

FIRESIDE STUDY 3

A study in the scale of the universe

Film: The Most Important Image Ever Taken (Hubble Deep Field)

Introduction:

This science documentary goes a long way to helping the average punter make sense of the vastness of the universe. As the numbers become mind-bogglingly large, the viewer is given a renewed perspective on how insignificantly small *we* must be by comparison.

Take a deep breath, and take in the weight of this impressive short film; a short film with ‘*universal*’ appeal, in the truest sense of the word.



Key issues:

How small we are

“In 1995 the Hubble Space Telescope stared for 10 days at a rather unremarkable patch of sky. The results were nothing less than humbling on a universal scale.” Suddenly our petty concerns and interests seem so ridiculous.

The most magical moment in this short film is when “the nooma nooma guy” appears – a wobbly-looking character who apparently became famous for his gorgeously self-absorbed singing. The juxtaposition of images is so powerful, that we are immediately forced to question our own strange obsessions. We feel for this guy and how silly he must now feel, shamed for believing for a moment that *he* was the centre of the universe. *“Let’s not be too hard on ourselves though,”* says the narrator. No indeed.

The possibility of life on other planets

Filmmaker Tony Darnell says in his narration, “Looking at this image, the idea that the earth may be the only planet in the entire universe that harbours life appears almost absurd.” It makes sense that he dedicates the film to Carl Sagan, who was heavily involved in efforts to search for extra-terrestrial intelligence.

In terms of sheer numbers – billions of other planets – it’s a hard case to argue against. Surely there *must* be other intelligent life forms beyond our own tiny spinning rock.

THE most important image?

The Most Important Image Ever Taken is a big claim to make in the title of a film. To the astronomer, perhaps this could be the most significant images ever recorded. However, as raised by a number of the initial ‘faith response’ contributors to the Campfire November festival, is it really possible to elevate one image over another like this? Everywhere we look around us is truly awe-inspiring. Both in scientific and artistic terms, the most amazing sights can be seen in so many places.

Suggested questions:

- Is there a time you have experienced this sense of wonder at outer space and our place in it? How did this film bring that sensation back?
- Does this sense of insignificance uplift, or downcast you emotionally?
- What evidence is there for believing that the earth is the *only* planet in the universe that sustains intelligent life-forms (*unlike* what the documentary suggests)?
- If you believe in God, what does this film suggest about the necessary ‘scale’ of God?
- Does this new or renewed knowledge increase or decrease your faith in God?