

Are We a Universe, or a Speck? - the Macrocosm Inside

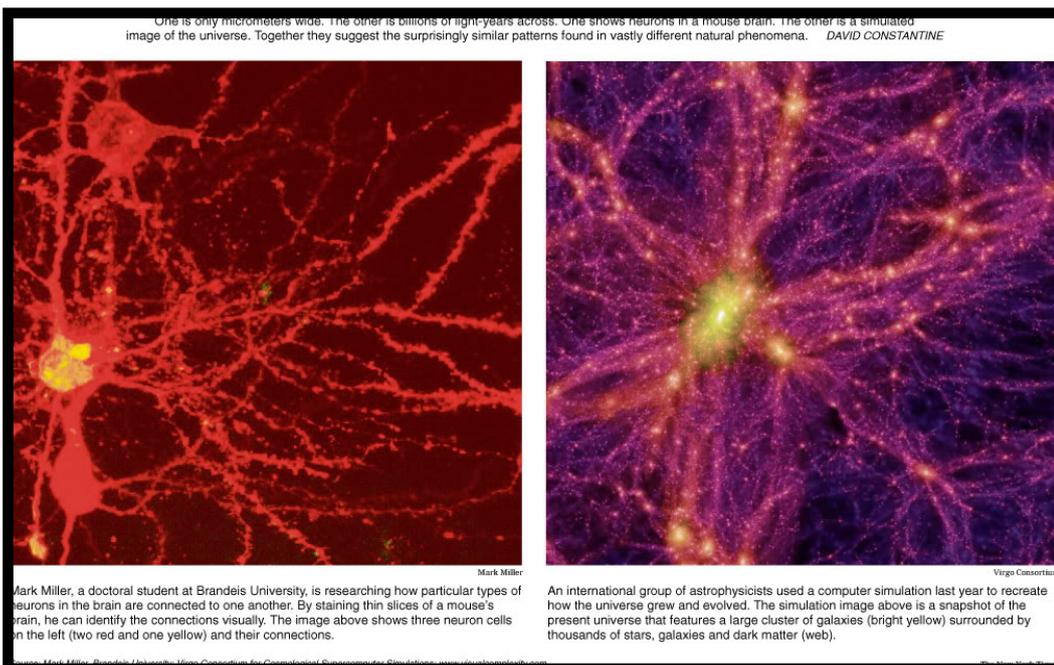
When I was 7, my teacher Mrs Cole explained the concept of atoms to me. Sometime that week, mulling it over as I was falling asleep, I fell into a dozey state where I had this vision roll out in my mind's eye.

I am floating in space, looking at a galaxy swirling through the void. I can see that it is made of stars and planets.¹ I realize that most of those planets are teeming with life, and all those people seem so small from this perspective, but I know they loom large in their own lives, just like I do in mine. What must be large worlds to them are not even spots I can see from here. But if I could zoom in, like with my microscope,² I could see it all.

Then my camera-eye-view starts to pull back. The galaxy gets smaller. Other galaxies come into view. Then more, and more. I realize I'm in a stream of swirling globs of stars, the galaxies looking more and more like specks. It's like they floating around, in motion, all flowing somewhere. Then I realize they ARE flowing somewhere. They are cells, and I am looking at a vacuous bloodstream, as it were, in some giant body.

I came completely awake then, kind of amazed at what I'd just experienced. Without articulating the thought, that vision gave me to understand there is a macrocosm in the microcosm, and likewise the reverse.³ Not the usual fare of childish insights, I know. I realized that at the time, just as I realized I'd grasped something unusual that would alter my perspective on things just a little. (Or maybe more than a little...)

So. This brings me to this FANTABULOUS set of photos. One is a network of neurons from a mouse brain. The other is an image from a computer simulation by astrophysicists of how the universe evolved.



Notes From the Lizard Lair

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I can't really see much difference - but then, according to my 7-year-old self, there isn't any. That the universe looks like a neural network makes perfect sense to me. And that a neural network looks like the universe - ditto.

I don't know about you, but I think that's just way cool.

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1. You are shocked, I'm sure, to learn that I was a geek from early on. I was already mistress of my own telescope, since my birthday a few months before the conversation with Mrs Cole. The scope was a present from my brother Don, who promptly set it up in the driveway at night and showed me how to see the moon in it. :) He always gave me presents that stretched my brain. And taught me chess when I was small, too.

2, The microscope came the year before the telescope. I spent hours looking at the cooties in dirty water with horrified fascination. Yech. I was much happier with the chemistry set that came when I was 8.

3. It also caused me to question what we perceive as reality, as did another vision around that same age frame. But that is a discussion for later.