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84 minutes, Color, Stereo
Exhibition Format: HDCAM
Production Format: HD
English, USA, 2011

- SYNOPSIS -

THE CITY DARK is a feature documentary about light pollution and the disappearing night sky. It premiered in competition at the 2011 South by Southwest Film Festival, where it won the Jury Prize for Best Score/Music. After moving to light-polluted New York City from rural Maine, filmmaker Ian Cheney asks: "Do we need the dark?" Exploring the threat of killer asteroids in Hawai'i, tracking hatching turtles along the Florida coast, and rescuing injured birds on Chicago streets, Cheney unravels the myriad implications of a globe glittering with lights—including increased breast cancer rates from exposure to light at night, and a generation of kids without a glimpse of the universe above. Featuring stunning astrophotography and a cast of eclectic scientists, philosophers, historians, and lighting designers, **THE CITY DARK** is the definitive story of light pollution and the disappearing stars.

- GENRES -

Nature, Independent, Wildlife, Environmental, Science, Astronomy, Urban, Culture, Spiritual, Personal Narrative, Social Issue, Health/Medical, News

- CREATIVE TEAM -

Presented by:	Rooftop Films & Edgeworx Studios
A Production of:	Wicked Delicate Films
A Film by:	Ian Cheney
Produced by:	Ian Cheney
Written by:	Ian Cheney
Directed by:	Ian Cheney
Edited by:	Ian Cheney + Frederick Shanahan
Co-Produced by:	Tamara Rosenberg, Colin Cheney + Julia Marchesi
Original Music by:	The Fishermen Three & Ben Fries
Cinematography by:	Ian Cheney + Taylor Gentry

- FEATURING -

Neil deGrasse Tyson – Astrophysicist, Hayden Planetarium

Don Pettit – Astronaut, NASA

Ann Druyan – Co-writer, *Cosmos*

Jack Newton – Astrophotographer

Chris Impey – Cosmologist, University of Arizona

Jeffrey Kuhn – Astronomer, University of Hawai'i

Roger Ekirch – Historian, Virginia Tech

Jane Brox – Author, *Brilliant*

Bill Sharpe – Historian, Barnard College

Susan Elbin – Ornithologist

Dr. Steven Lockley – Professor, Harvard University

Dr. Richard Stevens – Epidemiologist, University of Connecticut

Dr. George Brainard – Neurologist, Thomas Jefferson University

Dr. David Blask – Cellular Biologist, Tulane University

Jon Shane – Criminologist

Herve Descottes – Lighting Designer

- FILM SUMMARY -

THE CITY DARK chronicles the disappearance of darkness. The film follows filmmaker (and amateur astronomer) Ian Cheney, who moves to New York City from Maine and discovers an urban sky almost completely devoid of stars. Posing a deceptively simple question—"What do we lose, when we lose the night?"—the film leads viewers on a quest to understand how light pollution affects people and the planet. In six chapters weaving together cutting-edge science with personal, meditative sequences reflecting on the human relationship to the sky, **THE CITY DARK** shines new light on the meaning of the dark.

1. The City Bright

On Staten Island, we meet Irve Robbins, a Brooklyn-born astronomer running one of the last remaining observatories in New York City, where he is limited to showing his students only the brightest objects that shine through the city's light-polluted sky. As Robbins puts it, "I've seen twice the Milky Way in New York—when there was a blackout." At a Hackensack, New Jersey, warehouse filled with thousands of different light bulbs, owner Larry Birnbaum explains the evolution of electric lights since Edison's first tungsten bulb. Birnbaum notes that each successive generation sought to maximize its light output; today, lights produce thousands more lumens than Edison's original. Through history, as city lights grew brighter, and cities themselves grew bigger, fewer and fewer young people grew up with a connection to the stars. Neil deGrasse Tyson, a leading astrophysicist who grew up in the Bronx, describes falling in love with the stars during his first visit to the Hayden Planetarium in Manhattan, and notes the irony of falling in love with an artificial night sky; in the Bronx, after all, there were never more than a few dozen stars.

II. Islands of Dark

Seeking the astronomers who have fled cities for darker skies, the filmmaker finds his way to rural Arizona, just a stone's throw from the Mexico border, where a community of stargazers have established "Sky Village," a dark-sky haven for astronomers from all walks of life. The astronomers struggle to put into words what drew them to the stars, but time-lapse photography of the Milky Way says it all: it's one of the clearest views of the universe available in the United States. One of the other best places for stargazing—and said to be the best professional astronomy sites in the world—is under threat, on the islands of Hawai'i. Here, astronomers' attempts to detect earth-killing asteroids with the world's newest, largest camera are frustrated by urban population growth in the cities below. As Nick Kaiser of the University of Hawai'i puts it, "It's as though you're looking through fog." A brief animation sequence illustrates the haze of light that covers much of the planet, and findings by researchers in Italy that two-thirds of all humans now live under skies polluted by artificial light. In the researchers' words, "Mankind is proceeding to envelop himself in a luminous fog."

III. Nature and the Night

As it turns out, astronomers are not the only ones losing the night. Biologists along the Florida coast trace the death of thousands of hatching sea turtles due to their disorientation by Miami's lights. Volunteers at the Field Museum in Chicago collect from the city sidewalks thousands of dead birds, victims of light-induced disorientation and collisions into brightly lit buildings. As Chad Moore of the National Park Service explains, "When we *add* light to the environment, that has the potential to disrupt habitat, just like running a bulldozer over the landscape can." Which raises the question: do *humans* need the dark?

IV. Night Shifts

Suzanne Goldklang, a breast cancer patient who for years worked a night shift selling jewelry on late-night TV, says she spends little time wondering what gave her cancer. But epidemiologist Richard Stevens of the University of Connecticut has been struggling for his entire career to understand why women in industrialized societies suffer from increased rates of breast cancer. In 1987, he woke up in the middle of the night staring at the streetlight pouring in his window, and became the first scientist to suggest a link between light at night and breast cancer. Stevens' research led to the revelation that night-shift workers are almost twice as likely to develop breast cancer as day-shift workers, suggesting that disrupted circadian rhythms cause us more harm than we might think.

V. Why We Light

But don't we need lights? The filmmaker recalls a burglary at his childhood home in Maine; his family responded by installing an enormous, bright light on the corner of the barn. Historian Roger Ekirch confirms that humans have long feared the dark, and that crime was the original impetus for widespread street lighting on the planet. In Newark,

New Jersey, a criminologist shows how city parks have pushed back crime by introducing bright new lampposts; residents agree that lights have made the community more livable and sociable. From here, the film tilts towards an exploration of the human attraction to light. As author Jane Brox says, “The struggle to create more and more light was a struggle to dominate the night, rather than be dominated by the night.”

VI. Astrophilia

And yet, as Cheney notes from his rooftop in Brooklyn, “Though we may love the light, we may also *need* the dark.” In the film’s last chapter, we encounter the ways in which lighting designers—atop the High Line in Manhattan, and in a tiny Maine town—are balancing the human love of light with our need for darkness, our love of the starry skies, and our desire to cut energy costs with more efficient designs. In a final montage of starry skies, we hear remembrances from the film’s interviewees, recalling their first experience seeing the heavens; Neil deGrasse Tyson, the Bronx-born astrophysicist, has the final word: “When you look at the night sky, you realize how small we are within the cosmos. It’s kind of a resetting of your ego. To deny yourself of that state of mind, either willingly or unwittingly, is to not live to the full extent of what it is to be human.”

- BIO -

Ian Cheney is a Brooklyn-based documentary filmmaker. He grew up in New England and earned his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees at Yale. After graduate school he co-created and starred in the Peabody Award-winning theatrical hit and PBS documentary *King Corn* (2007), directed the feature documentary *The Greening of Southie* (Sundance Channel, 2008), and co-produced the Planet Green film *Big River* (2009). Ian maintains a 1/1000th acre farm in the back of his '86 Dodge pickup, which is at the center of his film *Truck Farm* (2011). He has been featured in the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Men’s Journal*, and on CNN, MSNBC, and *Good Morning America*. In 2011, Ian and longtime collaborator Curt Ellis received the Heinz Award for their environmental advocacy. An avid astrophotographer, Ian travels frequently to show his films, lead discussions, and give talks about sustainability, agriculture, and the human relationship to the natural world.

- DIRECTOR Q&A SAMPLE -

What led to the making of THE CITY DARK?

Most of the photographs I took when I was a kid were taken at night. Spending a lot of my childhood in rural Maine, I fell in love with the night sky and wanted to try and capture it as best I could. I used a Pentax camera borrowed from my Dad, a high school photography teacher, and experimented with different long exposures using an unforgivable amount of Dad's Kodak Gold film. And spending so many nights out under the stars, I became something of an amateur astronomer as a teenager, even building my own telescope out of an old cardboard construction tube.

But as I grew up and spent more and more time in cities, my connection to the stars faded. If I paused to wonder what this disconnection meant, I couldn't put it into words, and rarely thought if mattered much. Why would we *need* the stars? But then a few years ago, I heard that someone calculated that for the first time in history, the world was now a predominantly urban population, with more of us living in cities than in the countryside. It occurred to me that my own migration from countryside to city—and from dark, starry skies to bright, electric lights—mirrored the world's demographic shift in a rather startling way. With so few of us growing up with a connection to the stars, might we be losing something rather fundamental? The more I thought about it, the more I felt I *had* lost something—something I couldn't put my finger on.

And how did the film evolve?

I started with a simple question: "Why do we need the stars?" And clearly the first people to talk to were astronomers. And though they wove together an impressive array of astronomy-based answers for why we should be able to see a clear night sky—to detect earth-killing asteroids, say, or to discover what the universe is actually made of—many of them pushed me towards thinking outside the observatory, in two main ways.

First, it was clear that many of the astronomers I spoke to, especially the unpaid amateur astronomers, felt a kind of spiritual or emotional connection to the stars, much the way a person might feel an affection for a beautiful mountain, ocean view, or city park. Are the stars part of *nature*? How can we define what we gain from seeing the universe? Does human culture somehow need the context of the greater cosmos, to help us keep things in perspective? These intangible lines of inquiry became the undercurrent of the film, alongside another realm of inquiry that the astronomers pushed me toward: the science of the night. Given that the planet earth has evolved for billions of years with a very consistent rhythm of light and dark, might the sudden introduction of electric light affect more than our view of the stars?

THE CITY DARK also engages the relatively new field of the ecology of the night in an attempt to understand how our loss of darkness is affecting humans and wildlife. In all, the visual treatment of the film carries these two lines of inquiry forward by weaving together more poetic, meditative footage of the night sky with handheld footage of real people exploring these issues by day.