



J. G.
BALLARD

Edited by **Jeannette Baxter**

PREFACE BY **TOBY LITT**

CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES



J. G. Ballard

Contemporary Critical Perspectives

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Jeannette Baxter



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Foreword

Toby Litt

Recently, I caught the wrong bus (a number 21) from Norwich City Centre to the University of East Anglia – where the first International conference on the work of J. G. Ballard, ‘From Shanghai to Shepperton’ took place, in May 2007. Instead of heading to the campus directly, up the beautifully named Unthank Road, the bus went via Bowthorpe – it also went via Ballard.

Our slow, winding, doubling-back route took in Norwich Research Park and the recently built Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital. A bright low sun reflected off the artificial lakes, at least I assumed they were artificial. Most of the houses we saw, as we crawled along, were on the peripheries of housing estates – facades of pale pink brick and thickly double-glazed windows, lawns which give nothing away and decals on the bedroom windows of suicidal teens. A pregnant woman with a bindi got on; a research scientist I had taken for a student got off. Eventually, the bus arrived at the UEA campus, famous for its unapologetically concrete architecture, especially the stack-box ziggurats in which first-year students are accommodated. We had arrived, also, at Ballard.

Sometimes, when I think about J. G. Ballard the man, I find it hard not to suspect that – somehow or other – he gained access to Google Earth over 40 years ago. His fictional project seems to have been based on a cold assessment of what (apart from woods and fields) takes up most of our country’s surface area, what is most obtrusive when viewed from space. Hence, carparks and motorways, airports and their runways, high rise buildings, suburban housing estates, psychiatric hospitals, shopping centres. No other novelist has paid such close attention to the quiddity of where we now live and work – in all its recalcitrant mundanity. The rest of us, for the most part, pass through these spaces with the thought, ‘What could *possibly* happen in this emptiness?’ The Ballard bluff, or double bluff, has always been that he actually *likes* it here, not least because he sees it not as void but as unbounded plenitude. *Everything* can happen here. At the end of his introduction to *Vermilion Sands* (1971), he mischievously writes of his guess-at-the-future, ‘I wait optimistically for it to take concrete shape around me.’ This way, or so he insists, is his; the technological, the surface-loving, rather than all the possible others: atavistic, cthonic, nostalgic, theistic.

What we lack in the United Kingdom is any glamour of our present selves. (America, by contrast, suffers from the opposite problem: glamour-dazzle.) But, as an outsider-insider, or an insider-outsider, Ballard manages to see what we can't. He has no interest in our history or, even worse, our heritage. This, in itself, is remarkable.

One of the thought-experiments I play with any British writer is to reimagine them as coming from another country. For example, I refigure Graham Greene as a French writer. How much more seriously he would have been taken, as an existential thinker. Then I move to Muriel Spark and sense how the distance-travelled of translation from German to English would bring her metaphysics so much closer. Then I turn to Ballard. A French Ballard, I think, would be a normalized, de-radicalized Ballard. His characters behave, anyway, more like characters in French art movies than in other British novels contemporary to his own (let alone the ooh-er-missus intersex relations of British cinema 1950–1980). But how about a full-on German Ballard? – with autobahns for motorways, with the motorik regularity of his sentences, with Hitler as an unforgettable erotic backdrop. That has an eerie rightness about it.

As another thought-experiment, I find it suggestive, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's approach to Kafka, to speak not of Jim Ballard but of the Ballard Writing Machine (sweet echoes of the Burroughs Adding Machine).¹ This might take away the taint of Shepperton, but it might also take away the tang of Shepperton.

How does the Ballard Writing Machine work? It has a definite predilection for certain formalities. For example, the form of titles, both book and chapter, is very often Definite Article plus Adjective plus Noun (from *The Drowned World* (1962) to *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970)) although later this becomes Adjective plus Noun (from *Concrete Island* (1974) to *Super-Cannes* (2000)).

It favours a conservative structure. The novels come with numbered, titled chapters. Even the Machine's most extreme production, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, does not deviate from this template.

The contents page of a BWM novel, therefore, manages to suggest something both opaque and transparent. No plot developments are given away, but – if we have encountered the Machine's work before – we already know the parameters of the likely action.

There will be a building-up which is, at the same time, a breaking-down. People collectively will become involved in some regularized mania, within the elaboration of which the actions of the main characters will prove decisive but from which they themselves will remain essentially detached.

The BWM-men will have affairs with the BWM-women. These will start and end abruptly, without great difficulty or regret. Sex will occur but it will be less focused upon, in the writing, than those moments when the dreamworlds of the lovers coincide most closely. The Machine is more interested in the jerky choreography of meeting and parting

than the flowing entanglement of hearts. I don't believe any BWM novel features a couple who meet, marry and remain faithful unto death. The lovers are, in a sense, too easily distracted for that; not immoral, just unfocused. Often, it seems almost as if they never come to full consciousness, they are always half-dreaming one another.

But let's stop the Machine and return Ballard's humanity to him, if only for the sake of some slightly less inelegant sentences.

Despite Ballard's insistence upon the parapsychological (see V. Vale's *Quotes and Conversations*), it seems to me as though he has no interest in the Freudian subconscious as such. His interchangeable heroes – only a couple of short steps away from the active, square-jawed ciphers of 1950s sci-fi – do not have rich mental lives. But as soon as one takes the external world which they inhabit *as* their subconscious, as soon as one sees sublimation as being replaced by efflorescence, by architecture, then one begins to see Ballard aright. In this reading, there remains no barrier between external and internal worlds.

Ballard is a true Surrealist. But his distance from the originals of that movement is made clearer when you realize how useless a tool automatic writing would be to him. Either all his writing is automatic, or none. And, either way, it accesses the same well-springs.

While reading Ballard, I don't generally feel – as I do with other writers – that this or that passage has come from some deeper place within the psyche. Ballard's explorations are relentlessly horizontal – until, with the internal/external flip, one realizes that they have all along taken the horizontal for the vertical. (Here, he coincides with Warhol.) There follows a moment of vertigo: instead of driving, one has been flying; instead of exploring, one has been perpetually plunging. This simultaneous effacement and enactment of depth is one of Ballard's greatest achievements.

In fact, the post-Warholian displacement of depth, the removal of it as an aesthetic criterion, is one of the qualities most important in Ballard. As far as I'm aware, he did not spend a moment mourning it. Nor does he, like the 1980s Brat Pack writers, allow a satire of vacuity to be deduced by morally sophisticated readers. Patrick Bateman may be the genetic successor of Ballard's emptied heroes, but Ballard is never so obvious as to leave behind a trail of eviscerated bodies. He is, instead, strangely gentle with his characters, even when injuring them – almost, at times, courteous in his approach to their demise.

In Ballard's writing, there are things which are there, which fill page-space, but which function only to assert their own irrelevance. That the male and female characters are sexually attractive is, after you've read a book or two, taken as a *sine qua non*. This is the libidinal economy within which the Ballardian exchanges take place. It is a post-pill world. No female character can get pregnant, because that would impede the narrative flow; and if any woman does get pregnant, she must have an abortion immediately, silently. Children rarely feature as important

characters. What can happen sometimes, without ever mattering, is love. Though it is very likely to be over before it is described as such. All emotions go nowhere, unless they hasten destruction or self-destruction.

In a Ballard novel we expect certain events, and expect them not to bother us particularly; we are instead reading for the rhythm – it is in the wavelength or the pulse of each novel that its true meaning lies. Ballard's periodicity has always been spot on: he leaves out exactly the right things. Technology is central to his vision, but, at the same time, entirely irrelevant to it. The plots of his stories and novels almost never depend upon a recent invention (unless the automobile is recent). It is new conditions rather than new devices which he perceives; services rather than goods.

There is a particular Ballard-sentence. They lead up to and then away from the comma. Very often, the first half of the sentence gets the respectable, necessary job of narration out of the way. There follows a pause, after which the dreamworld of the novel floods through, most often in simile. Each book has its parallel world, from which its comparative imagery is drawn. But also, in some novels, there is a closed-circuit of reference, where a simile in one part of a book (*Crash* is perhaps the strongest example of this) refers or seems to refer to an object or incident at the other end of the book. On a level of similitude, it is emphasized that – from this particular world – there is no escape.

The works of few living writers could withstand the attentions of a two-day academic conference. That, at the end of 'From Shanghai to Shepperton', it still felt as if there was much more to be said, as if we had only started to establish a basic knowledge of the territory, was an indication of the enduring strangeness of Ballard's world.

Note

1. Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1986). *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, University of Minnesota Press.

General Editors' Preface

The readership for contemporary fiction has never been greater. The explosion of reading groups and literary blogs, of university courses and school curricula, and even the apparent rude health of the literary marketplace, indicate an ever-growing appetite for new work, for writing which responds to the complex, changing and challenging times in which we live. At the same time, readers seem ever more eager to engage in conversations about their reading, to devour the review pages, to pack the sessions at literary festivals and author events. Reading is an increasingly social activity, as we seek to share and refine our experiences of books, to clarify and extend our understanding.

It is this tremendous enthusiasm for contemporary fiction to which the *Contemporary Critical Perspectives* series responds. Our ambition is to offer readers of current fiction a comprehensive critical account of each author's work, presenting original, specially commissioned analyses of all aspects of their careers, from a variety of different angles and approaches, as well as directions towards further reading and research. Our brief to our contributors is to be scholarly, to draw on the latest thinking about narrative, or philosophy, or psychology, indeed whatever seemed to them most significant in drawing out the meanings and force of the texts in question, but also to focus closely on the words on the page, the stories and scenarios and forms which all of us meet first when we open a book. We insisted that these essays be accessible to that mythical beast, the Common Reader, who might just as readily be spotted at the Lowdham Book Festival as in a college seminar. In this way, we hope to have presented critical assessments of our writers in such a way as to contribute something to both of those environments and also to have done something to bring together the important qualities of each of them.

Jeannette Baxter,
Sebastian Groes and Sean Matthews

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Victor Sage's chapter, 'The Gothic, the Body, and the Failed Homeopathy Argument: Reading *Crash*' first appeared, in part, in, Graeme Harper and Xavier Mendelik (eds), *Unruly Pleasures: The Cult Film and Its Critics*. FAB Press: Surrey, 2000. We gratefully acknowledge the editors for allowing us to reprint material.

Contributors

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Jeannette Baxter is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge and specializes in modern and contemporary fiction. She has published journal articles and book chapters in the areas of literary modernism, post-modernism, Holocaust writing and contemporary British Fiction. She is the author of *J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship* (Ashgate 2008) and she has forthcoming publications on Ballard, the visual arts and popular culture. She is currently working on a book-length study of the cultural and intellectual legacies of Surrealism in British literature post 1930.

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Jake Huntley is an associate tutor at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, where he recently completed a Ph.D. on the representation of genre fiction. He has written articles on science fiction and horror film, principally from a Deleuzian perspective.

Toby Litt was born in 1968. He grew up in Ampthill, Bedfordshire. He is the author of *Adventures in Capitalism*, *Beatniks*, *Corpsing*, *deadkidsongs*, *Exhibitionism*, *Finding Myself*, *Ghost Story*, *Hospital* and he plays the

drums in a band called okay. He is a *Granta* Best of Young British Novelist. His website is at www.tobylitt.com.

Umberto Rossi is an independent scholar, translator, literary journalist and secondary school teacher. He completed a Ph.D. thesis on literature of the First World War at the University of Rome. He has published essays on science fiction, war literature, post-modernist fiction, and J. G. Ballard in Italian and English-language journals. He is currently writing a monograph for Bulzoni Press (Rome) entitled, *Fire Century: Introduction to War Literature*.

Victor Sage is a novelist (*Black Shawl* and *A Mirror For Larks*) and short-story writer, who has also written extensively on the Gothic tradition. His latest monograph on this subject is *Le Fanu's Gothic* (2003). He has edited Charles Maturin's *Melmoth The Wanderer* (2000) and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas* (2001) for Penguin Classics. He is currently working on a cultural history of European Gothic for Polity Press. Victor Sage is Emeritus Professor of English Literature in the School of Literature and Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, Norwich.

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Chronology or a Version of J. G. Ballard's Life

- 1930** James Graham Ballard born in Shanghai, China to Edna and James Ballard. Ballard's father is the manager of the China Printing and Finishing Company.
- 1930–42** lives at 31 Amherst Avenue, Shanghai, attends the Cathedral School. Margaret Ballard born in 1937.
- 1942–45** interned with his parents and sister in the Japanese Detention Centre, Lunghua.
- 1946–49** sent to England, attends Leys School, Cambridge.
- 1949–53** studies medicine at King's College, Cambridge. In 1951 Ballard wins joint first prize in a short-story competition with 'The Violent Noon'. Ballard soon abandons his medical studies at Cambridge and takes up a place to read English Literature at Queen Mary College, University of London in October 1951. Ballard leaves Queen Mary in 1952 without completing his degree; he writes copy for the advertising agency, Digby Wills Ltd, works as a Covent Garden porter (chrysanthemum department) and sells the *Waverley Encyclopaedia* door-to-door.
- 1953–54** joins the RAF and begins basic training at Kirton in Lindsey, Lincolnshire. In 1954 Ballard is posted to the RCAF flight training base at Moosejaw, Saskatchewan, Canada. Ballard writes his first science fiction story 'Passport to Eternity'.
- 1955** marries Helen Mary Matthews, and begins typing up the short stories he had written while stationed in Canada.
- 1956–62** lives in London; first child, James, born in 1956, followed by Fay (1957) and Beatrice (1959). In 1956, Ballard publishes his first science fiction story, 'Prima Belladonna' in *New Worlds* and visits the 'This is Tomorrow' at Whitechapel Gallery, London. Whilst trying to launch his writing career, Ballard also works as deputy editor of *Chemistry & Industry*. In 1960, the Ballard family settle in Shepperton and Ballard continues to publish science fiction short stories.
- 1962** becomes a full-time writer, publishes *Wind from Nowhere*, *The Drowned World* and a short-story collection, *The Voices of Time & Other Stories*. Ballard makes his *New Worlds*

- editorial debut with the controversial essay, 'Which Way to Inner Space?'
- 1963** *The Four Dimensional Nightmare* (short story collection).
- 1964** Helen Mary Ballard dies of pneumonia during a family holiday in Spain. Ballard brings up his three children in Shepperton. Publishes *The Drought*.
- 1966** *The Crystal World*.
- 1967** publishes three short story collections: *The Day of Forever*, *The Disaster Area* and *The Overloaded Man*.
- 1967–69** 'Plan for the Assassination of Jacqueline Kennedy' (1967) is debated in the House of Lords and denounced by Randolph Churchill as a slur on the memory of the dead US President. 'Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan' (1968) becomes the subject of an obscenity trial; charges against Ballard are eventually dropped. These scandals lead Doubleday to withdraw the first American edition of *The Atrocity Exhibition*.
- 1970** *The Atrocity Exhibition* published in England. Ballard stages an exhibition called 'Crashed Cars' at the New Arts Laboratory, Camden.
- 1971** *Vermilion Sands*. Ballard stars in a BBC documentary called 'Crash' (directed by Harley Cockliss).
- 1972** *Chronopolis* (a short story collection).
- 1973** *Crash*. Ballard survives a car crash.
- 1974** *Concrete Island*
- 1975** *High-Rise*
- 1976** *Low-Flying Aircraft* (short story collection).
- 1979** *The Unlimited Dream Company* wins the British Science Fiction Award.
- 1981** *Hello America*.
- 1982** *Myths of the Near Future*.
- 1984** *Empire of the Sun* is published to huge success, winning the Guardian Fiction Prize, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and appearing on the Booker Prize short list. Ballard turns down the CBE and membership of the Royal Society of Literature.
- 1987** *The Day of Creation*. Steven Spielberg's adaptation of *Empire of the Sun* is released.
- 1988** *Running Wild*.
- 1989** *War Fever* (short story collection). The annotated version of *The Atrocity Exhibition* is published by RE/Search.
- 1991** *The Kindness of Women*. Ballard returns to Shanghai to make a BBC documentary, 'Shanghai Jim'.
- 1994** *Rushing to Paradise*.
- 1996** *Cocaine Nights*; publication of a collection of Ballard's non-fiction writings (essays, reviews and articles), *A User's*