The spectacle of the stars is becoming ever more obstructed from view by increasing light pollution in the 'civilised’ world. Views of the heavens were familiar in ancient, medieval and modern times – until recently.

Contemplation of the complexities of the heavens has inspired religions, philosophies and myths – and also scientific analysis and theory. The night sky has been widely referred to in art and literature, with the fascination with the night sky providing a context for images of the stars and planets and myths.

Astronomers and astrologers have tried to explain the educational and psychological as well as the scientific and religious forces that operate in the universe. The night sky was a vital constituent of the world view of the ancient world, the medieval and the Renaissance and Baroque.

Familiarity with the Night Sky in the Ancient World

None of the accounts … concerning the Universe would ever have been given if men had not seen the stars or the sun or the heaven. … the vision of day and night and of months and years has created the art of number and has given us not only the notion of Time but also means of research into the nature of the Universe. Plato, Timaeus, 47 A-B

Historical perceptions of the dark are an essential backstory to the fascination with the night sky in relation to the problems of ever-increasing light pollution.

So many stars that the Milky Way was depicted as a solid circle. Outside everyone’s front door.

’The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves (Julius Caesar) ’The Milky Way is no longer visible to one third of humanity (60% Europe, 80% USA) During a 1994 blackout, Los Angeles residents called 911 emergency no. when they saw the Milky Way for the first time.

14th century

‘… cast up thine eye … See yonder, lo! the galaxie The which men clepe the Milky Way For it is white …’ Chaucer, The Milky Way, c 1380?

Population growth and lighting

1417 - London first organised lighting of streets (Mayoral decree)
1802 - more efficient coal-fueled lighting (William Murdoch)
1807 - London’s first gaslit road
1816 - Baltimore gaslit streetlights
1820 - Paris (1st electric lights, 1878)
1879 - Thomas Edison, incandescent lamps led to bulbs/street lighting

Light pollution in the 21st century

Astronomy, science: observations and analysis
Cities: for security/crime; safety/cars and people; ambience/monuments
Effects on human beings: health, well-being, routine, sleep patterns
The natural world, biodiversity: effect on animals, insects (bats to mayflies)

Fascination with the Night Sky

Juxtaposition of population/pollution maps with contemporary artworks shows that as light pollution increased, familiarity with the night sky (formerly outside everyone’s front door) has decreased, as reflected in art. Light shows us the world; darkness shows us the stars

References
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