

New Perspectives in Planetarium Lectures: How to Tell Science under the Dome Preserving the “Enchantment”

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We discuss the philosophy and strategy of a modern planetarium lecture, within the larger frame of the communication of astronomy. The planetarium is a peculiar medium that requires a creative and rigorous approach in order to balance the three propulsive forces behind the ‘planetarium experience’: scientific knowledge (method and contents), technological ‘sense of wonder’ and pre-rational (not necessarily anti-rational) ‘enchantment’. While scientific and technological resources are largely exploited in state-of-the-art domes, the latter concept – introduced by Max Weber in order to categorize the mystic/esthetic impact of nature on the human mind – has not been sufficiently explored. However, it implies an effort to delve into the public perception of astronomy, remarking the crucial role of professional communication skills for an effective communication of science. Rather than a forced alphabetization on science and/or a crusade against astrology, we believe that the planetarium experience should be a stimulating reawakening of curiosity and ecological awareness of the sky – hence of the universe. The research of a fine tuning of the above three components makes the classical conflict between the boring academic lecture under the stars versus the disneyish, hypertechnological shows obsolete. We present some solutions for “fine-tuned lectures”, with examples from our experience at the Rome Planetarium.