Into the “Immortal Well”: Uses of Time Capsules in the Present

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Abstract

Time capsules receive very little scholarly attention considering the popularity of almost everything else vaguely historical. Despite the banality of their contents, the act of compiling a capsule represents a material manifestation of public historical consciousness. Two millennial projects provide fodder for a discussion of the implications of time capsules as a vehicle to project a fragmented past into the imagined future.

Introduction

Time capsules don’t get much respect. “Newly Unearthed Time Capsule Just Full of Useless Old Crap,” reads a headline in the 13 October 1999 issue of the *Onion*. Perhaps a fake headline in a satirical newspaper should not be taken seriously, except William E. Jarvis, the world’s leading expert on time capsules, agrees: “As is the case with good satire, it is right on the mark about a solid, serious point. We really don’t know for certain what will interest people who retrieve what is sent to them” (2003, p. 36). When even experts and enthusiasts acknowledge “the dirty secret of most time capsules is that the stuff inside is pretty mundane” (Berger, 2007), is there any reason to subject them to scholarly inquiry? Given the popularity of almost all other things historical and the lack of scholarly literature on time capsules, it seems many have come to the conclusion that capsules are indeed as marginal and self-evident as they appear. Time capsules may be “retro-cornball,”
as Jack Hitt (1999, p. 14) describes them, but they are one of the ways we engage with the past-present-future continuum, and therefore warrant study to contribute to our knowledge of the landscape of popular historical consciousness. The people of the future may not be interested in the newspapers, coins, and postdated messages we leave them, but in the present, the act of compiling and squirreling away objects in formal, ceremonial ways reveals aspects of our relationship with time and death.

Time capsules are repositories “either of the past preserved against interference until the present, or of the present similarly preserved for posterity” (Durrans, 1992, p.51). As a notion, time capsules can be defined very broadly. As Jarvis (2003) explains, “almost anything or any method of information transfer from the recipient’s past to the sender’s future can be termed at one time or another as a time capsule” (p. 14). In physical form, capsules usually consist of material evidence deposited underground or otherwise stored until the future. This is a broad definition that encompasses examples such as cornerstone deposits, a city buried under volcanic ash, the archetypal civic capsule filled with “useless old crap,” or any large transmillennial effort such as the Crypt of Civilization (which is set to be opened in the year 8113). Different types of capsules can be distinguished by whether they were intentionally or unintentionally created and whether they have an indefinite or a targeted retrieval date (Jarvis, p. 23). For instance, a shipwreck is considered a non-intentional time capsule with an unscheduled retrieval (unintentional-unscheduled); the gold-plated copper phonograph records carried into orbit by Voyager 1 and 2 fall into the intentional-unscheduled category; a future-dated letter to yourself or a capsule buried until the year 3000 would be intentional-scheduled. Intentional time capsules, either target-dated or not, speak best to issues larger than their physical existence, due to the motivations and choices they involve; as such, the examples presented will draw from this set. A full history of time capsules is not possible here, but a few examples suffice to parse significance beyond the purpose of preserving the past for future generations.

New York City is home to two millennia-spanning time capsules. The first, the Westinghouse Time Capsule of Cupaloy, was buried at Flushing Meadows as part of the 1939 World’s Fair. Its target retrieval date is the year 6939. The second, the Times Capsule by The New York Times Magazine, was sealed in 2000 to be opened in 3000. The 1939 capsule, a 2-metre metal cylinder deposited 15 metres belowground into a resting place termed the Immortal Well, was conceived by Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company publicist G. Edward Pendray. Part publicity stunt for the development of a new copper, chromium and silver alloy (Cupaloy), and part archaeological fantasy, “the capsule’s techno-futurological implications were clearly intended by Pendray to complement the fair’s overarching theme, which was ‘Building the World of Tomorrow’” (Armstrong, 2007, p. 157). Pendray coined the
term “time capsule” to describe his project, which was a more fitting moniker than the contender of “time bomb”, a name that “described its torpedo shape but seemed inappropriate on the eve of World War II” (Berger, 2001). The capsule documents hope for science and technology in the future, tempered by despair for the destructive nature of man. Three messages from “noted men…chosen for their high reputation” were included for the benefit of the capsule’s “futurian” recipients, and reproduced in the capsule’s book of record (Westinghouse, 1938). Robert A. Millikan, Thomas Mann, and Albert Einstein each included a short statement, all of which share a bittersweet tension between hope and resignation for the future of the world. For instance, Mann starts his address with this statement: “We know now that the idea of the future as a ‘better world’ was a fallacy of the doctrine of progress” (p. 47). Einstein is more cutting, noting that “people living in different countries kill each other at irregular time intervals, so that…any one who thinks about the future must live in fear and terror” (p. 51). He then ends with a final sentence that can be read with either an optimistic, bleak, or sarcastic tone: “I trust that posterity will read these statements with a feeling of proud and justified superiority” (p. 51).

The New York Times Magazine capsule was created in 1999, during a flurry of time capsuling that marked the calendar event of the new century and millennium. Turn of the millennium excitement was a frenzy “of considerable popular cultural significance”(Jarvis, 2003, p. 222), characterized by a feeling that “human civilization was suddenly on a global term paper deadline and we had to get everything down before the semester that was the last century ended, or there’d be points taken off our papers” (Glass, 2000). Time capsules were a popular outlet for these commemorative sentiments, but in what Jack Hitt (1999) calls “an age of hip detachment” (p. 115), they were burdened with the tarnished reputation of hokey retrofuturism. Hitt, a regular contributor to The New York Times Magazine, wrote an article about the planning process of the millennial edition and the suggestion of making a time capsule, describing how, “when the phrase first bubbled up at a magazine editorial meeting, a cone of protective irony slowly descended over the chairs of the editors” (p. 115). After discussing a purely notional or hypothetical time capsule exercise, the editors eventually did decide to build the physical Times Capsule, now housed at the American Museum of Natural History. Knute Berger (2001), one of the founders of the International Time Capsule Society, considers the magazine’s offering a major historiographic shift in capsule making. “It attempted,” he notes, “to offer a snapshot of contemporary life for people in the year 3000, but its greatest contribution may have been to call itself a cliché before anyone else could, thus incorporating a kind of self-conscious irony that may have made it the first truly post-modern time capsule.”

The millennial capsules in New York City are no more representative of the full history of
time capsule making than any other examples, but their shared geography and culture make for an elegant comparison of a similar endeavor over time. This paper does not aim to be a total treatment of time capsule as a phenomenon; instead, the New York examples are outlined to provide just enough fodder to facilitate a discussion of some of the underlying motivations behind the practice. Time capsule projects, particularly those sealed for hundreds or thousands of years, are intended as ready-made archaeological deposits, an exercise that addresses the contemporary paucity of sources available about ancient cultures by preempting the role of the future archaeologist. Meanwhile, this process of creating an unrequitable relationship with the people of the future is fraught with practical and philosophical problems. While practical conservation problems have been detailed thoroughly elsewhere, the philosophical problems, while not untouched, still occupy a nebulous and sparse terrain within the scholarship of time capsules and historical reckoning.

Time capsules play at cheating time and death. In this, they achieve results, but these are diminished as they get caught in paradoxes and the vast category of all things that cannot be known. As John Lewis Gaddis (2002) writes, “the trouble with the future is that it’s so much less knowable than the past” (p. 56). Although time capsules can change the future and offer some immortality, the reward is often inadequate compared to the effort (Durrans, 1992, p. 52). The immortality offered is “at best, only deferred fame or, at worst, an insecure, surrogate life-extension by courtesy of the finder’s memory. After the capsule is discovered, its author, just like anyone else, is slowly forgotten” (p. 51-52). Thus, in their very effort to thwart time, time capsules, and with them their author’s intentions, are ravaged by it just the same.

In a historical sense, time is most easily conceived of as existing in three parts—past, present, and future. While this may be taken as a given for most historians and many people in their day-to-day lives, this division of time is only a very common (and convenient) notion, not a definitive truth. This view of time as linear dominates is best seen as simply an expedient, and majority view. For some capsules “time is so unproblematically linear that posterity is simply invited to see how properly they preserve the past. By contrast, time capsules that move away from that degree of conformism…are responses to the idea that the present is unique rather than merely the result of the past” (Durrans, 1992, p. 60). Therefore, time capsules can reinforce or challenge this view of time. Yet linearity allows us to imagine the future by way of the past. Even within a linearity that helps us make sense of our place in time there are conceptual challenges. Carl Becker (1932) explains:

Strictly speaking, the present doesn’t exist for us, or is at best no more than an infinitesimal point in time, gone before we can note it as present. Nevertheless, we must have a present;
and so we create one by robbing the past, by holding on to the most recent events and pretending that they all belong to our immediate perceptions (p. 226).

The grasping at, and robbing from, the past described by Becker is similar to what occurs when futurescapes are imagined in the process of creating time capsules. The futures we imagine are informed by our experiences in the past (through historical records and our own experiences) and the present. Time capsules are a way to feign control over the movement of time. By entombing objects, we both imagine the future in a way that addresses the past, and we ritualize a burial of something physical with the hope of achieving a kind of immortality.

According to accounts, spectators attending the descent of the Cupaloy capsule into the Immortal Well in 1939 doffed their hats, as if it were a funeral (Jarvis, 2003, p. 57). Indeed, as Fergus Armstrong notes, “time capsules are fun in smallish doses—but the grand, long-term projects have this crypt-like aspect whose implications can seem a bit bleak” (personal communication, April 21, 2008). If the key to cheating death is cheating time, then time capsules attempt to do both. This is not without parallel—the cryonics movement, for instance, is a similar, if more personal, reaction to the very same issues of asserting control over the future, and maintaining the hope that technology will eventually be our saviour.

Conclusion

The past, disseminated to us in fragments, is a collection of choices whose decisions have now become inevitable. The future holds no such limitations. As David Lowenthal (1975) writes:

As we erode and alter the inherited past, we more and more contrive our own. Creatures of historical processes beyond our control, we shape landscapes and artefacts to conform with illusory histories, public and private, that gratify our tastes. All the lineaments of the present are historical yet they are continuously reborn in the minds of every culture and of every generation. (p. 37)

Our history is necessarily fragmented, but the scraps we have in the present are knowable. The future is less knowable, but is a much cleaner surface on which to project the troubling and hopeful notions of the past. Time capsules can make the future knowable, at least in the present. “In a small way they really can determine something about the future and resolve the paradox in which posterity is trapped between a dream and an excuse” (Durrans, 1992, p. 65).

Time capsules manifest our attempts to overcome the inevitability of time and death. As self-conscious efforts to control the uncontrollable, they fail to live up to the imagined rewards. In the process, however, they impart a greater understanding of public engagement with the past, revealing our
relationship with, and the limits of, the knowable past and the unknowable future.
References


