

***AWAKENING THE ENTROPY WITHIN***  
***The novels of J.G. Ballard***

**By Andrés Vaccari**

*For although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.*

*Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory.*

*Like the Earth of a hundred years ago, our mind still has its darkest Africas, its unmapped Borneos and Amazonian basins.*

*Aldous Huxley, Heaven and Hell.*

## Introduction

To say that a writer always rewrites the same novel would, to most, sound like an insult. However, in the case of J.G. Ballard it is a compliment, an affirmation of an uncompromising fidelity to a core of obsessions that form the backbone of one of this century's most original and enigmatic bodies of work. Each one of Ballard's books is like a facet of a prism offering a new perspective on the same world, a world which becomes, paradoxically, both stranger and more familiar the more one immerses oneself in it. Ballard's style and imagery are instantly recognizable, and it seldom takes more than a page or two for his distinctive preoccupations to emerge and become the central engines of the narrative.

Ballard's first short stories appeared in *New Worlds*, a British magazine that would become (under the editorship of Ted Carnell and, later, Michael Moorcock) the main arena for the so-called "New Wave" of science fiction. Although they are a disparate bunch, the writers of the New Wave had in common an interest in issues generally neglected by the genre (politics, sexuality, human relations), as well as a psychological and existential bent which diverged from the emphasis on hard science that characterizes most science fiction. As an editor, Moorcock also encouraged his writers to break away from linear realism and experiment with more adventurous narrative forms. Although one of its long cherished themes is humanity's ambiguous relationship to technology, science fiction had never really focused on the technology of writing itself. Here we are, reading stories set in the twenty-fifth century but written with literary structures and psychological models borrowed from the nineteenth.

It is in this context that Ballard would develop his own personal platform, which he expounded enthusiastically in a handful of articles and put to practice in his stories. In one of these articles Ballard argued that the main concern of science fiction should be with the present:

The subject matter of SF is the subject matter of everyday life: the gleam of refrigerator cabinets, the contours of a wife's or husband's thighs passing the newsreel images on a color TV set, the conjunction of musculature and chromium artifact within an automobile interior, the unique postures of passengers on an airport escalator (1971:100).

Furthermore, it should also be about *inner* (rather than outer) space, for it is in the realm of our nightmares and desires that the future will really take place. In another early essay ("Time,

Memory and Inner Space", 1963) Ballard compares the role of the imaginative writer with that of surrealism in the graphic arts:

The dream worlds, synthetic landscapes and plasticity of visual forms invented by the writer of fantasy are external equivalents of the inner world of the psyche, and because these symbols take their impetus from the most formative and confused periods of our lives they are often time-sculptures of terrifying ambiguity.

This zone I think of as "inner space", the internal landscape of tomorrow that is a transmuted image of the past ... (100-101)

This notion of "inner space" became Ballard's battle cry. In the context of the realist and naturalist traditions, this term may invoke notions of an emotional or spiritual interiority. However, opting for an overt use of fantasy and symbolism, Ballard portrays the human psyche as an external realm permeated by non-human forces. There is little psychological "depth" to the characters, inasmuch as the setting has become an all-encompassing allegory of their internal workings. This is the first thing the reader notices about his stories, the fact that the landscape is of fundamental importance.

Although he is equally dexterous and prolific in the short story form, this essay will focus exclusively on Ballard's novels. His novelistic career lends itself more readily to a brief overall study since it is made up of clearly distinct periods, where a number of works is devoted to exploring a core of related themes. I will focus on a couple of novels from each period, draw out some common themes and attempt to follow Ballard's stylistic and intellectual evolution.

## One

On the surface, most of Ballard's novels are variations on the following single narrative:

A man (most commonly a doctor or scientist) finds himself stranded in a foreign place. This place can be a remote African nation (*The Day of Creation*), a crystal forest (*The Crystal World*), a London suburb (*The Unlimited Dream Company*), a Japanese prison camp (*Empire of the Sun*), a world ravaged by drought (*The Drought*), an apartment building gone berserk (*High-rise*) or an abandoned wasteland by the side of a busy motorway (*Concrete Island*). Ballard's anti-hero often arrives there by accident, haunted by a vague sense of failure and loss, by broken relationships or a feeling of not belonging in society. Sometimes, he is sent there as part of a scientific or

environmental expedition (*The Drowned World, Rushing to Paradise*); at other times, it may be the place he has lived in for most of his life, and which is suddenly affected by a radical transformation (*The Drought, Crash*).

Invariably, the protagonist decides to stay and explore the outlandish logic of the landscape. There are abstruse unconscious reasons for him to remain, notwithstanding the inhospitality or downright hostility of the surroundings. Ballard's characters act out of incomprehensible motives and often seem lacking in human warmth or common sense. This is heightened by the quality of the relations between the main actors, which are often functional or dictated by necessity. The landscape seems to confront the protagonist with a certain truth about himself; it unleashes powerful desires, beckoning forces that transcend the individual ego and ultimately dissolve it. The most important of these forces is entropy, and images of decay, abandonment, death and desolation figure ubiquitously in Ballard's work.

This entropy of the external world mirrors a cryptic internal imperative of human beings. At times, this drive seems to coincide with Freud's idea of a "death-instinct" (or Thanatos, one of the weakest points of psychoanalytic theory) although Ballard develops the idea along different lines. Frequently it is not clear when the outside world ends and inner space begins, and the reader wonders if even the secondary actors are not a figment of the narrator's imagination. The novels are told (with the exception of *High-rise* and *The Wind From Nowhere*) from a single person's point of view, increasing the impression of being locked inside an enclosed mind, a realm that is mostly psychical or imaginary. Nonetheless, Ballard never falls into an easy solipsism--that is, the outside world is never presented merely as the product of a mind or a dreaming self, nor is it a straight metaphor or an objective correlative.

## Two

Ballard's first four novels are about a series of catastrophes threatening to extinguish all human life on Earth--and, in one case, to swallow the whole universe.

Unlike other "catastrophe" novels, in these works the actual event is a mere excuse, a subsidiary aspect of the narrative. In *The Wind From Nowhere* (1962), a wind combs the Earth's surface at an accelerating speed, destroying cities in its path and threatening to wipe out civilization. Ballard describes this novel as "a hack job written in a fortnight to allow me to break into full-time

writing". Despite the bizarreness of its premise, it is a fairly conventional science fiction story showing Ballard's struggle to find his own voice. Two features, though, will remain constant throughout his career: An inability to write compelling action scenes and a great knack for the description of world devastation:

Harrod's department store lay in ruins, brownstone facing tiles lying thickly across the roadway, the wind picking like a thousand vultures at the tangle of girders and masonry, detaching fragments of furniture and tattered drapery and carrying them away in its fleeting clasp. (79)

*The Drowned World* (1962) and *The Drought* (1965) present us with a neat dyad of diametrically opposed cataclysms. In the former, a series of solar storms have altered the electromagnetic balance of the planet, causing the outer layers of the ionosphere to vanish and the mean temperatures to rise. The increased heat and radiation bring an accelerated rate of mutation that triggers the emergence of new forms of animal and vegetable life. The geography of the Earth is rearranged, the tropics become uninhabitable and the Antarctica is colonized. Finally, the melting of the polar caps brings about extensive floods that cause formerly civilized areas to become underwater cities, impenetrable jungles and tropical lagoons.

The central character, Dr. Robert Kerans, is a member of a biological testing station sent to study the new species of flora and fauna in an area of lagoons which is possibly the former city of London. Kerans spends most of the time in an abandoned hotel in the half-submerged city, managing to do a few hours of work in the mornings before the heat becomes unbearable and all the team members are forced to withdraw into their living quarters. All around them, the world is regressing to an earlier geological age, a time of large reptiles, giant insects and torrid jungles. The members of the expedition are undergoing a similar process of regression, withdrawing into themselves and experiencing lethargy and exhausting hypnotic dreams.

[The] growing isolation and self-containment, exhibited by the other members of the unit ... reminded Kerans of the slackening metabolism and biological withdrawal of all animal forms about to undergo a major metamorphosis. Sometimes he wondered what zone of transit he himself was entering, sure that his own withdrawal was symptomatic not of a dormant schizophrenia, but of a careful preparation for a radically new environment, with its own internal landscape and logic ... (14)

Following a time-honored SF cliché, there is a scientist (Dr Bodkin) who provides an explanation for what is happening. His rhetoric resembles a mixture of Jung and genetic determinism:

“... as we move back through geophysical time so we re-enter the amniotic corridor and move back through spinal and archaeopsychic time, recollecting in our unconscious minds the landscapes of each epoch, each with a distinct geological terrain, its own unique flora and fauna ...” (43)

As Bodkin points out, this process of devolution is not entirely psychological, inasmuch as it involves a *bodily* memory, a "time-code" carried in every chromosome and gene (42). The changed weather conditions are awakening instincts that have lain dormant for millennia, and the human race is now embarked in a journey backwards through time, a return to a primitive, insentient and collective type of consciousness.

As the temperature of the Earth maintains its steady ascent and the water level rises, the conditions become intolerable and the testing unit is recalled. But Kerans decides to stay behind, along with Dr Bodkin and Beatrice Dahl, a sensual and mysterious native of the lagoons. Their motives are not entirely clear, least of all to themselves. We are told that Kerans, Bodkin and Beatrice want to pursue their own pathways "through the time jungles, mark their own points of no return" (80). The human race is doomed, and the only chance of survival seems to accept the wayward logic of the water world. Paradoxically, "survival" in this case can only entail the death of the individual, or at least the death of individuality as we know it.

The arrival of Strangman is the central event of the narrative. Strangman is a shifty messianic figure who drains the lagoons and sets out to loot the treasures still stored in the buildings below. Surrounded by a grotesque crew of brutish sailors and domesticated crocodiles, he represents an old order that clings to material values and the debris of a soon-to-be-extinguished civilization. Not surprisingly, he does not seem to be affected by the retrogressive process, and is amused by the delusions of the three inhabitants of the lagoons. In contrast to his booming individuality and healthy ego, Bodkin, Kerans and Beatrice seem languid and insubstantial figures, forever dreaming of "the lost but for ever beckoning and unattainable shores of the amniotic paradise" (68).

As in much of Ballard's early work, the characterization is functional, often cartoonish and largely symbolical: Beatrice as erotic, passive, a little decadent; Riggs (one of the expedition's scientists) as the analytical, austere, no-nonsense man of action; Strangman embodying an individualistic rebellion against the inevitable fate of the universe. Their personalities remain mostly static and utterly unchanged by the situation, the antithesis to the classical narrative in which the hero sets out into the world and achieves a moral transformation from his experiences. Instead, in

the words of James Cawthorne, we have a figure "which is tempting to label The Dissolving Hero. Faced with the breakup of the Universe he does not fight, but instead seeks, literally, to be absorbed" (cited in Perry & Wilkie, 1970:100).

As the novel progresses, the reader realizes that this process can only culminate in the complete merging of subject and landscape--not so much a narrative "climax" as a kind of fizzling out, a heat-death beyond which there can be no further development. The exclusive reliance on a limited set of metaphors (the womb, Genesis, reptiles, the primordial ocean, Adam and Eve) makes the novel a bit repetitive in places, but Ballard uses this to achieve a kind of comatose density that ultimately works to its advantage. In the concluding chapter, after reflooding the lagoons, Kerans sets off on a lone journey south and towards the past, a voyage that is both an embracing of life and a suicidal search for death.

This paradox is at the centre of all Ballard's work, and teasingly ambiguous endings are only an aspect of it. Ballard plays with a series of tensions at both the narrative and stylistic levels. There is a constant struggle between hallucination and reason, order and entropy, form and formlessness. Although his novels are methodically structured, the plot is powered not so much by linear momentum as by a kind of entropic drift. The prose is punctilious and precise, yet heavily metaphorized and searching for a poetic effect. On one hand, the symbolic oppositions (in the case of *The Drowned World* north/south, future/past, individual / collective, etc.) are neat and deliberately set out; on the other, Ballard's universes tend towards a state of rest where all conflict and oppositions cease. In the words of Jerome Charyn, his characters "pull the world in upon themselves, wear it as a gruesome tent, so they can exist in some dark knot of the brain" (1978:46).

*The Drought*, as its title suggests, advances the opposite scenario to that of *The Drowned World*: A worldwide shortage of rain and water. In this case, disaster is brought about by the appearance of a resilient film that covers the surface of the world's oceans. Spontaneously produced from decades of industrial waste, the membrane impedes all water evaporation, causing the continents to dry up and become large deserts and dust-basins.

Charles Ransom, a physician, watches the slow disintegration of life in his home town of Hamilton. With the water level of the river going down and the drought steadily settling in, most of Hamilton's inhabitants have already left. But Ransom lingers, seemingly unmindful of his fate. It is suggested that the drought is connected to the failure of his marriage, and both the landscape and the house Ransom has shared with his wife Judith are described as a "spatio-temporal vacuum", a

neutral zone free of any associations (40). As the resources become scarce and the violence escalates, Ransom reluctantly decides to embark on a journey to the coastal cities, where the situation is supposed to be better. Ballard gathers an odd assemblage of characters for the trip: Philip Jordan, a vagabond boy whom Ransom has half-adopted; Mrs Quilter, the mother of the town's idiot; Catherine Austen, an introverted young woman; and Philip Jordan's father, an elderly and blind black man.

The group never succeeds in its journey, and instead ends up splitting up and joining the nomadic groups that scavenge the deserted beaches. Ransom becomes a wanderer of the sand dunes, living on the fringes of the various small communities. He is reunited with his wife Judith and together they struggle to "keep alive some faint shadow of their former personalities ... and arrest the gradual numbing of sense and identity that was the unseen gradient of the dune limbo" (161).

After a few years, the original group reassembles and sets back towards Hamilton, where Ransom's final confrontation with the logic of the apocalyptic landscape takes place.

The framework of *The Drought* is ambitious and often obscure. In contrast to the preceding novel, there is here a conscious attempt to do away with cultural references and build a self-sustained universe with a conceptual structure of its own. Ballard strips the natural elements of sand, water, wind, light of any mythical or historical context, revealing them in a new (or perhaps very old) dimension. Although he utilizes perennial and symbolically-laden motifs (the river, the desert), Ballard writes with a complete disdain for all previous literature and cultural codes. He is interested in the way these elements embody the return of a primal "in-itself" threatening not only the cozy narratives of civilization but, it seems, the very foundation of the human cognitive process.

Unlike the previous work, the psychic need fulfilled by the catastrophe is not collective but personal, and seemingly affecting people in different ways. Also, for the central character, the key is now no longer in the past but in the future. During their journey, Ransom glimpses a mysterious figure in the distance, and it is suggested that this is a future self. The figure is presented as an extension of the landscape, a kind of natural phenomenon. Once formed, this landscape of the future will provide a new frame of reference for their lives, a realm

where the unresolved residues of the past would appear smoothed and rounded ... like images in a clouded mirror. Perhaps these residues were the sole elements contained in the future, and would have the bizarre and fragmented quality of the debris through which he was now walking. None the less they would all be merged and resolved in the soft dust of the drained bed. (202-203).

It is not unusual for Ballard to describe things in function of the surroundings. Facial features, for example:

Each day her features seemed to get smaller, the minute mouth with its cupid's lips subsiding into the overlaying flesh, just as the objects in the river had become submerged by the enveloping sand. (244).

Contrary to what the codes of mainstream science fiction may dictate, Ballard is less interested in presenting a plausible vision of the future than in elaborating a complex parable on the present. At Hamilton, the river has been like "an immense fluid clock" (14), against which the people of the town have taken their respective positions. Once the river is gone, there will no longer be an absolute, external support for their lives and each one of them will become an "island in an archipelago drained of time" (15). The future threatens established notions of identity but opens the possibility of unlimited self-creation; it is a ground zero, a place of infinite freedom. For example, Ransom is now free to reimagine his role in the group, to become "the children's father and Quilter's brother, Mrs Quilter's son and Miranda's husband" (245).

However, in the end, only death (or something that sounds very much like it) can free Ransom from the trappings of time and identity. The novel closes with this passage:

Although it was not yet noon, the sun seemed to be receding into the sky, and the air was becoming colder. To his surprise he noticed that he no longer cast any shadow on to the sand, as if he had at last completed his journey across the margins of the inner landscape he had carried in his mind for so many years. The light failed, and the air grew darker. The dust was dull and opaque, the crystals in its surface dead and clouded. An immense pall of darkness lay over the dunes, as if the whole of the exterior world were losing its existence. It was some time later that he failed to notice it had started to rain. (252)

It is difficult to decide if this is Ransom's triumph or his defeat, successful transcendence or nihilistic collapse. Ballard's heroes inhabit a peculiar narrative space in which fundamental categories of human experience (subject-object, interior-exterior, dream-reality) have been abolished. Often, he seems to be describing a schizophrenic voyage, a withdrawal into a body without organization and a world devoid of categories. Both insanity and catastrophe have the function of sweeping away the tenuous ontological ground on which the above distinctions are based. Robert Platzner explains:

Our living space and temporal identity, Ballard suggests, are radical deceptions ... [The] psycho-physical conditions of life we term "reality" are just so many fortuitous arrangements. The proper function of catastrophe [in Ballard's works], then, is to expose the essential arbitrariness of those arrangements and of the certitudes they have spawned. Even so basic a distinction as that between the organic and the inorganic, or between the

living and the dead, blurs within the apocalyptized mind. For as the conditions of life change violently, so does the metaphysical ground for our existence ... (1983:13).

In these early novels, this metaphysical ground is *time*. Like the philosopher Martin Heidegger, Ballard seems to believe that temporality is the fundamental axis of human existence. Thus, the disintegration of consciousness is analogous to a “draining” of time. Also like Heidegger, (although for different reasons) Ballard suggests that awareness of our own finitude in time (that is, of death) is the key to an authentic and more truthful existence. For Heidegger, this was because death is always *my* death, a horizon that grounds identity and individuality. For Ballard, on the other hand, death is the irruption of a total other, of a cosmic time and an elemental materiality that is impervious to human concerns. In *The Crystal World* (1966), this theme acquires markedly Platonic overtones, and we find Ballard wishing for a place beyond death where things are preserved in a timeless shell of crystal.

In these works, time is not an absolute, that is, it does not precede or exist separately from the activity of consciousness. Mind is intimately embedded in the material world, from where it borrows its metaphors, its images and figures of thought. Teilhard de Chardin expresses a similar idea:

We are not set adrift and carried away in the current of life by the material surface of our being; but, like a subtle fluid, space-time first drowns our bodies and then penetrates to our soul; it fills and impregnates it; it blends itself with the soul's potentialities to such an extent that soon the soul no longer knows how to distinguish space-time from its own thoughts. (1965:243).

This all-pervasive substance is emblemised in the natural elements of sand, wind, water and crystal. In the end, however, it is not clear if Ballard is advancing a serious philosophical proposition or using time as a metaphoric or narrative device to explore the emergence of this “in-itself” from under the surface of everyday life.

Whatever the case, in the following works Ballard will apply this treatment to technology, imbuing the discarded jetsam of the modern world with a new and menacing kind of presence.

### **Three**

Written during the early seventies, the next tetralogy of novels shows a shift in style and subject matter. Whereas the previous works are set in an indeterminate near future, Ballard now sets his sight squarely on the present, focusing on technology, modern culture and urban living. The overall

mood is still apocalyptic, but it is now a human-made cataclysm that has crept surreptitiously into our lives.

*The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), a collection of previously published short texts, is the most experimental and conceptually demanding of Ballard's works. It deals with the mental collapse of a man obsessed with the unconscious subtexts of urban architecture, technology and contemporary events (the Apollo missions, Marilyn Monroe, the Vietnam war, etc.) Each chapter is subdivided into a series of fragmentary and densely packed narratives, but the reader's efforts to piece all the sections together into an overall story are continually frustrated. Ballard seems interested in emulating the experience of psychosis. Two central characters remain constant throughout the first nine chapters: Dr Nathan and a shadowy character who shifts names (Talbot, Travis, Travers, Talbert, Trabert, etc.). Some sections consist in lists of seemingly unrelated objects.

(1) The melancholy back of the Yangste, a boom of sunken freighters off the Shanghai Bund. ... (2) The contours of his mother's body, landscape of so many psychic capitulations. (3) His son's face at the moment of birth, its phantom-like profile older than Pharaoh. (4) The death-rictus of a young woman. (5) The breasts of the screen actress. (57-58).

(1) Her ungainly transit across the passenger seat through the nearside door; (2) the conjunction of aluminized gutter trim with the volumes of her thighs; (3) the crushing of her left breast by the door pillar, its self-extension as she swung her legs on the sandy floor; (4) the overlay of her knees and the metal door flank; (5) the ellipsoid erasure of dust as her hip brushed the nearside fender; (6) the hard transept of the door mechanism within the absolute erosion of the landscape; ... (69-70)

Fragmentation is not only the *modus operandi* of the book but also one of its subject matters. Here, nothing exists discretely or in isolation, but only in association and juxtaposition. Paranoia is, for Ballard's characters, the only valid form of knowledge as they wander through the fragments of our age looking for the evasive last fragment that will complete the puzzle of their lives.

The deaths of the three astronauts in the Apollo capsule were a failure of the code that contained the operating formulae for their passage through consciousness. Many factors confirmed this faulty union of time and space -- the dislocated perspectives of the apartment, his isolation from his own and his wife's body ..., the serial deaths of Ralph Nader on the advertising billboards ... (47).

In the perspectives of the plaza, the junctions of the underpass and embankment, Talbot at last recognized a modulus that could be multiplied into the landscape of his own consciousness. The descending triangle of the plaza was repeated in the facial geometry of the young woman. The diagram of her bones formed a key to his own postures and musculature ... (19)

Bodily postures are compared to large urban constructions. An elbow, a gesture, a cultural event suddenly acquire vital and obscure meanings. There are sudden, schizoid shifts of perspective and dimension. Magnified in immense billboards, the faces of celebrities haunt the characters and provide their lives with a frame of reference.

The magnification was enormous. The wall on his right, the size of a tennis court, contained little more than the right eye and cheekbone. He recognized the woman ... --the screen actress, Elizabeth Taylor. ... The planes of their lives interlocked at oblique angles, fragments of personal myths fusing with the commercial cosmologies. (11).

The result is a dense part novel, part treatise that can be described as an attempt to make sense of the media landscape, a place where, in Ballard's own words "presidential campaigns and moon voyages are presented in terms indistinguishable from the launch of a new candy bar or deodorant" and where "within minutes in the same TV screen, a prime minister is assassinated, an actress makes love, an injured child is carried from a car crash" (n.99). Ballard describes *The Atrocity Exhibition* as a series of "emergency scenarios" that act on the fragments of this landscape "just as our sleeping minds extemporize a narrative from the unrelated memories that veer through the cortical night" (99). The book can also be seen as an attempt to reconceptualize literature in an age where machines of vision (photography, cinema, television, abstract painting) and the perceptual and conceptual apparatus of science (radiotelescopes, medical imaging, various methodologies) have radically altered not only the way we perceive the world but the very nature of human consciousness. From now on, Ballard will often resort to technological metaphors (particularly cinema) to describe psychological processes. (A notable example of this is the first chapter of *Empire of the Sun*).

Ballard borrows from contemporary Freudianism the dictum that cultural objects and events have an unconscious psychological significance. However, Ballard reverses Freud by positing this unconscious no longer as a private realm, a "personal" or familial phenomenon, but as an inherently social and material reality. For Ballard the unconscious is external, visible, technological. The nightmares and fantasies of his characters are the nightmares of highway overpasses and celebrity assassinations, the fantasies of advertising and technology. All their dreams, and even their deaths, are posed in terms of a public landscape. Thus, rather than a metaphysical current, or a disembodied libido, their desire is a depersonalized material force producing various arrangements of bodies, images, machines and spaces. And whereas for Freud the key to the unconscious and the emotional makeup of the patient lies in the formative experiences of the past, (in the childhood stages of

development, the primal scene and the process of Oedipalization) for Ballard the key is in the future, in a psychology (or more accurately a psychopathology) yet to be structured or named. The technological sensorium of the twentieth century, with its novel forms of pleasure and death, demands a new kind of subjectivity. Hence, the indeterminacy of the characters, who are little more than ciphers among other ciphers searching for a vaster formula. Like R.D. Laing and the so-called school of anti-psychiatry, Ballard proposes that a pathological or perverse reaction might be the only sane response to an insane world, at least from an aesthetic (not *moral*) point of view. In the words of Platzner, Ballard regards the “gnosis of madness as the only credible perspective from which to view contemporary culture.” (1983:216).

*Crash* (1973) explores some of these ideas further, narrowing the focus to one kind of technology: the motor car. The most violent and sexually explicit of Ballard's works, *Crash* is also one of his most literary and accomplished, and signals the beginning of a more mature period in his writing. The fact that the story is structured as a more or less conventional linear narrative makes this a more effective and accessible novel than its predecessor.

Curiously, the main character in *Crash* bears Ballard's name, and the novel is narrated in the first person. James Ballard (the character) is an advertising producer bound in a flagging marriage to Catherine, who works for an airline company. One day, as James drives home from a date with his secretary, he is involved in a frontal collision with another car. On impact, the other driver is propelled through the windshield and dies instantly, while James and the victim's wife, doctor Helen Remington, escape with minor injuries. The crash is vividly described, grotesquely sexualized and laden with metaphor, setting the tone for the rest of the novel:

We looked at each other through the fractured windshield, neither able to move. Her husband's hand ... lay palm upwards beside the right windshield wiper. His hand had struck some rigid object as he was hurled from his seat, and the pattern of a sign formed itself as I sat there, pumped up by his dying circulation into a huge blood-blister--the triton signature of my radiator emblem ... his wife sat behind her steering wheel, staring at me in a curiously formal way, as if unsure what had brought us together. Her handsome face ... had the blank and unresponsive look of a madonna in an early Renaissance icon, unwilling to accept the miracle, or nightmare, sprung from her loins. (21)

Throughout his brief stay in hospital, James is visited by bizarre obsessions and morbid fantasies, mostly to do with bodily fluids and "the sexual possibilities of everything around me" (27). After his release, he realizes that his accident has radically altered his perception of the world. As he recuperates in his apartment, watching the motorway from the balcony, he is aware of a

hidden dimension to the city, a realm "of invisible eroticisms, of undiscovered sexual acts" (36). He feels that the human inhabitants of the technological landscape are losing their reality:

... the domestic wrangles of our well-to-do neighbours in our apartment house, all the hopes and fancies of this placid suburban enclave ... faltered before the solid reality of the motorway embankments, with their constant and unswerving geometry ... I was surprised by how much, in my eyes, the image of the car had changed, almost as if its true nature had been exposed by my accident (42).

The thought of his own death in a future car crash begins to obsess him. He is overwhelmed by "an undefined sense of extreme danger", as if a colossal "autogeddon" is about to take place. He spends most of his time watching the motorway, "determined to spot the first signs of this end of the world by automobile, for which the accident had been my own private rehearsal" (43). During the following days, James rents a series of cars and drives through the city, regularly revisiting the site of his accident. He meets Dr Remington again in the police lot where the remnants of their cars are kept. They feel a special bond with each other, as if the "crash between our two cars was a model of some ultimate and yet undreamt sexual union" (27).

As is quite common in Ballard's works, the characters have little life outside their obsessions. The universe of the motorway becomes all encompassing, and every other aspect of James' life (his work, for example) is described as "a vague penumbra, unsatisfactory footage that would later be edited out" (46). As he drives around the city, James notices someone is following him, a grotesque and scarred figure whom he has first spotted at the hospital. Later, James recognizes the man as Dr Robert Vaughan, a computer scientist who has become a minor TV personality a few years before. An expert in international traffic control, Vaughan's career was cut short by a severe motorcycle accident which has broken his legs and scarred his face and body.

Vaughan soon becomes the major centre of the narrative, gathering James into a circle of crash victims who share his same obsessions with sex and motoring. There is Seagrave, a stunt-driver with a "pallid hungry look", who mounts, with Vaughan's help, elaborate public recreations of famous road accidents (Albert Camus, James Dean, June Mansfield, etc). There is Gabrielle, a young girl whose legs and waist are clamped in surgical supports. Her car crash experience has deeply scarred her, turning her "into a creature of free and perverse sexuality" (79).

Vaughan is a kind of channeler or catalyst for these impulses. He shows James his detailed photographic dossiers on automobile accidents, an endless catalogue of wounds and every conceivable "death-mode". Vaughan keeps photos of celebrities and relishes in devising "optimum

auto-deaths" for them, mapping their possible injuries, positions and points of impact. He also dreams of a major project, a carefully planned collision with Elizabeth Taylor's limousine. Vaughan lovingly catalogues her future wounds, planning their orgasm-death in painstaking detail.

His photographs of sexual acts, of sections of automobile radiator grilles and instrument panels, conjunctions between elbow and chromium window-sill, vulva and instrument binnacle, summed up the possibilities of a new logic created by these multiplying artifacts, the codes of a new marriage of sensation and possibility. (85).

Ballard takes the notion that technology has a determining sexual element to its utmost conclusion, setting out to explore both as author and character every possible angle of sex and death via automobile. Thus, Ballard is asking not so much to invert Western technological thinking (via a terrifying *reductio ad absurdum*) as to explore its monstrous ramifications.

Vaughan is seductive, but also dangerous and manipulative, and James soon realizes that each of them is playing a role in his own cryptic scheme. Vaughan comes to represent James' alter-ego, his shadow, the incarnation of his darkest and most repressed desires. Similarly, there is a further doubling between Ballard-author and Ballard-narrator, which suggests that the novel be read as a kind of personal revelation, or an unflinching self-analysis, although it can also be argued that it is just a mischievous joke without much significance.

Great part of *Crash* is taken up by a series of sexual encounters: James and Helen, Helen and Catherine, Catherine and Vaughan, Vaughan and James. Needless to say, all the sex takes place in cars, since none of them is able to be aroused any other way. The encounters are described in a dizzyingly abstract manner, a kind of detailistic scientific pornography which often flirts with comic absurdity and excess:

I touched her mouth with my own, denting the waxy carapace of pastel lipcoat, watching her hand reach out to the chromium pillar of the quarter window. ... Its surface was marked along its forward edge by a smear of blue paint left by some disaffected production-line worker. The nail of her forefinger scratched at this fretline, which rose diagonally from the window-sill at the same angle as the concrete ledge of the irrigation ditch ten feet from the car. In my eye this parallax fused with the image of an abandoned car lying in rust-stained grass on the lower slopes of the reservoir embankment. The brief avalanche of dissolving talc that fell across her eyes as I moved my lips across their lids contained all the melancholy of this derelict vehicle, its leaking engine oil and radiator coolant (64)

But if there are any ironic or humoristic connotations, the sheer obsessiveness with which the premise is pursued to its most gruesome detail quickly freezes the smile on the reader's face. Ballard uses the polished surface of the writing as a kind of Trojan horse, simultaneously hypnotizing and

repelling the reader. Again, fragmentation plays a fundamental role, and *Crash* abounds with meticulous, and often fetishistic, descriptions of automobile interiors, clothing, wounds, scars, facial contours, architectural details, etc. Ballard has developed an extensive vocabulary for the minutiae of modern life, and his mastery of scientific terminology (especially medical and anatomical terms) lends the prose an air of vivid detachment. A new kind of poetry emerges from this violent landscape, a brutal kind of asignifying language etched on flesh, indicator signals, concrete and metal. When Vaughan pursues Catherine in his car, playfully trying to run her off the road, James has no difficulty identifying Vaughan's personal signature on her car. Part of Ballard's project is to expose the affinity between the discourse of science and the language of pornography. The raw matter of science is empirical data, the itemization of elements and events, while pornography is based on a segmentation of the body and an inventory of its erogenous possibilities. In *The Atrocity Exhibition* Dr. Nathan calls science the "ultimate pornography", since its aim is to "isolate objects or events from time and space" and calculate the "specific activity of quantified functions" (36).

As a result of Ballard's treatment, the boundaries between the organic and the inorganic, body and machine, begin to disappear. Ballard delights in crushing breasts against instrument panels and mixing bodily fluids with those of the automobile. Again, the role of catastrophe (in this case, the autoggedon) is to unsettle the fixity of the boundaries between the human body and the technological environment. This time, however, it is no longer a cosmic entropy which dissolves the body into its surroundings, but a hungry polymorphous perversity which transforms reality into a state of pure experimentation. This uncertainty, the seductive appeal of this destruction, is the chief mark, and also the chief danger, of our age.

## Four

In the two works that complete this period, *Concrete Island* (1974) and *High-rise* (1975), Ballard adopts a more fabulist tone. In *Concrete Island*, an architect named Robert Maitland plunges his Jaguar into an abandoned traffic island at the intersection of three gigantic motorways. Busy with their everyday lives, the hundreds of drivers that rush past fail to notice him, and Maitland soon realizes he is hopelessly stranded in this small universe, sealed off by high concrete embankments and a wire-mesh fence. After a series of tragicomic attempts to alert the attention of the rushing cars and climb one of the embankments, Maitland's efforts turn to his own survival.

Amidst pain, hunger and the unfamiliar surroundings, Maitland's identity begins a process of

decay, and he finds himself reminiscing about his childhood and the divorce of his parents.

Most of the happier moments of his life had been spent alone ... For years now he had remythologized his own childhood. The image in his mind of a small boy playing endlessly by himself in along suburban garden surrounded by a high fence seemed strangely comforting (22)

Gradually, the island acquires psychological significance and becomes “an exact model of his head” (51). As he walks through it, the place suddenly seems enormous, resembling, in fact, a small abandoned city. There is a churchyard, a group of air-shelters, the imprint of streets and alleyways overlaid by wrecked cars and urban refuse.

The injuries sustained in the crash quickly reduce Maitland to a state of childlike helplessness. Identifying the island with his own body, Maitland imagines leaving pieces of himself strewn across the place, “his right leg at the point of his crash, his bruised hands impaled upon the steel fence” (51). From a psychiatric perspective, this process of dismemberment may suggest the bodily experience of schizophrenia (and according to some, early childhood), where individual limbs seemingly fall away or are perceived as separate agents.

Shortly after, Maitland stumbles across evidence of other human activity in the island. Delirious and starved, he discovers a beggar's hovel, where he is beaten into unconsciousness by a "panting, bull-like" figure.

Enter the two other inhabitants of the island: a red-haired woman named Jane Sheppard and Proctor, a dwarf and intellectually retarded ex-circus acrobat. Aware of the fact that his life is in these people's hands (Jane brings food from her regular incursions into the outside and Proctor carries him piggyback across the island) Maitland struggles to gain control over the situation, bargaining with Proctor and establishing a rudimentary sadomasochistic relationship with Jane. Against the alien setting of the island--a forlorn and dystopic realm of rusted automobile parts, crumbling ruins and overgrown vegetation--all relationships are indeterminate and open to reinvention. In Maitland's mind Jane assumes a succession of roles (mother, child, wife, prostitute) while Proctor projects a dumb yet strangely touching figure. After nursing Maitland back to health, Jane turns unpredictable and suspicious of him. Later, they share a brief lapse of domestic bliss in her abandoned basement room, a moment Maitland appreciates for its emotional neutrality. The relationship between them is built on mutual dependence, distrust and cruelty, although at the end it is clear that they have developed a certain affection for each other. "You were on an island long before you crashed here," Jane tells him.

Far from wanting this girl to help him escape from the island, he was using her for motives he had never before accepted, his need to be freed from his past, from his childhood, his wife and friends, with all their affections and demands, and to rove for ever within the empty city of his own mind. (101)

At the end of the novel, after Proctor dies in an unfortunate acrobatic accident, Jane decides to leave the island. Although she insists in taking him with her, Maitland begs to be left behind, saying that he will get out later and in his "own way". Maitland's reasoning is delusional, and the reader realizes that he will die if he is left alone. "Already he felt no real need to leave the island, and this alone confirmed that he had established his dominion over it" (126). In an ironic twist, he watches Jane exit effortlessly, "picking her way along a succession of familiar foot-holds" (125). Escape has been that easy, all along.

Through a futile death, yet a death that is strangely meaningful, Maitland will both unite with, and escape *from*, the island and himself. In the spirit of Ballard's earlier works, the plot is resolved the moment subject and landscape cease to exist as separate entities.

The quartet of novels is completed with *High-rise* (1975), a darkly humorous account of a state-of-the-art apartment block which reaches psychological critical mass and descends into violence and primitivism. This work releases a long-suspected vein of humour in his work. It is an entertaining, if disturbing, read, mainly for Ballard's small and extraordinarily accurate observations about the everyday politics city living. The main premise, though, (that the urban environment releases primitive and tribal psychological mechanisms) remains unconvincing and undeveloped. Despite their dissimilarities, there is a common project at the heart of these works. Firstly, there is the question of their vexing moral ambiguity. Ballard's controlled and hypercool mode of exposition suggests a moral neutrality. He seemingly refuses to either endorse or condemn what he is describing, and has been repeatedly criticized for his apparent enjoyment of the very spectacle he should supposedly be condemning. Nevertheless, it is clear that his work is born out of a moral impulse to make sense of the world and to reveal destructive tendencies of contemporary life. It would be hard to imagine him (or anyone in their right mind) approving of the behavior of the characters in *Crash*, for example, or sanctioning the urban hells of *High-rise* or *Concrete Island* as a desirable way to live. Also, the fact that these four novels are situated in an ahistorical and transcultural vacuum (most of the action takes place in London, but the descriptions are distillations of a general urban setting) reinforces the impression that Ballard is aiming to portray a universal

condition.

Ballard's fiction performs on various simultaneous but conflicting registers, and owes much of its impact to the strong tension generated between them. As David Pringle has said, his work is born out of doubt and fear rather than of any particular set of convictions. (1973:58). What's more it is offered as a kind of questioning. Ballard has an instinctive approach, the approach of an explorer, and often he seems as puzzled by what he is describing as the reader.

Lastly, Ballard's portrayal of technology is original in that the entropy, breakdown and chaos are not perceived necessarily as a failure or a deviation from its proper or ideal conditions. On the contrary, these perverse dimensions are essential constituents of the technological experience, and already somehow inherent in its very logic.

## Five

After the urban tetralogy, Ballard undertakes yet another thematic leap. Spawning eight novels, this last period is somewhat more diverse than the two earlier ones, including two autobiographical novels (*Empire of the Sun* in 1984 and *The Kindness of Women*, 1991) and what can be considered two minor pieces: *Hello America!* (1981) and *Running Wild* (1988). Due to our space restrictions, we will only focus on the most important of these four mentioned works: *Empire of the Sun*.

Generally, (with the exception of *Hello America!*) this period is marked by Ballard's distancing from science fiction. The other four novels written during this period (*The Unlimited Dream Company*, *The Day of Creation*, *Rushing to Paradise* and *Cocaine Nights*) are centred around a curious shift on the main Ballardian motif. So far, as we have seen, Ballard's protagonists have been mainly passive players in the vast upheavals taking place around them, invariably seeking to submit and be absorbed into the perverted logic of the landscape. In startling contrast, the heroes in these following works are the chief agents in the process of transformation. They are demiurges, demigods embodying immense powers of creation and destruction, altering the environment to suit the image of his (and in one case, her) desires.

*The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979) finds Ballard at his most wildly surreal. Indeed, by naming the main character "Blake" (after the famous nineteenth century poet and mystic), a number of visionary and allegorical connotations are ostensibly invoked. Ballard's Blake is a drifter and social failure plagued with a host of weird preoccupations, mostly to do with flying. He describes himself as aggressive, lazy and highly imaginative. "I thought of myself as a new species of winged

man. ... Baudelaire's albatross, hooted at by the crowd, but unable to walk only because of his heavy wings" (11).

Blake's attempts to follow a normal life invariably end up in defeat. He is thrown out of school after being found copulating with a patch of earth while trying to recreate an ancient fertility rite. Later, he is expelled from medical school at London University for attempting to revive a corpse.

After working in an aviary at London Zoo, Blake befriends a retired air hostess and begins work as an airport cleaner. Dreams of flight begin to haunt him insistently. In his fantasies, his father is an anonymous American astronaut who has conceived him with "semen ripened in outer space" (12). As he wanders the airport during his shifts, Blake describes the parked aircraft in the hangars as "potent symbols that turned all sorts of keys in my mind" (14).

One day, discontented with the world and "accepting the logic of my dreams", Blake decides to take off. After a psychotic episode where he unintentionally nearly chokes his fiancée to death, Blake escapes into the airport, where he steals a light Cessna and sets off into the air.

But a few miles off the city, as the engine begins to overheat and the plane catches fire, Blake realizes he has no choice but to attempt an emergency landing. He decides to put the aircraft down in a nearby river. As he descends, he catches a glimpse of tennis courts, a park "ringed by dead elms" and a mansion atop a sloping lawn. A few moments after the violent impact, as he lies in the cabin with the water rapidly seeping in, Blake has a vision: "I seemed to be looking at an enormous illuminated painting, lit both by the unsettled water and by a deep light transmitted through the body of the canvas" (17).

A group of people are watching him from the slope of grass surrounding the large riverside mansion he has first spotted from the air. As he describes the frozen and vivid image, Blake introduces the group of characters about to enter the narrative: Father Wingate, the threatening figure of Stark, Dr Miriam St Cloud and her mother; and three disabled children: Rachel, Jamie and David.

Although Blake is not aware of having lost consciousness, the witnesses claim he has been under the water for more than eleven minutes, more than what any human can endure. Yet the residents seem to welcome his sudden arrival and unlikely resurrection as a kind of portentous sign. They take him into their midst, sheltering him from the inquiring authorities and accepting the function he has come to perform in their lives.

Blake's return from the dead has imbued him with extraordinary powers which become more fantastic and far-fetched as the narrative progresses. Blake becomes a messianic figure, a Pied Piper coming to save the residents of Shepperton "from their lives in this small town and the limits imposed on their spirits by their minds and bodies" (93). Blake's arrival brings about a change of weather and collective dreams of flight. Blake realizes that, indeed, he is dead, and that his body is still trapped in the underwater wreckage of the plane. What's worse, he cannot escape Shepperton, and when he tries to reach the outskirts of the town, the motorway recedes further away from him, until he realizes he is running on the same spot, as in a dream.

Through his mind and body the whole of the town is transmogrified into a wondrous and terrifying dream of itself.

The once immaculate lawns and flower-beds were overrun with tropical plants. Palmettos, banana trees and glossy rubber plants jostled for a place in the vivid light. Lilies and bizarre fungi covered the grass like marine plants on a drained sea-bed. The air was filled with the racket of unfamiliar birds. Screamers trumpeted from the roof of the supermarket. White storks rattled their bills as they surveyed the town from the proscenium of the filling-station. Around a swimming-pool strutted three emperor penguins, chased by a squealing child. (108).

He wanders naked through the streets, a seemingly endless flow of semen spurting from his penis and sprouting everywhere into exotic vegetation.

I let the pearly string fall across the water. Jewelled medallions glimmered on the surface, an electric chemistry rippled to and fro like an invisible swimmer. Within seconds the patterns had coalesced into a series of green saucers each with a white flower at its centre. (126).

The townspeople are transformed into fish and sea-turtles and released into the stream of the river, then returned to their original human form. Finally, in the hallucinatory climax of the book, Blake gathers the inhabitants of the town and together they fly away into the sun.

As opposed to the foreboding, often claustrophobic tone of *The Drought* or *Concrete Island*, the mood of *The Unlimited Dream Company* is celebratory and exuberant. Blake's story also invokes a number of religious themes: communion, transubstantiation, healing, transcendence. Like Jesus, Blake has come to Shepperton to turn father against son, brother against brother, "to cross the lines that divided children and parents, species and biological kingdoms, the animate and the inanimate" (166). But an air of irony surrounds these references, as if Blake's grand speculative flights are more the result of visionary delirium than of any divine intervention. In the end, Ballard's favourite theme (psychic disintegration and union with the inanimate) asserts itself above everything

else.

In fact, this is Ballard's most evocative and thorough rendition of this theme (with the possible exception of his 1964 short story "The Drowned Giant").

The river busied itself ..., swarming with thousands of particles, hydra and amoeboid forms, the debris of insects and small plants, minute algae and ciliated creatures. ... The excited congregation of a miniature cathedral, they crowded the vivid water. I wanted to shrink myself to a mote of dust, plunge into this pool I held in my own cyclopean hands, soar down these runs of light to the places where life itself was born from this colloquy of dust. (53).

Through Blake's agency, the animal and vegetable worlds become emblems of a desirable reality beyond reason and the pitfalls of human consciousness. But the sacredness and beauty of these worlds do not point to an otherworldly source, nor do they herald a possibility of life beyond the organic. When Blake makes love to the wild animals of the forest and is sexually aroused by everything and everyone in sight, we are in the presence of a fundamentally sensual and voluptuous universe, a world of immanence rather than transcendence, enchanted not by God or gods but by the forces of the imagination and desire. Blake comes to represent a polymorphous force breaking across the many strata of identity, dissolving not only social and familial roles but the very boundaries of bodies, as exemplified in his "marriage" to Miriam St Cloud:

We hovered above the water, Miriam's wedding dress like the spirit of this drowned aircraft. .... Her cool skin passed through my own, the loom of her nerves ran its quicksilver through mine, the tides of her arteries poured their warmth and affection into the remotest corners of my body. As we embraced she merged with me, her rib-cage dissolved into my own, her arms merged with my arms, her legs and abdomen disappeared into mine. Her vagina clasped my penis. I felt her tongue within my mouth, her teeth bite against my teeth. Our eyes merged, their retinas fused. Our vision blurred, multiple images seen by the faceted eyes of this chimerized being. (152).

The closing paragraph is, as usual, revelatory of the ultimate direction of Ballard's universe:

This time we would merge with the trees and flowers, with the dust and stones, with the whole of the mineral world, happily dissolving ourselves in the sea of light that formed the universe ... Already I saw us rising into the air, fathers, mothers and their children, our ascending flights swaying across the surface of the earth, benign tornadoes hanging from the canopy of the universe, celebrating the last marriage of the animate and the inanimate, of the living and the dead. (220).

Appearing insistently throughout many of his short stories and novels, the image of flight often acts as another metaphor for this process of dissolution. This theme surfaces in a variety of

guises, mostly as thwarted or failed flight: destroyed aircraft, dead birds, stranded space capsules, exotic flying machines, etc. The figure of the fallen pilot or astronaut is also recurrent in his work, his finest treatment of it being the short story “The Man Who Walked on the Moon”, (included in *War Fever*, 1990). A mischievous delight in portraying the failures of technology can only partially account for the appeal of these themes. Ultimately, Ballard’s symbols are like images in a dream, multilayered and dense with meaning, yet existing independently of potential readings. They have a power of their own, irreducible to any kind of interpretation or function, any stable and univocal object. Ballard uses his recurrent motifs and symbols in a manner more suitable to the visual arts and dreams. As Pringle says, “there may be deep meanings in Ballard’s fiction, but there are no Hidden Messages.”(1979:17).

Dreams of flight are also at the centre of Ballard’s most successful novel. With *Empire of the Sun* (1984), Ballard would achieve international recognition, winning the Guardian Fiction Prize and earning a nomination for the James Tait Black Award and the prestigious Booker Prize. For a number of reasons, this is Ballard’s most accessible novel to date. Indeed, before its publication, to mention Steven Spielberg (who turned it into a movie in 1987) and J. G. Ballard in the same breath would have been like that proverbial meeting of the sewing-machine and the umbrella on the operating table.

The story is a fictionalized account of Ballard’s own experiences in World War II. Given the fact that Ballard, both in interviews and in his fiction, had repeatedly referred to the great significance of these formative years, it was clear that this would be a different and more intimate kind of work. *Empire of the Sun* nonetheless remains a quintessentially Ballardian novel, brimming with the usual imagery and obsessions. It is tempting to attribute to these wartime experiences the role of ultimate biographical sources of all of Ballard’s work. But we must remember that this is Ballard, the adult writer, revisiting his past and reshaping his memories into fictional form.

The year is 1942, and the novel opens on the eve of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. Eleven-year-old Jim (Ballard’s own alter-ego) is the son of an English family living in Shanghai’s International Settlement, a neutral European zone established after the Japanese invasion of China in 1937. Through the eyes of Jim, Ballard weaves a rarefied and spellbinding world, a landscape of beggars and busy streets, of public executions and abandoned battlefields littered with corpses. In the midst of a bustling city where poverty and death are a common sight, the Settlement is an isolated island of luxurious mansions, American cars and endless cocktail parties. For the residents,

the war in Europe is a distant and imaginary world, mediated through newsreels and the glamorous chronicles of English and American magazines.

Jim had no doubt which was real. The real war was everything he had seen for himself since the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, the old battlegrounds at Hungjao and Lunghua where the bones of the unburied dead rose to the surface of the paddy fields each spring. Real war was the thousands of Chinese refugees dying of cholera in the scaled stockades at Pootung ... In a real war no one knew which side he was on, and there were no flags or commentators or winners. In a real war there were no enemies.(5-6).

When the hostilities break, with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and on the Allies' ships on the Yangtse, Jim and his family are caught in the violence and captured as his father tries to assist some injured British sailors. After a few days in hospital, his father is sent to a military prison camp and Jim is told to return to the family house, where he is to be reunited with his mother. But when Jim arrives there, the place is deserted and shrouded in darkness. His mother's room is strewn with signs of physical struggle. Jim stays in the house for a few days, waiting for the return of his parents. He is fearful, yet vaguely exhilarated by the lawlessness of war. He rides his bicycle through the house and lives on cocktail party food. When it is obvious that his parents will not return, Jim leaves the house and wanders through the suburbs. The sheltered world he has known all his life has turned into a disaster area ruled by a merciless code of survival. "It was not that war changed everything--in fact, Jim thrived on change--but that it left things the same in odd and unsettling ways" (46). The abandoned mansions, with their overgrown gardens and drained swimming pools, have an unequivocal post-apocalyptic aura that is instantly identifiable as Ballard's.

After a series of adventures, Jim is apprehended by the Japanese and driven to Lunghua, a prison camp where Ballard would stay until the end of the war. The camp becomes a strange microcosmos in the midst of the stranger reality of war. Potato-skins, for example, become a kind of monetary currency among the prisoners, while the Japanese pilots are transformed by Jim's imagination into fantastic, near-mythical figures.

One day Jim would become a wounded pilot, fallen among the burial mounds and armoured pagodas. Pieces of his own flying suit and parachute, even perhaps of his own body, would spread across the paddy fields, feeding the prisoners behind their wire and the Chinese starving at the gate (156).

Nonetheless, and although it is removed from the main focus of the military action, the Lunghua camp is symbolically at the very centre of the war. It is a place where the most

fundamental truths about the war become manifest. Later, after leaving the camp, Jim finds a handful of *Reader's Digest* magazines and is appalled by the false heroism in which accounts of the war are dressed up. Significantly, upon his return home towards the end of the novel, Jim describes the reality outside the camp as an illusion. William Boyd sums up Ballard's perspective on the war:

[*Empire of the Sun*] is a war novel that utterly eschews the consoling positive treatment of war. ... [I]n war, heroism, self-sacrifice and endurance are not key principles: rather, the codes by which people survive are pragmatism, mendacity and ruthless self-interest. ... It is Ballard's greatest achievement ... to have convinced us beyond doubt that Jim's meaningless, squalid, selfish war in the estuary of the Yangtze is not peculiar or unusual, but instead universal and eternal. (1984:13).

Unlike Ballard's other novels, *Empire of the Sun* has a markedly humanistic focus and is partly concerned with the study of human nature and relationships. The interns of the camp desperately collect all kinds of objects in the hope of salvaging their own identities from the threat of the effacing environment. (Even the main pathways through the camp have been named after London streets). Echoes of this theme (the landscape erasing identity) can be found in *The Drought* and other works, although here it is given a more exhaustive and plausible treatment. The historical basis of the narrative also enriches the novel with various subtexts, mainly commentaries on colonialism (both British and Japanese) and, as Boyd has noted, on the nature of war.

The fact that Ballard uses a child's perspective to tell the story is one of the keys to the novel's success. Since Jim is a child, the reader is inclined to accept the narrator's unusual perspective. So far, one of the difficulties a reader might encounter in Ballard's worlds is that they are self-contained, and that the logic grounding the narrator's interpretation of events is usually skewed and delusional. The reader is also asked not only to accept the strangeness of these worlds but also the shifting and uncertain balance between their constitutive elements: narrator and scenery, mind and world, etc. Ballard's characters are the ultimate unreliable narrators. Their voices merge inseparably with that of the author, who never stands outside or elevates himself above their delusions.

Acting both as a autobiographical sketch and as the archetypal Ballardian character, Jim is a plausible young Ballard, a solitary and self-absorbed youth filled with odd fascinations. At one stage, Jim considers becoming a communist, because the "communists had an intriguing ability to unsettle everyone, a talent Jim greatly respected." (15). Although in real life Ballard was sent to the camp with his parents, here he has chosen to edit them out, claiming it was more "psychologically accurate". The fact that we never learn Jim's surname also gives him a quality of abstract

anonymity, like the narrator of a dream. Although he is nominally English, Jim has never been to England. This expatriation (not only from England but, more significantly, from the war) is both real and symbolic. Like all Ballard's heroes, Jim is an expatriate also in a psychological sense, since he is detached and contemptuous of the sentimental ways in which the British prisoners hold on to their past. It is not until near the end of the narrative, as he throws his suitcase into a river, that Jim commits his first "sentimental but pointless gesture, his first adult act"(201-2).

Surprisingly, the constraints of writing in a realistic, historical-based mode of storytelling work to Ballard's advantage, and the dark surrealism, the dream metaphors and odd juxtapositions of imagery emerge strikingly from the austere realistic surroundings. For example, when an American plane drops provisions from the sky, the parachutes are described as "vivid parasols". Rotting coffins project "from the loose earth like a chest of drawers". And in another instance, Jim phantasizes about eating a ship:

He imagined himself nibbling at the masts, sucking the cream from the Edwardian funnels, sinking his teeth into the marzipan bows and devouring the entire forward section of the hull. After that he would gobble down the Palace Hotel, the Shell Building, the whole of Shanghai. (63).

Curiously, surrealism here is used for "realistic" purposes, since Ballard is using these fantastic perspectives to convey more accurately the brutal unfamiliarity of the experience.

The surreal climax of the novel takes place in a bombed football stadium filled with dying prisoners, American cars, refrigerators and furniture. In this, the chapter that gives the novel its name, the boundaries of Jim's mind begin to crumble due to exhaustion and malnutrition, and events take a solipsistic turn. It is suggested that the whole war is nothing but a dream of Jim's: "... in Lunghua, he had done all he could to stay alive, but now a part of him wanted to die. It was the one way in which he could end the war. (207).

Then, a sudden flash of light illuminates the stadium, what is supposedly the nuclear blast in Nagasaki.

They were sitting on the floor of a furnace heated by a second sun. Jim stared at his white hands and knees, and at the pinched face of the Japanese soldier, who seemed disconcerted by the light. Both of them were waiting for the rumble of sound that followed the bomb-flashes, but an unbroken silence lay over the stadium ... Jim smiled at the Japanese, wishing that he could tell him that the light was a premonition of his death, the sight of his small soul joining the larger soul of the dying world." (208).

It is this dying world, this world presided by this nuclear sun, which is the real Empire of the

Sun. It is the metaphoric birth of the post-war world, the omnipresent subject of Ballard's fiction.

## Six

It is probably not until *Cocaine Nights* (1996) that Ballard comes to realize most satisfactorily his project of a "science fiction of the present." Oddly enough, it comes in the shape of a crime novel, a genre that may, at first, seem an unlikely choice for J. G. Ballard, despite the fact that he had tried it successfully before, in the short novel *Running Wild*.

*Cocaine Nights* begins with the arrival of travel writer Charles Prentice at the fashionable Spanish coastal resort of Estrella del Mar. This is a residential retreat that has turned its back on mass tourism to become a leisure camp for wealthy European professionals on holidays or retirement. But Charles is not here for any of that. His brother Frank, the owner of a nautical club, has been charged with the arson-murder of five people during a party in the house of a retired Hollywood magnate. Although friends and acquaintances are convinced of Frank Prentice's innocence, all the evidence seems to point towards him. What's more, Frank has even confessed to the murders. Charles knows his brother is not a killer. Then why did he take the blame? Is he trying to protect someone?

As Charles sets out to investigate, Ballard's preoccupations gradually begin to emerge once again. We realize, with Charles, that the real cause of the murders lies beyond personal motives, and that it is somehow to be found in the place itself. The Spanish resort is a decadent world of luxurious villas and enclosed neighbourhoods, where a nascent leisure class has turned its back on the world and created a new kind of social order. However, Charles realizes that Estrella del Mar is different from all the other places along the coast. Writes Charles of a neighbouring resort:

I noticed the features of this silent world: the memory-erasing white architecture, the enforced leisure that fossilized the nervous system;... the apparent absence of any social structure; the timelessness of a world beyond boredom, with no past, no future and a diminishing present. Perhaps this was what a leisure-dominated future would resemble? Nothing could ever happen in this affectless realm, where entropic drift calmed the surfaces of a thousand swimming pools (34-5).

As Charles eventually discovers, beneath the tranquil appearance of Estrella del Mar there is a thriving underworld of drugs, petty crime and illicit sex. The place is a kind of social experiment engineered almost single-handedly by the mysterious and messianic figure of Bobby Crawford, a tennis coach who is at the centre of the community's social life. Charles knows that Crawford holds

the key to not only what has happened the night of the murders but also to the place itself. As the novel progresses, Charles becomes less interested in solving the murders and more involved with Crawford, in what seems a latent homosexual relationship. Charles begins to manage a club for Crawford. Eventually, Crawford expounds the sociological theory at the core of the novel.

Crawford has masterminded the renaissance of this coastal town by following an old dictum: Crime, violence and illicitness keep the creative juices of society flowing. Civilization would not survive without a controlled economy of ritualised and voyeuristic transgression. For those who can afford it, the main tendency of the future will be towards leisured communities, enclaves, self-contained worlds that offer comfort, safety and isolation. Like Dr Vaughan in *Crash*, Crawford is a forlorn and drastic reaction to a world retreating further and further into an amniotic cave lit by the twilight murmurs of cable TV and Prozac. And as such, Ballard portrays him as a paradoxical result of the very society he seeks to unbalance.

But, unusual for a Ballard novel, there are other voices puncturing through the narrator's delusional cocoon. Dr. Paula Hamilton, for example. And psychiatrist Irwin Sanger. These characters are the most well-rounded and plausible Ballard has ever written, and their conflicting viewpoints provide the novel with various narrative layers that decenter, for once, the cozy "knot of the brain" the narrator lives in. One of the narrative threads involves the narrator's family background, a quasi-Freudian drama that provides the motive for Frank's (and later, Charles') admission of guilt. In short, at this stage of his career, Ballard incorporates conventional novelistic elements that some of his previous works eschewed, not for lack of storytelling expertise but because they were not central or necessary to his vision. And, most remarkably, Ballard does so without sacrificing the "Ballardness" or the intellectual depth of his work.

Again, Ballard shows that the secret to our innermost dreams and desires lies not in a closeted and interior unconscious but in the very visible and stylized surface of modern life. His remote and elegant prose dwells with uneasy insistence on details of residences, room interiors, facial expressions. The collage of technological and architectural details ends up being inseparable from the psychological make-up of the characters themselves (Crawford and his demonic tennis machine, for example) and from the overall portrait of the modern age. Certain motifs are played obsessively--swimming pools for example. There are so many swimming pools in this novel (and indeed in a lot of Ballard's work) that the reader is left wondering about their significance.

## Conclusion

Ballard's worlds are disenchanted and largely informed by a secular world-view in which the universe is devoid of transcendence and human life is one among many other natural processes. Ballard is writing science-fiction inasmuch as he is preoccupied with the *Weltanschauung* of Reason. Science-fiction is to the world-view of science what myth was to the ancient one: a kind of ode, a poetization of possibilities. Ballard, for example, can take a scientific notion like "entropy" and explore its human implications and its poetic potential. Accordingly, his burnt and wasted worlds, drained from all historical or cultural hinges, are a kind of apocalyptic theatre where the drama of Reason against its Other is played out.

At the formal level of his writing, Ballard's prose has often been described as detached and clinical. It is possible that Ballard's training in medicine and his experience as an editor of technical literature has attuned his sensibility to the aesthetic dimensions of the languages of science. In various interviews, Ballard has professed an interest in what he calls "hidden literatures", a term by which he understands technical writings which are normally considered lacking in "literary" value. An example of these is *Crash Injuries*, a gruesome medical textbook that provided inspiration for *Crash*.

At the other end of the spectrum, Ballard is concerned with a different dimension, with dreams, sexual desire and the irrational areas of the human psyche. Accordingly, his writing contains large amounts of metaphor, lyricism, poetical imagery and symbolism. These elements nonchalantly coexist (often in the same sentence) with the vivisectionist empiricism outlined above. Ballard's greatest achievement as a stylist is to have rendered subjective obsessions in a language that suggests objective reasoning. He has shown us that a rational society is impossible, that the neat streamlined dreams of technocracy and liberal utopias will always be undermined by the uncontrollable and often self-destructive nature of human desire.

Critics have noted certain difficulties with Ballard. Some say that he is a writer whose skills can be admired, but it is hard to empathize with his vision. Others complain that the logic at work in his fiction is obscure and pointlessly difficult. Feminist commentaries point out that his female characters are unidimensional or plainly neurotic. Martin Amis has called him an "unselfconscious stylist" who indulges in a certain "creative narcissism". However, he has conceded that no one else could conceivably write what he writes.

In what respects science fiction, Ballard has exploded the definition of the genre and

struggled to keep it relevant to contemporary concerns. He has loosened up the scientific straitjacket of science-fiction, suggesting that the genre is also well-equipped to deal with the universe of dreams, fantasy and desire. This can be appreciated in the way he explores unusual and original aspects of sacred science-fiction themes (space flight, for example). But artistic success has come at a price. Besides a group of enthusiasts who regard him as a hero, for the bulk of the SF readership Ballard is an outsider, a abstruse writer who maintains an ironic distance from the codes of the genre. Similarly, sections of the mainstream readership have qualms about the overtly fantastic and science-fictional elements in his work, which often restrict its accessibility. Regardless of this, there are only a few writers who can be considered as visionary (or even as interesting) working in the SF mode or in any kind of mode. For Ballard, science-fiction has never really recuperated from the crisis the New Wave sought to remedy. Most notably, other mainstream authors are dealing with questions concerning technology and modernity more successfully than their science fiction counterparts. A recent example that comes to mind is Don DeLillo's magnificent novel *Underworld* (1997), a book which at times seems to approximate Ballard's dream of a science fiction of the present.

As if aware of this failure, Ballard has distanced himself from the genre (at least in his novels), choosing to rework his perennial preoccupations into other narrative modes.

J.G. Ballard will be remembered as a unique writer, a brave, if puzzling, literary radical spinning haunting fables about a future that has already become our present. In its rich suggestiveness, intellectual depth and peculiar intensity of vision, Ballard's work remains unrivalled.

## Primary bibliography

### *Works by J. G. Ballard*

#### Novels:

*The Wind From Nowhere* (1962)  
*The Drowned World* (1962)  
*The Drought* (1964)  
*The Crystal World* (1966)  
*The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970)  
(There is also an annotated edition of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, 1992)  
*Crash* (1973)  
*Concrete Island* (1974)  
*High-rise* (1975)  
*The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979)  
*Hello America!* (1981)  
*Empire of the Sun* (1984)  
*Running Wild* (1988)  
*The Day of Creation* (1987)  
*The Kindness of Women* (1991)  
*Rushing To Paradise* (1994)  
*Cocaine Nights* (1996)

#### Primary Short Story Collections:

*The Voices of Time* (1962)  
*Bilennium* (1962)  
*The Terminal Beach* (1964)  
*The Day of Forever* (1967)  
*The Disaster Area* (1967)  
*Vermillion Sands* (1971)  
*Low Flying Aircraft* (1976)  
*The Venus Hunters* (1980)  
*Myths of the Near Future* (1982)  
*War Fever* (1990)

#### Anthologies and other collections combining or reissuing stories from primary collections:

*The Four-Dimensional Nightmare* (1963)  
*Passport to Eternity* (1963)  
*The Impossible Man* (1966)  
*The Overloaded Man* (1967)  
*Chronopolis* (1971)

*The Best Science Fiction of J.G. Ballard* (1977)

## Non-fiction

*A User's Guide to the Millennium* (1996)

## **bibliography**

### Works cited:

- Ballard, J.G. (1963). "Time, Memory and Inner Space". Reprinted in Vale, V. & Juno, Andrea. (1984). *RE/SEARCH: J.G. Ballard*. Nos. 8/9. V/Search Publications.
- Ballard, J.G. (1971). "Fictions of Every Kind". Reprinted in Vale, V. & Juno, Andrea. (1984). *RE/SEARCH: J.G. Ballard*. Nos. 8/9. V/Search Publications.
- Boyd, William. (1984). "A Unique Vision," in *Books and Bookmen*, No. 348, September, pp. 12-13.
- Charyn, Jerome. (1978). Review of "The Best Short Stories of J. G. Ballard," in *The New York Times Book Review*, November 26, pp. 42-46.
- De Chardin, P. Teilhard (1965). *The Phenomenon of Man*. Collins/Fontana Books, London.
- Perry, Nick & Wilkie, Roy. (1970). "Homo Hydrogenesis: Notes on the Work of J. G. Ballard," in *Riverside Quarterly*, Vol 4, No 2, January, pp. 98-105.
- Platzner, Robert. (1983). "The Metamorphic Vision of J. G. Ballard," in *Essays in Literature*, Vol X, No. 2, Fall, pp. 209-17.
- Pringle, David. (1973). "The Fourfold Symbolism of J. G. Ballard," in *Foundation*, No 4, July, pp. 48-60. Also reprinted in *RE/SEARCH Ballard Special*.
- Pringle, David. (1979). *Earth Is the Alien Planet: J. G. Ballard's Four Dimensional Nightmare*. The Borgo Press.
- Wood, Michael. (1979). "This is not The End of The world," in *The New York Review of Books*, January 25, pp. 28-31.

Anyone interested in reading further about J. G. Ballard is recommended to start with the RE/SEARCH issue, containing comprehensive interviews, essays and various items of fiction. Also, the *J. G. Ballard's News*, edited by David Pringle is obtainable on the Internet: It contains detailed up-to-date information, reviews, etc.

Blurbs for the back:

-  
**James Graham Ballard** was born in Shanghai in 1930. During World War II, he was imprisoned with his family in a Japanese camp for three years, an experience that constitutes the basis of one of his most famous novels, *The Empire of the Sun* (1984). After returning to England in 1946, Ballard studied medicine for two years, worked as a copywriter and later joined the RAF. His first novel *The Drowned World* was published in 1961. Although he writes science fiction, Ballard's eclectic style and personal imagery has pushed the boundaries of the genre. Ballard belongs to a small group of practitioners (names like Olaf Stapledon and Philip K. Dick also come to mind) who have appropriated the codes and props of science fiction for their own purposes, always perceptive to the genre's unique capacity to deal with ideas in a grand scale. "However crudely or naively," Ballard maintains, "science fiction at least attempts to place a philosophical and metaphysical frame around the most important events within our lives and our consciousness."

**Andrés Vaccari** was born in Argentina in 1971 and migrated to Sydney, Australia in 1990. He is married, has two children, an Honors degree in Cultural Studies and an uninteresting job. His first novel, *Robotomy*, a text-and-image existential cyberpunk thriller, has been published through Saturn Press (1997).