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**The Call of the Anthropocene**

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## The Call of the Anthropocene

John Beck

### Abstract

In late 2012 a communications satellite called EchoStar XVI launched into space from Kazakhstan where it remains in a geostationary orbit around the Earth. The satellite contains artist and geographer Trevor Paglen's *The Last Pictures*, a collection of one hundred images, sourced from libraries and artists, micro-etched onto a gold-plated disc. Paglen's project is both a continuation of, and a critical response to, the notion of the time capsule as a means of delivering, either to a terrestrial future or to some extra-terrestrial destination, an abbreviated representative sample of 'civilisation.' The utopianism that motivates many time capsule projects, whether it is articulated through a belief in the power to communicate with a distant future or with some cosmically remote intelligence, is also a manifestation, the article argues, of progressive modernity's commitment to time-keeping – to the successful capture and command, interpretation and anticipation, of past and future times. Paglen's project is considered here as a retort to the repressions and exclusions that underwrite the optimism of the conventional capsule; *The Last Pictures* is the futureless call of the Anthropocene.

### Keywords

Anthropocene – time capsule – history – photography – archive.

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Telling the time is not merely an announcement of the hour but also a calculation, a reckoning. Telling involves counting, recounting, and accounting; it requires a measure, a narrative and an inventory. The Anthropocene, a term that emerged in the early twenty-first century as a means of naming the geological epoch marked by human impact on the Earth's ecosystems, insists that the present be understood in relation to planetary time; it at once recontextualizes human history as a mere moment in Earth's deep time while forcing into view the profound global consequences of human actions. The telling of our time, the evidence suggests, must use a new measure and new descriptive devices. Along with the Anthropocene, events post-World War II are now often referred to as part of the 'Great Acceleration', a term that seeks to capture the scale and speed of global change over the last sixty years. The planet may be in the middle of a 'sixth extinction', another phrase that measures the present according to the deep time of the Earth as it marks off the mass extinction events of the past and enumerates the current crisis of biodiversity among them. As a means of counting and accounting, this terminology shrivels anthropocentric thinking while underscoring the fact that human agency has already, to an unknowable extent, shaped Earth's future. Taking the long view, time yields no narrative of continuity or ascent; instead, the great temporal arcs of cyclical annihilation and transformation battered into the geological record suggest that humanity is counting down toward an end it has itself engineered.

Crucial to the apparatus of progressive modernity is the notion of posterity, the belief that the present is capable of producing something for future generations. This accumulation of knowledge and resources over time presupposes and constructs a continuity between past, present and future through which the future, while unknown, can be anticipated as emerging from past efforts. What industrial modernity has delivered, however, is the Anthropocene, a legacy that may have foreclosed on the very idea of posterity. So does telling the time of the Anthropocene, bereft as we are of any confidence that there is a future to count into, merely serve to announce the emergency of the present, or can the act of reckoning itself construct the conditions through which timekeeping might be interrogated as a function of a grander scheme of time management, one which modernity claimed as the measure through which it

might command and control history? What form of accounting led us to become geology?

When there is only a moment to live, there is nothing to hide. This is the sentiment expressed by Phillip Quinault in his libretto for Jean-Baptiste Lully's tragic opera *Atys*, first performed in 1676. *Atys* is derived from Ovid's *Fasti*, an incomplete poem that explains, month by month, the etiology and manner of Roman festivals and customs as they fall in the recently introduced Julian calendar. There is no evidence that Ovid worked on the months July to December after he was exiled by Augustus, and the poem that survives is thus a record not only of a project designed to give the state measurement of time the credibility of deep cultural background but of the provisional, easily foreclosed nature of such a project. Marking time can be suspended by the contingencies of history.

Lully was court composer for Louis XIV, who so loved *Atys* that it became known as the 'king's opera'. The Sun King was no doubt especially taken with the prologue, set in the palace of Time, who announces a plan to honor great heroes, especially Louis XIV. Melpomene, the muse of tragic poetry, suggests that the tale of *Atys* and *Cybele* is the best way to entertain the king. In the tale, the earth goddess *Cybele* loves *Atys*, who is in love with a nymph. *Cybele* throws *Atys* into a state of madness in which he castrates himself and intends suicide, but *Cybele* saves him by turning him into a fir tree. *Atys* thus comes to be worshiped as a god of vegetation controlling the seasonal cycle of death and rebirth. As a story of sacrificial heroism delivered to the court in honor of monarchical authority, *Atys* carries through the role of the *Fasti* since it confirms a crucial function of time to be the celebration and perpetuation of heroic power. The story of *Atys*, though, is also about assisted self-destruction and the catastrophic consequences of acts committed beyond reason. Inside the celebration of the king lies the story of a hero unmanned by the earth.

Quinault's lines about there being nothing to hide when there are only moments to live appear as the epigraph to Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'MS. Found in a Bottle' (1833): 'Qui n'a plus qu'un moment a vivre / N'a plus rien a dissimuler'. A tale of serial catastrophes scribbled out and tossed into the sea as the narrator is about to disappear into an Antarctic vortex, Poe's story is preoccupied with the maintenance and incremental intensification of suspense

and terror: 'we are hurrying onwards to some exciting knowledge -- some never-to-be-imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction' (Poe 2003: 61). The desire to capture the experience of the moment even as it disappears, to simultaneously experience and reflect and record that experience, gives 'MS. Found in a Bottle' a delirious time-keeping quality made raw by the constant appearance of the unexpected and the increasing proximity of certain death. As the vortex approaches, the narrator admits there is 'little time' left 'to ponder upon my destiny' (though time enough to report the fact) and as 'the circles rapidly grow small' he is plunged into the whirlpool: 'the ship is quivering, oh God! And -- going down' (61). Somehow the message is sealed in the bottle and dispatched, though the reader is not told how since the final declaration of descent leaves that particular secret intact.

In his epigraph Poe manages to hook up his story about the dilemma of doing and telling in the face of death to a long line of narratives concerned with the measurement and marking of time and with the relationship between the devastation of time passing and the inscribed remembrance of life already lived. The hyper-rational narrator of 'MS. Found in a Bottle' longs to log the experience of his demise, the 'never-to-be-departed secret' that can only remain, inconclusive to the end, in the washed up account found in the story. Yet this most irrational of desires – to place the survival of the text above that of its author (indeed, the text only exists because of the death of the narrator) – is perhaps as bizarre as the idea of a god of death and rebirth produced out of a frenzied self-neutering. Ovid's calendar is cut short, Atys' manhood is cut off; Quinault and Lully work in the full glare of the sun, and Poe's narrator is sucked away. Each is at the mercy of unpredictable and uncontrollable forces yet each is also committed, both because of and in the face of these forces, to mark events in time. Ovid's *Fasti* remains a key source for knowledge of Roman culture; the god Atys serves to mark the seasons; Lully's opera articulates the baroque power of Louis Quatorze; and Poe's tale lays bare the limits unto death of empirical rationality. In its way each has become a time capsule containing the message that the end, for some, has already come and gone.

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In late 2012 a communications satellite called EchoStar XVI launched into space from Kazakhstan where it remains in a geostationary orbit around the Earth. The satellite contains artist and geographer Trevor Paglen's *The Last Pictures*, a collection of one hundred images sourced from libraries and artists, micro-etched onto a gold-plated disc. Paglen's project is the latest in a series of messages sent into space since the Apollo 11 Lunar Module, still on the moon, contained a plaque showing the arrangement of the Earth's continents in 1969. Most enterprises of this nature, like the Pioneer and Voyager spacecraft of the 1970s that hold information on terrestrial civilization, anticipate the possibility of communication with other worlds. Others, like the 'Immortality Drive' taken to the International Space Station in 2008 containing digitized DNA sequences, or the proposed KEO satellite that will carry individual messages from Earth's inhabitants and a diamond-encased drop of human blood and samples of air, sea water, and earth, are extraterrestrial safe deposit boxes intended for a temporally distant humanity. Paglen's project is different because there is no expectation that anyone will ever retrieve the images blasted into space. Instead, the project is about the present, a provocation that demands a serious interrogation of the relationship among technological capability, global crisis (economic, political, environmental), and the need to push through short-termism toward new modes of long-term thinking.

Although the 'Crypt of Civilization' (1936) at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, Georgia is often regarded as the first modern time capsule, the term itself was coined by a spaceman. George Edward Pendray, a public relations executive and early advocate of spaceflight who would go on to contribute to the development of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at Caltech and the establishment of NASA, developed the idea of a 'time capsule' as part of the Westinghouse Electrical and Manufacturing Company contribution to the 1939 New York World's Fair. Avoiding the associations with death invoked by the Oglethorpe Crypt (which was inspired by Egyptian tombs and located in the foundations of a granite university building), the Westinghouse capsule was future-oriented, rocket-shaped and made of a new alloy the company called Cupaloy (copper, chromium and silver). What both capsules share is an commitment to

communication across deep time – the Crypt is intended to be opened in 8113 (1936 being taken as the midpoint between the start of the Egyptian calendar in 4241 BC and an equal length of future time); the Westinghouse capsule aims for 6939, a neat five thousand years after it was sealed. Each of these 1930s capsules also share features that have become commonplace in time capsule design, including Paglen's project. Among these is an investment in encyclopedic information about human history and culture, usually compressed and encoded onto the most efficient recording systems extant at the time of deposit. The Oglethorpe Crypt contains microfilm of over 800 works of literature, including the Bible, the Koran, and Homer's *Iliad*, alongside audio recordings of Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, and Franklin Roosevelt, as well as an original copy of the script for *Gone with the Wind* donated by David O. Selznick and a sound clip of Popeye the Sailor. Among the trove sequestered in the Westinghouse capsule is microfilm of a Sears Roebuck catalog, a dictionary, and an almanac; ten million words and a thousand pictures, also on microfilm, documenting twentieth century news, art and literature; and a copy of *Life* magazine. Unlike the later space-bound capsules, terrestrial capsules also favor the inclusion of small material objects, including a typewriter, radio, a cash register, dental floss, the contents of a woman's purse, Artie Shaw records, and plastic toys (Oglethorpe); or fountain pens and samples of fabric, metal and plastic (Westinghouse). In addition, anticipating the KEO satellite's germ-of-life notion, both the Oglethorpe and Westinghouse capsule contained seed samples.

The appeal of time capsules rests among a number of paradoxes, since, as Brian Durrans claims, they 'promise longevity to ephemeral things, but not to whatever these are usually meant to signify' (1992: 51). Even the most carefully chosen object remains open to future ambiguity, so the desire for honest communication with the future is fraught with problems. The present motivation behind selecting and sequestering objects for the future is no more secure to unanticipated interpretations than the objects themselves. The intention of communicating with the future, then, must itself be the primary message of any time capsule since the form and content of the communication can only be stabilized in the present. In fact, not even this intention is likely to be read as such since many actual time capsules may not survive while material remains

unintended for preservation could just as easily be discovered instead. The urge, however riven with likely failure, to secure the meaning of the present for the future may, in the end, have less to do with the future itself and have more to say about the conception of the present as the future's past; that is, with posterity. 'The action of compiling and depositing a time capsule,' writes Durrans, 'implies not only reflection on the nature of history (the archaizing effect of time capsules as a category) but also the creative provision of historical "evidence" (the appeal of each capsule as a unique message)' (53). Conceived in a mixture of 'pride and foreboding,' 1930s capsules like Oglethorpe and Westinghouse would soon be cast as anticipations of anxiety about imminent war and the prospects for civilization in the face of global nuclear threat. Twentieth century capsules are distinguished from those of earlier periods by their preoccupation with uncertainty, though the very act of depositing a capsule carries at least a residual element of utopian commitment to a future wherein its contents will be discovered. Furthermore, despite the distortions wrought upon the meaning of the capsule through the possibility of future (mis)interpretation, the capsule also seeks to exert some sort of control over the future by providing a particular version of (what will have become) the past for consideration. Despite the damage done to the narrative of progressive modernity by the catastrophes of the twentieth century, the time capsule continues to lay claim not only to the time of its encapsulation (the capsule as emissary from the past) but also to the future (in which it demands to be deciphered). The will to power latent in the time-keeper's desire to tell what time it is – to mark time according to the measure of the sovereign – finds its articulation in the modern time capsule's insistence that it is capable of defining not only past time but future time as well.

Although the future remains unknown to the encapsulator, if discovered, the imagined future contained within the capsule will find itself materially present in its own projected fantasy. This collapse of imagined and real futures makes time capsules, as Durrans suggests, 'expressive gestures in the present' that will also in the future be 'archaeological evidence of -- among other things -- such gestures themselves' (64). As a result, the modern time capsule is most often conceived as functioning less as a bridge over a gulf or distance in time (which would involve an acknowledgement of the ideological position of the



present as historically distinctive) and more as 'a way of fusing present and future into a single experience' (64). In this way, the future can be thought of, not as 'a danger zone or a simple recapitulation of the past' (conceptions more common with explicitly ideological projects) but as 'the source of the present' that is always coming into view, 'divulged to us a bit at a time. All our experience is of the future inexorably materialising before our eyes' (65). The theme for the 1939 World's Fair was 'design for tomorrow,' the future here providing the source for the present, a future materialized in advance even as the time capsule packs up and hides away the actual present as an already designated past.

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There was not much time to assemble the contents for the discs designed to hold information of human life aboard the Voyager space probe; Carl Sagan, who was responsible for the project, claimed that NASA wanted the package ready in six weeks. Sagan and his consultants – among them a physicist, two astronomers, a chemist, a philosopher, the vice president for R&D at Hewlett-Packard, and writers Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, and Arthur C. Clarke – set to work to gather as much pertinent material as they could fit on the artifact (Sagan et al 1978: 11). The result was a collection of 116 images, recordings of natural sounds, a musical selection attempting to cover different cultures and eras, spoken greetings in numerous languages, and printed messages from President Jimmy Carter and U.N. Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim.

The purpose of the mission, for Sagan, was to capture the spirit of hope implicit in scientific enquiry and an optimism toward the future he claims was instilled in him early in life through a visit to the 1939 New York World's Fair when he was five years old. If humanity shares anything with extraterrestrial life, Sagan argues, it will be a common concern with science, with the physical properties of the universe (6). As such, the Voyager record, while full of pictures and music, was conceived first and foremost as a device intended to communicate in the notionally transcendent language of mathematics. Aware that the chances of the probe surviving long enough to reach any distant life forms that may be out there, Sagan and his colleagues were wise enough to

admit, however, that the main target audience for the disc was closer to home. The 'real function' of the record, the Hewlett-Packard executive B.M. Oliver explained, is 'to appeal to and expand the human spirit, and to make contact with extraterrestrial intelligence a welcome expectation of mankind' (Sagan et al 1978: 11). Oliver's stress on the expectant, optimistic humanism of the project underscores the utopian function of the time capsule as the expression of a desire for a future made out of the best intentions the present can muster.

If the only knowable recipients of the message are earthbound, though, the humble bulletins from the head of the United Nations and the President of the United States –delivered as if standing on the precipice of the cosmic abyss – capture less the optimism of scientific curiosity and speak more tentatively of a barely maintained terrestrial equilibrium. 'We step out of our solar system,' writes Waldheim, 'seeking only peace and friendship, to teach if we are called upon, to be taught if we are fortunate.' As but a 'small part of the immense universe that surrounds us [...] it is with humility and hope that we take this step' (Sagan et al 1978: 26). Carter is still more circumspect about humanity's achievements, admitting to the deep future that '[w]e are attempting to survive our time so we may live into yours.' The 'hope,' for Carter, is that 'the problems we face' can be solved so that 'someday' humanity may 'join a community of galactic civilizations.' Finally, 'This record represents our hope and our determination, and our good will in a vast and awesome universe' (28). The plea, in Waldheim's and Carter's messages, is clearly directed to the home front, a reminder of the need for some collective effort to survive set against the backdrop of an unthinkable void.

Implicit in the reiterations on the Voyager disc of a hopeful future is the world of strife that has been edited out of the message. While Sagan, upbeat as ever, asks rhetorically if it is 'a mistake to put our best face to the cosmos?' (40), one of the things that has dated the Voyager record so quickly is its very 1970s ethos of what now looks like a devastatingly naïve view of human togetherness. Jon Lomberg, Sagan's long-term artistic collaborator, worked closely on the picture selection for the Voyager record and explains that there were topics that were 'intentionally avoided,' including 'war, disease, crime, or poverty' (75). The sense of legacy was powerful enough to persuade the team that, as possibly 'the

only token of Earth the universe would have,' it was best not to send 'the worst in us [...] across the galaxy' (76). At the same time, a desire to avoid charges of ideological bias meant that any visible sign of violence, such as an image of Hiroshima or My Lai, or even of a 'noble or heroic warrior,' was kept out (as were references to religion) (76). Images of artworks were also avoided because of the absence of an art expert and, Lomberg explains, to 'prevent any confusion between informative and aesthetic images' (76). If this appears to suggest lack of rigor in addressing the context-specificity of all modes of representation rather than the narrow focus on a predetermined category of the aesthetic, Lomberg does acknowledge the difficulty presented by the wider question of what might constitute a viable visual communication: 'How could the photograph be misinterpreted? What was ambiguous? How could scale be deduced? That bird in the distance flying past the man, a wingtip partly obscured by the man's outflung arm – I knew that the bird was a second creature in the distance, but if I didn't, couldn't it be a growth on the man's arm?' (77). Other members of the team, including Heinlein, pointed out that the notion of the 'picture' is not even universally understood on earth, let alone elsewhere. Faced with the contradictory demands of gathering information-laden images that should be as easily understood as possible, Lomberg elected to include some of each in the hope that the simple images would serve as instructions for how to interpret the complex pictures. Nevertheless, the question of decipherability remained unanswerable, 'an insoluble problem' (77) Lomberg and the crew had to shelve in order to complete the project.

Among the sources drawn upon to assemble the 116 Voyager images was photographer Edward Steichen's ambitious and controversial 1955 blockbuster show for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, *The Family of Man*. Despite its popularity – eight years on tour, thirty-seven countries visited, nine million viewers – *The Family of Man* from the outset attracted the kind of criticism that also bedevils projects like Sagan's gold disc. Art critic Hilton Kramer's early assessment of the show is typical: the exhibition, Kramer writes, is 'a self-congratulatory means for obscuring the urgency of real problems under a blanket of ideology which takes for granted the essential goodness, innocence, and moral superiority of the international 'little man,' 'the man on the street,' the

abstract, disembodied hero of a world-view which regards itself as superior to mere politics' (Kramer 1955: 367). Lomberg's explanation of the Voyager record team's desire to escape from ideology is so weak precisely because the evasion is itself shot through with ideological implications. Nevertheless, despite the bad press, in recent years *The Family of Man* has come in for serious critical reassessment, not least because of the show's utopian straining toward a broader view of human experience than that produced by Cold War containment culture and the American South's policy of racial segregation, and because of the evident hunger among audiences to encounter the exhibit en masse (see, for example, Stimson 2006; Azoulay 2011; Turner 2012). Trevor Paglen's *The Last Pictures*, I think, provides a similar corrective reading of the Voyager project, both aware of the serious deficiencies of the 1970s capsule but intent upon rescuing from its humanist limitations a model of large-scale thinking that is prepared to embrace paradox and contradiction as a necessary part of the task of moving beyond the confinements of presentist approaches to contemporary global challenges.

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While Sagan had only six weeks to assemble the Voyager disc, Paglen took five years to prepare his project. He conducted research for the project during a Visiting Artist residency at MIT, consulted with philosophers, scientists, engineers, artists, and historians, and a team of research assistants spent months digging through archives for images. In addition to being shot into space, the resulting collection of 100 images have been the subject of exhibitions, a book, a website, and a series of performances, conversations, and other events. Like previous time capsule projects, space messages, and exhibitions like *The Family of Man*, *The Last Pictures* is as much about the circulation of big ideas about time, space, and humanity as it is about the thing itself. Conceived as the equivalent of 21<sup>st</sup> century cave paintings and likely to last as long as the earth itself, the project shares with time capsules like Oglethorpe a sense of the present as a pivot between the deep past and the unfathomable future.

Paglen sees the repository of images and the satellite that hosts it as a future ruin of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the equivalent to prehistoric cave art that speak a

cryptic language of the deep past. Geostationary satellites like the Echostar XVI experience no atmospheric drag so will theoretically remain aloof from the earth until the sun expands and vaporizes the planet billions of years from now. However unlikely it may have seemed even at the time, Sagan's discs did imagine a deep future where communication was possible with other worlds, but Paglen's message is not venturing that far out in space. It is more of a time traveller, though Paglen is not even convinced it will be capable of speaking to our descendants, let alone extraterrestrials. 'The notion that the message could actually mean anything at all seemed ridiculous,' he observes: 'The message could only be a failure.' The real question concerns what kind of failure the project could be. Just as Sagan (not to mention Carter and Waldheim) was well aware of the symbolic resonance of the Voyager project for contemporary observers, so too Paglen knows that while the chances of a future audience is slim, 'the probability of people on Earth thinking about it here and now was guaranteed' (Paglen 2012: 12).

*The Last Pictures* refutes most of the claims made by Sagan's Voyager capsule: that science and mathematics constitute a universal language; that it is possible to communicate with other life forms and even humanity's deep future; and that a message of hope that removes all trace of human violence and suffering remains a true record of terrestrial life. 'I don't think that it will ever be "found,"' Paglen has said, 'nor do I think that it would look like anything more than a handful of nonsensical scratchings if anyone ever did find it' (Thompson 2012). He also disputes the notion that the work 'makes sense' in the present since he is much more skeptical than Lomborg was in the 1970s of the translatability of images. The project is, rather, a 'frozen contradiction' that embodies 'little bits of congealed humanity' designed to outlast all life on the planet. It is the material trace that fascinates Paglen, which is why the cave paintings at Lascaux are central to his thinking: the ancient markings remain ultimately unknowable but they are undeniably present as a marker of some prior life. While Paglen dismisses the communicative potential of *The Last Pictures*, however, he is willing to embrace the undecidable and admits that 'much of the project has been an enormous effort organized around the idea that I might be wrong' (Thompson 2012). Indeed, echoing Sagan, Paglen concedes

that '[r]egardless of whether anyone will ever find the pictures, the very fact of acknowledging the future[...] comes with a great responsibility' (Thompson 2012). Coming round to the party of hope, Paglen concludes that '*not* marking things for the future may be symptomatic of a culture in which we actively annihilate the future through our disregard for it' (Thompson 2012). The sense of deep time and deep responsibility shared by Sagan and Paglen splits, however, in terms of the conception of time under which each project operates. The Voyager record is not only about space exploration in a way that is irrelevant to *The Last Pictures*, but the projective dimension of Sagan's disc -- reaching out to a future that will be better than the present -- carries an ethos of human progression that is deliberately stalled by Paglen's geostationary orbit. Instead of 'the "linear" time of spacecraft that boldly explore the unknown,' Paglen explains, 'the perpetual circling of *The Last Pictures* is more like Blanqui's eternal recurrence—and his own critique of progress' (Thompson 2012). Paglen's sense of the limits of the historical record and the absurdity of his project -- 'a grandiose gesture that is partly about the suicidal nature of grandiose gestures' (Thompson 2012) -- recalls the narrator's compulsive desire to document the moment of death in Poe's 'MS. Found in a Bottle.' The epigraph from Quinault in that tale is a reminder, though, of the exposure that comes with there being but a moment to live. There is nothing left to hide because there is nothing to lose and if Paglen's project stalls where Sagan's soared, it is largely due to the condition of emergency, repressed in Sagan's enterprise, that is geostatically exposed in Paglen's reading of time.

The reference to the nineteenth-century French revolutionary Louis Auguste Blanqui is important in this regard not just because Blanqui's theory of eternal return in *L'Eternité par les astres* (1872), written during one of his many periods of imprisonment, speculates on the relation between the finite and the infinite and on the repetition of the same across time and space. Blanqui is also crucial to the development of Walter Benjamin's work on time and history, perhaps most famously articulated in his account of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920) where history is conceived backing into the future as the wreckage of time past piles up before his eyes. A photograph of the back of Klee's work, complete with labels from the Israel Museum, Jerusalem (which owns the

painting) and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (identifying *Angelus Novus* as part of 1996 exhibit called 'Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives'), is the first of Paglen's 100 last pictures. The viewer of Paglen's photograph is, then, behind Klee's angel, unable to see the image but assured by the authenticating labels that this is indeed the object being depicted. Behind the back of the angel, the observer is the future the angel cannot see and toward which he is heading.

Blanqui's conclusion to *L'Eternité par les astres* is that once it is understood that the finite elements of the universe must be endlessly replicated across the infinity of time and space, all illusions of progress must be dismissed. '[U]ntil now,' he writes, 'the past was for us little more than barbarism, and the future meant progress, science, happiness, illusion!' On infinite worlds, though, 'this past has seen the most brilliant civilizations disappear without leaving a trace; and they will disappear yet again without leaving a trace then either. On billions of earths, the future will again see all the acts of ignorance, the foolishness, and the cruelty of our previous ages!' (Blanqui 2009: 58). 'Now', for Blanqui, is the nineteenth century, the 'crisis moment' when, as Tyrus Miller explains, 'the cosmic order becomes conscious to Auguste Blanqui' (2008: 288). Consciousness of the fact that every moment is repeated endlessly wipes out any prospect of futurity and time stands still. 'What a noisy humanity,' writes Blanqui, 'infatuated with its greatness, believing itself to be the universe and living in its prison as in the vast immensity, only to soon sink along with the globe that, in the most profound disdain, has carried the burden of its pride' (2009: 59). This is Paglen's geostationary orbit, an endless repetition of the same; a rebuke to progressive time-marking that demands instead a self-cancellation of the notion of posterity.

*The Last Pictures* speaks not to what will be found tomorrow but about how the idea of tomorrow itself might be reconceived as an iteration of what might be done today. What distinguishes Paglen's time capsule from its humanist predecessors, with their sealed-in optimism in the capacity for human communication to reach across time and space, is its insistence on the necessary reflexivity of time telling as a mode of contingent spatio-temporal orientation. The frozen timelessness of the message's geostationary orbit underscores the insistent timeliness of being Earthbound, in the now of the crisis moment. While

the reach of Sagan and others may have been toward some deep future connection with a better place and a more enlightened time, there is also an implicit, if buried, acknowledgement in the twentieth century capsules that the end of progressive modernity is imminent. For Paglen, that end has indeed occurred. Yet while we may be on the other side of progress, we are more than ever inside time, a deeper, more capacious, no longer linear conception of time within which we have located ourselves as the self-designated creatures of the Anthropocene. Behind the angel of history, reading the label on the back of the image: if this is the future the angel cannot see, it is the present of our uncertainty, where even the sense of approaching finality – of lastness, let alone lateness – must be interrogated as a function of poor time keeping.



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