Constellations:  
On Josiah McElheny’s Island Universe

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If there is a modern age, it is, of course, the age of the cosmic.  
—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

Prologue

At first the screen is dark. Then a small constellation of lights slowly  
glows into existence, occupying the lower-right quadrant of the movie  
screen. This luminous field differentiates into individual, concentric  
clusters, as if a starry sky is being born. Soon we recognize that the  
source of the light is a set of chandeliers of various sizes, arranged in  
a slightly irregular, concentric pattern around a massive central chande-  
lier. Nevertheless we allow ourselves to be captivated by the illusion that  
we are looking upward at a rotating star or spiraling group of celestial  
objects. The scale is indeterminate. We sense a vast emptiness, which,  
at the same time, contracts into a tomblike cavity. We cannot be sure  
whether we see a single star, a galaxy, or a vast nebula suspended in  
intergalactic space. Or perhaps we are witnessing the birth of a whole  
universe—a stellar ballet set to a melancholic score. We appear to be the  
only audience. All other seats in the celestial balcony are deserted.

A Night at the Opera

Every beginning has its share of the accidental: “By chance one  
night, I sat in the cheap seats and they were right in front of  
me.”

“They” are the “stars” of Josiah McElheny’s film Island  
Universe (2008)—the chandeliers that he first saw while visiting  
the Metropolitan Opera several years ago. The artist recalls, “I  
started going to the Metropolitan Opera with friends and I was  
struck by the decor. It’s an odd building in that it combines  
precepts of modern architecture with remnants of the nine-  
teenth century, like lots of red velvet and gold leaf.” He was  
particularly fascinated by the glass chandeliers. McElheny knew  
that the Viennese company J. & L. Lobmeyr, a glassware firm  
with substantial links to modernist history, had created them.  
Josef Hoffmann and Adolf Loos, among others, had worked  
with Lobmeyr. The chandeliers, which McElheny considers  
Lobmeyr’s “last great achievement,” struck him as an unlikely  
mixture of Gilded Age and Space Age motifs, a mishmash of two  
distinct cultural imaginaries. The spherical form of the crystals,
for example, had a feel of the 1960s, yet their faceted and prismatic aspect lent a nineteenth-century sense of opulence. Like the opera building itself, which was designed by the American architect Wallace K. Harrison, the chandeliers seemed to come from a “weird transitional moment where modernism became infected with other influences.” The dominant association formed in McElheny’s mind was, however, of a galaxy or an explosion—“a Pop image of the big bang.”

Perhaps not everyone would share this impression, but McElheny, a skilled glassblower with a profound knowledge of the cultural history of glass, was bound to have a skewed perspective; the chandeliers were likely to attract his attention. And that one night when, as fate would have it, he sat “in the cheap seats,” in the top balcony of the Met, McElheny was positioned at an awkward angle to the stage, but nearly in front of the chandeliers. It was a happy accident, as it turned out, since from this viewpoint a film was born.

**Eternal Inflation**

*Island Universe* was shot on location at the Met and focuses almost exclusively on the chandeliers that hang in the foyer and auditorium. Only a person familiar with the actual building would recognize the site, however, for the film is not a straightforward document of its environment. The camera, rotating in a dizzying aerial ballet around the chandeliers and moving at times deeply into the space between the clusters of shimmering crystals, does not anchor the spectator within the interior space of the opera house. Deploying no match cutting, the film offers only discontinuous glimpses of the interior—no more than shards of space warped around the chandeliers. Whereas the chandeliers are suspended in a luminous pool of their own brightness, the architecture sinks into an almost opaque background. Only intermittently do certain architectural details light up, such as the webbed motif of the ceiling, the trimming of the horizontal balconies, or the airy arches of the foyer, looking out on an impenetrable black night. All the viewer sees in the immense glass surfaces of the foyer’s exterior wall is a reflection of the chandeliers and the faint glow of a few apartment windows, which shimmer like distant stars.

In contrast to the fragmented character of the represented space, the formal structure of the film is completely coherent. *Island Universe* is divided into five sections, each carrying a separate heading: “Heliocentric,” “Frozen Structure,” “Small Scale Violence,” “Directional Structure,” and “Late Emergence.”

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These subtitles refer to a set of three-dimensional models that McElheny constructed with the assistance of the astronomer David Weinberg, each of which represents an expanding cosmos after the big bang. In fact, together the models consist of a set of possible universes, since Weinberg and McElheny decided to pursue one of the more speculative and exotic ideas of cosmological theory—namely, that of the multiverse. The models are based on the “eternal inflation” scenario conceived by Andrei Linde, according to which plural, perhaps infinite, “bubble” universes coexist in time.6 Hence, the birth of our universe—depicted in the model titled “Heliocentric”—was possibly but one in an endlessly forking series of big bangs. Furthermore, each separate bubble universe would have distinct physical properties and may even answer to different natural laws.7 Island Universe proposes a set of possible universes that owe their distinct identities to varying levels of quantum noise or distributions of dark matter at the beginning of each universe’s expansion.

The formal structure of the models is inspired by the starburst pattern of the Met chandeliers: a central sphere from which a radiating set of rods emerges, each supporting clusters of glass pieces and lamps. The varying lengths of the rods are based on measurements of time, the clusters of glass disks and spheres accurately represent the clustering of galaxies in the universe, and the lightbulbs mimic the brightest objects that exist, quasars. Time is thus given a spatial dimension in the sculptures, with the primordial cosmos at the center of the structure and the present at its outer perimeter. A viewer looking at the structure from the outside occupies, therefore, an imaginary position in the future. Suspended in space as a sculptural installation, the models provide an elegant realization of an intricate theory. However, a further complication is in play.

Strolling Among the Stars
According to relativity theory, Weinberg explains, “In a homogeneous universe, there is a natural choice of timekeepers . . . who follow the cosmic expansion and see an isotropic cosmos. We can therefore speak unambiguously about the passage of time and the history of structure within any one cosmic bubble. In eternal inflation, however, the universe becomes radically homogeneous on scales far beyond our cosmic horizon, and there is no one privileged set of observers to run the clocks. In Island Universe, therefore, there is no clear way to reconcile the time of an individual bubble, which increases radially outward from its center, with the time of another bubble . . . As we walk among the islands, wandering superluminally through an inflationary sea whose smooth expanse and bubbling froth must extend far beyond the gallery walls, we assume vantage points that can exist only in the abstract realms of science, mathematics, and art.”

Weinberg suggestively describes Island Universe as occupying a radically heterotopic (if imaginary) space, only to resolve this tension by invoking an “abstract” domain of science, mathematics, and art, which in actuality overlaps with the viewer’s phenomenological experience of the sculptures. What this vision of the artist/scientist wandering among the worlds brings to mind is an image from another era: J. J. Grandville’s grandiose depiction in Un autre monde (1844) of an ornate cast-iron “interplanetary bridge,” across which a pipe-smoking man takes a leisurely stroll. What Grandville’s fantasy captured, in Walter Benjamin’s well-known estimation, was the “transfer of commodity-character onto the universe.”6 Living at the dawn of consumer society, Grandville already sensed the fervent dream of capitalism: to modernize the cosmos. Island Universe revives this dream not to relive it, but in order to falsify it.

To some viewers, McElheny’s movie resembles a primer for looking at the sculptural installation—that is, an instructional device that demonstrates how “to examine a static thing through time, through the body’s temporal experience of walking around it, and through the temporal experience of thinking.”10 This response seems to take the artist slightly by surprise, as he expected the film to seem “self-consciously antiquated or like a false period piece.”11 Indeed, it is highly significant that the work is shot on Super 16 film, which produces flaring at the edges of the frame and possesses a grain that is absent in digital recordings. These features add to the film’s 1960s “look,” its slightly outmoded aesthetic, which McElheny pursued on several levels (more on this topic later).

To read Island Universe as a primer is not totally off the mark, although this comment leaves much room for improvement. As I mentioned above, the film does not offer the viewer a phenomenological anchoring in space. We see the same object repeatedly, but every time we are given a different description of it. The chandeliers do not seem to exist independently of the cinematic time and space in which they are cast: An inward zoom becomes an outward expansion of the chandelier; a movement of the camera is mirrored or countered by a movement of the chandelier. At times the chandeliers even appear to dissolve into an abstract swirl of particles through the shifting focus of the lens, an effective metaphor for the birth and death of galaxies.

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Within each section, the film establishes a distinct rhythm by deploying a different system of framing and montage—although "system" is perhaps too strong a word to use here. We might at best distinguish certain structural traits within each section in order to indicate the different properties of each bubble universe. Whereas, for instance, the "Heliocentric" segment is characterized by a geometric style of framing, which tends to center the chandeliers within the image and correlates all movement to the rectangular edges of the frame, "Small Scale Violence" uses various decentering devices, such as extreme close-ups, rapid zooms, jolty camera movements, and image flare-outs. Yet one should not overstate the inner consistency of the film. Despite what I have just suggested, the chandeliers never completely dissolve into the diegetic space of the film. This film seems permanently poised on the threshold between the actual and the virtual, between the banal existence of these objects, their dusty surfaces mercilessly exposed to the camera, and the diminished imaginary potential that continues to slowly burn within these modernist relics and is rekindled by McElheny's camera.

**Faceted Time**

Within McElheny's gaze, the Met chandeliers unite vastly different time scales: They superimpose the present (of the 1960s) upon the past (of the universe). At the moment of its demise, the mythic consciousness of modernity, with its faith in progress, saw itself reflected in the galactic design of these objects. Transient and eternal, historical and natural dimensions appear to exchange places. Yet McElheny also noticed that the Met's decor is destabilized on another level: The purity of modernism rubs shoulders with the opulence of the nineteenth century. With this incongruous mixture of Space Age and Gilded Age, time seems oddly out of sync. Time, as Benjamin would say, has been blasted out of the continuum of history.

As it turns out, the Met chandeliers date from the same year, 1965, that big bang theory was proven correct. By chance, two astronomers, Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson, had detected an omnidirectional spread of faint radiation in space, the so-called cosmic microwave background. This glow is a relic of an early stage of the universe, when it consisted of a red-hot but opaque gas of electrons. After cooling down, the plasma became transparent and the radiation was released. Peering into deep space, an observer can look no further back in time than this last scattering surface of cosmic radiation—the birth of the universe is forever removed from our sight.

News of this scientific discovery turned into a big media event. According to McElheny, it profoundly altered how humanity viewed its place within the universe: “[Big bang theory] marks the first time in human history where there was a consensus that humans are absolutely not at the center of the universe. One of the central concepts of big bang theory... is the word isotropic, which, in this scientific context, means that the universe is the same everywhere. You can go to any point in space and time in history and from that vantage point tell the whole history and story of the universe just as accurately as from any other point. This does away with the idea of a progressive, singular, linear narrative, also implying the end to the modernist project.”

A series of questions enter into play at this point, some more essential than others: Did big bang theory actually influence the design of the chandeliers? How did politics enter into this crossing between science and art? And why does the Met’s decor exhibit a return of the repressed, as it were, with its references to a premodernist era?

We may dispatch of the first question with relative ease. Researching the history of the Met chandeliers, McElheny discovered that their designer, Hans Harold Rath, had consulted on the project with the Met’s architect, Wallace Harrison, and that during their meeting Harrison had given Rath a book with images of galaxies. Whether the topic of the big bang came up is not known, but the pinning down of an exact iconographic source is not relevant: McElheny is more interested in how scientific ideas can seep into the cultural imaginary, lending their aura to certain contexts while being transformed in the process. The sheer possibility of such a connection is already sufficient to act as a point of departure. From here, several bifurcating paths open up.

Let me put this idea in slightly different terms. As one delves further into the prismatic universe of Island Universe, it becomes clear that the film fashions an allegorical image of modernism and its “explosive demise.” It presents a montage of heterogeneous moments in time, causing constellations of ideas and images to shift into changing patterns of historical meaning. As such, the film manifests a basic fascination for McElheny: how we animate objects “through our experience of them, our understandings, misunderstandings, memories and imaginings.” McElheny consistently explores in his work how a forgotten or latent significance can be restored to objects and materials that have suffered disable by history. Modernism sought to purify materials of extraneous associations, seeking an eternal present mirrored in unmodulated surfaces of translucent glass. McElheny, however, seeks the impurities of the crystal, which provide time its iridescence.

The Politics of Science

The celestial order has always been a model for the sublunary political world. McElheny seems to resort to a similar idea when he links cosmic theory to the micropolitical revolutions of the 1960s: “I think it’s no coincidence that in the events of 1968, the political structures of the world were radically questioned—whether they were changed is another issue—right at the same moment that big bang theory was confirmed.” A bold claim, for sure. Yet before we judge this comment too rashly, let me attend to the science McElheny invokes, although only the briefest history of time will have to do.

For centuries, astronomy maintained a mechanistic conception of the universe. Standing firmly on the foundations of classical science, it promulgated a Newtonian view of nature as law-abiding, docile, and predictable. The constant force of gravity, acting across vast distances, was the sovereign force policing this world. Adjustments and refinements were made to this cosmic model, but one principle could not be integrated—indeterminacy. To allow randomness to enter into the workings of the machine would spell the ruin of the clockwork system of nature. Yet that is precisely what happened. During the nineteenth century, the Newtonian worldview was challenged by a kinetic theory of gases, and soon thereafter atomic chaos entered into physics. At the microscopic level, one might say, the laws of classical mechanics were replaced by quantum physics, and at the level of the universe, relativism displaced Newtonian physics. In this new world, the course of events was no longer subject to prediction, but to probability.

This principle of randomization stands at odds with the drive toward axiomatization that dominates classical science. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have argued, the polarity between the two forms is as much a political as a scientific affair: “Science must not go crazy.” The politics of science, in other words, do not concern an imposition of power from outside: It erupts from within, through the interplay of stochastic and axiomatic forces. In this sense, politics are indeed not foreign to big bang theory. Andrei Linde’s theory of quantum fluctuations stirring up a frothy sea of “eternal inflation” discovers a creative potential in the stochastic. Linde also stands within a proud philosophical tradition. The Greek atomists had already argued
that the universe floats within a churning expanse of molecular chaos, and the concept of multiple universes emerging and submerging within an infinite void of random movement was not foreign to them.18

Island Universe is an “atomistic” film in more than one sense. I may point, first of all, to the fact that the sculptural models of Island Universe were designed by developing a set of rules that passed through a series of computer programs to create a random realization of these rules. This procedure created, as McElheny has noted, “a specificity in terms of the lack of patterning.”19 Furthermore, I may refer to McElheny’s use of abstract diagrams to introduce each section of the film. The diagrams form pure graphic notations that depict various vectorial spaces, arboretic systems, and distributional fields. Although their origin is not revealed in the film, they apparently stem from publications on big bang theory. These diagrams play no more than a “piloting role,” to use the words of Deleuze and Guattari once more: They do not determine the images that follow, imposing an axiomatic reading on them, but inform their possible meaning, without instructing us as to their meaning. The diagrammatic is not a model for something, but develops certain traits of formless matter; it “does not function to represent even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality.”20

The multiverse models are themselves, of course, the product of alterations in the “cosmic noise” of the universe. That is to say, the big bang left behind a kind of sonorous fossil: the microwave background radiation. This spectrum is not uniform, however, and it is possible to tease out basic harmonics from this primordial roar, giving us an updated “harmony of the spheres.” These minor alternations in frequency correspond to a slight patchiness in the original distribution of matter; they are the seeds, as it were, from which the current galactic structure of the universe world nucleated. “One can even detect in the present day tapestry of galaxies the faint residual signal of the first (odd) harmonic coming from those early times.”21 Each section of McElheny’s film is introduced by the sound of this relic radiation, which to the naked ear sounds like white noise. The film’s images, however, are accompanied by music composed by Paul Schütze that expands on the primordial harmonics. As it turns out, the cosmic chord of our universe is set in F-sharp minor, a melancholic key befitting the allegorical nature of the movie.

Like the universe that still reverberates to an old refrain, the film footage is cut to the rhythm of Schütze’s music. The composer constructed the music from a “grammar of sounds and sonic events” that has an almost molecular quality to it. Shifting from section to section, different interlocking patterns are set in motion between at least three separate levels of high-pitched, tingling sounds, midlevel drones, and a deep roar (an electronic manipulation of the other sounds, scattering their frequencies and time-shifting them). I can do no justice here to the richness of Schütze’s music and the complex relations it entertains to the various ideas circulating in Island Universe. Let it be sufficient, then, to note how the music appears in perfect sync with the atomatic logic of the film, in which time appears to vibrate upon itself.

Cosmic Theaters

Adolf Loos, author of the notorious “Ornament and Crime,” has acted as a foil to McElheny’s project of reading modernism against the grain. Often considered the opening bid in modernism’s pursuit of a sleek, “functionalist” aesthetic, Loos’s 1908 essay equates decoration with “wasted capital” due to the intensive nature of the labor required to produce it. “Stragglers” who cling to outmoded forms impede the frontal march of progress that requires that everyone walk in step. Advancing himself a few years into the future, Loos complains about the heterogeneity of his own time: “I am living, say in 1912, my neighbour around 1900 and that man over there in 1880.” If modernization was to succeed, uneven development was to be avoided. In short, time must form an empty continuum. There is no little mischief, then, in McElheny’s juxtaposition of the Space Age with the Gilded Age at the Met. Yet if we are not to fall into a tired mode of postmodern pastiche, I shall need to expand upon McElheny’s conceit of filming a “false period piece.” And to do so, I shall need to embark on a small story of my own, returning in the end to the artist’s notion of falsification.

Another conjurer of multiple universes, the revolutionary Auguste Blanqui, forms a perfect counterpart to the aristocratic Loos. (Whether or not McElheny is familiar with the life and writings of the arch-subversive Blanqui is beside the point, but I am inclined to think that the former would take a great interest in such a mercurial figure as Blanqui.) An indefatigable conspirator, Blanqui had garnered a reputation that was so formidable the government in Versailles kept him locked away during the Paris Commune of 1871. As a result, he was forced to watch from the sidelines while the “evolutionary accident” of
the Commune unfolded. So unexpected was this singular event, which appeared to defy all “universal” laws of history, that it forced Karl Marx to rethink his “scientific” method of historical prediction. To Marx’s great consternation, history appeared to travel down several roads. Sequestered in his cell on a prison island, Blanqui occupied his time with somewhat different reflections. He penned a cosmological pamphlet, “L’éternité par les astres,” which contains a quite stunning hypothesis.

Building on the premise that a finite amount of elements exist within an infinite space-time, Blanqui deduces that there must be endless worlds set within an eternity of time. It follows that our world reproduces itself without cease. All of existence is but repetition: “That which I write in this moment in a cell of the prison of the Fort du Taureau I have written and I will continue to write for eternity, at a table, with a pen, in clothes, in circumstances that are absolutely similar. It is the same for everyone. One after another, each of these planets sinks into the flames of renewal, reviving and then falling again, the monotonous flowing of an hourglass that turns itself around and empties itself eternally.” Within this infinite mirroring of the present, time is immobilized and eternalized. Progress is but an illusion, since everything has already happened in the past and will happen again in the future.

Blanqui, in short, invented the idea of the eternal return ten years in advance of Nietzsche. And this idea, according to Benjamin, “makes a mass article out of historical occurrence itself.” Blanqui’s cosmic view is an infernal one: “It is an unrestrained submission, but at the same time the most terrible accusation against a society that throws this image of the cosmos as its projection onto the heavens.” Others have given a more sympathetic reading of this text, but its interest to us lies in how this atomistic hypothesis of multiple universes reveals the obverse side of progress—namely, the cyclical structure of reified time. Blanqui’s cosmic vision blends into that of Grandville’s Un autre monde. Whereas Un autre monde marked the beginning of the modernization of Paris under the stewardship of Baron Haussmann, “L’éternité par les astres” came toward its end. Haussmann strove to place Paris at the center of the galaxy: “Paris will climb the clouds, scale the heavens of the heavens, make districts for itself out of the planets and the stars.” The goal was to transform Paris into a vast cosmic theater where crowds could circulate in a sidereal space illuminated by sparkling new commodities. The City of Lights was to resemble a huge crystal palace enclosing the sky.

In many ways, the urban renewal project that produced New York’s Lincoln Center, home of the Met, paralleled that carried out in Paris during the Second Empire. It also strove to homogenize the urban fabric, displacing workers from the city center to the periphery (and thus displacing consciousness of the uneven development of capitalism). Driving forces behind the Lincoln Center project were the Rockefeller family, whose fortune was made during the Gilded Age, Robert Moses, the Haussmann of mid-twentieth-century New York, and the architect Harrison, who was primarily responsible for Lincoln Center’s layout. Harrison’s Metropolitan Opera building was meant to constitute the crown jewel of the project, as the new Opéra had in Haussmann’s Paris. Lincoln Center was to operate as a beacon broadcasting Manhattan’s ascendancy to global capital of the financial and cultural worlds; nevertheless, its architecture was to turn its back on the city itself, sheltering behind raised walls as a self-enclosed acropolis. A modernist structure clad in classicizing forms, Lincoln Center is an island unto itself.

Just as the heavenly new Paris was mirrored in the enchanted fairy-grounds of the Universal Exhibitions, Lincoln Center had its celestial twin in the 1964–65 New York World’s Fair—a project to which Harrison and Moses were also committed. If Lincoln Center constructed a linear connection to the past, the World’s Fair opened a straight line into the future. Dedicated to “Man’s Achievement on a Shrinking Globe in an Expanding Universe,” the World’s Fair was meant to exude confidence in the advent of the Space Age. Nevertheless, for many, tomorrow’s party came too late. The great science-fiction writers of the 1960s, such as J. G. Ballard, had declared the Space Age dead before it even got underway. They could no longer share its fantasies of technological mastery and spatial conquest. Like Blanqui, Ballard was drawn to the dark side of modernity’s imagination of better worlds, yet his cosmology followed a different kind of stochastic process, one more apocalyptic in nature: Ballard’s universe was doomed to suffer a slow heat-death through entropic loss of energy. In The Crystal World (1966), for instance, the world slowly freezes over, mutating into a vast crystalline structure, a jewel-like replica of itself in which the passage of time is suspended.

Robert Smithson, an avid reader of Ballard, figures as another dissenter of the 1960s who remained unmoved by monumental gestures of empire formation: “They build gigantic culture centers all over the country here, and then they don’t have anything to put into them. . . . [T]hese big fortress-like,
Medieval, Bauhaus structures proliferate like crazy, and what that does is just reinforce the Rockefeller economic aesthetic. Smithson was to counter this model of an expanding universe with a contracting one. Like Ballard, he inverted the crystaline metaphor of modernism—that is to say, Smithson detected the presence of a crystalline state of mind everywhere. In one place in his collected writings, he notes that Donald Judd bought a purple fluorite crystal at the World’s Fair, which the minimalist admired for its “uncreated” look; in another, he identifies Judd’s pink Plexiglas boxes as “a giant crystal of another planet” that causes inside and outside to vanish into each other. Crystals, in Smithson’s writings, are the symbol of collapsing differences, an implosion of space-time that spreads into the “celestial playgrounds” of the suburban landscape. Here, no sense of scale or duration remains. It is like another planet with a map of Earth drawn on it; all that persists is a “cheap copy” of itself, a “clique idea of infinity.”

Perhaps the centerpiece of all these crystal worlds is Mel Bochner and Robert Smithson’s “The Domain of the Great Bear” of 1966. This magazine piece, which masquerades as a “public interest” essay about the Hayden Planetarium at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, is riddled with several veiled references to contemporary art. The rhetorical flourish of the opening sentence immediately sets the tone for the following text: “For some, infinity is the planetarium, a frozen whirlpool at the end of the world, a vast structure of concentric circles, round whose borders one may find an interminable collection of ideas as objects, a repository of model universes.” In this imaginative account, the planetarium becomes a dumping ground of the spent dreams of modernity. Its vast spaces of exploration have shrunk to nothingness—if this is outer space, any closet will do—and the forward motion of time is defeated by the dreary routines of a planer show: “The time of our mind becomes a frozen actuality, while the clock is forgotten.” Rather than masters of the universe, the stupefied audience has become a captive of the planet. Blanqui’s cosmic invention, for all its atomistic overtones, does not fully discard of the image of the world as a machine. Nevertheless, Blanqui’s universe does not operate in a strict mechanical fashion, but in an energetic one; it is fueled by the “resurrectional shock” of colliding stars, which convert motion into heat. In short, Blanqui’s cosmography is modeled not after a clockwork mechanism, but after a heat engine, and is thus correlated to an early phase of industrial society.

Remarkably, Blanqui’s stellar engine never runs out of energy; it ceaselessly renews itself through an infinite cycle of destruction and creation, death and resurrection. Blanqui’s universe is one of perpetual becoming even though it is finite in its possibilities—a cosmic factory consuming its own products with out end. The entropic metaphors of “The Great Bear,” however, do not just announce a slowdown of the cosmic factory, the dwindling of output due to an exhaustion of resources: “The Great Bear” must be understood as an allegory of the information age, where the gravest threat to the maintenance of social control is noise, not acts of sabotage. You might even say that Bochner and Smithson’s text functions as a kind of jamming signal, although Bochner prefers the image of an “intellectual time bomb inside the art system’s machinery.”

In relation to these great antiutopian texts “L’éternité par les astres” and “The Great Bear,” we may begin to understand how Lincoln Center could form a relic of both the Space Age and the Gilded Age. But it is, of course, Island Universe that makes it possible for us to scale these modern heavens. For this very reason, I have frequently underscored that McElheny intends Island Universe to resemble a kind of “false period piece.” Without doubt, this is the most potent idea conveyed by the film. But what exactly does this idea mean?

Hopefully, it will be apparent that the “false” image is not the simulacral image, a floating signifier located within a system of total equivalence. Island Universe does not propose that we accept the indifference of all historical narratives; quite the opposite. After all, McElheny is involved in the production of “models” of time that are not interchangeable; my brief foray into the “politics of science” indicates as much. Nor should the notion of a “false” image be opposed to the concept of an “authentic” image of the past. It is not a question of error, or even doubt concerning the historical testimony of the image. Instead, we should think here in terms of Deleuze’s “power of the false”; that is, of the ability of certain cinematic images to falsify the standard narratives of the past and shatter the apparatus.
of judgment to which they refer.31

As I have maintained, the Met chandeliers offer a glittering prism through which we may observe, from our standpoint in the future, a scattering of the linear narrative of modernity. The year 1965 "is" the multiverse: a virtual manifold where many temporal strands become woven and unwoven. My own narrative has explored only a part of the spectrum of possibilities that are refracted by Island Universe. McElheny’s film works over the narrative elements of the past, “falsifying” their sedimented links of historical meaning and entering them into new constellations with the present. As Deleuze writes: “The point is that the elements themselves are constantly changing with the relations of time into which they enter, and the terms of their connections. Narration is constantly being modified, in each of its episodes, not according to subjective variations, but as a consequence of disconnected places and de-chronologized moments.”32

Deleuze also has another term for the falsification of time in cinema—the “crystal-image.” Unlike the crystalline metaphors of Ballard or Smithson, however, Deleuze’s crystal-image should not be confused with a notion of entropy. In fact, Deleuze’s worldview is arguably more atomistic than that of Blanqui; the former puts no holds on the process of “perpetual becoming.”33

In the visual regime of the crystal-image, the object is continually erased and created anew, giving way to other equally adequate descriptions, which may modify or contradict the ones preceding it. The object does not extend into movement, but enters into relation with a specific recollection-image that it evokes. The crystal-image, like the chandeliers in Island Universe, constructs a point of indiscernibility between the actual and the virtual; it opens up to a zone of recollections, dreams, and thoughts that are no longer “policed” by any natural laws of attraction between objects and ideas. I can put it no better than McElheny, who states, “The whole project exists at the intersection of specific concepts and abstract ones, of intentional and unintentional cultural products. And, finally, it’s about how they all become interconnected and confused.”34

McElheny’s beautiful leap of imagination was to envision the Met as a cosmic theater that sets other model universes spinning as well. Yet they do not all turn to the same rhythm. Unlike “L’éternité par les astres” or “The Great Bear,” the vertiginous revolutions of Island Universe are designed to draw difference, not sameness, from the repetitions of time. McElheny’s film unlocks the quantum fluctuations within the strata of history.

Notes
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
7. The Island Universe models were preceded by a set of models that showed our universe at various stages of development. For more information, see David H. Weinberg, “From the Big Bang to the Multiverse: Translucence in Time and Space,” in this volume pp. 68–81.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
29. As Jacques Rancière notes, Blanqui’s atomism opposes the law of attraction as the “police force” of the universe that maintains the cosmos in a static state, a notion invoked by the positivist Auguste Comte, among others, in support of hierarchical social structure.
32. Ibid., 133.
33. Notwithstanding its nonlinear character, Island Universe is not simply Deleuzian in nature. Like the counternarratives of “L’éternité par les astres” and “The Domain of the Great Bear,” it stands in strategic relation to the social system of control from which it emerges. In this respect, I believe the prevalent factors of “noise” and “chance” in McElheny’s project provide two important clues that require further development.
34. McElheny, cited in Rothkopf and McElheny, “1000 Words.”