

## Romantic Cybernetics: Jorie Graham, Trevor Paglen, and the Sublime Contradictions of the Anthropocene

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### Abstract

The Anthropocene sublime is a necessarily hybrid concept, one that is generated from a palimpsest of previous iterations of sublimity, and which is critically modified by contemporary crisis. Alexander R. Galloway's notion of the "juridico-geometric sublime" captures this hybridity in its combination of Romantic play with the homeostatic model of cybernetics, which brings into effect a synthesis of digital unrepresentability and Romantic freedom. Operating as a figure for the incommensurability generated by the confluence of the Romantic sublime and the cybernetic control paradigm, this version of the sublime also relates the concept to the impact of systems of power on aesthetic representation. This article aims to fill in the ecological gap in Galloway's conceptualization, while applying this hybrid sublime to the current era of environmental entanglement. In doing so, it argues that a contemporary, Anthropocene sublime reveals both the lingering impact of Romantic modes of environmental thought and the dominance of a cybernetics-derived concept of a mappable technological biosphere. The magnitude of the totality such a hybrid form constitutes is what inspires the experience of terror and awe that characterizes the sublime. The work of the poet Jorie Graham and the artist Trevor Paglen provide vital documents of the hybrid states and representational impasses of this contemporary sublime, as they demonstrate how natural processes are always already folded into economic and technological systems, while nature is both in our devices and irrevocably exteriorized. In different ways, their work demonstrates the essential incommensurability that is generated by the combination of the Romantic and the cybernetic modes of sublimity, while mapping out the political suspension that an Anthropocene sublime necessarily generates.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, sublime, cybernetics, Romanticism, hybridity.

### Resumen

Lo sublime del Antropoceno es un concepto necesariamente híbrido, uno que se genera a partir de un palimpsesto de iteraciones previas de sublimidad, y que la crisis contemporánea modifica de forma crítica. La noción de Alexander R. Galloway del "sublime jurídico-geométrico" anticipó esta hibridez en su combinación de juego Romántico con el modelo homeostático de la cibernética, que dio lugar a una síntesis de irrepresentabilidad digital y libertad Romántica (29). Funcionando como una figura para la inconmensurabilidad generada por la confluencia del sublime romántico y el paradigma de control cibernético, esta versión de lo sublime también relacionaba el concepto con el impacto de los sistemas de poder en la representación estética. Al abordar la brecha ecológica en la conceptualización de Galloway y aplicando este sublime híbrido a la actual era de enredo ambiental, este artículo argumenta que lo sublime del Antropoceno contemporáneo revela tanto el impacto persistente de los modos románticos de pensamiento ambiental como la dominancia concomitante de un concepto de biosfera tecnológica derivado de la cibernética—el cual es entendido como un recurso a ser mapeado. La magnitud de la totalidad que constituye tal forma híbrida es lo que inspira la experiencia de terror y asombro característicos de lo sublime. La obra de la poeta Jorie Graham y el artista Trevor Paglen proporciona documentos vitales de los estados híbridos y los impasses

representacionales de este sublime contemporáneo, ya que ambos muestran cómo los procesos naturales están desde siempre entrelazados en sistemas económicos y tecnológicos, y la naturaleza está tanto en nuestros dispositivos como irrevocablemente exteriorizada. De diferentes maneras, su trabajo demuestra la incommensurabilidad esencial que se genera por la combinación de los modos romántico y cibernético de la sublimidad, al tiempo que mapea la suspensión política que necesariamente genera lo sublime del Antropoceno.

*Palabras clave:* Antropoceno, sublime, cibernética, romanticismo, hibridez.

## Anthropocene Modalities

The Anthropocene and the sublime are terms that encompass a markedly similar set of critical contradictions. Depending on their context, they both oscillate between parallel conflicting poles: environmental entanglement and anthropocentrism, the collective more-than-human and the singular *anthropos*, an awareness of ecological interrelation and an elevation of the human, considered as an undifferentiated totality. Taken together, the two terms offer productive, parallel forms of critical ambivalence; a specifically Anthropocene sublime, emerging as a response to the extent of human degradation of the environment, provides a means of evoking the incommensurability *within* these terms, and highlighting the ways in which the subject is paradoxically split between these terms' ranges of competing imperatives. One way of thinking through such contradictions is by considering the inherently palimpsestic nature of both the Anthropocene and the sublime. "If the Anthropocene has a face," Sharon Noble writes, "that face needs to be entirely hybrid. It is a patchwork, palimpsest, which can embody our overwritten and overdetermined ideas of nature and culture as well as reflect them back toward us as in a mirror" (125)—a statement that applies just as much to the sublime. Moreover, the patchwork quality of the Anthropocene reflects what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Andrew S. Mathews, and Nils Bubandt describe as "the uneven conditions of more-than-human livability in landscapes increasingly dominated by industrial forms." This unevenness is expressed through the notion of a "patchy Anthropocene": a phenomenon taking shape discontinuously, in ecological "patches" where the overlapping of human and more-than-human worlds becomes acute (186).

Hybridity is particularly evident in Alexander R. Galloway's version of sublimity, which he postulated as a figure for the impasse manifested by attempts to represent digital experience. In *The Interface Effect*, Galloway describes the dominant economic paradigm of the digital era as one of "ludic capitalism," where "flexibility, play, creativity, and immaterial labor [...] have taken over from the old concepts of discipline, hierarchy, bureaucracy, and muscle" (27). The play impulse that underlies this version of capitalism is informed by two influences: "Romanticism and cybernetic systems theory," the confluence of which is described by Galloway as a "juridico-geometric sublime," a hybrid form that draws on seemingly oppositional critical traditions to establish its validity (29). What is crucial about Galloway's intervention

into the tradition of the sublime is that it provides a means of linking this primarily aesthetic concept with systems of power, as they are mediated in technological representation. It thus shows us how that mediation reflects and reinforces those systems and the wider epistemic climate from which they emerge. This version of the sublime therefore raises a series of questions: while it can be seen as a productive means of synthesizing a specific form of digital sublimity, what are its implications when it is applied to aesthetics more broadly? Furthermore, how does this “juridico-geometric sublime” relate to the Anthropocene, an era in which digitality—as what Seb Franklin calls “a predominant logical mode” emerging alongside forms of social control (xviii)—still dominates, and in which it has been subsumed by the imperatives of an escalating environmental crisis? To address these questions, and to interrogate the broader contradictions of sublimity in the Anthropocene context, this article will analyze the way in which two artistic practitioners, the poet Jorie Graham and the artist Trevor Paglen, evoke the experience of the Anthropocene as one of profound, disjunctive sublimity in a way that can be read through Galloway’s hybrid sublime, as a conjunction of Romantic and cybernetics modes of being and representation.

By bringing together Romanticism and cybernetics, Galloway foregrounds the way in which these two seemingly disparate ideological and intellectual frameworks both remain operative in contemporary experience. From Romanticism, Galloway takes the instinct towards play, which was described by Friedrich Schiller as having the capability to “suppress the contingency” in experience (27–28). Play here refers to the imperative of imaginative freedom that motivated many Romantic works: the possibility that the creative impulse, when given free reign or when responding to a sublime object, could mitigate the discordance of human faculties. For Galloway, play represents “abundance and creation, of pure unsullied authenticity, of a childlike, tinkering vitality perennially springing forth from the core of that which is most human” (27–28). From cybernetics, on the other hand, Galloway takes an understanding of the digital episteme as one characterized by control, in the form of data capture, homeostatic feedback, and programmability—all of which operate to restrict the autonomy of the digital user in often invisible or opaque ways. As is evident, there is a productive contradiction between these two terms: the freedom of the play impulse in Romanticism and the control of the cybernetic model are necessarily opposed. It is the friction that arises from the Romantico-cybernetic synthesis that allows Galloway’s version of the sublime to function so effectively as a diagnosis of the incommensurability of a contemporaneity saturated by the digital and threatened by ecological collapse. An essential precursor to this synthesis is Donna Haraway’s cyborg, which similarly emerged from a nexus of oppositional poles. In Haraway’s words, the cyborg was the “illegitimate offspring” of “patriarchal capitalism,” and was, in a rejection of its roots, “resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity” (151)—an echo of the paradoxical synthesis that structures Galloway’s sublime.

The digital, where this version of the sublime becomes manifest, is defined by a combination of geo-spatial determination and a juridical impetus, one modulated by the strictures of control. Dialectically opposing this, as a radical counterpoint, is the Romantic conception of play:

Today's play might better be described as a sort of "juridico-geometric sublime." Witness the Web itself, which exhibits [...] three elements: the universal laws of protocological exchange, sprawling across complex topologies of aggregation and dissemination, and resulting in the awesome forces of "emergent" vitality. This is what Romantico-cybernetic play means [...] labor itself is now play, just as play becomes more and more laborious [...]. (28-29)

For Galloway, it is the subsumption of the play drive, which in Romanticism was a site of freedom, *within* the world of labor that generates the specific character of digital incommensurability. The user within the digital interface is *both* provided with sovereignty and freedom *and* mapped by the very systems he or she appears to be freely navigating. Technological rationalization, epitomized in the homeostatic feedback loop of cybernetics, has been combined with the seemingly irrational Romantic imagination, thus apparently overcoming the opposition between Romanticism and cybernetics, or the sublime and the rational, and revealing how such terms can be related. The sublime that Galloway puts forward emerges from the friction between these two now-conjoined fields, control and play. One example of this friction can be seen in Alenda Chang's analysis of the way that contemporary video games create "mini-ecosystems," in which "real worlds and fictional rules" overlap (20). As Chang makes clear, these gaming ecosystems can be read as environmental spaces, in the sense that they model "ecological dynamics based on interdependence and limitation," thus allowing "players to explore manifold ecological futures" (16).

It is this ecological emphasis that, particularly from the perspective of the Anthropocene, is missing from Galloway's account of the sublime—the way in which the environmental overlaps with the technological or with the social within systems of production (Keller 15). Within Romanticism, the impetus towards forms of creative play, as well as the aesthetic of the sublime, were both manifested in response to nature. For Romantic poets, a sublime experience occurred in response to the incomprehensible magnitude of natural phenomena, while nonetheless allowing for an elevation of the self and a reinscription of human mastery over the environment. The Romantic sublime was therefore paradoxically evoked in response to both environmental entanglement and anthropocentric human hegemony, with the former acting as the means by which the latter could be realized. Experiences of nature provided a realization of what William Wordsworth described as "A presence that disturbs me with the joy / Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused" (418)—both a means of poetic elevation and a possible vector of transcendence towards a nebulous omnipresent unity. Nonetheless, these modes of both anthropocentrism and transcendence were never more than provisional within Romantic poetics, as they competed with a sense of entanglement within a more-than-human world and a concomitant emphasis on materiality, which

had the capacity to disrupt any project of transcendence. This is why Thomas Weiskel describes the Romantic sublime as “an attempt to revise the meaning of transcendence precisely when the traditional apparatus of sublimation—spiritual, ontological, and [...] psychological and even perceptual—was failing to be exercised or understood” (4). Absent of the teleological aims of conventional religious transcendence, the Romantic sublime is an attempt at finding a replacement in the magnitude and opacity of nature while maintaining the centrality of the *anthropos*. As Marjorie Hope Nicolson argues, it was the manifestation of this aesthetic in externalized nature that marked the “most profound difference between older and ‘modern’ landscape” (27).

In Galloway’s postulation of sublimity, nature can be considered the hidden third term—represented by his recovery of Romanticism and its structures of transcendence but not elucidated as such. However, it is important to note that the play drive, which informs Galloway’s understanding of Romanticism’s relevance, was traditionally considered to some extent a more harmonious counterpoint to the disjunctive experience of the sublime. For Schiller, as noted, play had the potential to suppress contingency and provide it with artistic form, a maneuver that balances human faculties of judgment and allows for freedom to emerge (27–28). In contrast, what Linda Marie Brooks calls the “negative regress” of the sublime—with its suggestion of ultimate formlessness—disrupts the form-giving faculty of the autonomous self and the enterprise of the play drive (950). Similarly, Immanuel Kant’s concept of the sublime, to which later Romantic iterations responded, was based on an understanding of the discordant nature of the human faculties of sense, imagination, and reason. For Kant, the sublime is “the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense”; this is the “super sensible faculty” that, following a failure to imagine or represent the magnitude of the natural world, emerges to reinscribe humanity’s hegemony by encompassing that world within the workings of reason (88–89). In contrast, play, for Kant, is a manifestation of the free and harmonious interaction of the faculties of imagination and understanding, from which the judgment of taste emerges as “the state of mind in the free play of imagination and understanding (insofar as they harmonize with each other [...])” (217–218). In Kant, as in Schiller, the sublime represents the discordancy between human faculties, while the play drive allows for the harmonious balancing of those faculties. In the context of Galloway’s Romantico-cybernetic sublime and our updating of it for the Anthropocene, this can be considered a productive divergence, as it allows for the competing claims of sublimity and play to operate simultaneously, as two ways our experience of the environment is modulated: through harmonious appreciation and the dissonance of divergent faculties.

Complemented by these divergences, and with the ‘hidden’ ecological element foregrounded, Galloway’s Romantico-cybernetic model provides a compelling means of analyzing the isomorphic relation between nature and technology in the Anthropocene: a time when nature has become a technological space, as prone to be

the object of systems of quantification and mapping as the digital, and a space in which contingency and opacity are sacrificed for a totalizing form of knowledge. Erich Hörl foregrounds a parallel formulation when he cites the “technoecological condition” of contemporary nature, through which “nature’s essential technicity” emerges. Hörl identifies a “cybernetic state of nature” as the dominant paradigm of the contemporary era, in which, “thanks to the radical environmental distribution of agency by environmental media technologies,” what he calls an “environmental culture of control” is crystallized (8–9). If there is such a thing as an Anthropocene sublime, it becomes evident here, in the oscillation between control and freedom, play and labor, technology and the environment, that produces the particular chaotic intensity of contemporary crises. The hybridity of the Anthropocene sublime could be considered an index of this epistemic confusion, in which sublime objects become sublime ecologies, manifested across the complex, interwoven topologies of capitalist processes and environmental materialities.

### Jorie Graham: Ecopoetic Entanglements

Galloway put forward the juridico-geometric sublime as a figure for digital unrepresentability, as expressed in the suggestion that interfaces are not workable; they do not provide the transparency they purport to facilitate. In relation to the Anthropocene, such representational unworkability arises in the sense that the totality of humanity’s impact on the environment, as well as the stratification of that impact by socio-economic factors, remains necessarily opaque—there is no representational form that can adequately address the shifting scalar and temporal frames through which the Anthropocene operates. I argue that the sublime can provide a language for expressing this inexpressibility, which helps explain why poets and artists continue to return to this aesthetic. Graham and Paglen both, in different ways, mine the palimpsestic character of sublimity as a means of foregrounding its potential as a figure for contemporary incommensurability and impasse. They also register the sublime as an archetypal Anthropocene aesthetic: one that is redolent of the ways in which economic and industrial processes have impacted the environment, while also being an index of how such impacts have been effaced or obscured in contemporary culture.

In many of her recent collections, including 2017’s *Fast* and 2020’s *Runaway*, both included in the 2022 publication *[To] The Last [Be] Human*, Graham, long regarded as one of the most prominent American practitioners of ecopoetics, persistently returns to the notion of nature’s mediation. This mediation renders nature as an intimately observed site of crisis, one that generates poetic inspiration, but which is also a source of overwhelming alterity. The mediation Graham sees as determining this human and nonhuman relation is digital in character. It is the screen that both radically extends the scope of the lyric self and circumscribes the agency of that self. Graham therefore evokes the paradoxical character of the digital interface that Galloway foregrounded in his Romantico-cybernetic sublime: the duality of a

system that conceives of play as individual liberation while simultaneously enforcing opaque structures of control. The impossibility of dialectically resolving the contradiction between these two impulses is the site of Graham's sense of the sublime; the point at which incommensurability becomes most acute. Unlike in Galloway's formulation, however, it is also the site at which the poet's relation to a crisis-ridden natural world comes into focus.

As in Romanticism, nature is seen to resist figuration, but in Graham's work this is not only because of its magnitude, but also because it is mediated in complex ways that are beyond individual perception; it is made into a resource and its autonomous essence is perpetually withdrawn. Graham's is thus a prototypically Anthropocene poetics, one consumed by an awareness of how the poet's perceptions of the natural world are mediated by technological systems of appropriation and annexation and how they exist within a totality that cannot be entirely comprehended. In this regard, her perspective on nature brings to mind Timothy Morton's concept of the "hyperobject," a thing "massively distributed in time and space" that exhibits "effects *interobjectively*," in the space *between* "aesthetic properties," and which cannot be comprehended in its totality (1). For Morton, hyperobjects show how categories such as nature, understood as an "empty term" that projects the existence of a reified externality, are no longer valid, as they have been replaced by the "disturbing intimacy" of the hyperobject, which makes evident the prevailing immanence of individual and collective experience—a condition that Graham's emphasis on environmental mediation explores (109). Where Graham diverges from Morton, however, and makes the sublime a more apt frame through which to read her poetry, is her insistence on the subject as the locus of such immanence; it is by foregrounding the subject's experience of entanglement, mediation, and the limits of comprehension that Graham evokes a specifically sublime poetics.

"Honeycomb" from 2017's *Fast* encapsulates many of these themes. In this poem, Graham offers a vision of a free-floating consciousness cast adrift by the mediation of the digital interface and struggling to establish a meaningful connection to the object world. The poem establishes a sense of imbrication—epitomized in the image of a segmented honeycomb—and of overlapping claims on identity, which together transform the self into a site of flux. The poem begins with what appears to be a series of alternative titles: "Ode to Prism. Aria. Untitled"—emphasizing the provisionality and uncertainty of the speaker's voice; this is not the self-confident autonomy of the Romantic poet, surveying the grandeur of nature (142). Such provisionality is reiterated in the speaker's subsequent pleas for recognition, which encapsulate the sense that, despite all possibilities for connection offered by the screen, the end result of such mediation is anomie: "Have you found me yet. Here at my screen, / can you make me / out? / All other exits have been sealed" (142). The poem expands on the reality of digital mediation through its ironic insistence on the necessity of quantification and classification as forms of self-knowledge: "We need emblematic subjectivities. Need targeted acquiescence. Time zones" (142). The

quantification that is required is inherently opaque and invisible: “This is / the order of the day. To be visited secretly. To be circled and cancelled” (142). In this context, the self emerges as a contested space, one determined by the interface and its apparent lack of any exterior referent: “If you look in, / the mirror chokes you off. No exit try again” (142). The screen is a mirror that chokes the user, providing no “exit,” and instead leading to the endless quantification of everything, even poetry, which has become debased and denuded in the process: “These talkings here are not truths. / They are needs. They are purchases and invoices. They are not what shattered the / silence. Not revolutions clocks navigational tools” (142). The truth content of poetry has been reduced by the commodification of private life, such that “purchases and invoices” are what make up a poem, which offers no revolutionary or navigational potential. The possibilities of a self-conscious mapping of the self are precluded, as these are functions that have been entirely co-opted by the technological interface.

Graham’s poem links this digital anomie with a vision of environmental degradation, in which nature is conceived of as a techno-biological space permeated with the detritus of industry:

In the screen

there is sea. Your fibreoptic cables line its floor. Entire. Ghost juice. The sea now does not emit sound. It carries eternity as information. All its long floor. Clothed as I am→in circumstance→see cell-depth→sound its atom→look into here further→past the grains of light→the remains of the ships→starlight→what cannot go or come back→what has mass and does not traverse distance→is all here→look here. Near the screen there are roses. Outside a new daymoon. (142)

The screen contains the sea, just as the map contains the territory. In a reformulation of Romantic poetics, the discrepancy between figure and ground has been diminished, but not in the service of human expression. Meanwhile, the sea contains the “fibreoptic cables” that carry digital communications across the globe, or, as Graham terms them, the “Ghost juice”: the spectral emanations of a seemingly ephemeral global network that is in fact, as these cables suggest, a highly complex material infrastructure that intersects with natural landscapes in an often-malign manner. The poem records the discursive effect of such technologies as “Eternity” being reduced to “information,” a maneuver signaled typologically by the use of arrows as punctuation marks. These arrow marks suggest forward motion, metonymically representing the relentless spread of digital technologies or the implacable escalation of environmental crisis, while also evoking the language of code, in which each statement leads ineluctably to the next. They evoke a form of what N. Katherine Hayles has called “dematerialized materialism,” in which materiality becomes an “informational pattern,” to be read in the language of code (104). At the same time, the arrows function to cut up the speaker’s flow and to reduce statements to truncated phrases. Paradoxically, the perception of the speaker seems to widen as these phrases become more succinct, to contain both “cell-depth” and “starlight”—both the microscopic and the cosmic. The speaker therefore experiences the technological colonization of environmental space, epitomized in the cables that line the seafloor, as a transformation of the prosaic into the sublime: a surreal “daymoon”

heralds this shift into the incomprehensible. Graham thereby puts into poetic practice Galloway's conception of the sublime, emergent vitality of the digital network. She does so by giving this sublimity material form in the infrastructure that is hidden in plain sight within nature, and which is both the vehicle for the transparency of media communications, as it provides a vector for economic and political communications networks, and a necessarily obscured technological reality.

"Honeycomb" questions how the individual can relate to a systematic reality of overwhelming complexity, other than by succumbing to the dominance of this system: "can you please / track me I do not feel safe" asks the speaker, suggesting that the search for the "nearest flesh to my flesh" can only be carried out through the computer interface (143). Similarly, nature, "this void," must be monitored and tracked as a means of guaranteeing its survival: "surveil this void→the smell of these stalks and the moisture they / are drawing up→in order not to die" (143). Ultimately, both speaker and natural environment are subsumed by the quantifying gaze of technology, reducing everything of value to an algorithmic calculation:

can you please track that→I want  
to know how much I am worth→riverpebbles how many count them exact  
number→and the bees that did return to the hive today→those which did not lose  
their way→and exactly what neural path the neurotoxin took→please track  
disorientation→count death→each death→very small→see it from there→count it  
and store→I am the temporary→but there is also the permanent→have you looked  
to it→for now→ (143)

The poem ends here, with the speaker imploring its addressee to track everything, to subsume nature within the computational gaze and to quantify the deaths that accompany environmental breakdown, while also moving from the "temporary" to the "permanent," as if facilitating the search for something other than contingency. Ending on a final arrow mark, the text questions what comes after the processes of environmental and ontological destabilization that constitute the present moment of crisis. By doing so, it dramatizes the collision between cybernetic systems of quantification and a neo-Romantic insistence on the imaginative potential of the natural world. The fundamental realization of the Anthropocene is that nature and society are intimately, terminally interwoven. This is made evident here through the subjection of the self to such bio-technological forms of entanglement, and the experience of them as beyond comprehension, as sublime.

Graham's depiction of entangled selfhood, imbricated with systems of technological mediation, evokes Galloway's conception of the juridico-geometric sublime as a form of algorithmic political determination, one in which personal freedom is both encouraged and highly circumscribed, while the impetus towards play, and its evocation of harmonious understanding and imagination, is similarly circumscribed by this technological determination. Her evocation of the environmental materiality of technical media parallels Jussi Parikka's understanding of "media and nature as co-constitutive spheres," in which the "ties are intensively connected in material nonhuman realities as much as in relations of power, economy, and work" (14). This interconnection gives rise to Parikka's concept of

“medianatures,” which expresses the “double bind” of media’s reliance on material resources and its deleterious effect on the state of the biosphere (13). Parikka’s concept of medianatures could be said to reflect the palimpsestic nature of the Anthropocene sublime, in which it is the irreducible complexity of interconnection—between natural processes and extractive systems—that is incomprehensible on an individual scale despite being given material expression through the devices we carry in our pockets. The linkages put forward by Graham’s poetry demonstrate how that co-constitutive relation between such processes impacts selfhood. Mapping the materials of the natural world is depicted as a parallel form of the mapping of the self, and both are seen as examples of an ideology of epistemological transparency and totalizing calculation that underpins the Anthropocene reduction of nature to a calculable quantity.

These ideas come to the fore in Graham’s exploration of forms of machinic and nonhuman selfhood in *Runaway*, in which she foregrounds a conception of the self as both extended and restricted by technology. Graham’s depiction of a posthuman self and of its limitations and possibilities becomes a means of exploring what it means to be human in the Anthropocene, when an awareness of entanglement of the human and nonhuman has become inescapable. This is most evident in “[To] The Last [Be] Human,” the poem which provided the title of Graham’s 2022 collection of her four previous publications. As the title suggests, the poem is both an entreaty to maintain something of human nature in the face of catastrophe and an interrogation of what it means to be the ‘last’ of humanity, before a possible posthuman future. The poem begins with an encounter with a prescriptive, sacred natural object:

Today I am getting my instructions.  
I am getting them from something holy.  
A tall thing in a nest.  
In a clearing. (243)

The “instructions” the speaker receives appear insufficient, as the provisionality evident in “Honeycomb” returns here as a suggestion that the identity and form of the addressee are somehow unstable and immaterial. Furthermore, what the speaker requires from this individual or entity exceeds the boundaries of both language and data:

What is this you  
are giving me, where are  
your hands, what can you  
grip. The thing I am asking for, it is not made of  
words. No. It is not made of  
data. (243)

What the speaker is searching for from this ‘last human’ is a transcendent property, something that can’t be expressed through any linguistic medium. The “map” that can offer guidance also turns out to be insufficient, being only a catalogue of catastrophe, on which “famine” and “haunted faces” are in evidence.

We’re so full of the dead the burnt fronds  
hum, getting going each day again into too much sun to no

avail. I was human. I would have liked to speak of  
that. But not now. (243)

The landscape that emerges from the poem is post-apocalyptic, defined by the prevalence of the “dead” and the humming made by “burnt” vegetation. The speaker’s admission that “I was human” suggests that a transformation has occurred, but that it is somehow unspeakable. At the same time, this transformation is bound up with the degradation of the biosphere and a decisive climatic alteration: the “too much sun” that has made life in this landscape precarious. Alongside such precarity, the inability to speak appears to have a political motivation: “yr name just about stripped from / u if u try to say it out / loud” (244). Identity, when enunciated, can be stripped away, and language has therefore become truncated. In this poem, like elsewhere in the collection, Graham condenses language, utilizing a form of text speak abbreviation to evoke technological mediation and to express the rapidity of this state of crisis in which temporality itself appears condensed.

Indeed, temporality is central to the poem, as Graham makes it apparent that the time of the poem is a time of endings, of the “sliver-end of the interglacial / lull,” in which “Human time” is coming to an end:

Whatever *before* had meant  
before, now there is a blister over time.  
[...]  
So one has to figure out now how to  
understand  
time. Your time & then  
time. Planet time and then yr  
protocols, accords, tipping points,  
markers. Each has a prognosis. (244–55)

The “blister over time” prohibits any clear understanding of conventional chronology, with the implication that the notions of before and after no longer designate anything meaningful. Instead, time is individualized, it is “your time,” the time of this last human, rather than “planet time”—the geological timescales indicated by the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene’s geophysical rendering of the geological as data is referenced through “protocols, accords, tipping points, / markers,” which represent another form of mapping that takes as its object the health of the planet rather than the self. Given the way in which that planetary health has been degraded, there is no prospect of aligning human time with planetary time, which now operates on scales incomprehensible to the observer:

Will the river fill again.  
Will there be pity taken.  
Will it ever rain again.  
What is ever. What is again. (245)

Instead of a conventional sidereal understanding of chronology, there is only a sense of fragmentation and decay, occurring on a geological scale. In a way that evokes the final lines of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Mont Blanc”—“And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind’s imaginings / Silence and solitude were

vacancy?”—Graham questions what will constitute the time beyond humans, in which human systems of meaning are no longer valid (1107). These parallels are made particularly apparent in the final lines of Graham’s poem: “Blood flows in my hand writing this. / The crows glance through the upper branches. / They are not waiting” (245). The death-stalking crows are either not waiting for the speaker to die, or are not waiting for whatever the poet is bringing forth; they are operating according to their own temporal priorities.

Graham’s poetry presents a refashioning of the lyric self, in which perspective and agency are re-determined by the co-optation of the self within technologically enacted systems of power. Where this refashioning becomes most apparent is in the relation of the lyric self to nature, which, even in its state of crisis, remains a primary imaginative resource for the poet, but which has also been co-opted by a cybernetic worldview. I argue that the contradictions of such a position are the points where an Anthropocene sense of the sublime becomes apparent: the conflict between nature as idealized object and nature as degraded resource; the friction between a seemingly empowered posthuman identity and a comprehensively mapped and mediated self; and the incommensurability of a Romantic view of freedom in nature and a machinic view of autonomous cybernetic systems populating the natural world. These contradictions foreground the intractable paradoxes of the Anthropocene, while manifesting a more ecologically focused version of the dualities and paradoxes referenced in Galloway’s *Romantico-cybernetic sublime*.

### **Trevor Paglen: Sublime Palimpsests**

Galloway’s hybrid sublime allows for multiple readings, signaling its value as an experiential figure for incommensurability as well as a means of thinking through the representative impasse such incommensurability gives rise to. This latter vector is explored by Trevor Paglen, an American artist who has spent his career documenting the aesthetic properties of state power, particularly in terms of its embodiment in an infrastructure that is hidden from the general populace. In contrast to Graham, Paglen focuses on the aesthetic imbrication that results when the aesthetic of Romantic nature is overlaid with that of technologies of control and surveillance. By doing so, Paglen reveals the interrelation between these two aesthetic forms and their underlying political determinations. Paglen is not interested in interrogating how such forms have refashioned selfhood, or, indeed, how their opacity functions to determine systems of oppression, but in how that opacity is inherent to technological domination, manifestations of which return us to a sublime of spectacle and alterity. Selfhood is diminished in such a practice, not as a means of limiting its aesthetic potential, but so as to reveal the immensity of the control architectures being captured and the way in which, in this sublime of state invisibility, obfuscation has been transposed from the unintelligibility of nature in Romanticism to the imperatives of state surveillance and control.

In photographic series such as *Limit Telephotography* and *The Other Night Sky*, Paglen explores the interface of visibility and invisibility as it relates to the machinery of power, machinery that is inherently built on opacity. In the former series, Paglen used high-powered lenses, some of which were designed for astronomical photography, to photograph top secret government sites from extreme distances, thereby questioning how an aesthetic of secrecy can operate within an otherwise familiar geographic landscape. By creating photographs of these highly classified military sites, which are otherwise completely hidden from the public, Paglen extends his gaze technologically, not as a means of piercing the veil of secrecy—often all his photos reveal are indistinct office buildings and hangars—but to make that veil evident, to show the secret architecture of state control that operates within American society, but which cannot be seen or tracked. As many of these facilities operate on an extra-judicial basis, their existence is itself a form of state alterity, and the limitations on public knowledge of such operations parallel the limitation these operations put upon democratic processes. Julian Stallabrass explains that this focus on such operations reveals the different “limits” that lie at the heart of Paglen's project: “the limits of democracy, secrecy, visibility, and the knowable” (3).

The opacity Paglen captures extends to the texture of his photographs, in which blurriness, light features, and general abstraction are prevalent. Forms of abstraction make these seemingly mundane buildings strange, suffusing them with a palpable sense of mystery and, ultimately, sublimity. As John P. Jacob argues, “[b]y augmenting the eye with technology, *Limit Telephotography* first made visible what is hidden in the landscape [...] the photographs ask, ‘How is this space called secrecy produced?’” (35). The interrogation of such a space elevates the photographs from the itemization and categorization of investigative reporting to the space of the sublime, which Paglen himself defines as “the fading of the sensible, or the sense you get when you realize you’re unable to make sense of something” (qtd. in Weiner). The realization that the architecture of control exists in such forms is accompanied by the knowledge that its sublimity reflects the impossibility of truly comprehending the network of power of which one is a part. While Graham’s poetry depicts the effect of such an awareness of sublime entanglement on the observer, Paglen pushes against the limits of what can be seen of this architecture, and therefore undercovers the opacity of state operations as a sublime space, evident only indirectly or in a fragmented form.

The objects of Paglen’s photographs include chemical and biological weapons training grounds, prisons specializing in extraordinary rendition (the state-sponsored transfer of suspects from one state to another for the purposes of extradition, interrogation, and/or torture), and aircraft testing sites, among other establishments. Together, they represent a half-hidden networked architecture, underpinning and facilitating the visible architecture of power in ways that are not possible to track. What Paglen does is document the existence of such an architecture as a means of interrogating the limits of the visible within the existing apparatus of power. Sublimity, for Paglen, is a materially instantiated aesthetic, which derives from

a realization (always partial and compromised) that there is a network of power too large, complex, and multifaceted to observe, and that this network thrives on opacity and invisibility, which allows it to operate in ways that visible state power could not. The technology of Paglen's camera facilitates the realization of this opaque architecture, but it is also the technology of the very military and state surveillance that is the object of his photography. Paglen's work thus evokes Fredric Jameson's understanding of the technological sublime, in which certain forms of technology provide a distorted figuration of the "world system" (37):

The technology of contemporary society [...] seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself. (37-38)

As in Jameson's formulation, Paglen's works, particularly the *Limit Telephotography* series, do not seek to depict the global network of capital, but they do shine an opaque light on the network of power that underpins capital's dominance and facilitates its exploitative and extractive practices.

Where Paglen's work overlaps with the Romantic aesthetic of the sublime is in its allusions to the work of landscape photographers who documented the American West in the nineteenth century. This is most evident in *The Other Night Sky*, in which Paglen replicates some of the iconic photographs of historical precursors such as Timothy O'Sullivan and Ansel Adams, but expands the frame vertically to include the trajectory of communications satellites, including those used for military surveillance. The result, as in a work such as "DMSP 5B/F4 From Pyramid Lake Indian Reservation (Military Meteorological Satellite; 1973-054A)," which references O'Sullivan's photo of the same lake from 1867, make clear the links between an aesthetic of spectacular wilderness and an aesthetic of technological infiltration—an aesthetic resonance that is central to Leo Marx's notion of the technological sublime, which predates Jameson's (145). Paglen's suggestion that O'Sullivan and others were the "reconnaissance satellites" of their day foregrounds the way in which these early photographs were a means of mapping and codifying the American West in the service of both capital and state power (qtd. in Jacob 41). These photographers were also, paradoxically, influential in the consolidation of the national parks system, which, alongside their impetus of environmental preservation, were in many senses colonial projects (Spaulding). The reconnaissance satellites that Paglen captures in orbit above the lake today are merely the most cutting-edge means of advancing the same epistemological goal: the inscription of nature as capturable on behalf of the knowledge systems of state power and capital. The intrusion of satellite technologies into Paglen's frames, alongside the ancient rock formations of the American West, also gestures towards a duality that we have already noted in conceptions of the Anthropocene—what Paglen calls the "temporal contradiction [...] in which Marx's space-time annihilation chafes against the deep time of the earth" (*The Last Pictures* xii). Paglen foregrounds the disjunctive impact of this duality, which is central to the

experience of the Anthropocene, in a way that subverts the monumentalism of the earlier photographers.

In Paglen's work then, the Romantic view of an unblemished landscape, sublime in its scale and emptiness, is overlaid by the cybernetic systems of control and communication management that make up the modern architecture of power. Paglen thus makes apparent the synthesis of Romanticism and cybernetics that informs contemporary sublimity on an aesthetic level by not only revealing the intersection of these two aesthetic paradigms, but also by showing how these paradigms share tendencies towards a totalizing form of aesthetic mastery that elevates the viewer over and above the environmental object. As Paglen claims, "[c]ontemporary military and reconnaissance satellites are ideologically and technologically descended from the men who once roamed the deserts and mountains photographing blank spots on the maps" (qtd. in Jacob 47). Paglen's work suggests that the surveying missions carried out by these nineteenth-century photographers were colonial enterprises, and while their photographs evoke the immensity of sublime nature, the pristine quality these landscapes retain obscures the native peoples who occupied them. Satellite technology surveys and targets to different ends, but with the same imperative of capture and control. Paglen therefore overlays several distinct but interrelated modalities of the sublime, such as those pertaining to nature, the military, and digital technology, to name three of David Nye's seven categories (Nye).

Underscoring the sense of the invisibility of the architecture of power, Paglen's series *Cable Landing Sites* documents the points at which ocean-traversing cables carrying internet communication signals reach land. Utilizing material taken from Edward Snowden's leaks of classified material, Paglen visualizes the massive data gathering enterprise that Snowden's leaks uncovered and shows how this enterprise is carried out in the background of everyday life. Mundane scenes of seaside activities are juxtaposed with geospatial material culled from classified sources that show how, hidden beneath these banal scenes, is the infrastructure of surveillance. The actual subjects of the photographs—the cables—are obscured, buried underground or deep undersea, making the diptychs an exercise in inference: how do the operations of state communication hegemony intersect with the mundanity of everyday life, or with the apparently pristine picturesque of nature? In a way that mirrors Graham's evocation of the materiality of fiberoptic cables as a choke point in which the entanglement of the self and hidden networks of power becomes apparent, Paglen's depiction of these landing sites shows how a seemingly serene scene can be underpinned by an architecture of power stretching far beyond any individual's perspective.

The maps that accompany the photographs of cable landing sites are, like the Snowden files, examples of another form of sublimity that Paglen has highlighted in his work, that of the "bureaucratic sublime" (Weiner). Unlike the Romantic sublime, the bureaucratic sublime is achieved through the layering of seemingly mundane, yet at the same time overwhelming, administrative detail scrapped from the bureaucracy

of state power. The effect is that of tedium rather than awe, but the dread of the sublime is still present, as it becomes evident that the workings of power, the infrastructure of global military and economic might, functions on the basis of such bureaucratic density of information. Sianne Ngai's notion of "stuplimity," which reveals the limits of comprehension through "an encounter with [...] finite bits and scraps of material in repetition" has many parallels with the bureaucratic sublime, as it also reveals how a sublime magnitude is now more often experienced through its fragmentation, which evokes boredom as much as dread, but which yet retains the sense of the individual being dwarfed by an irreconcilable immensity (271). Such an aesthetic is also evident in a different mode in *Limit Telephotography*, where it is evoked by the dreary, humdrum buildings that make up the black sites Paglen photographs, and from which extraordinary rendition was carried out. Similarly, Paglen's compilation of nonsensical NSA codes names in *Code Names of the Surveillance State* functions to reveal the role of the banal in the totality of state architecture. Another series, *Seventeen Letters from the Deep State*, has a similar impact as it reveals the legal mundanity of such operations. It is made up of the letters carried on airplanes that were sent on rendition flights. Written in the dull legalese of bureaucracy, these letters evoke a creeping sense of dread as the purpose to which they were put is considered and the viewer is encouraged to see the immensity of the sublime operations of power they enable. They therefore show how the sublime can underpin the more mundane 'stuplime' of Ngai's formulation, as the immensity of the former term comes into view through the accreted banality of the latter. Evoking the negative sublime, which abstracts the existence of an incomprehensible whole from a series of fragments, the mundane bureaucratic language highlighted by these works intimates the existence of the totality of state architecture while simultaneously showing how it eschews comprehension.

## Conclusion

While Paglen's artworks reveal how hidden networks of power intersect with the mundanity of the everyday, and, indeed, are premised upon that mundanity as an aesthetic, Graham's mode of disjunctive juxtaposition renders the incommensurability of individual selfhood with the totality of the operations of power. Paglen works on the surface of visibility, pushing at its weaker points, while Graham attempts to show how the encounter with hegemony, manifested through digital technology or environmental co-optation, undermines the stability of the self. In the service of this hegemony, in both Graham and Paglen, the dominant mode of production and extraction is withdrawn from view, providing an experience of sublime limitation that compels stasis on the part of the individual. Both Graham and Paglen therefore, in different ways, show how the Anthropocene sublime functions: as an aesthetic form that highlights the unrepresentable way in which everyday life is complexly woven into systems of extraction, domination, and exploitation that take the environment as their object and that are enmeshed within broader structures of

state and extra-state power that remain largely invisible. Galloway summarizes how the kind of opacity that both Graham and Paglen highlight functions in relation to systems of power:

Consider the logic of how the thing that most permeates our daily lives will be the same thing that retreats from any tangible malleability in our hands and minds. But what are these things? We must speak of the information economy. We must simply describe today's mode of production [...] these are the things that are unrepresentable. And are they not also harbingers of a new pervasive and insidious social violence? (92)

As I noted, what is missing in Galloway's account are the operations of environmental extraction and annexation that have led to climate breakdown, and which intersect with this information economy in terms of material inputs and negative effects. Nonetheless, Galloway's argument that the "point of unrepresentability is the point of power" makes it clear how modes of production and social violence, including extractive systems, are coordinated as a means of establishing both control and opacity, and how sublimity can function as an index of that unrepresentability—something we have seen in both Graham's and Paglen's work (92). Systems of control and systems of extraction are further intertwined on a discursive level by what Tiqqun calls the common intent towards "*total transparency*, an absolute correspondence between the map and the territory, a will to knowledge accumulated to such degrees that it becomes a will to power" (29). The transformative extent of this power is signaled by the all-encompassing nature of the Anthropocene, which is also the manifestation of the total transparency claimed by cybernetics: the will to make everything computable has resulted in the realization of the magnitude of planetary disruption that is registered by this new geological epoch.

If we take Galloway's intervention as a means of understanding how the self (postulated as Romantic in terms of its capacity for play and creative enterprise) intersects with a social-political framework (postulated as cybernetic in its focus on transparency, control, and communicative feedback), it becomes clear that both Graham and Paglen show how that relation is underpinned by material environmental realities. Taken together, the specific opacity generated by such interrelations, considered either from the subject position (as in Graham) or as an aesthetic conjunction (as in Paglen), represents the site of an Anthropocene sublime. Graham and Paglen both interrogate the limits of such a sensibility, which, for both of them, offers a language of incommensurability that gestures at what is obscured and therefore offers a limited means of contesting its inscrutability. By reflecting on the way in which the sublime figures systems of overwhelming complexity, both Graham's and Paglen's works ultimately offer a means of inscribing ourselves into the network of extraction and power, and itemizing its deleterious effects on selfhood and the environment, however partial or compromised that inscription may be.

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