopeful possibilities).

¹ Recently, focusing only on Immanuel Kant's aesthetics, Jean-Marie Schaeffer analysed the similarities and differences between the 18th-century aesthetics of nature and contemporary environmental aesthetics to conclude that the differences outweigh the similarities (Schaeffer, 2018). (I am grateful to one of my blind reviewers for having called my attention to this article.) However, when I am loosely phrasing the emergence of environmental aesthetics from the mid-1960s onwards as a kind of "replay" of the rise of modern aesthetics, I mostly think of pre-Kantian discourses of natural beauty and natural sublime. Although I do not want to diminish Kant's significance at all, his aesthetic insights cannot fully represent – for his transcendental philosophical language cannot adequately treat – the abundance of the aesthetic ideas of his age and of the previous one from the mid-17th century onwards.

² In the pre-Kantian aesthetics it was far from being so evident, most probably due to the metaphysical 'burden' of starry heaven, night sky was often missing from the list of the 'aesthetic' scenes of wilderness, but at least it was not at all the paradigmatic example of the sublime.

³ As already Ronald Hepburn discussed it (cf. Hepburn, 1988). It is a quite rarely referred paper, perhaps due to its only publication in a not easily available Polish academic journal. The sublime was so much neglected in the aesthetic discourse by the 20th century that it needed to be rehabilitated for the environmental aesthetics (cf. Brady 2012).

⁴ For the sublime as an ardent issue of contemporary aesthetics today, see e.g. (Arcangeli and Dokic, 2021; Brady, 2021; Shapshay, 2021).

⁵ Like the breath-taking pics from the Universe's map, cf. *The Sloan Digital Sky Survey*, <https://www.sdss.org/> (Accessed: 28 December 2020)

1. The Sublime and the ENS

If by now the notion of the sublime is theoretically ambiguous, then why not choose another term or terms to preserve the significance of vivid ENS? Awe, admiration, wonder, grandeur – could be a few candidates. And why can one suggest that the ENS is problematic at all? Is it not universally accepted that it elicits aesthetic experience? Arnold Berleant, for example, argues that we only have access now to the sublime (understood as *negative sublime*) which emanates from the human environment, namely from “a cultural environment of towering institutions whose power is so great that it cannot be conceived directly and concretely and exceeds our capacity to grasp it rationally”; we no longer have access to natural sublime (including the night sky). Moreover, “[m]ost people are no longer aware of the starry heavens that so awed Kant that he took them to exemplify the sublime. The glow of light from our cities renders the stars quite invisible.” (Berleant, 1997, p.78) Indeed, our sublime ENS is significantly different from the starry heavens grasped by Anaxagoras, Ovid, Blaise Pascal, Joseph Addison, Blake, Kant, Henry David Thoreau⁶ but not only in that the light and air pollution hinder most of us from seeing the starry sky in its full brightness every clear (or slightly cloudy) night, or in that we have to make longer and longer excursions to find a proper spot far enough away from every human environment for this kind of enjoyment⁷, but in that the night sky today, especially from places close to crowded airways, is full of flying objects: airplanes⁸, satellites and even the International Space Station. The image of the night sky used to be the prime example of tranquillity, immutability and eternity for millenaries. Nowadays it is replete with human artefacts, and we have to take long and expensive journeys to find a place (in the middle of a desert, of an ocean or of a distant mountain region, etc.) to obtain an ENS at least remotely resembling what was universally and readily available to everybody just a hundred years ago.⁹ Nowadays, the view of a huge and bright starry sky can even carry the sinister meaning of an horrid solitude or an unbridgeable distance from the inhabited regions.¹⁰ Briefly, the erewhile common and potentially everyday ENS has become a rare and almost extraordinary experience to most of us, especially to city dwellers. At the same time, the idea of night sky and its common associations remain highly

⁶ Cf., respectively, Aristotle, *Eudemean Ethics*, 1216a; *Metamorphoses*, I. 84–86.; (Pascal, 1688, p. 147); (Addison, 1965, p. 529); e.g. *America: Prophecy*, plate 10; (Kant, 1892, p. 137); (Thoreau, 1863).

⁷ For example, the *International Dark Sky Places* programme was established in 2001 to worldwide find and to protect “dark sites” for ENS, cf. <https://www.darksky.org/our-work/conservation/idsp/> (Accessed: 28 December 2020)

⁸ Due to the current covid-19 pandemic, just these days the airways are much less busy, the night sky has temporarily regained something from her earlier peacefulness.

⁹ Even then the ENS would often go unnoticed due to its everydayness. Take for example Tolstoy’s wounded Prince Andrew lying in the battlefield of Austerlitz is wondering at the immeasurably lofty sky with gray clouds above him: “How quiet, peaceful, and solemn; not at all as I ran,’ thought Prince Andrew ‘not as we ran, shouting and fighting [...]: how differently do those clouds glide across that lofty infinite sky! How was it I did not see that lofty sky before? And how happy I am to have found it at last!’ ” (Tolstoy, p. 512)

¹⁰ Like in the movie *Life of Pi* (2012): the magnificent prospects of starry sky from the middle of the ocean may also express the desperate solitude of the main character. Nowadays such a crystal-clear prospect can be gained only very far away from human inhabited regions.

estimated and exploited in our culture, let me refer only to those well-known and oft-cited or -seen dystopian scenes of popular novels and movies, in which the night sky (or the sky in general) cannot be seen in the dark future of humankind.¹¹ The imagined disappearance of the (night) sky is usually associated with some tremendous loss of humanity – loss in both physical and moral/spiritual senses. Based on the popularity and universal communicability of this motif, we may conclude that the archaic spirituality of the direct prospect of the night sky has been somewhat preserved.

2. Scientific Representations of the Night Sky

Today, in an everyday conversation, if we mention 'night sky', images that pop up in one's mind are mostly based on one's memories, on the one hand, of photos taken by (or rather compiled by) astronomers by means of their high-tech devices, by professional photographers who use special filters and exposure durations to show such colours, shades and details of the night sky as we would be unable to perceive otherwise, by astronauts (or by satellites and space probes) from the space, and, on the other, of certain sci-fi or fantasy movie scenes designed by artists and CGI engineers.¹² Undoubtedly, these offer spectacular and unforgettable pictures of the night sky and deep space. While these artistic or artificial representations might raise the threshold of our admiration of the ENS, I think that they have been unable to significantly reshape the traditional ENS, so to speak. Rather, they may replace it because they are more easily available on various digital or broadcasted channels. This development of our visual culture has made the accessibility of real ENS more difficult, and, indirectly, underlines the recently born features of the latter: rarity and exceptionality.

The accumulation of scientific knowledge about the universe from the time of Copernicus onwards has also had an influence on our ENS. Arguably, it does not result in disenchantment (*Entzauberung*): “what our best science” – as Sandra Shapshay claims – “tells us is that the night sky is still full of scientific mystery.” It “gives us a new, informed appreciation of the depths of these mysteries; in such a case, it supports thick sublime experience” (Shapshay, 2013, p. 197). I admit that we can still enthusiastically and/or out of curiosity admire the night sky and deep space (as well as any other vast or small object of nature) through the lens of our best science, but this admiration is not necessarily of an aesthetic nature¹³, and if

¹¹ Like the movies *Blade Runner* (1982), *Matrix* (1999) or the most recent *The Midnight Sky* (2020), etc. In the latter, the night sky, as an apt projective screen, is the appearance of the hope for humankind, but there is only one man in this film, with whom we can see it from the Earth, but he is an exception, the rest of people on Earth have already lost this vision.

¹² As for traditional art, while the starry sky is a topos in poetry and belles-lettres of all ages, it is apparently not a favoured subject for great painters, Vincent van Gogh's or Edvard Munch's canvases seem quite exceptional. For the sky in general as a topic of representational art from Romanticism to avant-garde, see (Clair, 1999). For the contemporary 'sky art', see (Saito, 2017, pp. 69–92).

¹³ Already Edmund Burke recognised that the curiosity, admiration and satisfaction of an anatomist (i.e. a scientist) upon discovering some “excellent contrivance” in nature, differed from the allurements and pleasures of beauty for an ordinary man (i.e. an “aesthete”): “in the former case, whilst we look up to the Maker with admiration and praise, the object which causes it may be odious and distasteful” (Burke, 1990, p. 98) – and what is odious or distasteful is beyond the scope of the aesthetic (i.e. of the beautiful and the sublime).

we call it *sublime*, I think, we misuse this term.¹⁴ Certainly, it is possible and customary to extend the sense of 'the aesthetic' to embrace also the intellectual curiosity and awe – even to set a tight parallelism between aesthetics and mathematics concerning ENS (cf. Rolston, 2011, pp. 274–5) – but these efforts seem to me rather a special blend of the aesthetic and the scientific.¹⁵ I would rather insist on that peculiar type of sensuous-spiritual quality (or type of experience) as 'aesthetic' which was invented and elaborated from the late seventeenth century onwards.¹⁶ The historical relationship between the intellectual or 'scientific' conception of beauty and the imaginative-emotive-spiritual notion of the aesthetic is a quite complicated issue; suffice it to say that the very example of the starry sky can cast some light on it. The rise of modern natural sublime can be interpreted as a reaction to the shift from the finite world of Ptolemy and even Copernicus to the infinite (immense) universe of Newton, from the hierarchically ordered cosmos of quality to the horizontally (multi-sided) extended universe of quantity, from the beautiful, august, divine fabrication to the sublime abyss of deity, etc.¹⁷ Hence it might seem that this transition offers an ample proof for the indispensability of natural scientific knowledge for the aesthetic experience of the given natural object or scene, shortly, for the claim that every aesthetic appreciation of nature must be eventually based on scientific facts, as several cognitivist environmental aestheticians claim (e.g. Carlson and Parsons, 2008; Parsons, 2008). However, in her important paper, even Patricia Matthews acknowledges that not every bit of new scientific information has relevance for our aesthetic experience, only that kind of knowledge matters which “can change our aesthetic assessment of the object by changing how we perceive it.” (Matthews, 2002, p. 44) Newton's and his fellow-naturalists' astronomical discoveries undoubtedly changed the way we perceive the starry sky, and this change could stimulate the rise of the natural sublime from Pascal to Shaftesbury and Addison, from John Baillie¹⁸ to Kant and

¹⁴ “Wonder” as an alternative to “sublime” has already been recommended by Philip Fisher, although at the expense of the oversimplification of the sublime as religious feelings “under aesthetic disguise” and as the “aestheticization of fear” (cf. Fisher, 1998).

¹⁵ Already in 1725, Francis Hutcheson speaks “in the Mathematical Style” about the beautiful in objects, including the works of nature, as “a compound Ratio of Uniformity and Variety”. As for the heavenly bodies, we need “Reasoning and Reflection” to be able to sense beauty in these giant structures (Hutcheson, 2004, pp. 29–31). The “starry Hemisphere” is a “complex idea” which is “Beautiful, Regular, Harmonious” (p. 22) inasmuch as the regular revolutions of the planets, the repetitions of the appearances of the sky with “invariable Constancy”, etc. “are the Beautys which charm the Astronomer and make his tedious Calculations pleasant.” (p. 31) This beauty of the starry sky seems rather a reward for tiresome scientific labour, and only available to a naturalist; moreover, it leaves the question answerable how it is possible to enjoy and to admire the night sky without proper astronomical knowledge.

¹⁶ Recently, concerning mostly Addison's essays, I wrote about this “sensuous-spiritual” as (proto-)aesthetic quality in more detail (cf. Szécsényi, 2020, pp. 59ff) Or as David B. Morris claims in his seminal book, commenting Addison's reflections upon the effects the ocean can take on the imagination: “Simply by opening his eyes to the sublimity of nature, a reasonable being can achieve a new power of religious conviction, one made accessible by the imagination, rendered persuasive by the feelings, and ultimately confirmed by the understanding” (Morris, 1972, p. 137). By “sensuous-spiritual”, I mean something quite like Morris' “imaginative perception” as an alternative “way of knowing the Deity”, but, concerning the later developments, it does not necessarily have to be something religious or theological in the traditional sense.

¹⁷ For the classical interpretations of this shift, see, e.g. (Koyré, 1957; Tuveson, 1960). For the rise of natural sciences in general and their role in the shaping of modernity, see, e.g. (Gaukroger, 2010, pp. 11–54).

¹⁸ The author of *An Essay on the Sublime* (1747).

further. At the same time, alchemical and natural magical elements (besides further ones from different theologies, anthropologies, literature, etc.) were also forged and exploited in the same process of invention of natural sublime of ENS: this may suggest that the manner and the purpose of application could be more relevant than the origins or scientific establishment of the applied elements. Moreover, it is also telling that Pascal and Kant refused the active role of new natural scientific insights in the (proto-aesthetic) wonder of the infinity of space (Pascal, 1688, p. 147) or of the starry sky.¹⁹ To Kant, Thoreau and many others, it has remained a breath-taking and awe-inspiring experience of an enormous canopy with amazing colours and lights: “we must regard [the starry heaven] just as we see it, as a distant, all-embracing, vault.” (Kant, 1792, p. 137) – as it was in the case of the Ptolemaic and Copernican heavens.²⁰ Natural sciences have never had exclusive authority in determining what was ‘nature’ for the modern sublime experience of nature.²¹ Although the concept of an infinite universe came from the natural scientific discoveries of the age, the response to this new situation, the contents, structure and associations of the natural sublime of ENS cannot be fully understood only from the scientifically triggered change of our perception.

My major aim, however, is not to contribute to the long and still ongoing debate concerning the role of scientific knowledge in the aesthetic appreciation of nature, it suffices to say that my position is closer to e.g. Ronald W. Hepburn’s, Emily Brady’s and Beatrice Beressi’s who have claimed that “attempts to make the aesthetics of nature an annex of the natural sciences should be treated with suspicion” (Beressi, 2020, p. 744), that is, who have raised doubts on the cognitivist explanation – elaborated extensively by Allen Carlson and Glenn Parsons, also developed by Matthews, Shapshay and (with historical interest) by William M. Barton (Barton, 2016) amongst many others – of the aesthetic experience of nature. In the case of the night sky, in the paradigmatic Kantian sense, we “can look to the left and the right, and all around” – as Brady writes –, “but it seems to go on forever, filling space and extending outwards in all directions in such a way that we cannot put any boundaries around it through perception. Through this kind of aesthetic experience, *we have a kind of sensuous feeling for the infinite*, one which is quite different from any kind of intellectual, mathematical idea of it.” (Brady, 2013, p. 60 – my emphasis, E. Sz.)

¹⁹ For more details about the incompatibility of Kantian aesthetics of nature with the realist/objectivist demands of the cognitivist environmental aesthetics, see (Schaeffer, 2019, p. 63).

²⁰ Interestingly though, in the above quoted “Conclusion” of the Second Critique, Kant still speaks about the sublimity of the starry heavens in the context of the infinite other worlds discovered by telescopes; in the Third Critique, however, he already excludes these (scientific) reflections from the aesthetic experience of natural sublime (cf. Etlin, 2012, p. 231).

²¹ The vast canopy of the night sky in itself is too big for our imagination, as Kant observed. As if our imagination could not keep pace with our intellect, and it could not absorb all aids and new information from our science. If I gaze at the Orion as I did already decades ago, by now I can know that its famous cloud is a nebula, or that the rising Sirius, “behind” Orion, the brightest fixed star from the Northern hemisphere, is actually a double system, etc. Has my aesthetic appreciation of the night sky changed due to my enlarged astronomical and astrophysical knowledge? Maybe a little, although my accumulated life-experience matters much more in this respect. But has my aesthetic judgement become more proper or more correct? – as Matthews claims (Matthews, 2002, p. 45). Has my wonder become more profound or ‘thicker’? I don’t think so.

In what follows, I shall raise just one further issue concerning the live ENS available to us within the framework of the sublime but not from the angle of the *sensuous feeling for the infinite space*.

3. The Night Sky as Time-Experience

Two years after his death, the last paper of Hepburn, the father of environmental aesthetics, came to light under the title “The Aesthetics of Sky and Space” (Hepburn, 2010).²² The title is already telling: the (aesthetic) experience of sky, either day or night one, is usually connected to – or even identical with – that of space (or recently deep space). My further remarks, however, concern time. When I just began to write this essay, I bumped into an astronomical news article in which a rare appearance of the night sky was recommended: the approximately one-month close of Saturn and Jupiter from earthly perspective.²³ The previous one occurred far before my birth, the succeeding one will do after my death.²⁴ So this was the only opportunity in my whole life to enjoy this particular heavenly spectacle, had I missed it, it would have been gone forever. However, I (together with my readers, of course) have never seen, for example, an explosion of a supernova. If Betelgeuse of Orion remains calm for a few more decades (which is close to nothing in the lifespan of an 8–8.5 milliard-year old red supergiant), I will never see such a magnificent singularity.²⁵ Decades ago, when I was a teenage schoolboy wanting to be an astronomer for a short time, I spent hours and hours examining the night sky through my small refractor. And in one of those cold and clear winter nights (which I used to prefer to warm and balmy summer ones, perhaps because – as Thoreau had remarked in his essay *A Winter Walk*,– “The heavens seem to be nearer the earth” at this season), there was one long minute when I thought that I was being a witness of an outburst: it was incredible and unforgettable. Suddenly, a giant star appeared in the sky, it was seemingly motionless in the constellation in which it kindled, and it was much brighter than any other stars and planets. I was just gazing at it with my naked eye (my small glass was useless to scan stars anyhow). Then I had to realize that it was the reflector of a fighter jet from the nearby military airbase, and it just happened to fly in the very direction of me for a minute or so, then the pilot switched the headlight off and turned his MiG–23 Flogger away, by that time I heard its engine – the miracle was

²² Originally it was a lecture that Hepburn delivered in the conference *Celestial Aesthetics: The Aesthetics of Sky, Space and Heaven* held in Heinäves (Finland) in 2009. Cf. further later developed presentations from this conference (Berleant, 2010; Rolston, 2011; Saito, 2017, pp. 69–92).

²³ Later this event gained a high reputation in the world press, a little bit surprisingly, because it was much less spectacular than, for example, a total eclipse.

²⁴ I found quite different data, according to the first reports, the last similar spectacular conjunction happened in the eighteenth century, the next will do in 2080; according to others, these two giant planets have not been this close to each other in a dark sky from the Earth for 800 years, and we should wait 400 years for the next occurrence.

²⁵ The light takes more than half a millennium to arrive from this star to the Earth, thus perhaps Betelgeuse has already been burst for a while, still perhaps I do not have enough lifetime to abide those gorgeous beams.

over. These examples,²⁶ although *in quite different ways* can show how personal life (its timespan, its fears and hopes) could shape or give meaning to the 'cosmic time' and vice versa in ENS. In addition, our earlier encounters with the night sky, in so far as we dwelled upon those occasions, were often or perhaps always existentially significant for us, and their memories, as in the above examples, carrying relevant moments of our past, can also come into play during our current ENS, as it were, we can experience a kind of emancipation from eternity to lived time in ENS, or, in Blake's words, we can directly feel that "Time is the Mercy of Eternity." (*Milton: A Poem*, Plate 24, ln. 72) Simultaneously, in this lived time of ENS we can also feel a unique timely bond to our ancestors, contemporaries and descendants: the night sky – obviously in its 'intact' prospect (that is, unaltered by our technological civilization, e.g. if we happen to look up the starry heaven travelling halfway on the Trans-Siberian Express) – is perhaps the *only* available particular 'object' that has been immutable throughout the history of our race.²⁷ Since time immemorial every generation has had the opportunity to wonder at almost *the same* breath-taking sight of the starry sky, while everything else in our environments has changed and is incessantly changing.

From the extended history of modern aesthetics, I take Francesco Petrarca's famous letter of c. 1350–1352, backdated to 1336, on his climb of Mont Ventoux, when his "only motive was the wish to see what so great an elevation had to offer." (Petrarch, 1898, p. 307) Amongst the several possible interpretations, now I read it as a report of an attempt to experience the Whole of nature in an enormous prospect, that is, in space: this Whole is identical with the divine that establishes and embraces every existence in nature (cf. Ritter, 1974, pp. 141–147). Once the poet laureate with his brother reaches the summit, he looks around and recognizes the astonishingly broad view in space, still he surprisingly soon loses his interest in this prospect; after a few lines of description in quite a neutral tone, we can read: "Then a new idea took possession of me, and I shifted my thoughts to a consideration of time rather than place [*Occupavit inde animum nova cogitatio atque a locis traduxit ad tempora*]." (Petrarch, 1989, p. 314) As a result of this shift from places to time, Petrarca begins to meditate on his life, his past, present and possible future, much more intensively and in greater length than on the spatial view before. There is an exciting play between space and time: the apparent diminution of spatial distances in his view from the peak are paralleled with, or rather engender, a densification of (personal) time in his mind. His past and future come closer to each other, he is intensively reflecting on the significant events of his life, he is finding new perspectives to see and to evaluate them, he is extending his contemplation backward and forward including afterlife. Space somehow belongs to the terrestrial area, while *time to the spiritual*. After a

²⁶ All of these employ some scientific knowledge about the sky, but these bits of information are quite occasional and contingent, easily replaceable with another ones, with even the traditional image of the eternal and stately rotating starry heaven decorated exceptionally with comets and "falling stars" or their culturally mediated memories.

²⁷ It is not true in a precise astronomical sense, of course, we know that even the "fixed stars" are moving and changing their position in our sky, but the time-scale of their motion is practically beyond human comprehension and experience.

fleeting return to some geographical details of the actual view, the poet opens St Augustine's *Confessions* in whose tenth book he happens to find this sentence (X. viii. 15.): "And men go about to wonder at the heights of the mountains, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolution of the stars, but themselves they consider not [*Et eunt homines admirari alta montium et ingentes fluctus maris et latissimos lapsus fluminum et oceani ambitum et giros siderum, et relinquunt se ipsos*]." (Petrarch, 1898, p. 317) Besides high mountains and other magnificent natural scenes, there is the starry sky amongst the examples of worldly (therefore worthless) wonders of huge quantity. This ascetic-Platonic refusal means that Petrarca still saw an unbridgeable gap between terrestrial and celestial, between the visible-sensuous and the invisible-spiritual. His enterprise, although it seems modern and unprecedented in many respects, to grasp the Whole in a landscape-view could not have been 'aesthetic' in our sense, the play between the spatial and the temporal was intriguing but remained only rhetorical, and did not constitute a balanced structure of the experience: his spirit could not work, with Hepburn's phrase, as a "metaphysical imagination".²⁸ This is why even ENS could be refused, at least as a physical experience, despite the traditional estimation of the starry heaven as the visibility and the presence of our *cosmos* (Ritter, 1974, p. 148), and/or despite that the contemplation of starry sky had been held to be the metaphysical destiny of humankind (cf. Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* 1216a; Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, I. 84–86.)

Yet Petrarca clearly recognised how the vision of a vast space in landscape could intensively evoke the sense of time – which can offer us a useful parallelism between vast landscapes and the night sky. Traditionally, the latter can be considered as the display of 'astronomical' time being expressed in distances²⁹ in an Einsteinian or Lemaîtreian space; as the monumental reminiscence of both the 'mythological' and 'cosmogonical' time³⁰; as the message board of 'astrological' time; regarding its majestic revolution, as the basis of our calendar; and also as – maybe firstly and mostly – the profound experience of personal lifetime. Pre-eminently, the latter is the spectator's vivid and strong feeling of the finitude of her own life. While experiencing immense space (and power) has a potential to overwhelm the spectator, and she can sense her own existential insignificance (as it is a commonplace from Pascal's encounter with spatial infinity onwards),³¹ time may have an exciting,

²⁸ Metaphysical imagination "connects with, looks to, the 'spelled out' systematic metaphysical theorising which is its support and ultimate justification. But also it is no less an element of the concrete present landscape-experience: it is fused with the sensory components, not a meditation aroused by these." (Hepburn, 1996, p. 192)

²⁹ In the lightyears between different cosmic bodies and the Earth, in the diameters of nebulae and galaxies, in the length of intergalactic filaments, etc., or in the hypothetical age of our Universe (currently 13.8 milliard years).

³⁰ Either frozen in the constellations (many of which tell some old and tragic stories that had happened between gods and humans), or represented in the more ancient ideas of distant Uranian god(s) (cf. Eliade, 1987, p. 118). Even nowadays the imagination of our scientists constructs mythological names for their astronomical objects from black hole and dark energy to blue giants and brown dwarfs, etc. (cf. Berleant, 2010, p. 142).

³¹ At least this has been the customary description of the first or initial phase of the sublime experience of immense space.

elevating, emancipatory potential quite different from space's. The sense of finitude may immediately raise a feeling of *uniqueness* and *imitability* on a cosmic scale, without there being any hubris or anthropomorphising. During ENS the spectator does not think of herself as the ruler of the universe, as the only source of meaning in the void, or as someone who possesses moral superiority over immense physical objects and dimensions – even if she necessarily and always stands in the centre of ENS, i.e. in the physical centre of the perceived hemisphere. The position she gains is still a special one from where she can reflect on the sky, on Earth, on herself, on her own life and on the history and future of the human race, on the relationship between all these, eventually on the relationship between past, present and future. Although the spatial and the temporal aspects of ENS are eventually inseparable, they can have different and complementary functions in aesthetic appreciation.³²

In his essay *Night and Moonlight*, Thoreau remarks that the light of the Moon “is more proportionate to our knowledge than that of a day. It is no more dusky in ordinary nights, than our mind's habitual atmosphere, and the moonlight is as bright as our most illuminated moments are.” (Thoreau, 1863, p. 583) One and half centuries earlier, in the first piece of his *Spectator* series “Essays Moral and Divine” (1714) written in Pascalian inspiration, Addison tells the story of his “Sun-set walking in the open Fields, till the Night insensibly fell upon” him. The amazing and spectacular sight of the starry sky with the glowing Milky Way was completed by the rising “full Moon [...] in that clouded Majesty, which Milton takes Notice of”: all this “opened to the Eye a new Picture of Nature, which was more finely shaded, and disposed among softer Lights than that which the Sun had before discovered to us.” (Addison, 1965, p. 529) With these two quotations, finally, I would like to set up a hopefully illuminating analogy between this experience of reverberation under the starry sky and the time-experience of ENS: an analogy between the relationship of cosmic light-beams with the nightly lighting of nature on Earth and that of cosmic time (eternity) with lived personal time.³³ Both types of experience may help us elaborate an aesthetic interpretation of ENS which – without drawing on some illusionary unity or harmony with some Whole and without any distorting projections of anthropomorphising – *could relate us to* the radical otherness and even inhumanity of the night sky. And, although to different extent, both cited authors can suggest the multisensory features of ENS, which is never identical of the mere view of starry sky, but it contains – as its constitutive element – the terrestrial environment (specially illuminated terrestrial landscapes, sounds and voices, smells, tastes, breezes, heat and coolness, etc.). The spectator is at the centre of ENS, but not of the universe or even of the

³² There are, of course, other scenes or sources around us in which we can aesthetically feel and live the temporality of our existence, like, commonly, the sites of ancient or modern ruins, or the surface of Earth regarded as a gigantic ruin (after Thomas Burnet's popular theory of the late 17th century), or the “*sic transit...*” lessons from the history of humankind, or even some foxed photos in a family album, but the night sky offers something else due to its radical otherness and the immutability of its vast prospect.

³³ It might seem interesting to refer to Lyotard's (and Barnett Newman's) “sublime Now”, but I can only indicate here that their “sensation of time” differs from the above outlined timeexperience of ENS (cf. Lyotard, 1991, pp. 89–107).

cosmos; she can simultaneously experience another 'Picture of Nature' with the previously hidden details now disclosed only by the Moon- and starlight – and another state of herself.

Here I can also refer to a passage by Hepburn, even if he insists on the vocabulary of space and body there. In his late evening walk to a Lake District tarn he found, besides the “wonderful enjoyment of the unbroken level surface of water”, that “The moon reflects on the tarn; and that bright, tiny addition to the scene prompts a momentous further change”: he could realize that he was “simply a solitary tarn-watcher” no more, but “one who walks the surface of a planet suspended in a space”, his “sense of bodily size and scale” and his “position” were “determined by [his] relationship with” “other heavenly bodies, planets, satellites and stars” (Hepburn, 1998, p. 273). The reverberation of the Moonlight on the surface of the tarn triggered a sense of an extended self; applying it to the time-experience of ENS, we could say that it is the sense of the past–present–future of both the spectator and the human race on Earth. As if this dimension of the night under the starry sky would have been recognised in the ancient concepts of dreams and prophetic visions, at least in dreams the self’s sensations are intensified and she is partly emancipated from her bodily-physical and timely barriers. This was called Selene’s realm who was the sad lover of Endymion, the shepherd sleeping and dreaming for ever in a cave, and – as the eighth Orphic Hymn says – she was “the Mother of Ages”, the “Fair lamp of Night, its ornament and friend, / Who giv’st to Nature’s works their destin’d end” (Taylor, 1792, p. 126).

4. Concluding Remarks

In the late 17th and the 18th centuries, on the emergence of modern aesthetics, the task was to re-discover the night sky as natural sublime in the context of immense space, reconfiguring its earlier metaphysical and mythological contents; nowadays the task could be to re-discover the quasi-Ptolemaic scheme of aesthetic ENS and to re-appropriate its existentially relevant contents, reconfiguring the claims of natural scientific curiosity and awe, or, more generally, those of the scientific culture in modern Europe, whose most distinctive feature has been “the gradual assimilation of all cognitive values to scientific ones.” (Gaukroger, 2006, p. 11) While the night sky can represent unreachable spatial distances and incomprehensible timescale, some radical otherness and inhumanity, in ENS as an aesthetic experience of the sublime, it is connected or rather related to the Earth including the peculiar circumstances of the experience (the enlightening of terrestrial landscape, voices, smells, etc.), to human race (its past and future), and to the personal life of the spectator. According to my non-cognitivist interpretation, one can exploit the aesthetic potentials of the ENS if one regards the night sky as a reverberation of the cosmic time into the lived world and one’s own lifetime, and not as an inexhaustible fund of astronomical and astrophysical riddles. Certain pieces of scientific knowledge can – as have often – become ingredient of the aesthetic ENS, but this knowledge is not all-explaining, nor exclusive, not even constitutive here: the aesthetic spectator of the night sky will only, so

to speak, cherry-pick from the buffet table provided by our “best science”, she may find some intriguing or inspiring grains of information, indeed, at the same time she permanently uses and applies several other, quite diverse, sources including the elements of the cultural heritage of humankind and those of her own life-experience (her earlier encounters with the night sky, her fears and hopes, etc.). Nowadays, the experience of this reverberation can immediately give a warning: we have one Earth, one world and one life to enjoy, live and preserve; it is not simply anthropocentrism in the pejorative sense of the word, rather an intensively felt awareness of the uniqueness of the sublunary sphere.

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Endre Szécsényi
 Department of Aesthetics
 ELTE – Eötvös Loránd University
 H-1088 Budapest, Múzeum krt. 6-8.
szecsenyi.endre@btk.elte.hu