

# Post-temporal Subjectivity in the Fiction of J. G. Ballard

by

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation is an analysis of a selection of texts by J. G. Ballard (1930-2009) concerned with the collusion of personal and cultural trauma. Semi-autobiographical texts such as *Empire of the Sun* and other more imaginative works such as *Crash* and *The Unlimited Dream Company* are examined as illustrating the psychological and fictional processes of trauma, a wound that destabilizes time and space and the workings of memory and the imagination. Ballard's themes of the death of affect, the mediatized subject, and the intractability of death are posited as consequences of a post-temporal subjectivity effected by the traumas of the Second World War and the emergence of the overloaded communications landscape of the 1960s. This dissertation adds to the existent literature in that it attempts to explore a poetics of a certain disconnect in the relation between subject and object, a relation that is skewed by the workings of trauma and repression, and that manifests itself in attempts to direct and order the real.

Keywords: trauma, World War II, postmodernism, spatiality

## Resumo

Esta tese é uma análise de uma seleção de textos de J. G. Ballard (1930-2009) que tratam da confluência do trauma pessoal e cultural. Textos semiautobiográficos como o *Império do sol* e obras como *Crash* e *The unlimited dream company* são examinadas como ilustrações dos processos psicológicos e ficcionais do trauma, uma ferida que desestabiliza tempo, espaço e os funcionamentos da memória e da imaginação. Ballard trata a morte do afeto (*death of affect*), o sujeito mediatizado, e a intratabilidade da morte como consequências de uma subjetividade pós-temporal em virtude da Segunda Guerra Mundial e da emergência da sobrecarregada paisagem midiática dos anos 60. Esta tese contribui para a literatura existente ao explorar uma poética do desencontro na relação entre sujeito e objeto, por sua vez distorcida pelos efeitos de trauma e repressão e que se manifesta em tentativas de ordenar o real.

Palavras-chave: trauma, pós-modernismo, Segunda Guerra Mundial, espaço

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## Introduction

While J. G. Ballard (1930-2009) was still alive, there was a certain difficulty in Britain in acknowledging his stature as a writer. The appreciation of his work has been steadily growing in the five years after his death, exemplified by the advent of numerous critical books, academic conferences, and film adaptations in the works. Outside of Britain, Ballard is still less known, but the publication of a volume of his complete short stories was met with great enthusiasm in the United States in 2010. In the assertion of writers such as Will Self, Jonathan Lethem, and John Gray, he is probably the preeminent English writer of the postwar period. Still, Ballard sits uneasily as an “English” or “British” writer, for in many ways he never left Shanghai, where he was born and which remained his spiritual home. Postwar England was a shock to Ballard: having grown up in the prosperous International Settlement in Shanghai, the England of the Age of Austerity was a country that engaged in a deep cultural repression. England had not lost the war, but it certainly looked like it had.

In Shanghai, became aware of the brutal reality of the world, the flimsy structure of social convention and the vulnerability of human life. The catastrophic breakdown of life in China that occurred after Pearl Harbor left him with an indelible impression. In his autobiography, *Miracles of Life*, Ballard recounts visiting the ruins of a formerly lush casino with his father before the war in Shanghai, a building that held “a deeper meaning” for him, “the sense that reality itself was a stage set that could be dismantled at any moment, and no matter how magnificent anything appeared, it could be swept aside into the debris of the past” (58). He then counters this gloomy impression with characteristic ambivalence:

I also felt that the ruined casino, like the city and the world beyond it, was more real and more meaningful than it had been when it was thronged with gamblers and dancers. Abandoned houses and office buildings held a special

magic and on my way home from school I often paused outside an empty apartment block. Seeing everything displaced and rearranged in a haphazard way gave me my first taste of the surrealism of everyday life, though Shanghai was already surrealist enough. (59)

Ballard calls “surrealism of everyday life” an ability to look at the world at an angle, a view that uncovers the hidden, often unconscious, motives and reasons for behavior—not only social behavior, but also in architecture, in the media, and war.

### **A World without Time**

In a trilogy of stories from the early 1980s, Ballard develops a science fictional concept of “space sickness,” a slowing down of time connected with the trauma of the NASA space program. “Memories of a Space Age” (1982) opens with a striking image of an aircraft flying in circles over an abandoned space center in Florida. The protagonist, Edward Mallory, is a NASA employee who has returned to Cape Kennedy to understand the sickness, and the pilot of the aircraft is Hinton, a rogue astronaut. Space sickness causes the slowing down of time, as Ballard writes: “One day, time would stop, freeze forever on one frame”, a movement that has centered “into the eternal present of [a] timeless zone” (1051) that is, Florida. Mallory eventually follows Hinton to an abandoned motel, and Ballard describes the “out of time” nature of the landscape:

Time was slowing now, coming almost to a halt. Mallory hung in mid-step, his bare feet in the air above the ground. ... The waves were no longer running towards the beach, and were frozen ruffs of icing sugar. Fish hung in the sky, the wise dolphins happy to be in their new realm, faces smiling in the sun. The water spraying from the fountain at the shallow end of the pool now formed a glass parasol. ... Time had flowed out of Florida, as it had from the space age.

After a brief pause, like a trapped film reel running free, it sped on again, rekindling a kinetic world. (*Complete Stories* 1045)

Like so many Ballardian antagonists, Hinton has already welcomed the catastrophe, and here he embraces the “destruction of time” and kidnaps Mallory’s wife to “cast them both loose into space” (1059). Mallory remains alone in the desert motel, and in a characteristically Ballardian suspended ending, he will soon unlock a caged tiger and wait for the emergence of “a world beyond time” (1060).

Ballard often constructs worlds in which a single event—in this case, spaceflight—can alter the perception of time. Notably, the astronauts who return to Earth are unaffected by the physical consequences of zero gravity for instance, but they are psychically changed and moved into an inner space where time has a different dimension. This has the consequences of a traumatic event, one that represents a breach of the laws of time and space: “Perhaps the right to travel through space belonged to another order of beings, but his crime was being punished just as surely as would any attempt to ignore the laws of gravity” (1019). Like a virus the astronauts bring from space, the space sickness puts their carrier bodies out of time and leads to dissolution.

This post-temporal structure of trauma, portrayed as a fissure in time, recalls Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in which the protagonist becomes “unstuck in time” and, like a broken record, keeps skipping from one time to another, gravitating around a traumatic primal scene. Traumatic memory, or the “unclaimed experience” for Cathy Caruth, has these properties, since it “is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (qtd. in Levi and Rothburg 193). Ballard’s “space sickness” is a science fiction construct that illustrates a world in which space and time are profoundly affected by past events, or even Freud’s notion of “deferred action,” or *Nachträglichkeit*, in which “experiences, impressions, and memory traces may be revised

at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or the attainment of a new stage of development” (Laplanche and Pontalis 118). For Caruth, this raises the question of whether trauma is an event experienced as it occurs or an experience grasped only *afterwards*. “The fact of latency,” she writes, “consist[s] not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself ... fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time” (57).

Ballard is aware of this double action and locates past trauma in one place and one time, and conceives of another context to bring them to light. In the case of “Memories of the Space Age,” he writes, “Each flight to the moon and each journey around the sun was a trauma that warped their perception of time and space. The brute-force ejection of themselves from their planet had been an act of evolutionary piracy, for which they were now being expelled from the world of time” (1061). This evolutionary “sin,” the flight from the limits of our known natural universe, is therefore punished (even if Hinton seems to think it is a reward), and the trauma of outer space is perceived in the desert and Cape Kennedy, the abandoned space center that is described as an ancient archeological site. Its towers are “as old in their way as the great temple columns of Karnak, bearers of a different cosmic order, symbols of a view of the universe that had been abandoned along with the state of Florida that had given them birth” (1042). Traumatic in these stories is not the flight from planet Earth, but the return to a reality that failed to accompany the extraordinary leap that space exploration promised, but never delivered.

### **A Space of Memory**

In “Memories of the Space Age,” there is an unfolding of time over space: as time slows down, the landscapes become vast and prominent; the desert becomes for Ballard a zone of non-time. In Ballard’s fiction, David Pringle notes, “landscape is always a state of

mind,” and the symbol of sand pertains to the future, to its mutability and capacity to obliterate the present (129). Ballard’s static spaces are reminiscent of the dreamy tableaux of Surrealist painting, but the logic of slowing down time is certainly indebted to the language of film.

In 1966, Ballard wrote a review of the French science fiction film *La Jetée* (1962), directed by Chris Marker, published in *New Worlds*, and like most of his non-fiction, it is just as much about the film as it is about Ballard’s own fiction. *La Jetée* is an unconventional film: a short photomontage about nuclear catastrophe and time travel, it “creates its own conventions from scratch” and “triumphantly succeeds where science fiction almost invariably fails” (*User’s Guide* 29). The film resonated for Ballard on many levels: it shares many of his themes, but also some of the same logic that goes into his formal strategies. The film is comprised almost entirely of still photographs, “a succession of disconnected images ... a perfect means of projecting the quantified memories and movements through time” (*User’s Guide* 28), a description that could just as easily characterize “The Terminal Beach” and *The Atrocity Exhibition*. The central character in *La Jetée* is very much a Ballardian character: he is haunted by his memories and able to travel back in time because of them in a scene that Ballard calls the “only convincing act of time travel in the whole of science fiction”, in which “the subject [lies] on a hammock in the underground corridor as if waiting for some inward sun to rise” (29). Later this character has a sense of having “committed some kind of psychological crime in pursuing this memory” (29), a being isolated in time, and much like the central figures of *The Drowned World* and other stories.

The first time we see the central character of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, he is busy assembling his terminal documents amid “the noise from the cine-films of induced psychoses” (1). Among these documents are Marey’s “Chronograms,” later described as “multiple-exposure photographs in which the element of time is visible—the walking human

figure, for example, is represented as a series of dune-like lumps” (6). This is analogous to a cross-sectional view of the human body, a photograph that exposes something invisible. In evidence is repetition, the repeated body, since in real life, we see it in motion—films deceive us in the way that they only convey motion by an optical illusion, because, in fact, they are static shots following one another. Dr. Nathan, another character in *Atrocity*, explains to Catherine Austin, the practice that her husband, Travis, had developed:

Your husband’s brilliant feat was to reverse the process. Using a series of photographs of the most commonplace objects—this office, let us say, a panorama of New York skyscrapers, the naked body of a woman, the face of a catatonic patient—he treated them as if they already were chronograms and extracted the element of time. ... The results were extraordinary. A very different world was revealed. The familiar surroundings of our lives, even our smallest gestures, were seen to have totally altered meanings. (6)

It is hard to imagine how Travis could have achieved that in actuality. We can only assume that Travis is inscribing entropy into these images, in which the element of time is *not visible*, but somehow present in his interpretation of it. The presence of entropy allows for commonplace objects and familiar surroundings to stand out, as if Travis is able to see them developing through time, a naked body decaying, and skyscrapers becoming rubble. In *La Jetée*, there is a single moment in which the static photographs are replaced by film and indeed move, a moment of eerie uncertainty because the illusion of a narrative being told completely by stills is temporarily suspended and we are reminded of the real medium, film. That moment seems to be the filmic equivalent of Travis’s entropic perspective, by which we stare at a photograph, and the image it depicts suddenly moves through time. Furthermore, the way the language works in *Atrocity* resembles a film, by association, each paragraph or section a short video clip. Take for instance, this passage from “Cinecity,” in “Tolerances of

the Human Face,” where the connection to film language is made even more explicit, when Travers is watching war and surgery footage:

Sequence in slow motion: a landscape of highways and embankments, evening light on fading concrete, intercut with images of a young woman’s body. She lay on her back, her wounded face stressed like fractured ice. With almost dream-like calm, the camera explored her bruised mouth, the thighs dressed in a dark lace-work of blood. The quickening geometry of her body, its terraces of pain and sexuality, became a source of intense excitement. (63)

Ballard’s images, however, do not seem to be *in motion*, they are usually still tableaux, or a sequence of photos as in *La Jetée*. Furthermore, this denotes Ballard’s strategy of using filmic space as a heterotopic space of memory, as will be discussed in further chapters.

The topography of late capitalism, characterized by a depthless “death of affect” (or “waning of affect” in Fredric Jameson’s terminology), expresses, for Ballard, an inversion of commonly held values. In the introduction to the French edition of *Crash*, he writes of an “ever more ambiguous world,” born out of the “marriage of reason and nightmare”: “In the past we have always assumed that the external world around us has represented reality, however confusing or uncertain, and that the inner world of our minds, its dreams, hopes, ambitions, represented the realm of fantasy and the imagination” (96). For Ballard, the responses triggered by this affectless, mediatized landscape are so irrational that to understand it, one must “assume it is a complete fiction,” the one “small node of reality left to us [being] inside our own heads” (97). He sees the world as an enormous novel, and the tools to interpret and decode it lie not in reality, but in fiction. Texts like *Atrocity* are, according to David Punter, attempts to “examine the conclusions of an extreme materialism in which minds exert no hold over matter but have to find spaces in the material to insert themselves into, so that they can be fixed into some semblance of coherence” (*Terror* 137). In an

increasingly virtualized world, it is only when the system fails and breaks down that we begin to feel that we have to remake the world again from our bodies outward. *Crash*, *High-Rise*, and especially *Concrete Island* are intensely physical novels, concerned with sensation and feeling—a return to the body is Ballard’s answer to the death of affect, but one that is not without its own pitfalls.

This dissertation is an analysis of central texts in the Ballardian canon concerned with the collusion of personal and cultural trauma. Semi-autobiographical texts such as *Empire of the Sun* and other more imaginative works such as *Crash* and *The Unlimited Dream Company* are examined as illustrating the psychological and fictional processes of trauma, a wound that destabilizes time and space and the workings of memory and the imagination. Ballard’s themes of the death of affect, the mediatized subject, and the intractability of death are posited as consequences of a post-temporal embodiment effected by the traumas of World War II and the emergence of the overloaded communications landscape of the 1960s. This dissertation adds to the existent literature in that it attempts to explore a poetics of a certain disconnect in the relation between subject and object, a relation that is skewed by the workings of trauma and repression, and that manifests itself in attempts to direct and order the real.

In the first chapter, I provide a theoretical context that enables such a reading. I propose that Ballard’s “out of time” perspective can lead to a complex view of contemporaneity in which time has unfolded into space, consonant with Jameson’s conceptualization of late capitalism. The second chapter reviews the critical literature on Ballard relating to his concept of inner space, and his uses of Surrealist, Postmodernist, and Pop Art techniques. Chapter 4 looks at texts that deal explicitly with World War II and its aftermath, discussing the blurring of reality and fiction: “The Terminal Beach,” parts of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, the short story “The Dead Time”, *Empire of the Sun*, *The Kindness of*

*Women*, and the autobiography *Miracles of Life*. The following chapter, “Machine Embodiment,” explores Ballard’s narratives that revolve around a trauma of a specific kind: the crash. In this section, I expose how *Crash*, *Concrete Island*, and *The Unlimited Dream Company* imagine the psychological processes that unmake and remake the world after the trauma. I conclude with observations on Ballard’s fictional explorations on the inscrutability of death.

**Chapter 1:**  
**Space, Time, and the Uncanny**

One of the key characteristics of postmodernism, according to Jameson, is the spatialization of time (*Postmodernism* 18). The coexistence of multiple periods, exemplified by the workings of pastiche and nostalgia, point to the cultural imperative of a continual present, populated by signifiers from the past and from an imagined future. The presence of these signifiers function as a “blot,” an element that distorts the conceptualization of the world, akin to Jacques Lacan’s “point de capiton,” or “upholstery button”: “Everything radiates out and is organized around this signifier, similar to those little lines of force that an upholstery button forms on the surface of material. It’s the point of convergence that enables everything that happens [in a certain discourse] to be situated retroactively and prospectively” (*Seminar III* 268). These markers are revenants of the repressed, and they stand at the very seams that hold together reality. The “points de capiton,” indicate the place in the signifying chain that a process of substitution has happened, pointing to the arbitrariness of the sign. Žižek, for example, discusses the “blot” materializing in Alfred Hitchcock’s films as a sign of the gaze, when a supplementary element is inserted and sticks out, denaturing and making the whole scene uncanny and ambiguous (*Looking* 88). In the same manner, we can identify similar points in postmodernist fiction.

How are we to identify the “points de capiton”, or the points in the signifying chain in which “the signifier stops the otherwise endless movement of the signification” (Lacan, *Écrits* 303)? I propose that the uncanny is such a marker. When Freud reads E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman,” he identifies the uncanny effect with castration anxiety and repression, which he describes as “the necessary condition of a primitive feeling recurring in

the shape of something uncanny” (“Uncanny” 94). Likewise, that effect is present in Ballard, and if we follow Freud’s remarks, it points to the site of repression.

Ballard’s fiction, which deals largely with the psychological aftermath of World War II and the culture of mass communication of the 1960s, and which has played a large part in Jameson’s (and other theorists’) conceptualization of postmodernity, partakes in a process of Freudian “deferred action,” triggered by the trauma of World War II. This dissertation analyzes Ballard’s work in terms of three organizing topics: time, space, and body. These topics are under constant reconfiguration in Ballard’s oeuvre, and indicate a larger cultural phenomenon at work that postulates time as circular or out of joint; space as multiplying into heterotopias, non-places, and zones of transit; and the body as being morphed into a techno-body. In question is the very interface by which the subject relates with these three concepts in Ballard, and how they can constitute reality. The theoretical framework to be developed herein can help us to attain a particularly Ballardian perspective that postulates the future as exhausted, a feature of an unrealized past, forever oscillating between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

### **Ballardian Perspective**

First, we must turn to Ballard’s view of the contemporary world, a world that has inverted the categories of outside and inside:

The most prudent and effective method of dealing with the world around us is to assume that it is a complete fiction—conversely, the one node of reality left to us is inside our own heads. Freud’s classic distinction between the latent and manifest content of the dream, between the apparent and the real, now needs to be applied to the external world of so-called reality. (“Introduction to *Crash*” 98)

Ballard believed that the rules of the dream work could be applied to fiction and to life. Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis summarize the psychoanalytical concept of manifest and latent content as follows:

The manifest content ... is as it were the abridged version, while the latent content ... which is revealed by analysis is the correct version: the two are presented to us like two versions of the same subject-matter in two different languages, or, more properly, the dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation. (235-36)

Here we can see two concerns: a need to translate the discourse of one reality into another, and the need to posit the existence of those not alongside or in opposition to each other, but within the same space and inextricably bound to one another. As in the dream work, the two realities are only two different modes of expression. Ballard's writings reveal a world conceived in terms of geometry, patterns, and codes, a system at odds with the way life is usually perceived. The uncovering of the hidden desires that govern the external world is at the core of Ballard's fiction: "Does the angle between two walls have a happy ending?" he asked in one of his experiments in conceptual advertising of the late 1960s, putting it both in terms of Euclidean geometry and of a Zen koan.

### **The Uncanny**

In the following sections, I will trace a history of the uncanny from Freud to surrealism.<sup>1</sup> It is my contention that the surrealist uncanny (as interpreted by Foster) as well

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed history of the uncanny, see Masschelein's *The Unconcept*.

as the uncanny in postmodernity is quite different from the Freudian one. As an aesthetics, I propose that it is paralleled by the Lacanian “point de capiton” (in terms of slippage).

By way of an etymological study, Freud arrives at a number of definitions of the word *unheimlich*, but two of them are of particular importance. One is Schelling’s formulation that the uncanny is “what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open” (“Uncanny” 132), which leads Freud to relate the uncanny to repression. The other formulation is that *unheimlich* acquires the sense of its opposite, *heimlich*, which “thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym, *unheimlich*. The uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*, ‘the unhomely’), thus, is in some way a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, ‘the homely’)” (134).

Freud came to his formulations of the uncanny through the study of nineteenth-century Gothic fiction, especially “The Sandman,” by Hoffmann, which he discusses at length in “The Uncanny.” The relationship between bodies and their spaces in Gothic fiction is almost symbiotic—there are few boundaries between the characters’ feelings or perceptions and the configurations of external space. In short, outer space is a projection of inner space. Edgar Allan Poe’s uncanny story “The Fall of the House of Usher” is paradigmatic of this intimate relation with space: “[W]ith the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. ... [T]he feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible” (317). The building is described as having “vacant eye-like windows,” and possessing familiar qualities, however strange: “[W]hile I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this—I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up” (318). Here Poe anticipates Jentsch’s and Freud’s formulations of the uncanny—how the unfamiliar and the familiar coincide.

Freud narrates an uncanny experience in a letter to Romain Rolland (“A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis,” 1936) that bears significance on the present dissertation: a rupture in temporality caused by a placement in space. In the letter, he tells of his first visit to the Acropolis in Athens with his brother Alexander. Freud admits having mixed feelings about visiting the site, despite being very drawn to it. He writes of his arrival: “[M]y eye took in the landscape, [and] the curious thought suddenly came to me: *So this all really does exist, just as we learned in school!*” (“Disturbance” 70). For Freud, this is more than just seeing something one has only imagined in person. He recalls reading about the Acropolis as a schoolchild, and not really believing it when he is actually in that space. The feeling, Freud writes, should have been phrased more accurately (“undistorted”) as: “I would really not have believed that I should ever be granted the chance to see Athens with my own eyes, as it is now indubitably the case!” (“Disturbance” 72). He explains that his superego forces him into thinking that he does not deserve to be in that place, because as a schoolboy he could not even imagine having the means and the opportunity to see it in person, and in a way, he is surpassing his father: “The very theme of Athens and the Acropolis in itself contained evidence of the sons’ superiority. Our father had been in business, he had had no secondary education, and Athens could not have meant much to him” (“Disturbance” 75). In this short piece, we can see a phenomenon of “time out of joint”—less in the Shakespearean sense than as suggested by the Philip K. Dick’s novel of that name—but triggered by the mechanisms of desire, projection, and guilt. It is not the site of the Acropolis itself that triggers these disjunctions, but the subjective surplus charge that Freud brings to it—in Lacanian terms, the “objet petit a,” to which we will return later.

In “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety” (1926), Freud posits the ego as the source of anxiety—a mild repetition of a past trauma deployed by the ego to ward away expected trauma (93). The uncanny return is a source of anxiety as well, but according to him, the

primordial anxiety is caused by the trauma of birth: “Anxiety is the original reaction to helplessness in the trauma and is reproduced later on in the danger-situation as a signal for help” (“Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety” 92). Repetition, exemplified by the “fort-da” game described in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), is linked to anxiety and points toward the death drive—implied a year before in “The Uncanny”—a force that makes living creatures strive for an inanimate state (a deeper, primordial, and essential state of things) and for death and self-destruction (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 43). The longing for this earlier state can be aligned to a fundamental sense of lack in the ego. The ego, which originally contained everything, is separated (from the mother’s body) when it is inserted into external world: “Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive—indeed, an all-embracing—feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it” (*Civilization and its Discontents* 29). The fantasy of returning to an Edenic past, an unachievable ur-home, the mother’s breast or even the womb. Death would be the entryway to this strange, other, inanimate realm—familiar because it is also the primordial home.

### **The Home**

The house is “body and soul,” writes Gaston Bachelard. “It is the human being’s first world. Before he is ‘cast into the world,’ ... man is laid in the cradle of the house .... Being is already a value. Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house” (7). Bachelard dedicates a chapter of *The Poetics of Space* to the house, “our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word” (4). For him, all of our perception of the external world is grounded in this safe, domestic space. It is no wonder that the Gothic haunted house is so intimately connected to the body—the body, even before Bachelard’s house, is the “first world.” In the womb, there is no separation between body and space.

Writing about mimicry and camouflage in the natural world in “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” (1935), Roger Caillois mentions a “depersonalization by assimilation to space” (30): to dissolve into space and achieve wholeness is to abandon one’s individuality and relinquish control to a higher, communal entity. Caillois, however, points out that schizophrenics have a particular relation to space, which for them is a devouring force:

Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at *himself from* any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, *dark space where things cannot be put*. He is similar, not similar to something, but just *similar*. (30)

This scenario is apposite to the spaces of Gothic fiction. One can think of examples that range from Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) to more modern instances such as Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of the Hill House* (1959) and Stephen King’s *The Shining* (1977), in which spaces threaten to engulf the individual, who would be in turn robbed of any individuality. King’s novel is a good example of this paradigm: the protagonist, Jack, is led by the ghosts of the Overlook Hotel to bring about the return of *his* repressed past (alcoholism and child abuse) and of the hotel (murder) at the same time. The final image of Stanley Kubrick’s adaptation provides the perfect encapsulation, as a shot of Jack, frozen in the snow, is juxtaposed with his framed image in a 1921 photograph in the lobby: engulfed by space and frozen in history.

This confusion between subject and space, inside and outside, was represented in surrealism as dealing with the trauma of birth, and for Walter Benjamin as the loss of an “aura.” For Hal Foster, in surrealism the “endogenous or ‘compulsive’ stimuli are projected

outward as exogenous or ‘convulsive’ signs, as in convulsive beauty” (*Compulsive Beauty* 195). The traumas “parried in surrealism,” continues Foster, “derive not only from individual experience but from capitalist society as well: the excessive stimuli of the city, the becoming machine and/or commodity of the body, and so on.” For Benjamin, the shock of modernity triggered a feeling of loss and longing for a forgotten human dimension. Lost, according to Benjamin, is the aura, the experience of which “rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationship to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man” (“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 188). “The person we look at,” Benjamin continues, “or who feels he is being looked at looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to gaze at us in return. This experience corresponds to the data of the *mémoire involuntaire*.” The pre-Oedipal relation to the mother and a unity with her body is repressed and superseded by the perception of the body as fragmented and castrated. As Foster writes, this forgetting is crucial, as when an “outmoded” or “auratic” image “returns to the present, it does so as an uncanny reminder of a time before alienation” (197). The image is invested with a power to return the gaze, “across the distance of this alienation ... because it is still part of us or we part of it.” Auratic space, according to him, would entertain the fantasy of maternal intimacy, and even “intrauterine existence,” often depicted as subterranean or submarine (203). Again, this involves death—only death can bring about this return to the maternal.

Foster’s *Compulsive Beauty* downplays the importance of dreams and automatic writing and posits the uncanny as the key to the unconscious of surrealism, attempting to “locate a problem in surrealism that exceeds its self-understanding” (xvii). The surrealists’ fascination with dream states follows Freud’s statement that the dream is the royal road to the unconscious. In the dream, and in automatic writing, writes Pierre Reverdy, a “juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities” (qtd. in Breton 20) is possible. “The more the

relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true,” writes Breton, “the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional power and poetic reality.” For Foster, the uncanny is “a concern with events in which repressed material returns in ways that disrupt unitary identity, aesthetic norms, and social order” (xvii), and is implied in Breton’s most famous definition of surrealism:

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now, search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point. (123-24)

The uncanny then, would be a shaping force within surrealism, concerned with the return of repressed material that would act to disrupt oppositions, and no longer make them seem like contradictions, certainly in tune with Freud’s delineation of the passage between *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. According to the surrealist project, the world needed to be reawakened, and often by the use of the uncanny effect of the Benjaminian “outmoded”: “as familiar images and objects made strange by historical repression, as *heimlich* things of the nineteenth century returned as *unheimlich* in the twentieth century” (Foster 1993: 126-27).

### **Space/Power/Knowledge**

Jameson’s spatial turn asks for a theoretical understanding of the spaces of postmodernity. In what follows I describe how these spaces can be imbued with hidden anxieties and powers, and can come to characterize a modern Gothic.

Michel Foucault notes that during the Enlightenment, in the second half of the eighteenth century, there was a “fear of darkened places, of the pall of gloom which prevents

the full visibility of things, men and truths” (“The Eye of Power” 153). The Gothic emerged as a reaction to this suspicious devotion to reason in the Enlightenment, and Gothic narratives, according to Foucault, developed “a whole fantasy-world of stone walls, darkness, hideouts and dungeons” (154). These “imaginary spaces are like the negative of the transparency and visibility [the Enlightenment] aimed to establish.” The idea of “hygienic space” was championed in the early twentieth century by modernists led by Le Corbusier, as transparency was thought to “eradicate the domain of myth, suspicion, tyranny, and above all the irrational” (Vidler 168). There was power through transparency, subjection through “illumination”—as Foucault elaborated in works such as *Discipline and Punish*—and surveillance was the optimal instrument of control, as “the principle of the dungeon is reversed; daylight and the overseer’s gaze capture the inmate more effectively than darkness, which afforded after all a sort of protection” (“The Eye of Power” 147). Furthermore, it posits the gaze as the ultimate disciplinary instrument, “a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer” (155), thus relinquishing an external agency of control.

For Le Corbusier, the healthy home is akin to a machine: “If we eliminate from our hearts and minds all dead concepts in regard to the house, ... we shall arrive at the ‘House-Machine,’ the mass-production house, healthy (and morally so too) and beautiful in the same way that the working tools and instruments that accompany our existence are beautiful” (qtd. in Vidler 63). Morality here is connected to transparency: functional, light space sets boundaries between the individual and its space. Going against this, surrealism fixated, writes Foster, on forms tabooed in the functionalism of modernism, forms associated “not only with the historical and the fantastic, but with the infantile and the feminine” (190). In opposition to Le Corbusier’s House-Machine, the house in surrealism is presented as a “hysterical body,” implying that the distortions created by prohibitions cannot be undone.

The modern era was a moment of great social change, and the rise of the metropolis brought about new modes of living. Modernity sought to generate the demythologization and disenchantment of the social world, but Benjamin believed, in keeping with surrealism, that “under conditions of capitalism, industrialization had brought about a *reenchantment* of the social world, and through it, a ‘reactivation of mythic powers’” [italics in original] (Buck-Morss 254). The “new nature” of industrial culture had generated all the mythic power for a “universal symbolism” based on “things of nature” that “both signify and are” (255). Benjamin noted that big cities were sites of fear, revulsion, and horror (qtd. in Vidler 227), as the chaos of urban life threatened a sense of individuality and orientation. Thus, the uncanny space became the interior of the mind, “one that knew no bounds in introjection or introversion” as phobias and neuroses described a rejection of reality caused by reality (Vidler 6). The modern, urban uncanny was also shaped by a sense of “unhomeliness” provoked by World War I, a time in which the “cradle” and “secure house of western civilization” saw a barbaric regression, shattering notions of a unified European culture (7). Freud’s studies on anxiety derive from observations of shell-shocked patients of the war, as he noted in “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (1915). The war had thrown the world into a state never before experienced, evoking by the sheer scale of its violence, feelings of dread and anxiety toward the home, the basis and safe ground for the Western culture. Home was no longer secure and protected, and the condition after World War I was one of perpetual homelessness or unsettledness.

Henri Lefebvre recognizes a crucial change around this time, changes prompted by forces as diverse as World War I, the Russian Revolution (1905), Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity (1905), and the rise of psychoanalysis:

The fact is that around 1910 a certain space was shattered. It was the space of common sense, of knowledge, of social practice, of political power, a space

hitherto enshrined in everyday discourse, just as in abstract thought, as the environment of and channel for communications. ... Euclidean and perspectivist space have disappeared as systems of reference, along with the other former ‘commonplaces’ such as the town, history, paternity, the tonal system in music, traditional morality, and so forth. This was truly a crucial moment. (25)

This space of greater fragmentation and relativism also saw a great number of technological advancements that would affect everyday life. David Harvey uses the example of the assembly line, set up in 1913 by Henry Ford, which “fragmented tasks and distributed them in space so as to maximize efficiency and minimize the friction of flow in production ... Time could be then accelerated by virtue of the control established through organizing and fragmenting the order of production” (266). This is paradigmatic of Marxist alienation, the act of “transforming human properties, relations and actions into properties, relations and actions of man produced things which have become independent ... of man and govern his life” (Petrović 411). It is also metonymically related to what happened in consumer culture: the whole of production becomes invisible, to extend Adam Smith’s metaphor of the “invisible hand” that regulates the marketplace. The greater the efficiency of industrialization, the more efficient were the armies during World War I—contributing, insidiously, to even greater destruction.

In “The Eye of Power,” Foucault notes, “A whole history remains to be written of spaces—which would at the same time be the history of powers (both these terms in the plural)—from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat, institutional architecture from the classroom to the design of hospitals, passing via economic and political installations” (149). Here he speaks not only about architecture, but also of the practices conducted in these spaces. In Foucault’s view, the philosophy of time took

precedence over that of space. Time belonged to “nature” and was not part of discourse or embodying power. “We are in an era of the simultaneous,” he writes in “Different Spaces,” “[w]e exist at a moment when the world is experiencing ... something less like a great life that would develop through time than a like a network that connects points and weaves its skein” (175). In the preface of *The Order of Things*, Foucault advances the concept of heterotopia when discussing Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” a space that can contain different realities, resisting categorization: “Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that ... Heterotopias dissolve our myths,” destroying the syntax, “which causes words and things to ‘hold together’” (xviii).

“Des autres espaces,” a 1967 lecture published in 1984 in *Architecture, mouvement, continuité* (and in English as “Different Spaces” two years later), is Foucault’s most systematic discussion of space and time, and expands the concept of heterotopia. Foucault searches for “other spaces” and “other emplacements” (or sites), those that have the “curious property of being connected to all the other emplacements, but in such a way that they suspend, neutralize, or reverse the set of relations that are designated, reflected, or represented by them” (“Different Spaces” 178). Utopias are one of these sites with “no real place ... [that present] society perfected or the reverse of society ... fundamentally and essentially unreal,” but heterotopias are real places, “sorts of actually realized utopias in which the real emplacements ... are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed” an observation that foregrounds the fact that utopia essentially means “no place.”

Foucault then succeeds into “a sort of systematic description” of heterotopias. He approximates the reflection in *The Order of Things* when he writes of heterotopias juxtaposing “in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves” (“Different” 181), the theater stage and the cinema screen being examples. Foucault also

mentions *heterochronies*, a concept also relevant for the present dissertation, places “of all times that [are themselves] outside time and protected from [their] erosion,” such as libraries and museums, where “time never stops building up” (“Different Spaces” 182). Furthermore, heterotopias “always presuppose a system of opening and closing that isolates them and makes them penetrable at the same time” (“Different Spaces” 183). Foucault closes his paper with a discussion of the relation heterotopias have with other spaces, an “external” function unfolding between poles:

Either the heterotopias have the role of creating a space of illusion that denounces all real space, all real emplacements within which human life is partitioned off ... Or on the contrary, creating a different space, a different real space as perfect, as meticulous, as well-arranged as ours is disorganized, badly arranged, and muddled. This would be not the utopia of illusion but of compensation.... (“Different Spaces” 184)

Foucault goes on to suggest that it is in this second mode of compensation that certain colonies functioned, namely the “absolutely perfect places” of Puritan societies of seventeenth-century America and the “marvelous, absolutely regulated colonies in which human perfection was effectively achieved” in the Jesuit villages of Paraguay, in which the heterotopian role was in the general organization of terrestrial space, a whole village replicating the sign of the cross to some God’s eye perspective. One cannot help but think of Lucio Costa’s geographical “Plano Piloto” design for Brasilia, imprinting, in one level, the motif of flight to the utopian fantasy of that city, but also resembling an irregular cross itself, with all the connotations that it may bring.

The anthropologist Marc Augé has described similar heterotopic spaces, abundant in “supermodernity”—the flipside of postmodernity, with an excess of meaning and history instead of a loss—as “non-places.” “If a place can be defined as relational, historical and

concerned with identity,” he writes, “then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (77). Augé is not only concerned with these neutral spaces of transit, but with any kind of space that effaces historical relations, leaving meaning suspended: “A person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants” (103). Non-places are characterized by a conscious convergence of homogeneity, as everything is made to appear and act neutral, without any apparent signs of identity, and for this reason, any person of any social background and nationality can be made to feel accommodated in them. We have grown accustomed to this apparent neutrality, but in actuality, non-places are far from neutral, and they participate in the act of normalization and discipline that Foucault discusses. Anthony Vidler opens *The Architectural Uncanny* writing of “the contemporary sensibility that sees the uncanny erupt in empty parking lots around abandoned or run-down shopping malls, in the screened *trompe l’oeil* of simulated space, in that is, the wasted margins and surface appearances of postindustrial culture” (1). These spaces do not, in Vidler’s point of view, have uncanny properties—rather, they are sites that, aesthetically, become sites of estrangement. The uncanny is not “a property of the space itself nor can it be provoked by any particular spatial conformation; it is, in its aesthetic dimension, a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming” (11). The slippage points to the site of repression, and therefore allows us to pick out the seams, as it were, of the fabric of homogenous spaces of postmodernity. As an aesthetic, it can lead to questionings of conceptualizations of time, space, body, and the discourses and structures of power embedded therein. As a marker of the return of the repressed, it allows us to perceive the anxieties lurking underneath the surface at one particular point in time, shifting the boundaries between what is accepted, desired, and forbidden.

### The Death of Affect

Jameson's "waning of affect" in *Postmodernism, Or, The Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) recalls Ballard's formulation of the "death of affect" from *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970). The "waning of affect" is the "end of the bourgeois ego," which "brings with it the end of the psychopathology of that ego" (Jameson 15). For Ballard, "Voyeurism, self-disgust, the infantile basis of our dreams and longings—these diseases of the psyche have now culminated in the most terrifying casualty of the century: the death of affect" ("Introduction to *Crash*" 96). Whatever "feeling" is present in postmodernism, Jameson contends, it is closer to Lyotard's "intensities": "free-floating and impersonal," intensities tend to be "dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria" (Jameson 16), a euphoria that despite its surface opposition to a lack of affect, in fact lacks a proper emotional context.

"The Death of Affect" is the title of a paragraph in Ballard's "Tolerances of the Human Face" (chapter 8 of *The Atrocity Exhibition*), and reading it in terms of Jameson's conceptualization elucidates how it is indebted to Ballard. The section describes a visit that the protagonist, Travers, and his lover, Karen, make to a site of a car accident.

After four years the oil stains had vanished. These infrequent visits, dictated by whatever private logic, now seemed to provide nothing. An immense internal silence presided over this area of cement and pines, a terminal moraine of the emotions that held its debris of memory and regret, like the rubbish in the pockets of a dead schoolboy he had examined. (*Atrocity* 70)

Implied in these sentences is the spatialization of a particularly meaningful event in time and effectively erased through time itself, making Travers's and Karen's repeated visits fruitless, providing "nothing." The "area of cement and pines" is juxtaposed with the image of a "terminal moraine" (an accumulation of glacial debris). Emotion here is associated with

“rubbish” and “debris,” and its expression is overwhelmed by the “immense eternal silence” of the space, making even the sudden mention of a “dead schoolboy” seem casual. Coming back to Jameson, this can be seen as an example of “[t]he shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology ... characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter’s fragmentation” (14). Jameson’s contention that “high modernist” concepts such as “anxiety” and “alienation” are no longer appropriate in the postmodern world could also be construed as a commentary on *The Atrocity Exhibition*. For Jameson, the concept of expression presupposes that there is an interior to be exteriorized, a preoccupation that echoes the themes of Ballard’s experimental novel.

Ballard’s introduction to the French edition of *Crash* (1973) can be read as a manifesto for his middle period (following *The Atrocity Exhibition* and before *Empire of the Sun*) and an articulation of his preoccupations within this period. He writes,

Increasingly, our concepts of past, present and future are being forced to revise themselves. Just as the past itself, in social and psychological terms, became a casualty of Hiroshima and the nuclear age, so in its turn the future is ceasing to exist, devoured by the all voracious present. We have annexed the future into our own present, as merely one of those manifold alternatives open to us. Options multiply around us, we live in an almost infantile world where any demand, any possibility, whether for lifestyles, travel, sexual roles and identities, can be satisfied instantly. (“Introduction to *Crash*” 96)

Jameson, who conceptualizes the postmodern after Ballard,<sup>2</sup> is apposite to this spatialization of the temporal: “our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by

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<sup>2</sup> See chapter 6 of Jameson’s *Postmodernism*, where he discusses Ballard and other science fiction writers.

categories of space rather than categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism” (16). “A certain spatial turn,” he contends, is “one of the more productive ways of distinguishing postmodernism from modernism proper,” in that the dominant of high modernism is the “experience of temporality” (154). Concomitantly, “the displacement of time, the spatialization of the temporal” is perceived “by way of a sense of loss,” an observation concluding Jameson’s gloss on Ballard’s “The Voices of Time”: “it seems possible that the pathos of entropy in Ballard may be just that: the *affect* released by the minute, and not enthusiastic, exploration of this whole new world of spatiality, and the sharp pang of the death of the modern that accompanies it” (156). As Karen in “Tolerances of the Human Face” tries to “re-create the accident” in her mind, Travers wonders, “How would she have preferred it: in terms of the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, the ‘50s school of highway engineering or, most soigné of all, the Embarcadero Freeway?” (Ballard, *Atrocity* 70). This multiplication of abstract spaces to signify this one event in time alludes to the flexibility of the spatial signifier. The “new world of spatiality” put forth by Jameson is devoid of affect, multiplying and interchangeable, but this void is, full of “pathos” and incurs “a sharp pang”: the affect is still present, but displaced. It is ironic that Jameson uses “waning” and Ballard the more definitive “death” in referring to affect, since Ballard sees psychopathology—the death of which is proclaimed by Jameson—as a revitalizing force, a means to surmount the death of affect by espousing “the moral freedom to pursue our own psychopathologies as a game” (75), with varying degrees of success, as we shall see.

### **Postwar Subjectivity and the Technological Sublime**

Ballard began publishing his first stories in 1956, and it belongs within the context of postwar literary representation, especially when it begins to tackle directly the iconography of the Cold War. Reports of the atrocities committed during wartime, the Holocaust, the

bombing of Dresden, Tokyo, and the atom bombs dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, not to mention the great development in the technology of mass communication and transportation, provoked a seismic change in the experience of space and time. “After the Second World War, everything, including a resurrected culture, has been destroyed without realizing it,” writes Theodor Adorno about the insurmountable aftermath of the war. “Humankind continues to vegetate, creeping along after events that even the survivors cannot really survive, on a rubbish heap that has made reflection on one’s own damaged state useless” (244). Jean-François Lyotard provides a helpful analogy:

Suppose that an earthquake destroys not only lives, buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and indirectly. The impossibility of quantitatively measuring it does not prohibit, but rather inspires in the minds of the survivors the idea of a very great seismic force. (11)

History, like the Lacanian Real, is unknowable and ungraspable. Jameson notes that the Real is that which resists symbolization absolutely:

it is not terribly difficult to say what is meant by the Real in Lacan. It is simply History itself; and if for psychoanalysis the history in question here is obviously enough the history of the subject, the resonance of the word suggests that a confrontation between this particular materialism and the historical materialism of Marx can no longer be postponed. (48)

Freud’s concept of the *Nachträglichkeit*, or deferred action, is crucial to the understanding of a restructuring of a traumatic event—the primal scene—in a way that is only understandable and felt in retrospect. In Laplanche and Pontalis’s definition, “experiences, impressions, and memory traces may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development” (111). Peter Nicholls writes of this process: “Belatedness ... creates a complex temporality which inhibits any nostalgia for origin and

continuity—the ‘origin’ is now secondary, a construction always contained in its own repetition” (54). For Jameson, the superficiality and loss of historicity of postmodernism—or late capitalism—is linked to this process of deferred action, a “retroactivity” in which “people become aware of the dynamics of some new system, in which they are themselves seized, only later on and gradually” (*Postmodernism* xix). As Alfred Kazin writes about representation of the postwar world, “War as an actuality, bound by space and time, an event that literature ‘could do justice to’, soon yielded to an apocalyptic sense of the possible destruction of mankind, the boundlessness of its enmities” (81). In a world that was half in rubble with the other half under threat of being destroyed with the pressing of a button, the feeling was of a continued general ominousness. There is a kind of presentism at work, and according to David Harvey, time is spatialized (privileging Being), an inability to think in terms of progress and in the axis of time (Becoming) (273). This trend echoed in a number of conceptualizations of postmodernity, enumerated by Harvey: “Lyotard’s ‘local determinisms,’ [Stanley] Fish’s ‘interpretive communities,’ [Kenneth] Frampton’s ‘regional resistances,’ and Foucault’s ‘heterotopias’.”

The spatialization of time—presentism over progress—is corollary with the spatialization of the subjectivity in postmodernist fiction, as outlined in Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction*.<sup>3</sup> For McHale, postmodernism impinges on a change of “dominant,” or “the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components” (7), from epistemological in modernist fiction to ontological in postmodernist fiction. The epistemological dominant focuses on questions of narration and knowledge, perception and interpretation, whereas the ontological dominant, is centered on being rather than knowing, on collision and shifting of boundaries and worlds (44). The site of these

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<sup>3</sup> McHale’s observations on Ballard as a postmodernist are discussed in chapter 2, p. 55.

ontological shifts is what McHale calls the Zone, a truly heterotopic space of indeterminacy and floating signifiers (45). The focus on the *telos* of epistemological dominant implies development over time (Becoming), as opposed to the multiplicity of worlds in the ontological dominant (Being).

Postwar literature in the Anglo-American world tended to respond to the sense of disruption by a return to safe, pre-modernist models, such as nineteenth-century realist novels. The disordered timelines of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), as well as the alternative worlds and timelines of Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), however, point toward a movement in the opposite direction. These postmodernist narratives acknowledge the failure of assimilating the psychological effects of the atrocities of World War II, atrocities that reverberate in the media culture of the 1960s and of the Cold War. The satirical *Catch-22* represented a break with traditional representations of war. Firstly, the narrative revolves around a primal scene in which the protagonist, Yossarian, is unable to save his dying gunner, Snowden, during an air raid. The scene of Snowden's death is fragmented and scattered throughout the book, as if the whole chronology of the events is jumbled because of this irruption of the (Lacanian) Real—that unrepresentable core that can only be confronted indirectly, through a multitude of symbolic fictions. These iterations (Snowden is always dying) reinforce a sense of stagnation and continual present in the novel, as Yossarian is stuck and cannot go home as his superiors keep increasing the number of missions required for dismissal. “[T]he telltale quality of *Catch-22*,” writes Kazin, “is that it doesn't move, it can't. The buried-alive feeling of being caught in a plane under attack, of seeing one's partner eviscerated, produces the total impotence of being unable to move, to escape” (84). There are two overlays of repetition in *Catch-22*. On one hand, there is the repetition of the trauma and deferred action, and on the other, the stagnation caused by the absurd circular logics of inefficient bureaucracy that

would rather move the bomb line inch by inch to meet their goals than to take efficient measures.

Representing the war in those terms, *Catch-22* makes evident how war becomes a complete abstraction. Moreover, the novel is less about World War II than the Cold War, about the possibility of a war being fought in total confusion and without limits. The Vietnam War, which took place soon thereafter, bore many aspects of an undifferentiated, virtual conflict. Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) resists a unified vision of World War II with its fragmented narrative, anachronisms, and rewriting of history. As the character Roger Mexico asks, "Will Postwar be nothing but 'events,' newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is this the end of history?" (57). As in *Catch-22*, there is a sense of events that do not amount to a meaningful end, just enacting endless empty repetitions. Pynchon looks at World War II through the prism of the Vietnam War,<sup>4</sup> tracing the true legacy of the war in terms of technology and communication, highlighting the presence of an unseen, insidious force having needs and powers of its own: the war becomes "a machine of many separate parts ... [with] a cruel, accidental resemblance to life" (133), as it was "never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted ... secretly, it was being dictated by the needs of technology ... by a conspiracy between human beings and techniques, by something that needed the energy-burst of war" (530). A preoccupation with the blurring between agency and chance, self and Other, is apparent in the characters' conflation of Tyrone Slothrop's sex life with the V-2 rocket targets. Slothrop is believed to have some kind of preternatural link with the German rockets that attack London, because a map of his sexual conquests parallel the military targets, and the Pavlovian scientists in "The

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<sup>4</sup> Pynchon even includes "anachronistic" passing references to "prisoners from Indo-China" and "eyes from Burma, from Tonkin" (132).

White Visitation” come up with different theories. Like Dr. Nathan, experimenting on the main character in Ballard’s *The Atrocity Exhibition*, there is a desire to read the chaos and destruction of the postwar world in terms of codes:<sup>5</sup> “Isn’t there an ‘interface’ here? a meeting surface for two worlds ... sure, but which two?” (Pynchon 688; ellipsis in the original).

In McHale’s assessment, Pynchon’s depiction of occupied Germany in the anarchic months following the end of the war, known as the Zone, is the postmodern heterotopia par excellence: “As the novel unfolds, our world and the ‘other world’ mingle with increasing intimacy, hallucinations and fantasy become real, metaphors become literal, the fictional world of the mass media ... thrust themselves into the midst of historical reality” (45). In Pynchon and Ballard, Eros is bound inextricably with the Thanatos of technology. Pynchon opens his novel with a quote from Wernher von Braun—the creator of the V-2 rockets, the very technology of which went into making the rockets of the Apollo program—“Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death” (1). Here Pynchon shares with Ballard a concern with the transmutation of all discourses, through technology, to a sublime existence “beyond the zero.” Von Braun’s pronouncement, from a NASA press release regarding the Apollo 11 launch, is about the transformation of the technology of war (the V-2 rocket) into an instrument of “pure” sublime transcendence in sending man to space. Seeing the sublime in the space race, however, is undermined by the fact that the race itself was a means of ideological domination of the Cold War. Ballard is likewise cynical about attaining the sublime through technology

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<sup>5</sup> This is only one of a series of similarities between *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *The Atrocity Exhibition*.

and language, as I will discuss in chapter 4 in relation to *Crash* and the character of Vaughan. In keeping with *Gravity's Rainbow*, the postwar world actualizes von Braun's dream of immortality, dispersing the destructive technologies of war into mechanisms that govern and populate our lives and dreams.

### **The Media Landscape**

The prologue of DeLillo's 1977 novel *Players* provides a textual example of how media realizes a death of affect, as a heterotopic space is constructed by way of conflicting apparatuses. In the text, passengers standing in the piano bar of an airplane in flight watch a film of terrorists shooting a group of golfers to death. The plane is, as Foucault said in a different context, "a piece of floating space, a placeless place that lives by its own devices, that is self-enclosed and, at the same time, delivered to the boundless expanses of the ocean" ("Different" 184-85). One is the actual space the characters are, inside a plane; a film that is projected in that space, converting it into a cinema of sorts and changing its relations conveys the other. The space is not homogeneous to begin with, as the space inside the aircraft is divided into two different spaces, the seats and a piano bar. For the passengers in the bar, there is no soundtrack, but the piano player improvises to accompany the film, creating a very different experience.

The terrorists, trying to isolate their victims singly or in twos, have three men dead almost immediately. Bodies tumble in slow motion. There's blood on golf bags, on white shoes, spreading over tartan pants.... It isn't until now that the silent-movie music reveals the extent of its true relationship to the events on the screen. To the glamour of revolutionary violence, to the secret longing it evokes in the most docile soul, the piano's shiny tinkle brings an irony too

apt to be ignored. The simple innocence of this music undermines the photogenic terror, reducing it to an empty swirl. (DeLillo, *Players* 8)

This is met with laughter and seen as “an occasion for sardonic delight” (9). The viewers’ reaction is confused, prompted by the melodramatic piano music, which seems to come from a different time altogether. The horrific violence on screen is framed as farcical: “The golfers are strewn everywhere. We see them frame by frame, split open, little packages of lacquer. The terrorist chief, *jefe*, honcho, leader fires several rounds into the air—a blood rite or passionate declaration. Buster Keaton, says the piano” (10). Again, we have a disconnect between the carnage and the musical commentary, creating an ambiguous, dialogic, scene.

The end of the film signals the restoration of a humdrum order: “With the configuration thus upset, the piano silent, the film ignored, there is a sense of feelings turning inward.” DeLillo’s narration of a sudden burst of filmic violence that momentarily destabilizes the order of a space shows a desensitized audience, made numb to the images of violence by the simple presence of a discordant piece of music in the soundtrack. A film showing their upper-class filmic avatars engaged in leisure activities being massacred by foreign terrorists has every reason to be disconcerting to them, but DeLillo implies that there is an undermining element at work, making the images lose their potential to shock—and this takes the form of an intrusion of a device from another era. The piano music is uncanny, an eruption from another world that shifts the perspective in such a way to suggest a complicity between the images and their consumers. Violence in the media is no longer an irruption of the Real; it is part of the fabric of the simulacrum: “They remember they are on a plane, travelers. Their true lives lie below, even now beginning to reassemble themselves, calling this very flesh out of the air, in mail waiting to be opened, in telephones ringing and paper work on office desks, in the chance utterance of a name” (10).

The first thesis of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) comments on separation from reality: "The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (11). The turning point in the 1960s, where reality became finally virtual, seems to be for DeLillo (and Ballard) the Kennedy assassination, "a symbolically necessary but imagined origin of the 'society of the spectacle' that America has come to inhabit" (Knight 34), exemplified in the endless replication of the Zapruder film in televisions across the world and repurposed to various means in DeLillo's *Libra* (1988) and *Underworld* (1997), as well as in Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*: "Each night, as Travers moved through the deserted auditorium, the films of simulated atrocities played above the rows of empty seats, images of napalm victims, crashing cars and motorcade attacks" (74). Debord's fourth thesis describes the condition in which these images are replicated as becoming another kind of reality, a simulacrum: "The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (11). The Zapruder film is appropriated in *Underworld* as having a mystical force around it as an underground movement stages a screening of it:

The event was rare and strange. It was the screening of a bootleg copy of an eight-millimeter home movie that ran about twenty seconds. ... Of course the event had a cachet, an edge of special intensity. But if those in attendance felt they were lucky to be there, they also drew a kind of floating fear, a mercury reading out of the sixties, with a distinctly trippy edge. (DeLillo 488)

*Underworld* shares some of the concerns of *Gravity's Rainbow* in tracing the relation between paranoia, media, and technology from World War II to the Cold War to the present world. The more stable, binary paranoia of the Cold War gives rise to a dispersed, heterotopic and insecure paranoia of postmodernity, in which everything relates to everything and threats

are everywhere. This shift is a development from DeLillo's work in the 1970s, which is less concerned about the workings of history and in which the media landscape is numbing. DeLillo, like Ballard, is troubled with the surplus charge of these images—far from being meaningless, they constitute a new mythos. The depthlessness of these cultural artefacts might be read, as Paul Crosthwaite observes, “as serving simultaneously to ward off and to register a range of insistent, unresolved historical traumas (23). Indeed, reverberations of World War II are not only “machinations of capitalist reification” but also a sign of “psychic defence-formation” (23). This is precisely what Jean Baudrillard misunderstood about Ballard's *Crash*, when he used it as an example of his theory of simulation.<sup>6</sup> For Baudrillard, simulation is not representation, because that implies the existence of an original—in the contemporary world, the simulacrum or image bears “no relation to any reality whatsoever” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 6). Reality in the simulation is abolished: “Simulation is ... the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal ... It is all of metaphysics that is lost. No more mirror of being” (1-2). In *Crash*, according to Baudrillard, there is only the hyperreality.

Mistaken as he might be about *Crash*, Baudrillard still provides useful ways of looking at atrocities. In *The Transparency of Evil*, he comments on the strange aura that images of atrocities gain in our culture as taking part in

a transition from the historical stage to a mythical stage: the mythic—and media-led—reconstruction of all these events. And in a sense this mythic conversion is the only possible way ... to absolve us in phantasy from the guilt of this primal crime. But in order for this to be achieved, in order for even a crime to become a myth, the historical reality must first be eradicated.

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<sup>6</sup> The critical debate concerning *Crash* and Baudrillard is discussed in chapter 4, pp. 105-07.

Otherwise, all these things (fascism, the camps, the extermination) have been, and remain, historically unresolvable for us, we should be obliged to repeat them forever like a primal scene. (105)

We now look only at the empty shells of the simulations of atrocities, brought forth as attempts to ward off trauma. The fact that atrocities, even if hollowed out, are repeated and replicated in media speaks to their enduring potency and weight as cultural signs. They keep being reworked, repeated, and reproduced, even if inappropriately. One can think here of DeLillo's satiric *White Noise* (1984), in which the protagonist, Jack Gladney, is a professor of "Hitler Studies," fascinated with Nazi aesthetics but oblivious to the moral dimension of the atrocities of the past.

### Hauntology

In Ballard the encounter with the Real is ambiguous. The primal scene is in place, but the return to the traumatic moment is not one fraught with impotence, but with a sense of omnipotence—in Lacanian terms, this is the "answer of the real": instead of "derailing the balance of our daily lives," writes Slavoj Žižek, "it serves at the same time as a support of this very balance" (*Looking Awry* 29).<sup>7</sup> The momentary loss of the symbolic reality often taking place by the intrusion of the real in Ballard's fiction (prime examples being *Empire of the Sun* and *Crash*) is inverted from impotence to omnipotence. The contingent world of the real is seen as "answering" the demands of the subject: "There must always be some 'little piece of the real,' totally contingent but nonetheless perceived by the subject as a

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<sup>7</sup> The concept was originally developed by J.-A. Miller's in "Les réponses du réel," itself based on Lacan's remarks in *L'étourdit*. Žižek discusses it in terms of Steven Spielberg's film of Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* in *Looking Awry* (28-32).

confirmation, as the support of its belief in its own omnipotence” (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 30). Ballard’s characters are not thrown in states of despair or confusion in the face of the *unheimlich*—these are feelings mostly alien to Ballard’s writings, which articulate the way the encounters with the real are contained and balanced within the psychic apparatus. In this sense, Ballard’s fiction is one of psychological survival. For the reader, this may have an uncanny feeling because of the inversion, from *unheimlich* to *heimlich*. The question remains, however, whether this sense of omnipotence is part of a therapeutic working through or just a worsening of trauma by systematic delusion. The unseemly fascination in Ballard with car crashes, the atom bomb, as well as the romanticization of a World War II concentration camp, just to name a few examples, is part of the act of mythologizing pointed out by Baudrillard. Far more radical than the defamiliarization of Shklovsky and Brecht, Ballard’s fiction illustrates how we can be prepared to accept what is bizarre, traumatic, and catastrophic, and make it familiar.

We can now return to the notion of estrangement from the beginning of the chapter, with Žižek’s idea of a “parallax gap,” which can serve here as a useful visual metaphor. In *The Parallax View* (2006), the *objet a*, the object-cause of desire, “is the very cause of the parallax gap, that unfathomable X which forever eludes the symbolic grasp and thus causes the multiplicity of symbolic perspectives” (18). Žižek continues his argument: “*L’objet petit a* can thus be defined as a pure parallax object: it is not only that its contours change with the shift of the subject; it exists—its presence can be discerned—only when the landscape is viewed from a certain perspective” (*Parallax* 18). Moreover, that means that the status of the Real is parallaxic, going against the Lacanian notion that the Real is “the same in all possible (symbolic) universes” (Žižek, *Parallax* 26). For Žižek, “the parallax Real is rather that which accounts for the very multiplicity of appearances of the same underlying Real—it is not the hard core which persists as the Same, but the hard bone of contention which pulverizes the

sameness into the multitude of appearances.” Žižek proposes that the Real is not stable but virtual and non-existing. This “unfathomable core” can only be reconstructed, retroactively, from the profusion of symbolic fictions. This proposition helps to explain why the postmodern multiplicity of worlds is not only without meaning, but in fact constitutes a mythos, albeit one with no real center.

The repetition of images of atrocities in the era of simulation shows us how repression works in postmodernity. There is an illusion that this repetition is instrumental in the deadening of our affect, as if the affect is being repressed, or even that there is no repression at all. In Ballard’s work, the postmodern world is constantly reconfiguring its parameters, always in parallax. The uncanny, through its quality of destabilizing oppositions, can signify the parallax gap itself; it lurks beneath the surface, in-between states of being. Without a future, the Other of the present is a spectral past. Jacques Derrida’s notion of *hauntology* (a pun on ontology), outlined in *Specters of Marx* (1993), describes this condition of a past that, like the ghost of Hamlet’s father, returns and haunts, awaiting a resolution.

To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a *hauntology*. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration. (161)

Presentism is fundamentally unsatisfying because of its inability to truly deal with the past as that which precedes the present. The postmodern obsession with relics of a(n) (imagined) past is typical of this sense of disquiet, as the present is conceived not as taking place after the past, but trying to incorporate, or at the very least, coexisting with specters of the past within that present. Philip K. Dick’s *Ubik* (1969) exemplifies this in terms of breaking of ontological boundaries, as one reality seeps into another and the characters see objects

“degrading” from the present reality to another, past reality. The same process of gradual breakdown of reality can be seen in films such as David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Drive* (2002), in which reality slips into fantasy and vice-versa. Ballard does not deal with two opposing worlds—in his fiction, the world is already an amalgam, a fantastic reality. There, we often see relics from the future: the dead astronauts, the abandoned launch pads of places such as Cape Kennedy, and the retrofuturist resort of Vermilion Sands are archetypal figures of this imagined future that was once tenable. They return, uncannily, not only from the past, but also from this spectral future, enacting a temporal reconfiguration within a mythology of the “time out of joint” of the postwar world.

In postmodernity, Jameson argues, temporality has collapsed into spatiality. Ballard’s fiction is characteristic of a spatial turn; a certain death of affect emerges from these spaces, but Ballard takes a page from the surrealist book and tries to revitalize the numbing effects of the media landscape, investing his images with a mythical quality. This allows him to work through traumas and crises of representation of the postwar world, including the fascination with the media landscape itself. In this sense, it is important to make apparent the conceptual boundaries of time, space, and body, and identify the anxieties lurking underneath the surface at one particular point in time and shifting the boundaries between what is accepted, desired, and forbidden.

## Chapter 2:

### J. G. Ballard and the Technological Uncanny

This chapter is concerned with a review of the secondary literature on Ballard. It begins with a discussion of Ballard's central concept of "inner space," a fictional zone of constant slippage between signifiers, and how it is central to his poetics; then it moves on to discuss how Ballard's work has been read as combining elements from surrealism, romanticism, Pop Art, science fiction, and postmodernism.

#### From Outer to Inner Space: The New Wave

Ballard championed the turn from outer space to inner space in the early 1960s with his manifesto/editorial in *New Worlds* titled "Which Way to Inner Space." He illustrated the concept of inner space with hyperboles such as "the only truly alien planet is Earth" and "the biggest developments of the intermediate future will take place, not on the Moon or Mars, but on Earth, and it is *inner* space, not outer, that needs to be explored" (*Guide* 197). Inner space was extremely influential in the British New Wave, but Ballard was not the first to use the term in a science fiction context. J. B. Priestley's 1953 essay "They Come from Inner Space" characterized UFO legends, "the myths and characteristic dreams of our age," as signals from the unconscious, "the first rumblings of the volcano that will overwhelm us" (21). Priestley elaborates:

We prefer to think of ourselves traveling to the other side of the sun rather than sitting quietly at home and then moving inward, exploring ourselves, the hidden life of the psyche. All this comes of trying to live a dimension short, with infinite length and breadth, from here to Sirius, but with no depth, without the spirit. (22)

Ray Bradbury used the tropes of science fiction to express his deepest feelings, according to Priestley (24). Similarly, Ballard noted that Bradbury could transform these conventional tropes into “an enthralling private world” (*User’s Guide* 195), thus prefiguring a certain distrust of technology later shown by the New Wave, as Bradbury “ignored the manifest content of science fiction and worked up its latent symbolism to inform a peculiar, stylized vision of his own” (Greenland 52). This early incarnation of inner space promotes a science fiction closer to Earth, closer to the present, and closer to our own mentalities. Ballard ends his manifesto with an anecdote about Dali, who delivered a lecture in London dressed in a diving suit: when asked how deep he proposed to descend, Dali answered, “to the Unconscious!” Ballard concludes that it is that inner space suit that was needed, and up to science fiction to build it (*User’s Guide* 198).

In “Time, Memory and Inner Space” (1963), Ballard furthers the connection with psychoanalytical discourse:

Without in any way suggesting that the act of writing is a form of creative self-analysis, I feel that the writer of fantasy has a marked tendency to select images and ideas which directly reflect the internal landscapes of his mind, and the reader of fantasy must interpret them on this level, distinguishing between the manifest content, which may seem obscure, meaningless or nightmarish, and the latent content, the private vocabulary of symbols drawn from the writer’s mind. The dream worlds invented by the writer of fantasy are the external equivalents of the inner world of the psyche, and because they take their impetus from the most formative and confused periods of our lives they are often time-sculptures of terrifying ambiguity. (*User’s Guide* 200)

In this incarnation of inner space, it is not only the wild, dream imagery of the unconscious that make their way into the page, but a mixture of imagination and memory. It is crucial to

create fictions that elide the division between the manifest and the latent content. Ballard was intent on exploring this, to the point that inner space was an appropriate way to tap into the latent content not only of his own psyche, but also from a cultural psyche as well—an interest documented in media-centric fictions such as *The Atrocity Exhibition*. These dream worlds, for Ballard, are derived from the “most formative and confused periods of our lives” and are “time-sculptures of terrifying ambiguity” (*User’s Guide* 200) that denote a close association with an uncanny remembrance of traumatic memories. In a 2005 interview, Ballard stated that by inner space he meant “the invented space that you see in dreams and surrealist paintings in particular, but also in highly dislocated realities such as war zones, sites of plane crashes, earthquake aftermaths, derelict buildings, where the observer imposes his own dreams, fears, phobias” (qtd. in Francis 67). The shifting nature of his view of inner space, later modified to comport “real” spaces is reflected in his work, and will be discussed in further chapters.

Colin Greenland, in his 1983 study of the New Wave, *The Entropy Exhibition*, notes that inner space spoke to a certain romantic sensibility that valued subjectivity over objects and objectives, and writers who wanted to describe new worlds “but felt that the subjectivity of their vision was more important than objective correspondence with the laws of probability, astrophysics, or even logic” (54) set out to explore it. In these fictions, inspired by Jungian psychology,

[a] dream-like atmosphere displaces the reader as it does the central character; removed to an unfamiliar and unpredictable world, we share his enlivened awareness of its contours and climate. Details assume the quality of omens, signs, annunciations. Incidents seem portentous, decisions irrevocable: the hero is engaging the events of his destiny.

The New Wave's turn to inner space was a significant step toward a postmodern discourse within science fiction, and the representation of a world in which the concept of reality was no longer stable. For the New Wave, the world was a disaster area, filled with fragments from which survivors had to piece together their own subjective reality. A disaster had already taken place, and this was an attempt to deal with the shock of a history that had been disrupted, by bridging the gap between inner world and a derelict external world (Greenland 58).

Science fiction writers of the 1960s, according to Greenland, sought to demystify the two figures of contrasting scientific establishments of the day: the astronaut and the psychiatrist (66). They represent this almost interchangeable quality between outer and inner space, neatly summarized by Burroughs, who described himself as a "cosmonaut of inner space" (qtd. in Greenland 66). This "shortening of imaginative focus, from the inconceivably remote to the inescapably present" produced dark fictions, skeptical of utopian projects and of the space race. This skepticism is exemplified by Ballard's recurring figure of the dead astronaut, which represents the death of a particular dream of the future. The New Wave succeeds, however, in representing a space of the now, engaging with history and technology to properly situate us, "despite failing communications and disintegrations of language," to let us know "where and what we are now" (Greenland 67).

### **Ballardian Space**

One of the earliest monographs about Ballard is David Pringle's *Earth is the Alien Planet*, published in 1979, around the middle of Ballard's career. Pringle identifies, at the time of publication, three major periods in his writing. The first period, 1956-65, encompasses the early short stories and the quartet of catastrophe novels, the disowned *The Wind from Nowhere*, *The Drowned World*, *The Drought*, and *The Crystal World*. The second,

1966-75, Ballard's middle, dark period, sees the publication of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, *Crash*, *Concrete Island*, *High-Rise*, and a number of short stories. The first period for Pringle is one of the inner landscapes, whereas in the second Ballard's interest shifted to outer landscapes and abandoned most of the science fiction conventions, and brought his fiction closer to the present day (8). The third, which would include the novella "The Ultimate City" and *The Unlimited Dream Company*, is somewhat "mellower" and more "romantic," "tending towards the fantastic again, back to the inner landscapes." An organizational principle of Ballard's work grounded on the study of his landscapes can be dated back to this early study of his fiction.

Despite its brevity, *Earth Is the Alien Planet* is an incisive and cogent interpretation of Ballard's work up to the late 1970s. Pringle's knowledge of Ballard's work is impressive in its breadth and precision of interpretation, as he stays close to the primary texts and does not attempt to force Ballard into any kind of theoretical framework, except to point out repetitions of settings, character types, names, and symbols. Writing about Ballard's visual qualities, Pringle provides a comprehensive list of Ballardian properties and settings, of "things seen" that are instantly recognizable:

I am referring of course, to such things as concrete weapons-ranges, dead fish, abandoned airfields, radio telescopes, crashed space-capsules, sand dunes, empty cities, sand reefs, half-submerged buildings, helicopters, crocodiles, open-air cinema screens, jeweled insects, advertising hoardings, white hotels, beaches, fossils, broken juke-boxes, crystals, lizards, multi-storey car-parks, dry lake-beds, medical laboratories, drained swimming pools, mannequins, sculpture gardens, wrecked cars, swamps, motorway flyovers, stranded ships, broken Coke bottles, bales of rusting barbed wire, paddy fields, lagoons,

deserts, menacing vegetation, high-rise buildings, predatory birds, and low-flying aircraft . (16)

This world of landscapes and objects is indelible and characteristic to Ballard, in which this incredible stillness presides over characters and their actions.

Pringle suggests that Ballard's use of symbols is consistent and revolves around four categories: water, sand, concrete, and crystal (18). The water imagery that dominates works such as *The Drowned World* represents the past; sand, as in *The Drought* and the Vermilion Sands stories, indicates the future; concrete, as in *Crash* and *The Atrocity Exhibition*, the present; and crystal, featuring prominently in *The Crystal World*, is a symbol of eternity. His "water" and "sand" stories are set in the natural world: in *The Drowned World*, the landscapes figure submerged buildings and lagoons, whereas in *The Drought*, they are almost the inverse, with dried-up riverbeds and dunes (20). In the "concrete" works, Ballard shows an affinity with modern architecture, structures that impart a sense of enclosure. Stories such as "Billennium," "The Concentration City," and "The Subliminal Man" are set in worlds surrounded by machines and media. Pringle suggests that the world of *The Atrocity Exhibition* induces claustrophobia because "it represents an exteriorization of his own mind—or, more widely, a concretization of the mind of modern urban man" (27). Since everything is artificial, it is also "coded" and subject to (psycho)analysis. Man is trapped "within his own creations, and thus within himself. ... [This] completely 'fictional' world ... is a work of science fiction, since it has been brought into existence by science and technology" (27). For Ballard, the truly frightening aspects of the contemporary world have to do with the fact that its technologies are set in place to indulge our most dangerous whims.

For Pringle, the last major symbol, that of the crystal, represents eternity and the infinite, used most prominently in *The Crystal World* and in the story "The Garden of Time": "In the crystal world all opposites merge: light and dark, man and animal, life and death,

space and time—all are resolved into one” (32). This symbol refers to a recurring expression, “a philosophy of acceptance” (as in “The Terminal Beach,” “The Impossible Man,” and “The Assassination Weapon”), an acceptance that is about the “justness of existence ... the very antithesis of Western civilization’s perennial discontent” (30) and a way to “make a ‘whole’ out of a quantified universe” (31). The crystal world is a world without time, a fragment of eternity to fill the entire universe, “an ultimate macrocosmic zero beyond the wildest dreams of Plato and Democritus” (Ballard qtd. in Pringle 32).

Much like the landscapes and objects, characters in Ballard, according to Pringle, have a symbolic function: “If landscape is a state of mind in Ballard’s writing, then this rule must extend to the figures that people the landscape” (39). Ballard’s secondary characters could be seen as figments of the protagonist’s imagination or set types, a claim that Pringle defends by arguing that Ballard is a symbolic fantasist, more interested in the complex and unique relation between subject and world, between the individual and setting.

He achieves his effects through the intelligent manipulation of symbols, properties, [and] landscapes ... Ballard does not write a fiction of social *interaction*; he is not primarily concerned with the ways in which people change each other ... Rather, he is concerned with the individual’s relationship with his own mind and impulses; with the relationship between the solitary awareness and various environments and technologies; ultimately, with the relationship between humanity and time, the fact of death, the “phenomenology of the universe.” (40)

This does not mean that Ballard is entirely solipsistic, only that he is more interested in exploring the complex and unique relation between subject and world, between the individual and setting, rather than the conventional relation between individuals of realism.

Greenland adds to Pringle's defense of Ballard's "unrealistic" characters, arguing that Ballard chronicles mental breakdowns and journeys of psychic dissolution:

[The hero is] bound on a quest through solitude and death for a reality larger than we can perceive: the true nature of the external world. Separate from it, man feels a deathwish [sic] for total immersion in it. Ballard, convinced that the world itself needs psychoanalyzing, has no place for novelistic conventions of verisimilitude, whether of things or people. (99)

Ballard is very much interested in psychological processes, but these seem to take shape in spaces and landscapes. In a 1976 interview, he stated:

All my fiction is in a sense about isolation and how to cope with isolation. I'm talking about man's biological isolation in relation [to] the universe, his isolation in time, the sense of his finite life in the face of this panoply of alternatives from which he is excluded, and latterly the isolation between man and the individual and this technological landscape, which offers more hope perhaps. (qtd. in Greenland 99)

Ballard seems to be interested in only one character, which takes the form of his protagonist, usually a doctor, or an architect, in his mid-thirties, with obsessional tendencies. He has deviated from this norm only a few times, most notably in "The Dead Time" and *Empire of the Sun*, in which the protagonist is a young boy. Not coincidentally, these texts have strong autobiographical elements.<sup>8</sup> The protagonist of his most radical fictional experiment, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, does not have a fixed name (interchangeably called Traven, Travis, Talbot, Trabert), and the supporting characters seem to come and go from the narrative as if

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<sup>8</sup> "Having a Wonderful Time" is the exception to this rule, as it has a female protagonist.

from a dream, even returning from death more than once. Punter rejects an autobiographical prism and calls Ballard a post-structuralist in terms of character:

the long tradition of enclosed and unitary subjectivity comes to mean less and less to him as he explores the ways in which a person is increasingly controlled by landscape and machine, increasingly becomes a point of intersection for overloaded scripts and processes which have effectively concealed their distant origins in human agency. (*The Hidden Script* 9)

Punter's description of a "visual slippage" that occurs "as we gaze at individuals," refocusing our attention to a web in which they are suspended, recalls Foucault's visual metaphors when talking about heterotopias,<sup>9</sup> again recognizing different power structures and roles in those spaces ("Different Spaces" 178). Often in these texts, as Brian McHale has noted, the perspective and consciousness are limited to a single observer, and "we are encouraged to wonder how much of the implausible external landscape might actually be due to this observer's projections and distortions" (69), again pointing to this elision between the real and the imagined.

### **The Influence of Surrealism**

Greenland compares Ballard's habit of beginning a story with a pictorial tableau reminiscent of Surrealist paintings, scenes of dereliction and decay, again suggesting a particularly visual and evocative stillness to Ballard's writing (93). Ballard's enthusiasm for the Surrealists is explicit and even shared by many of his characters. Beatrice Dahl in *The Drowned World*, for instance, possesses paintings by Paul Delvaux and Max Ernst, tableaux that will echo in the imagery of the novel.

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<sup>9</sup> See chapter 1, p. 22-23.

Over the mantelpiece was a huge painting by the early 20th century surrealist Delvaux, in which ashen-faced women danced naked to the waist with dandified skeletons in tuxedos against a spectral bonelike landscape. On another wall one of Max Ernst's self-devouring phantasmagoric jungles screamed silently to itself, like the sump of some insane unconscious. (Ballard, *The Drowned World* 23)

The “skeletons in tuxedos” will make an appearance in the chapter titled “The Feast of Skulls,” and Ernst's phantasmagoric, silent jungle—probably an allusion to “The Eye of Silence”—seems to mirror the descriptions of the submerged buildings.<sup>10</sup> Salvador Dali, Giorgio de Chirico, and Ives Tanguy are other painters whose works are often mentioned. Ballard noted that the connection with these paintings is deliberate:

[T]he surrealists have created a series of valid external landscapes, which have their direct correspondences within our own minds. ... [H]ere, in these spinal landscapes, which I feel that painters such as Ernst and Dali are producing, one finds a middle ground (an area which I've described as “inner space”) between the outer world of reality on the one hand, and the inner world of the psyche on the other. (Ballard qtd. in Greenland 101)

Greenland argues that Ballard's images, like the surrealists', have “an extraordinary power of emotional and imaginative conviction ... Violating our expectations of continuity, every painting, every collage is a metaphysical disaster area” (102). Ballard's non-fiction piece

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the surrealist imagery in *The Drowned World*, see chapter 1 of Jeanette Baxter's *J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination*, which traces parallels with paintings by Dali, Delvaux, and Ernst.

“The Coming of the Unconscious” (1966) expounds his affinity with the surrealist’s project of investigating the latent content of reality.

The images of surrealism are the iconography of inner space. ... [S]urrealism is in fact the first movement, in the words of Odilon Redon, to place “the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible.” This calculated submission of the impulses and fantasies of our inner lives to the rigors of time and space, to the formal inquisition of the sciences, psychoanalysis pre-eminent among them, produces an alternate reality beyond and above those familiar to either our sight or our senses. (*User’s Guide* 84)

At the heart of Ballard’s engagement with surrealism is a fascination with the discourses of psychoanalysis, particularly with Freud. Surrealism provides an artistic mode of expression of our inner lives, a way of disrupting reality to allow the repressed to emerge. Ballard’s descriptions of paintings by Dali, Ernst, de Chirico, Magritte, and Dominguez in “The Coming of the Unconscious” read uncannily like the landscapes of his own fiction. “If anything,” Ballard writes, “surrealist painting has one dominant characteristic: a glassy isolation, as if all the objects in its landscapes had been drained of their emotional associations, the accretions of sentiment and common usage” (*User’s Guide* 88). Years later, in an interview for *The Paris Review*, Ballard rejected the intimation that these landscapes are related to decadence, instead claiming that they are like the desert, “in that I see them merely as psychic zero stations, or as ‘Go,’ in Monopoly terms” (*Extreme* 184). He is interested in the surrealist use of the uncanny, at least in terms of the landscape, a juxtaposition that turns the “unfamiliar” into the “sensational,” through a “revelation of unexpected associations.” He argues that it may be “an attempt to invert and reverse the commonplace, to turn the sock inside out.” Thus, surrealist techniques were particularly relevant at a time in which the “fictional elements around us are multiplying to the point it is almost impossible to

distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘false’” (*User’s Guide* 88), creating a space for juxtapositions and inversions, as Gregory Stephenson notes, close to André Breton’s notion of the *point sublime*, a state of consciousness “from which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable, and the incommunicable, the high and the low, are no longer seen as contradictory” (Breton qtd. in Stephenson 165), essentially an uncanny space.

In a 2005 study, Andrzej Gasiorek states that Ballard’s “strange, haunting landscape exteriorizes inner experiences that are otherwise inarticulable” (12), as they combine analytical and synthetic tendencies to lay bare “the unconscious processes that informed key aspects of external public life” (8). In keeping with surrealism, they also seek to “overcome divisions—between self and world, the rational and the irrational, the conscious and the unconscious—sublating them in a liberatory synthesis” (9). Jeanette Baxter’s *J. G. Ballard’s Surrealist Imagination* (2009) attempts to posit Ballard’s work as “a radical Surrealist experiment in the rewriting of post-war history and culture” (2). Surrealist art, in Baxter’s view, was “a way into the historical unconscious for Ballard; a way of reassessing and rupturing the flat, homogenous and ideologically contrived surface of official narratives of post-war history and culture” (7). For the purposes of the present dissertation, Baxter’s discussion of “historical atrocity and its legacies of trauma, guilt, and amnesia” (7) can help to illuminate the exploration of the space of cultural memory at work in Ballard in chapter 6. Baxter views his writing as an “exercise in historical representation that insists on subjectivity and agency, and which views history and its vicissitudes without fetishism in order to confront its neuroses, anxieties and psychopathologies” (8), effectively historicizing Ballard, and drawing him as an imaginative writer dealing with contemporaneous issues. Ballard’s “remapping of the contemporary, post-war psyche through the topography of ‘inner space’” has, for Baxter, surrealist origins (6), and in her attempt to reinstate surrealism as a governing influence on Ballard, she criticizes Gasiorek for ignoring its “historical, political or

visual dimensions” (13). Baxter’s study, while important in expanding Ballard’s engagement with surrealism, downplays how other, equally important discourses—namely science fiction, psychoanalysis, and Pop Art—shaped his writing.

### **Ballard and Postmodernism**

Gasiorek categorizes Ballard’s work into two modes: the first is an analytical, investigative mode that attempts to uncover forces motivating social life, dealing with, among others, urbanization, technological change, war, and “the effect on everyday life of an increasingly image-based culture”; the second includes “rhapsodic, restitutive texts” that touch on “themes of metamorphosis and transfiguration” and try to evade “the tyranny of linear time or to overcome the strife of a conflict-torn world” (8). This categorization implies that, in some level, Ballard writes in either one mode or the other—whereas this is true, to some extent, in his short fiction, it is reductive to assume that these modes are mutually exclusive. Novels such as *Crash* act in both modes, articulating the interdependence of the trends Gasiorek identifies. While surrealism is a potent way of “seeing through the surface truths of social phenomena” (13), Gasiorek claims that it is not the master-key to Ballard’s fictional world, and contextualizes Pop Art as an equally significant influence, quoting from a discussion between Ballard and Eduardo Paolozzi:

Surrealism moulds the two worlds together, remakes the external world of reality in terms of the internal world of fantasy and fictions. [T]his position has [now] been reversed. It’s the external world which is now the realm, the paramount realm, of fantasy. And it’s the internal world of the mind which is the one node of reality that most of us have. The fiction is all out there. You can’t overlay your own fiction on top of that. You’ve got to use, I think, a much more analytic technique than the synthetic technique of the surrealists.

Eduardo does this in his graphics. He's approaching the subject matter of the present day exactly like the scientist on safari, looking at the landscape, testing, putting sensors out, charting various parameters. (qtd. in Gasiorek 13)

In his introduction to *Crash* (1973), Ballard takes on this role of an artist on safari, testing out fictional experiments.<sup>11</sup> Apparently here lies the break between Ballard's first, allegorical stage (before the "condensed novels" of *The Atrocity Exhibition*), in which the landscapes were an expression of inner space, to a second stage in which the "fiction is all out there," a space in which "your own fiction" cannot be overlaid on. The motif of trying to colonize an empty space and meeting resistance on the part of the landscape is one that Ballard would explore in later fictions, such as *The Atrocity Exhibition*, *Concrete Island*, and *Hello America* (1981).

Gasiorek sees Ballard conducting inquests or postmortems when writing in his analytical mode, "dissect[ing] the body of contemporary culture with scalpel-like precision, deploying a deliberately 'cold' technique," often seen as lacking moral engagement (13). Moreover, this reversal of the fictional and the real world for Ballard, according to Gasiorek, meant that surrealism was tied to an outdated division between conscious and unconscious, and "[surrealism]'s desire to overcome division, to bring about a synthesis of disparate psychological and phenomenological elements, threatened a premature resolution of

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<sup>11</sup> Ballard writes, "I feel myself that the writer's role, his authority and licence to act, have changed radically. I feel that, in a sense, the writer knows nothing any longer. He has no moral stance. He offers the reader the contents of his own head, a set of options and imaginative alternatives. His role is that of the scientist, whether on safari or in his laboratory, faced with an unknown terrain or subject. All he can do is to devise various hypotheses and test them against the facts." ("Introduction to *Crash*")

contradictions” (14). Ballard’s usage of surrealist techniques such as the collage explores similar territory as Max Ernst’s: to bridge the private sphere and the public world, and to allow another reality to emerge. In Scott Bukatman’s assertion, in Ballard’s texts of the late 1960s, “it is only the fact of coincidence that is meaningful, the randomness of collision, the cut-ups of a reality that is *already* cut up” (44).

Ballard’s shift in his conception of inner space owes to the influence of Pop Art—especially of the British Independent Group of the 1950s and 1960s—is clear, as it “refused to disavow the materiality of culture, treating the growth of technology, consumerism and the mass media as the everyday data to which the arts should respond” (Gasiorek 14), and Ballard would even produce works within the constructivist collages and assemblies of Pop Art in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ballard links science fiction to Pop Art as an art of the present moment in his nonfiction piece “Fictions of Every Kind”:

The subject matter of science fiction is the subject matter of everyday life: the gleam on refrigerator cabinets, the contours of a wife’s or a 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 ... (*User’s Guide* 207)

Analysis of a “hidden agenda” of the “consumer landscape” could also be seen as a surrealist preoccupation, but, according to Gasiorek, surrealism’s attention to the individual ignored a “social unconscious that was being exteriorized on a daily basis” and Pop Art was better equipped to deal with this scenario (15). “In essence,” Ballard writes, “science fiction is a response to science and technology as perceived by the inhabitants of the consumer goods society” (*User’s Guide* 205). The “mediascape,” both in Guy Debord’s Situationism and in science fiction, is a “reality ontologically transformed by the multiplicity of electronic signals in the air ... an extension of the mass media” (Bukatman 42). Scott Bukatman sees Ballard’s

mission as decoding the multitude of signals in order to identify the latent meanings of the mediascape, “to tease out the ‘deviant logic’ found in the random geometries of pop-historical artifacts” (43). In stories such as “The Subliminal Man,” where billboards flash a constant barrage of subliminal advertising, or “The Intensive Care Unit,” where humans only communicate with each other through video screens, even the unconscious, is annexed by this mediascape.

Bukatman resists classifying Burroughs and Ballard as “postmodern,” but concedes that postmodernism would be inconceivable without them (46). For Ballard, the way reality was lived in the 1960s resembled more the form of the cut-ups and his condensed novels than the linear narrative of the traditional novel—a recognition that these are techniques “largely mimetic of a profoundly transformed reality” (Bukatman 46). Brian McHale elects *The Atrocity Exhibition* as the point when Ballard “frees his ontological projections from their epistemological constraints, producing what is essentially a postmodernist text based on science-fiction *topoi*” (69). Furthermore, Ballard’s recycling of names, settings, objects, and situations—taken to an extreme in that text—complicates science fiction’s “ontological confrontation between the present and a dystopian future world by superimposing on top of it so to speak, a characteristically postmodernist ontological confrontation between the text as formal object and the world that it projects” (70). Even though McHale has been criticized for his purely aesthetic “art in a closed field” analysis and his “too convenient separation of ontology from epistemology” (Bukatman 164), he does highlight Ballard’s preoccupations with representing a fragmented, “already cut-up” reality—raising the question whether Ballardian spaces can even be considered mimetic.

### From the Sublime to the Grotesque

In the following sections, I discuss readings by Gregory Stephenson, David Punter, and Roger Luckhurst about the notion of sublime transcendence (away from the body) on the part of Ballard's characters. In Ballard, especially in the series of technological disaster novels, there is a "profound suspicion of the new cultural formations," but the act of acceptance, Bukatman claims, is paramount (46).

In *The Drowned World*, the hero, Kerans, is the only one to do anything meaningful. His decision to stay, to come to terms with the changes taking place within himself, to understand the logic of his relationship with the shifting biological kingdom ... is a totally meaningful course of action. The behavior of the other people, which superficially appears to be meaningful—getting the hell out, draining the lagoons—is totally meaningless. (Ballard, qtd. in Goddard and Pringle 33)

Bukatman sees this acceptance as particularly influential, especially in cyberpunk (46), a genre that advocated and embraced all-inclusive technological change in many fields, including psychology.

There is a certain strain in Ballard's writing related to a sublime transcendence of the material world, as noted by Gregory Stephenson in his Jungian study *Out of the Night and into the Dream*. For Stephenson, the central concern of Ballard's writing is "the problem of exceeding or escaping the limitations of the material world, the space-time continuum, the body, the senses and ordinary ego consciousness, all of which are seen as illusory in nature" (1). Stephenson misses the irony of these attempts at transcendence, and argues that these themes "represent neither an expression of universal pessimism nor a negation of human values or goals, but, rather, an affirmation of the highest humanistic and metaphysical ideal: the repossession for humankind of authentic and absolute being" (2). It is not hard to find

fault with Stephenson's reasoning, because much of the irony in stories such as "The Overloaded Man" comes from the fact that the protagonist escapes reality and ends up killing his wife without even realizing it. Similarly, Stephenson reads *Crash* as "an affirmation of survival and the persistence of forces in the psyche that seek to redeem us from the sterility and futility of our lives in the world and from the prison of material, temporal existence, from the finite universe" (74), but there is no suggestion in the text that there indeed is an "ontological Eden," a space where this escape can take place. Vaughan, the character who leads the protagonist into the sub-world of car-crashes mediated by sexuality, commits suicide by crashing his car into Elizabeth Taylor's limousine at the end of the novel. *Crash* is only one of the texts that imply that this search for an "ontological Eden" is a delusion, as that Eden can only be constructed out of the very materials that consciousness is trying to discard.

Significantly, Stephenson sees Ballard's affinity with the "dark realm of the irrational" as a carryover of the "prose romance"—the Gothic novel being its chief manifestation (161). Ballard shares many characteristics with the "prose romance," including the "quality of being impelled by the power of the unconscious and of being imbued by its energies," but Stephenson fails to trace a connection between Ballard's landscapes and the uncanny spaces of Gothic fiction. His analytical framework does not allow him to see Ballardian space as anything besides an expression of the unconscious, which accounts for many of Ballard's symbols, but does not fully consider the implications of his subject matter.

Ballard should be seen "in the context of developing conceptions of [the imagination] from the romantic period onwards," writes Samuel Francis, even "quixotically reasserting the romantic heritage of the Surrealist imagination in the context of the postmodern world of simulation" (186). David Punter in *The Literature of Terror* connects Ballard to that tradition, claiming that the main issue in Ballard's works is the conflict between "the individual and a

dehumanized environment,” and the same fears of scientism expressed by Mary Shelley and H. G. Wells are reconfigured “in terms of an exploration of incompatible geometries” (374). The apparatus of science (such as in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, or even the clinical language of *Crash*) is used as a means to view the world as “pattern and geometry,” an approach reflected in the “empty” characters attempting to construct identity in a world that appears to deny it (Punter, *Terror* 392). They inhabit worlds of extreme materialism in which “minds exert no hold over matter but have to find spaces in the material into which insert themselves,” and make it into some semblance of coherence (399).

In *The Hidden Script*, Punter describes Ballard’s landscapes as “symbolic reflections of a yearning for fullness of subjectivity which has been transcended by mechanism and the massive systems of information and data which order decisions and supplant choice” (9). The Romantic quest for a sublime “fullness of subjectivity,” “transcendence” (in Stephenson’s words), or even Jungian “individuation” is very much in place in Ballard’s writings, but the grotesque underside of that search should not be ignored. Strange forces that take multiple forms and agencies and are sometimes seen, sometimes unseen, thwart attempts of achieving this sought-after deliverance.

It is as though the individual hangs on to a discourse which he or she can own only with enormous difficulty, often in the end failing entirely to do so: the pressure of these other discourses is too great, the areas of language already colonized by the public media too developed to allow for more than the slightest insertion of a discourse of individual desire. (Punter, *Script* 10)

This is very different from the idealization proposed by Stephenson, and seems to be the more astute reading of Ballard, for it accounts for the more complex relation to space (and inner space) in the fictions from *The Atrocity Exhibition* on, that describe the mediascape as a space entirely alien to individual subjectivity.

### Technological Uncanny

Roger Luckhurst, in his book-length study on Ballard, *The Angle between Two Walls*, talks about Ballard's fiction as "exploring the uncanniness of contemporary post urban spaces" (131), and juxtaposes Augé's discussion of non-places and Vidler's study of the spatial uncanny. Luckhurst mentions a number of texts that describe the ahistorical and non-relational spaces outlined by Augé, from the highways and multistory car parks of *Crash* to "zones of transnational leisure complexes increasingly detached from culture, history and work" (130) of "The Largest Theme Park in the World" and "Having a Wonderful Time." In fact, the hospitals and universities of stories such as "Manhole 69," "Zone of Terror," and *The Atrocity Exhibition* could also be examples of these interstitial spaces. Ballardian spaces, in Luckhurst's analysis, however, are not non-places, because they are resistant and never totally erased. In "Motel Architecture," "The Intensive Care Unit," and "The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista"—stories that will be discussed in further chapters—Luckhurst identifies spaces that, by their very design, are sites of "violent eruptions of uncanny traces—'dead' concepts that cannot be eliminated" (133). In these spaces, the "recalcitrant historical trace" is installed in its design rather than erased. The world, far from being homogeneously developed and flattened, as suggested by Baudrillard in his reading of *Crash*,<sup>12</sup> is uneven, filled with detritus of past systems of technical order (Vidler 162). A passage from Michel de Certeau illuminates how remnants of past systems can structure the present world in a way similar to the depicted by Ballard:

Epistemological configurations are never replaced by the appearance of new orders; they compose strata that form the bedrock of a present. Relics and pockets of the instrumental systems continue to exist everywhere. ... Tools

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<sup>12</sup> See Baudrillard's "Two Essays," also discussed in chapter 4.

take on a folkloric appearance. They nevertheless make up a discharged corps left behind by the defunct empire of mechanics. These populations of instruments oscillate between the status of memorable ruins and an intense everyday activity. (146)

Reading Ballard's landscapes through the prism of the uncanny shows how these "simulacral" landscapes should not be read as "completed systems of an era of simulation, an era which casually erases all prior historical moments" (Luckhurst 135). They exist in a complex relation between a projected dream of a technological sublime and the uncanny eruption of the detritus from de Certeau's "defunct empire of mechanics." Luckhurst believes that reading the "logic of the uncanny ruin and surmounted technologies" can open "the matrix of Ballard's texts in unforeseen ways" (137), but disappointingly, this is as far as he takes his argument. Missing from Luckhurst's argument is the aspect of the body: specifically, what is coming to the fore is a sense of the body, of the body needing to re-ground itself in reality, or in the absence of that, becoming that reality. This takes the form of the new sexual configurations in *Crash* and the body's association with a space in *Concrete Island* and *The Atrocity Exhibition* to the designed, controlled recreational violence in the late quartet of novels, notably *Super-Cannes*. This is not simply a return, because this newfound experience of the body is mediated through technology.

For the modernists, Ballard writes, "ornamentation concealed rather than embellished," whereas classical features implied a hierarchical order:

Power and authority were separated from the common street by huge flights of steps that we were forced to climb on our way to law courts, parliaments and town halls. Gothic ornament, with all its spikes and barbs, expressed pain,

Christ's crown of thorns and agony on the cross. The Gothic expressed our guilt, pointing to a heaven we could never reach. ("A Handful of Dust")<sup>13</sup>

After World War I, modernism was an appealing option for a society willing to forget and overcome its terrors. In Ballard's opinion, a fresh start, based on cleanliness and rationality was what the modernists offered, but this utopian project fell short and opened the doors to the excesses of Nazism and Fascism,

Architecture is a stage set where we need to be at ease in order to perform. Fearing ourselves, we need our illusions to protect us, even if the protection takes the form of finials and cartouches, Corinthian columns and acanthus leaves. Modernism lacked mystery and emotion, was a little too frank about the limits of human nature and never prepared us for our eventual end. ("A Handful of Dust")

For Ballard, the recesses and dark corners of "Gothic" architecture, with towering power to recriminate and judge, were actually complex systems built to maintain mental and social health. The opacity of the Gothic and Baroque models of architecture, which projected inner anxiety onto physical space, protected us from looking at ourselves, thus displacing our moral anxieties onto illusions and myths. Modernism, on the other hand, was generally stripped bare of ornamentation and this blankness created a dead space, a hall of mirrors that reflected only our worst impulses. Instead of darkness, there is an excess of light, inviting the repressive tendencies to manifest themselves.

It is part of the present study to look at how Ballard exposes the dangers of the modern world-view as mediated by contemporary technology, and converts the repressed forces of

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<sup>13</sup> Ballard seems to refer to Gothic Revival, an architecture style that began in the late 1740s in England and took decorative patterns and structural elements from the original Gothic.

Thanatos into Eros by way of that very technology. Kerans, the protagonist of *The Drowned World*, and all other main figures in his fiction, are led to immerse themselves, as Ballard (after Conrad) often said, in the destructive element, pursuing a logic more powerful than reason. Ballardian space represents the present world of (super)modernity as unfamiliar. This changed perspective elicits unexpected connections that uncover hidden meanings of the landscape and can even lead to a dissolution of the self into that space—as in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*. But Ballard’s late fictions can be read, as *Crash* certainly can, as cautionary tales, texts that warn against the volatility of the boundaries between the metaphoric and the real, and the symbolic and the literal. In postmodernity, Hal Foster notes, “our forest of symbols is less disruptive in its uncanniness than disciplinary in its delirium” (*Compulsive Beauty* 210), and we are surely at danger of inhabiting the simulacra described by Baudrillard. As Vidler acknowledges, “[F]aced with the intolerable state of real homelessness, any reflection on the ‘transcendental’ or psychological unhomely risks trivializing or, worse, patronizing political or social action” (163). Therefore, we must be careful not to romanticize these conditions and give them a proper perspective.

These two characteristics of the uncanny, one rooted in aesthetics—seeing landscapes and objects through a Ballardian prism, attentive to the operation of desires “coded” in them—and the other on morality—conditions of real homelessness, and real death of affect—converge in what may be the central issue of Ballard’s fiction, and the source of the controversy surrounding the polemical *Crash*: a generalized inability to differentiate reality from fiction, individual from society, and body from space.

### Chapter 3:

#### Journeys to an Interior: Ballard and World War II

In his monograph on David Cronenberg's film adaptation of *Crash*, the English writer Iain Sinclair suggests that that novel is far more autobiographical than the nominal, fictionalized account of Ballard's childhood in wartime Shanghai, *Empire of the Sun* (34).<sup>14</sup> Sinclair is right in claiming that *Empire* has overtly autobiographical elements and that it could be read as part of a tradition of fictionalized war memoirs, such as Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*. *Crash*, on the other hand, is a scandalous work of imaginative fiction that prompted a reviewer for Jonathan Cape to pronounce the author "beyond psychiatric help" (46). The protagonists of both novels have slightly fictionalized versions of J. G. (James Graham) Ballard's own name (James Ballard in *Crash*, Jim Graham in *Empire*), and join a host of characters that, during the span of fifty-two years, have borne glaring similarities with their author.

*Empire* is a coming-of-age story about a boy sent to a POW camp during the Japanese occupation of China in World War II. Suddenly all the cryptic images from Ballard's fiction had found an ur-text; the empty swimming pools and obsessively repetitive images could now be explained by this new book. Angela Carter, in her review of *Empire*, was skeptical, and rightly claimed that the "entire context of the novel is true, but Jim's adventures are invention. The book is by no means autobiographical" (qtd. in Baxter, *The Inner Man* 49).

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<sup>14</sup> Sinclair, however, apart from pointing out Ballard's own claim that the character of Catherine was based on his actual girlfriend, Claire Walsh, and that the novel is set in the suburbs of London, where Ballard lived, does not really elaborate on how *Crash* is more autobiographical than *Empire*.

Despite the seductiveness of reading these texts as keys to decode Ballard's other work, one should be wary of such an operation. As Roger Luckhurst argues, critics who advocate such a reading

detach the "autobiographies" in order to give them the textual sanction to operate as decoding machines for the oeuvre. And yet *Empire* and *Kindness* slip the fixity of the division that would render transparent the fictional code because they are, of course, autobiographical *novels*. ... The fictionalising goes much further than the alteration of a few facts: *Kindness* often contradicts, rewrites, and even erases sections of *Empire*. No simple identity, either, can be established between J. G. Ballard and the Jamie/Jim figure in the texts. ... What the initial reviewers believed they had found in these texts—the key to unlock the opacity of the fictions—already founders over the indeterminate zone between fiction and autobiography that *Empire* and *Kindness* occupy. (*Angle* 162)

Moreover, in 2008, Ballard published his *de facto* autobiography, *Miracles of Life*, and that it reads largely like a Ballard novel should be further indication that Ballard constantly blurs the line between reality and fiction. *Miracles* repeats many events fictionalized in *Empire* and *The Kindness of Women* (1990) under the guise of autobiography, but Ballard could be simply striving for some sort of artistic consistency, or even that acts of remembrance only have meaning when interspersed with fiction.

Pierre Janet, a French psychiatrist contemporary with Freud, argued for psychological health being dependent on an individual's ability to narrativize temporal experience:

Memory, like belief, like all psychological phenomena, is an action; essentially, it is the action of telling a story. ... The teller must not only know how to [narrate the event], but must also know how to associate the happening

with the other events of his life, how to put it in its place in that life-history which each one of us is perpetually building up and which for each one of us is an essential element of his personality. (661-62)

This describes Ballard's project, especially in *Kindness*, in which the memories of World War II comprise only the first part of the novel, which actually covers much of the protagonist's life, with further chapters having significant parallels to his fiction. For instance, *The Crystal World* comes to mind when Jim experiments with LSD; elements of *Crash* are interspersed with his infamous "Crashed Cars" exhibition in 1970, and an episode that essentially rewrites the short story "My Dream of Flying to Wake Island." At times, *Miracles* appears to be a concurrent, parallel narrative of *Kindness*, a straightforward recollection fleshed out with memories, rather than a factual skeleton fleshed out with fiction—as it seems the case with *Kindness*. Ballard spoke of that novel as being "substantially fiction," a retelling of his "life seen through the mirror of the fiction prompted by that life" (*Extreme Metaphors* 345).

One of Freud's discoveries in the "Wolf Man" case history (1918) is that analysis is a process of construction, not authentic recollections of remote events. "These scenes from infancy," Freud wrote, "are not reproduced during the treatment as recollections, but are the products of construction. ... Previously unconscious recollections ... may be [true]; but they are often distorted from the truth, and interspersed with imaginary elements" (*Three Case Histories* 208). This seems analogous to the way memory and imagination work in the writing of fiction. Ballard's background, a story closely resembling *Empire*, was publicized at the time, and the literary establishment was all too eager to pigeonhole and explain him away. *Empire*, to be fair, has strong autobiographical elements, but it is not a novel that departs stylistically from Ballard's other work, nor was it the first autobiographical piece written by him. No one really believed that *Crash* was autobiographical, even if the protagonist shared

Ballard's name; "The Dead Time," a story published in 1977, was thematically very close to *Empire*, but it also shared some of its delirious and surrealistic images. *Empire* represented a departure for Ballard only in the sense that it could fit into a genre that was not science fiction or fantastic fiction: it can be read as a war novel, and it meant that the establishment could finally see him as a "real writer."

It is difficult to talk about Ballard's history, for he was always in the process of remythologizing his life, presenting contradicting stories to interviewers while rehashing old, rehearsed speeches about his childhood and his interests. Even after the publication of John Baxter's (spurious) biography, *The Inner Man*, in 2010, a collection of interviews, *Extreme Metaphors*, in 2012, a number of TV specials (including 1991's *Shanghai Jim*), it is impossible to form a consistent picture of Ballard. The publication of *Empire* distorted the interpretation of his work, not because it functions as a decoding machine, but because it is clear that some of Ballard's obsessions have basis on fact. At the time of its publication, *Empire* was hailed as a major novel by the press, collected awards, and was made into a film by Steven Spielberg in 1987. The novel, Sinclair argues, made sense of Ballard's obsessions to the public, as if the events of the novel could explain how Ballard's mind worked. *Empire* is, of course, only one more piece in an oeuvre fraught with repetition, obsession, displacement, and self-mythologizing.

In this chapter, I will explore how Ballard conflates public and private trauma in *Empire* and other texts with clear allusions to his wartime background. I do not attempt, however, to posit any claims that the texts are autobiographical, only that if they are read in context with Ballard's fictional and non-fictional oeuvre, they may form a rich and complex picture, albeit inconsistent—and for that very reason all the more interesting.

### Montage Landscapes of War: *The Atrocity Exhibition*

*The Atrocity Exhibition* and “The Terminal Beach” are parts of a particular project carried by Ballard in the late 1960s and early 1970s to come to terms with the nature of the media landscape and the death of affect, a period that coincided with the aftermath of the death of his wife, Mary. I believe Sinclair has a valid point by arguing the autobiographical inclinations of *Crash*, reinforced by Ballard’s use of autobiographical allusions, inasmuch as it plays a key role in Ballard’s fictional development of his own biography. *Atrocity* is one of Ballard’s most complex texts, a collection of interrelated short stories or “condensed novels”; a collage and a narrative woven out of found texts that attempt a reinterpretation of reality in terms of the reconfiguration of central elements in order to evoke an inversion of the inner and outer world. William Burroughs called *Atrocity* a bomb in his preface: “This is what Bob Rauschenberg is doing in art—literally *blowing up* the image. Since people are made of image, this is literally an explosive book” (viii). Andrzej Gasiorek describes it as a text that works by way of “suggestions, resonances, echoes” (59), almost an index of Ballardian icons, themes, and concerns. The text is so dense that it “will take decades to decompress Ballard’s brutal paragraphs, to trace out the wiring diagram of this fiendishly booby-trapped device” (Luckhurst, “Ballard/Atrocity/Conner/Exhibition/Assemblage” 35).

If we assume that there is an overarching narrative to *Atrocity*, even though that narrative is represented obliquely, we can attempt to sketch some idea of the events that take place in the novel. The central character (whom I will call Traven) is haunted by his wartime experiences and by the death of his wife, is on a quest for meaning. The war for him had become

an expression of the failure of his psyche to accept the fact of its own consciousness, and of his revolt against the present continuum of time and space. ... [H]is intention is to start World War III, though not, of course, in the

usual sense of the term. The blitzkriegs will be fought out on the spinal battlefields, in terms of the postures we assume, of our traumas mimetized in the angle of a wall or balcony. (*Atrocity* 6)

He believes that by enacting certain bizarre experiments, they will reconfigure the relation between self and world, embodying a sort of “secularized apocalyptic ur-Christ figure who seeks to redeem the world” (Gasiorek 60). Vaughan, Ballard’s most famous Christ (or Satanic) figure from *Crash*, who dies in a collision with Elizabeth Taylor’s limousine, makes his debut in *Atrocity*; to redeem themselves and others, these Christ-like figures need to reconfigure and reinterpret the world according to their own needs, and what is truly Satanic about them is that they make it look as if it is the world that must be rewritten *after* them. The strength of much of Ballard’s fiction stems from this powerful and seducing way of looking at the world. *Crash* is his most radical and impressive experiment in a double play that simultaneously repels and attracts the reader.

Naming the protagonist of *Crash* James Ballard approximates the reader, by establishing a pact of honesty, even if illusory: Ballard does away with an alter ego: the Ballard in the book is the same as the Ballard who wrote it, or so it seems. The fragmented narratives of *The Atrocity Exhibition* have the opposite effect on the reader, implying a distanced and intellectualized attitude: Ballard enacts a breakdown of identity and narrative, with a protagonist that seemed to change identity from one chapter to the other (Traven/Talbot/Trallis/Trabert/Travis/Talbert/Travers), at the same time a lecturer and a patient at a psychiatric institution, a bomber pilot, and an avatar for Christ’s reincarnated body. There is a rejection of conventional reader identification as vague plots for the individual stories emerge only with careful reading, characters die and reappear in different roles, and events follow an irrational logic. *Crash*, for its part, attempts to apply some of the unorthodox, deviant logics exposed in the previous book inside a linear narrative.

The first overt autobiographical aspects in Ballard's fiction appear in the jumble of lists that populate *Atrocity*. Contemporary readers, unaware of Ballard's biography, must have ascribed mentions to World War II in Shanghai as part of Traven's fictional past, but after the publication of *Empire*, *Kindness*, and *Miracles* (as well as other autobiographical pieces, "From Shanghai to Shepperton" in 1984, "Unlocking the Past" in 1991, and "The End of My War" in 1995), it seems negligent not to read certain aspects of Ballard's fiction as working through his personal history.

All mentions of Shanghai in *Atrocity* are inside lists, the sections that most resemble the Surrealist technique of automatic writing. In his annotations to the novel, Ballard encourages reading those lists as being produced without conscious filtering (90). Some of the images described seem to be strongly autobiographical in content due to their similarities to his posterior, more nominally autobiographical works. In the first chapter, "The Atrocity Exhibition," Travis listens to a series of transmissions on his pirate radio, one of which is described as "V.J.-Day, the bodies of Japanese troops in the paddy fields at night. The next day, as he walked back to Shanghai, the peasants were planting rice among the swaying legs" (5). In chapter 2, "The University of Death," there is a second mention of Shanghai, one of a number of "journeys to an interior": "montage landscapes of war—webbing heaped in pits beside the Shanghai-Nanking railway; bargirls' cabins built out of tyres and fuel drums; dead Japanese stacked like firewood in L. C. T.s off Woosung pier" (27). In chapter 6, "The Great American Nude," this is one of the "landscapes of the dream" that "preoccupied Talbert": "The melancholy back of the Yangtse, a boom of sunken freighters off the Shanghai Bund. As a child he rowed out to the rusting ships, waded through saloons awash with water. Through the portholes, a regatta of corpses sailed past Woosung Pier" (82). Without knowledge of Ballard's further work, these seem to blend into the myriad references of the complex puzzle that is the narrative of *Atrocity*. The idea of trauma is already present,

however, in the figure of the protagonist, who is a bomber pilot (as in “The Terminal Beach”) but with no true fixed identity (his name shifts from Trabert to Talbot to Travis, etc.). Ballard’s protagonists are always wounded, obsessive characters, but here and in “The Terminal Beach,” he locates the source of this malaise for the first time in World War II.

In the commentary added to recent editions of *Atrocity*, Ballard advises readers “daunted by the unfamiliar narrative structure” to “turn the pages until a paragraph catches your eye. If the images or ideas seem interesting, scan the nearby paragraphs for anything that resonates in an intriguing way. ... In effect, you will be reading the book in the way it was written” (vi). We should be careful not to take Ballard’s pronouncements at face value. While his recommendation does elucidate the formal logic of the novel—with no fixed entry point—it might be disingenuous to forego other aspects of that logic that only become apparent if one approaches it in a linear fashion. In chapter 8, “Tolerances of the Human Face,” suddenly we encounter the longest section of the novel, one that stands out because it breaks a pattern. Here the language is unusually direct, unadorned, and there is a sense of urgency that is lacking in the rest of the novel. It functions as a piece of straight recollection in the midst of all the supposedly free-association and automatic writing that defines *Atrocity*. The section, titled “Too Bad,” was also the first to be composed, dating from the 1950s, and presumably, Ballard kept it and inserted it in *Atrocity*. The section narrates an American atrocity committed against a shipload of Japanese prisoners awaiting repatriation, which Travers supposedly witnessed. The previous section, “Cinecity,” Travers is watching atrocity films when the following sentence segues into the memory of “Too Bad”: “Watching from the embankment, Travers found himself thinking of the eager deaths of his childhood” (112). It is, therefore, nothing more than a straightforward analepsis, inserted into the surrealistic collage of *Atrocity*, but its apparent normality destabilizes the text: to which reality does this

section refer? Here we might have one of the few moments of genuine “affect” in the whole novel, even if it is hard to qualify the word “genuine” in Ballard’s work.

In *Atrocity*, the protagonist, who has been through some trauma—in one story we learn that he was dead for two minutes, in another he was a bomber pilot, yet in another he lost his wife—and is desperately trying to reinvest the empty world of the media landscape with some kind of affect. As Roger Luckhurst summarizes, the protagonist of *Atrocity* is “searching for a ‘modulus,’ a measure, a mode of explanation, that would both re-fix his name and identity as well as serve to de-code the densely overdetermined landscapes in which he appears” (*Angle* 86). He plans to do so by reenacting violent media-saturated events such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy. As Dr. Nathan, the character in charge of this simulacral “course of treatment,” explains: “You can see he’s trying to build bridges between things—this Kennedy business, for example. He wants to kill Kennedy again, but in a way that makes sense” (*Atrocity* 6). Here Ballard anticipates some of the concerns and formal strategies Thomas Pynchon used in his magnum opus *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), especially in what concerns the paranoid relation between war, technology, and simulation. Like Traven, Pynchon’s Slothrop is trapped in a system of simulation and unfixed identity, moving toward the dissolution of his own body.

In the first eight chapters of *Atrocity* the central character experiences these shifts in identity, but in “You and Me and the Continuum,” Traven becomes a Christ-like figure, his body already starting to become unmoored like his identity. Here he is described as an “unidentified Air Force pilot” whose “mortal remains” were to be found in unexpected places (abstract and concrete). In this chapter, we still have the familiar figures of Dr. Nathan, Karen Novotny, and Catherine Austin and a fragmentary narrative. The paragraph headings are now organized alphabetically, suggesting some kind of (outside) order being imposed. The chapter ends with the sentence “As his own identity faded, its last fragments glimmered across the

darkening landscape, lost integers in a hundred computer codes, sand-grains on a thousand beaches, fillings in a million mouths” (*Atrocity* 138), which finds an echo in the closing lines of *Crash*: “The aircraft rise from the runways of the airport, carrying the remnants of Vaughan’s semen to the instrument panels and radiator grilles of a thousand crashing cars, the leg stances of a million passengers” (*Crash* 224). Again, like Slothrop, Traven becomes enmeshed in the virtual world of the media landscape, an abstract code, invisible and atomized. Traven becomes part of the simulacra, part of a world without time, without affect, and more importantly, without pain.

The subsequent chapters of *Atrocity* have no characters, and are even more experimental. For one, character names appear only briefly in the paragraph headings, and in chapter 12, the first three headings read, “Each afternoon in the deserted cinema”; “Tallis was increasingly distressed”; “by the images of colliding motor cars” (153-56). The headings in the first seven chapters, in contrast, have a more indexical purpose, with cryptic titles such as “Marriage of Freud and Euclid” and “Biomorphic Horror.” They are alphabetized in chapter 9, “You and Me and the Continuum” and the remainder follow this pattern of a concurrent or parallel narrative in which Traven continues to exist, but not in the actual body of the text, as if his dissolution shifted his presence to another level, a shift represented textually. Therefore, to read *Atrocity* randomly, as Ballard proposes, would be to miss this important formal logic at work, one that goes largely unnoticed in most discussions of the book.

Ballard’s pronouncements about his own fiction can be a little disingenuous, belying the careful construction of his texts. By presenting himself as a writer who rarely reads or talks about literature—going as far as denying having read Joseph Conrad before writing *The Drowned World*, an assertion so unlikely it could even be interpreted as pure mischievousness—Ballard cements his persona as a romantic, but he chooses his

predecessors with the same care he labors over his texts. Paul Crosthwaite elaborates on this notion, discussing passages from *Atrocity*:

[E]ven if we understand these passages as constituting acts of autobiographical revelation, they might equally be read as conscious, perhaps even (as the novel's title implies), "exhibitionist," displays of extreme authorial experience, and their fragmentary sentences as skillful, performative evocations of post-traumatic testimony. (97)

We have to remember that there was nothing overtly autobiographical in *Atrocity*, since Ballard at the time had never alluded to his wartime experiences. Therefore, it is only with hindsight that we approach texts such as *Atrocity* looking for autobiographical elements. It is clear on the text of "Tolerances of the Human Face" that the trauma is Traven's, and in the context of the novel, it is astute to treat those passages as playing a performative role, expressing trauma, repetition, and abreaction.

### **Death Games: "The Dead Time"**

The unnamed protagonist of "The Dead Time" (first published in the magazine *Ambit*, later collected in 1982's *Myths of the Near Future*) is a twenty-year old inmate of a Japanese camp outside Shanghai during the final weeks of the war. He is older than the protagonists of *Empire* and *Kindness*, probably because the plot involves the transportation of a large number of dead bodies to a cemetery in Soochow, north of Shanghai. Taking place after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and during the "dead time" before peace, the protagonist and a

colleague are to be released as long as they deliver the bodies to the cemetery in a couple of trucks.<sup>15</sup>

Stretched out on the frayed grass were some fifty corpses, laid out in neat rows as if arranged with great care and devotion. All were fully dressed and lay with their feet towards us, arms at their sides, and I could see from the bright pallor on their faces that these people, whoever they were, had only recently died.

(*Myths* 147)

Ballard associates this period with the death of affect, an emotional distancing clearly necessary to carry the task through, a “kind of forced intimacy that absolved [him] from all future contact or obligation” (150). After the corpses are loaded onto the truck, the narrator notices how much better fed they were than he and any of his inmates, and the complete absence of signs of violence. Within the nightmarish logic of the story, the corpses probably belong to some other time, to the time before the war, to a time in which taking them to a cemetery would make some sense.

“The Dead Time” is very much about an interstitial space in time between realities: when do these corpses are no longer human beings and become objects? When one of the truck fails, the characters are required to lighten the load, so they dump some of the corpses in a body of water. Later the corpses clog up a passage, and the protagonist is surprised to recognize each of them; he is taken over by a “presentiment of death—though not [his] own

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<sup>15</sup> The story has the same hallucinatory quality as Part III of *Empire*, and the rather incredible plot was probably inspired by Henri-Georges Clouzot’s 1953 film *The Wages of Fear*. In it, four inexperienced drivers are hired to transport in two trucks a load of nitroglycerine to extinguish the fire on an oil well, a job considered too dangerous for their syndicated employees.

or of these drowned creatures” (154). As the bodies are retrieved and handled even more, he sees for the first time a “distinct personality” in the face of one of them, a woman, “visualizing her talking” to him. The more the bodies are handled, the harder it gets to relate to them as mere objects, a rather paradoxical view since their appearance worsens with time. In fact, the protagonist starts to see it as a mission, and guards the completeness of his truck’s bodies calling it his “flock” and removing the ones mistakenly taken from his companion Hodson’s truck, seen as “intruders, ... members of a rival clan” (157). The story is one of Ballard’s illustrations of his theme of reinvesting death of meaning, in which the repetition of the same thing does not divest it from affect, quite the opposite. Meaning is changed and displaced, and the matter for the protagonist is now one of security, “loyalty,” and “the feeling that they, the dead, were more living than the living who had deserted [him]” (158). He feels he is “the instrument of the new order ... delegated by [the dead] to bring to the world,” and soon the whole planet would “share in the new life they had earned for us” (161). As in *Empire*, death provides a spiritual form of nourishing. Ballard touches here on the reality of a world on the brink of the irreconcilable recognition of the prospect of total self-annihilation, in the case of the atom bomb. The story allows for a mental distortion that effaces subjectivity, and like death and the bomb itself, brings about “total fusion and non-differentiation of all matter” (*Atrocity* 48). According to Freud, the aim of all life is death, and this lack of subjectivity would be the ultimate relief, a resolution to this uncertain and unstable “dead time.”

Carrying a famished Chinese girl in his arms, the protagonist, without thinking, gives her a morsel of his own flesh for her to eat. Instead of letting her die on her own, he leads her, with an Eucharist of his own body, into his flock, harnessing the power of the dead to move into a mental domain that transcends death: “At last, through this child and my body, the dead were coming to life, rising from their fields and doorways and coming to greet me ... I

had given my death to them and so brought them into this world” (168). The motif of the rising of the dead is repeated in Ballard’s fictions of the late 1960s and 1970s. In *Crash*, when the protagonist finally engages in a sex act with Vaughan, he describes a post-orgasmic feeling in bizarre terms: “In our wounds we celebrated the re-birth of the traffic-slain dead, the deaths and injuries of those we had seen dying by the roadside and the imaginary wounds of the millions yet to die” (203), which recalls the “millions of mouths” of “Tolerances of the Human Face.” One of the most horrific images in “The Terminal Beach” is that of a pool of test-mannequins that turn into corpses, echoed in the ending of *High-Rise*, where a swimming pool becomes a “bone-pit” covered with “skulls, bones and dismembered limbs of dozens of corpses,” a “crowded beach visited by a sudden holocaust” (*High-Rise*, 170). In “The Dead Time,” we witness the rising of the dead as the protagonist arrives at the Sookchow camp where his parents are supposed to be, finally reunited with their dead bodies. Only in this final embracing of death is he able to say, “I knew now that the war was over” (163). The story represents Ballard’s first direct attempt to deal with his wartime experiences, and it remains as one of his darkest stories.

### **The Open-Air Cinema: *Empire of the Sun***

*Empire*, even with its overt autobiographical elements, does not signal a transition into realism for Ballard. The novel can be just as subjective and hallucinatory as sections of *Atrocity* in parts, and in the first chapter, we already have a blurring of the boundaries between self and world. *Empire* takes place in the same inner space as all of Ballard’s novels, a phenomenological domain “where the inner world of the mind and the outer world of reality meet and fuse” (“Introduction to *Crash*” 97). This interstitial zone does not commit to either exterior or interior space; it is an imaginative fusion of both. It is not wholly psychological since the outer world appears equally informed by the individual’s desires, and

there is a constant slippage of one realm into the other. On the first page of *Empire*, Ballard tells us how the novel is supposed to be read, as a blend of reality in fiction not unlike *Atrocity*:

Jim had begun to dream of wars. At night the same silent films seemed to flicker against the wall of his bedroom in Amherst Avenue, and transformed his sleeping mind into a deserted newsreel theatre. During the winter of 1941 everyone in Shanghai was showing war films. Fragments of his dreams followed Jim around the city; in the foyers of department stores and hotels the images of Dunkirk and Tobruk, Barbarossa and the Rape of Nanking sprang loose from his crowded head. ... The whole of Shanghai was turning into a newsreel leaking from inside his head. (*Empire* 11, 14)

Jim's consumption of images and icons from movies, magazines, posters and ads is, as Punter notes, a consumption of "implanted icons" and "discarded images," the true "points of reference against which our action takes place" (*Script* 10). Subjectivity is produced by these representations, and as Tamas Benyei argues, inner space is the end of intimacy as pure interiority as this reality is neither the external or the internal world, but a composite, a symptomatic product in which "there is a circulation of signifiers ... traversing subjectivity as well, producing it and being produced by it" (255). This complicates the notion of trying to identify what is real in these semi-autobiographical fictions. In this sense, the war in *Empire* is already filtered through media representations, wartime Shanghai reimagined as the media landscape of the 1960s, consonant with the discussion of the mediatized postwar world in chapter 1.

Jim's relations to media echoes Traven's, to the point that he wonders whether his brain "had been damaged by too many war films" (14): "In an eerie way, these shuffled images of tanks and dive-bombers were completely silent, as if his sleeping mind was trying

to separate the real war from the make-believe conflicts invented by Pathé and British Movietone.” His dreams are like the films of atrocity projected by Dr. Nathan and Traven; the lack of sound signifying at the same time a detachment from reality but also a mythical quality, recalling the otherworldly quality of the Zapruder film, the eighteen seconds of silent film that captured the Kennedy assassination and which feels like a dream. There is already a concern in trying to separate reality from fiction, as Ballard elaborates:

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 Hunjao 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 sealed stockades at Pootung, and the bloody heads of communist soldiers mounted on pikes along the Bund. 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. (14)

Ironically, “real war” for Jim is quite the opposite of what we would expect: a Gothic scenario of “unburied dead” rising to the surface or with heads on spikes. Either Jim knows something about the reality of war that a child like him could not have known—that it is unspeakably violent, cruel, chaotic, and indifferent—or these Gothic excesses are a fancy of his overactive imagination. As the novel unfolds, these two views will converge. We see here an example of a double discourse that is present in *Empire*, a voice that alternates between the innocence of its young protagonist and the hindsight of the implied, more mature author. Simon Dentith defines a Bakhtinian double voiced discourse as one in which the reader can “recognize that there are two distinct consciousnesses operating in a single utterance, and that their evaluative attitudes are not the same” (*Parody* 64). It is from this device that, as

Gasiorek suggests, *Empire* derives much of its humor (145), as Jim often misunderstands what is going on around him.

Yet the presence of the mature voice of the implied author creates a gap. It allows Ballard to do much more than just humor, though. Consider, for instance, the scene in which Jim returns to his house in Shanghai after being separated from his parents. Expecting to find them there, he is greeted by an empty house and signs of an altercation. There are two descriptions of footprints:

His mother's clothes were scattered across the unmade bed, and open suitcases lay on the floor. Someone had swept her hairbrushes and scent bottles from the dressing-table, and talcum covered the polished parquet. There were dozens of footprints in the powder, his mother's bare feet whirling within the clear images of heavy boots, like the patterns of complicated dances set out in his parents' foxtrot and tango manuals. (62)

In the talcum on the floor around him he could see the imprints of his mother's feet. She had moved from side to side, propelled by an over-eager partner, perhaps one of the Japanese officers to whom she was teaching the tango. Jim tried out the dance steps himself, which seemed far more violent than any tango he had ever seen, and managed to fall and cut his hand on the broken mirror. (64)

These two passages occur within two pages of each other, and three days seem to have passed between one impression and the other. In the first, Jim's impression is subtle, making the connection between the footprints and patterns of dances he had seen in books; whereas in the second, Jim imagines his mother might have been teaching the tango to an officer, an impression only a child could make. It is impossible to identify, however, where one voice

ends and the other begins; they are doubled and juxtaposed. Jim never grasps the brutal, hard reality—that his mother was violently seized by the Japanese—even though the reader is keen enough to realize it. This gap allows for humor, but more importantly, it gives Ballard a visible rationale for a double voice that was already in place in his work. Ballard’s protagonists often act like Jim, with a child-like curiosity and eagerness to pursue their own obsessions with total disregard for others and even their own well-being. Part of the uneasiness of reading *Crash* or *Atrocity* is precisely because this double discourse is so veiled: the voice of the critical distance never takes over—there is no safety net. In *Empire*, it is precisely because of the double discourse that we can read it as a matrix of Ballardian concerns and icons, as it is always indexing Ballard’s work in its context. The drained swimming-pools, the suspension of moral values, the obsession with airplanes, just to name a few, are described with the fascination of a young teenager but with the voice and the vocabulary that belongs to the Ballard of *The Drowned World* and *Atrocity*.

Jim’s predicament is one of cognitive mapping, an attempt to find some way of orientating himself within a situation he is not equipped to understand. As Gasiorek suggests, “Jim’s apprehension of events is stronger than his producible vocabulary and [the text] describes him struggling to discover a vocabulary adequate to his experiences” (157). These experiences make him grow old too fast and Jim realizes that morality might get in the way of survival, causing him to fail to recognize himself, as this key passage illustrates:

A strange doubling of reality had taken place, as if everything that had happened to him since the war was occurring within a mirror. It was his mirror self who felt faint and hungry, and who thought about food all the time. He no longer felt sorry for this other self. Jim guessed that this was how the Chinese managed to survive. Yet one day the Chinese might emerge from the mirror.

(102)

This notion of “doubling of reality” here is about Jim’s character, but it can also be read as central to the understanding of Ballard’s fiction, a work that oscillates between one thing and the other: reality and fiction, the outside and the inside, the manifest and the latent content, and between Shanghai and Shepperton. The double discourse is another example of the presence of a double, a presence that is ethereal and haunting. More importantly, the doubling of the image, especially through films, thoroughly characterizes Ballard’s explorations of his past. As we have seen in *Atrocity*, the section “Too Bad” appears as if conjured by the images projected on a screen, and part of the “treatment” in the novel is to reconfigure, reenact, and reinvest images with a meaning. In *Empire*, the reality of war exists first in the form of images, as if leaking from Jim’s mind to be concretized in real life (instances of an effect that Lacan calls the “answer of the real”).<sup>16</sup> Earlier in the novel, when Jim finds footprints in his mother’s bedroom, he is unable to understand what has happened, and finally stares at his image in the mirror:

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<sup>16</sup> In the early parts of the novel, Jim’s father admonishes him for calling the Japanese sentries attention in Shanghai: “‘Jamie, not now,’ his father repeated, adding with rare humour: ‘You might even start the war.’” To which Jim replies, “‘Could I?’” Later, he imagines he did start the war as he plays with semaphores on a window overlooking the Shanghai port: “He realized that he himself had probably started the war, with his confused semaphores from the window that the Japanese officers in the motor launch had misinterpreted.” In later sections, Jim imagines being able to conjure the appearance of a B-29 bomber: “Unlike the Mustangs and Lightnings, which skimmed like racing cars across the paddy fields, the B-29s would appear without warning in the sky above his head, as if summoned by Jim’s starving brain.” Lacan describes this effect as the “answer of the real” (see p. 37, note 7).

Jim sat on the bed, facing the star-like image of himself that radiated from the centre of the mirror. A heavy object had been driven into the full-length glass, and pieces of himself seemed to fly across the room, scattered through the empty house. He fell asleep at the foot of his mother's bed, rested by the scent of her silk nightdress, below this jewelled icon of a small exploding boy. (62)

Ballard's logic is visual: for Jim, the trauma of being separated from his parents and thrown into the war is one that shatters his reality, scattering "pieces of himself" across the room, a similar effect to that of *Atrocity*, in which Traven's identity is splintered. Not only his identity, but in *Atrocity*'s formal collage, also gone are notions of linearity, coherence, and unity; the subject is divided and never reconstituted again. Burroughs' metaphor of *Atrocity* as a bomb is strikingly apt to describe its disorienting effects, as it explodes and shatters everything that is inside, and it is up to the reader to (try to) reassemble the pieces.

In the first quotation in the previous paragraph, Jim likens himself to the Chinese, an interesting parallel, since earlier he states, "The Chinese enjoyed the spectacle of death, Jim had decided, as a way of reminding themselves of how precariously they were alive. They liked to be cruel for the same reason, to remind themselves of the vanity of thinking that the world was anything else" (57). We can trace a development of the death of affect, as outlined in chapter 1, from these impressions of the Chinese. Jim's fear of course, is that one day he might become a figure that enjoys the spectacle of death. Later on, the notion that life was "worth nothing" (words that echo Jim's American friends Frank and Basie's first impression of him) begins to take hold as he observes the death of American pilots during raids to the camp:

Jim grieved for these American pilots, who died in a tangle of their harnesses, within sight of a Japanese corporal with a Mauser and a single English boy hidden on the balcony of this ruined building. Yet their end reminded Jim of

his own, about which he had thought in a clandestine way ever since his arrival at Lunghua. He welcomed the air raids, the noise of the Mustangs as they swept over the camp, the smell of oil and cordite, the deaths of the pilots, and even the likelihood of his own death. Despite everything, he knew he was worth nothing. He twisted his Latin primer, trembling with a secret hunger that the war would so eagerly satisfy.

This is the first time that Jim is all-too-eager to give in to his “destructive element” and let death embrace him in the search for his obsessions, and to end as so many Ballardian characters do. The death of affect here is a question of survival and adaptability. For Ballard, this adaptability is only apparent—this fascination with death is something that must be fought if one expects to survive. Can it even be called adaptability, or is it just a matter of the lure, of seduction? As in “The Dead Time,” the protagonist is seduced by “a logic more powerful than reason” but is able to save himself, reminiscent of a key moment in chapter 22 of *Crash* and discussed in the next chapter of the present work.

### **The Persistence of Memory: *The Kindness of Women and Miracles of Life***

In *Kindness*, Ballard returns to this moment of “dead time” (corresponding to Part III of *Empire*), after the end of the war but before the Japanese surrender. In the 1991 novel, the guards at Lunghua disappear: “By leaving the camp I had stepped outside my own head. Had the atom bombs in some way split the sky and reversed the direction of everything?” (*Kindness* 46). Jim decides to walk the eight miles back to Shanghai in order to join his family. Unlike *Empire*, this Jim has a composed distance from the events and there is none of the hallucinatory energy that characterized the former novel. On a railway station, he sees four Japanese soldiers, fully armed, waiting. One of them signals to Jim as he walks by, beckoning him to come closer. Jim is surprised to find out that one of the soldiers is holding a

telephone wire, coiled around the neck of a young Chinese man. The Chinese is out of place, “unlike the soldiers and myself” (55), he states. Ballard compresses this interstitial “dead time” into this tense scene in which time is stretched: Jim is paralyzed, unable to leave, even though he wants to explain that the war is over but does not know enough of the language. “From the moment I left Lunghua all the clocks had stopped. Time had suspended itself, and only the faraway drone of an American aircraft reminded me of a world on the other side of the pearly light” (55). One of the soldiers decides to inspect Jim’s belt, testing the plastic between his hands, and finally destroying it as the Chinese is finally killed. “None of them had been touched by the youth’s death, as if they knew that they too were dead and were matter-of-factly preparing themselves for whatever end would arrive out of the afternoon sun” (56). As in “The Dead Time”, imagining that one’s self and the whole world are dead is a way of justifying the death of affect so as to cope with the close contact of the reality of death.

For the first time it seemed obvious that this remote country platform was the depot from which all of the dead of the war had been dispatched to the creeks and burial mounds of Lunghua. The four Japanese soldiers were preparing us for our journey. I and the Chinese whom they last suffocated were their last arrivals, and when we had gone they would close the station and set out themselves. (56)

Upon returning to Shanghai, Jim struggles resume his old life, as if “landed in an unfamiliar future,” relating in traumatic terms, “so much had happened that I had not been able to remember or forget”, and he feels his sense of self changed, as if he had “misaid part of [his] mind somewhere between Lunghua and Shanghai” (60). He admits being disappointed he did not stay behind with the Japanese, as if, in a way, he wanted the security they could have provided him in their ushering toward death.

In *Kindness*, Ballard plays the game the critics accused him of doing and puts his wartime experiences at the center of his work, and the death of this Chinese peasant as a primal scene. Jim's "entire world had been shaped by the camp," and "instead of wanting to escape from it", he had sought "to burrow ever more deeply into its heart" (48) and in a sense the main theme of *Kindness* is Jim's failure to work through personal trauma and the difficulty of living in an unresolved psychological limbo. Another character confronts him: "A part of it actually happened to you. All those car crashes and pornographic movies, Kennedy's death, they're your way of turning it into a film, something violent and glamorous" (270). This identification is such that Jim's mind is "up there, molded against the screen" (269). Gasiorek argues that by rendering it safe and displacing the violence to the realm of the imaginary, he ends up by "colonizing" his psyche to the glamorized allure the violence subsequently represents (150). The episode of the railway station is repeated in *Miracles*, in which Ballard writes of the moment of uncertainty: "August 1945 formed a strange interregnum when we were never wholly certain that the war had ended, a sensation that stayed with me for months and even years" (103). Walking toward the railway station, he is aware of a singsong sound (absent in *Kindness*), which turns out to be the Chinese on his knees, being strangled by Japanese soldiers. One of the soldiers calls Jim up and asks to see his transparent plastic belt, "a prized novelty that no Japanese was likely to have seen" (107), and examines it slowly, while Jim waits, and the Chinese is choked to death. There is a clear disconnect between the atrocity taking place and the matter-of-fact manner of the Japanese, who demand him to act in the same way. They were, Ballard writes, "beyond the point where life and death meant anything at all. ... Peace, I realized, was more threatening because the rules that sustained war, however evil, were suspended. The empty paddy fields and derelict villages confirmed that nothing mattered" (108). Ballard continues describing the in-between world where wars merged into one another, and the proximity of his autobiography to his

fictional narratives calls into question how much of *Miracles* are actually memories, unadorned and uninformed by decades of filtering these memories through his imagination.<sup>17</sup>

*Miracles*, written after Ballard was diagnosed with cancer in the late 2000s, is in many ways his testament, in which he details how he wanted to be remembered. For the first time in his written output, he talks candidly about his children (the “miracles of life” of the title), trying to reconcile his personal life and his work—in which the only children are projections of himself. In his autobiography, Ballard finally concedes that his formative wartime experiences were what populated his imagination from the very beginning: “For a long time I resisted this, but I accept now that it is almost certainly true. The memories of Shanghai that I had tried to repress had been knocking at the floorboards under my feet, and had slipped quietly into my fiction” (*Miracles* 120).

The repetitions of certain elements throughout Ballard’s work, even though it has been read (following Ballard himself) as a working through, seem more akin to repetition compulsion, acquiring pathos and potency in their relentlessness. They repeat, but their traumatic components never subside, only to displace onto other elements. Jeanette Baxter contends that Ballard’s “authorial doubles” in his non-fiction are often at odds with each other, and discrepancies between their accounts should be taken as a sign that “these

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<sup>17</sup> In *Shanghai Jim*, Ballard alludes to this incident: “I know that when the war ended there was an uncertain period of about two weeks when no one knew—the Japanese didn’t know—if the war had ended after the Emperor’s broadcast, or at least for a few days. And I remember deciding to walk to Shanghai, and I climbed through the wire and I set off northwards towards the western suburbs and Amherst Avenue and reached a railway line, where I came across a tragic incident in which some Japanese soldiers were tormenting a Chinese to death.”

autobiographical ‘non-fictions’ [should be set] apart from claims to veracity” (*Visions/Revisions* 61). In 1991, following the publication of *Kindness*, Ballard returned to Shanghai for the first time after the war, accompanied by a BBC crew to make the documentary *Shanghai Jim*. Ballard recounts the experience in “Unlocking the Past”:

One can never go home, the American novelist Thomas Wolfe has written, meaning that everything changes, the past and one’s memories of it. Since coming to England in the grey, austere days after the war, I had kept alive my precocious memories of Shanghai. ... But what if my memories were false? My great fear was that far from evoking new memories, the visit might erase the old ones that had sustained me for so many years. (*User’s Guide* 173)

The memories from Shanghai, the unresolved trauma of those years, were what fueled Ballard’s imagination, and the fear Ballard alludes here is of losing not only cherished memories, but also the psychic support they provided him, and the very structure that formed his identity as a writer. In 1987, *Empire* was turned into a Hollywood production, directed by Steven Spielberg and written by Tom Stoppard. Coincidentally, some of the film was actually shot in Shepperton Studios, located near Ballard’s home just outside London. Ballard can be seen briefly in the background in one of the scenes as a party guest, even though the scene he supposedly interacted with his alter ego (played by Christian Bale) was cut from the final film. This uncanny encounter with these doubles—of himself, his childhood home, his parents—taking part of a fantasy he wrote, is fictionalized in the last chapter of *Kindness*, titled “Dream’s Ransom.” There is a telling moment in which the director asks Jim to come up with a line of dialogue for his cameo: “I stared at [the director], too tongue-tied to even say my name. [...] I felt myself drifting into a trance, trying to imagine this line of dialogue missing from my earlier life, which I had spent my entire career trying to define” (331). That line would correspond to the *Vorstellung*, that piece of the real that cannot be reduced to

words; if he could, he probably would not be writing about and around it for all these years. Interestingly, Jim's reaction is one of shock, and he cannot say his name, even though he was not asked for it. Not coming up with those words is analogous to not saying one's name, as it is an operation of protecting one's identity.

That Ballard essayed a resolution of these operations in *Kindness*, before his actual return to China, should be enough indication of their status as fabulation, as part of the myth he created for himself.

The film had served a deeper role for me—seeing its masterly recreation of Shanghai had been the last act in a profound catharsis that had taken decades to draw to a close. All the powers of modern film had come together for this therapeutic exercise. The puzzle had solved itself: the mirror ... had been broken from within. In my mind the image had fused with the original, enfolding it within its protective wings. Looking at the great hotels along the Bund, unchanged after fifty years, I could almost believe that my memories of Shanghai had always been a film, endlessly played inside my head during my years in England after the war. (341)

To believe in the fantasy constructed by *Kindness*, that of a working through, of a cathartic experience that somehow resolves itself, is to believe a novelistic device. The greatest weakness of *Kindness* as a novel is this simple-mindedness, an eagerness to resolve and to achieve a cure. In *Miracles*, Ballard seems to have succumbed to this easy fiction, and his work's rich ambiguity becomes overdetermined and impoverished in a simple "therapeutic exercise." As we know from *Shanghai Jim* and "Unlocking the Past," the puzzle did not and could not solve itself. In *Miracles*, the return to Shanghai is the "psychological equivalent of an adventure holiday. I had walked up to a mirage, acceptant that in its way it was real, and then walked straight through it to the other side" (273). There is little of the complex

repetition and unsettling media replication of *Atrocity* and *Crash* here, but Ballard returns to the notion that his memories had *always* been a film: that Ballard himself started believing his own fiction to some degree is a testament to the power of the imagination to reconstitute and mythologize, never reaching an end.

We should take heed of Angela Carter's astute reading of *Empire*, in which she claims there is nothing autobiographical about it, and continue reading Ballard as a fantasist. His project of reimagining his life in the context of his work in *Kindness* makes it clear that there is no stable ground that we can claim as truthful or autobiographical. In this sense, a text such as *Crash* can even be more autobiographical than *Miracles*, and it is probably more so because in *Crash* we have Ballard at his most naked, without the distance that (even reinvented) memories and history can provide.

## Chapter 4:

### Machine Embodiment: *Crash* and Death

*Crash* remains Ballard's most notable and disturbing book, as it is able to reach a wider audience than *Atrocity* simply because of its concessions to "straightforward" narratives and characters, and because of a critically successful film adaptation in 1996. It is also, in many ways, as Ballard himself said, his most autobiographical novel:

Not literally, but in the mind, of course. I chose to call the narrator in my novel *Crash* by my own name simply because these were my fantasies. I was writing the book in the first person and I thought, why invent a character who's working his way through this extraordinary landscape when I can simply use my own name and give this novel what I think is a degree of honesty that would be absent otherwise? (*Extreme* 389)

This commentary of course does not explain the extraordinary claim of autobiography, but to adopt the name "James Ballard" seems to be the logical progression after the unstable identity of Traven in *Atrocity*, where the practice was alienating to the reader; in *Crash*, it is perhaps too close to comfort.<sup>18</sup> The simple act of naming his character James Ballard has, of course, prompted many reviewers to take the book too seriously and dismiss it and Ballard as insane (or "beyond psychiatric help" as the story goes), but this is precisely the intended effect: a blurring of the boundaries between the author and its creations. And it speaks volumes about Ballard's fictional practices because what he probably means by

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<sup>18</sup> The novels following *Crash* would revert to more "fictional" central characters, even if in *High-Rise* (1975) we have the only instance of Ballard using more than one protagonist as he is split into three different characters.

“autobiographical” is this “degree of honesty” “in the mind,” not whether the narrative has any basis in fact.

Similarly, his introduction to the French edition of *Crash* can be seen as a manifesto for his late 1960s and 1970s output, in the same way “Which Way to Inner Space?” was for the first part of his career. Later Ballard came to regret two of its most often-quoted sections, one that claims that *Crash* is a cautionary tale, “Of course it isn’t anything of the sort. . . . *Crash* is what it appears to be. It is a psychopathic hymn. But it is a psychopathic hymn which has a point”; and “all [the] talk about science fiction. Of course *Crash* is not science fiction” (*Extreme* 347). Ballard seemed to go back and forth about this, as he would try to soften the radicalism of *Crash* every now and then by adding these distancing frames, which would ultimately defeat the purpose of giving the “degree of honesty” he so intended.<sup>19</sup> David Cronenberg, who wrote and directed the 1996 film adaptation, admitted that the name of the protagonist in his version should have been called David Cronenberg, and not James Ballard, an idea Ballard approved.

What all Ballard’s semi-autobiographical texts have in common is the notion of coping with trauma. *Crash* does not locate the source of trauma in World War II, but it is of course a narrative that develops from a traumatic incident, one that destabilizes the protagonist’s identity and world-view, and not at all different from *Atrocity* in that regard.<sup>20</sup> A motif from Cronenberg’s films can be very illustrative in describing the process in which trauma dominates the logic of the narrative in Ballard: his films should be seen from the point of

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<sup>19</sup> This is probably because Ballard felt that British culture was not ready for it, and he may have been right: as of 2013, Cronenberg’s adaptation of *Crash* is still banned in Westminster.

<sup>20</sup> In fact, Vaughan is a character that first appeared in “Tolerances of the Human Face” and there is a chapter in *Atrocity* titled “Crash!”.

view of the disease. One example would be *Videodrome* (1983), in which a pirate TV signal induces paranoia and a mediatized brain disease that causes bizarre hallucinations, illustrated in an iconic scene in which James Woods makes love with a TV set: the point of view is expressionistic, unflinchingly from the “diseased” brain, a view that contaminates reality. The psychic trauma restructures the world around itself, and the way *Crash* shows this at work is particularly fascinating. In this chapter I analyze *Crash* and the novel *The Unlimited Company* as Ballard’s most sustained efforts to explore a delusion centered around trauma and the (im)possibility of acceptance of death.

### **To Become a Machine**

In chapter 2 of *Crash*, we have James Ballard’s (heretofore known as James to avoid confusion) first car accident, the one which sets off the narrative. He has a heads-on collision with an incoming car, and in a long passage, James observes rescue attempts of the passengers of the other car, Helen Remington and her husband. Already there is a sense of the virtual intruding and the setting of a complex scene: “For a moment I felt that we were the principal actors at the climax of some grim drama in an unrehearsed theatre of technology, involving these crushed machines, the dead man destroyed in their collision, and the hundreds of drivers waiting beside the stage with their headlamps blazing” (22). Sex is introduced in a characteristically cold and clinical language, as James looks at Helen: “... all I could see was the unusual junction of her thighs, opened towards me in this deformed way. It was not the sexuality of the posture that stayed in my mind, but the stylization of the terrible events that had involved us, the extremes of pain and violence ritualized in this gesture of her legs” (22). Sex is conveyed in an extremely stylized way (to echo Ballard’s words), an extreme aestheticization that can only come with a complete dissociation of feeling, and that seems to be consonant to Marshall McLuhan when he writes: “It could well

be that the successive mechanizations of the various physical organs ... have made too violent and superstimulated a social experience for the central nervous system to endure (*Understanding Media*, 43). The pleasures in *Crash* are not really sexual, but aesthetic. When a fireman is able finally to rescue James, the narration goes: "If one of [the firemen] had unbuttoned his coarse serge trousers to reveal his genitalia, and pressed his penis into the bloody crotch of my armpit, even this bizarre act would have been acceptable in terms of the stylization of violence and rescue" (23). In a way, James is here imagining the most extreme act he can think of, since the scene is so strongly unreal that even the intrusion of unmotivated, bestial sex would not be out of place. The dimension of sexual desire is also one that permeates the world but it is often hidden, even with the myriad of codes in the media that point to it. Along with that other repressed, violence, when it finally comes to the surface, it can be overpowering.

The idea of sex keeps contaminating the prose for the next paragraph, which is worth quoting at length:

By this same nightmare logic the firemen racing towards the burning wrecks of crashed airliners might trace obscene or humorous slogans on the scalding concrete with their carbon dioxide sprays, executioners could dress their victims in grotesque costumes. In return, the victims would stylize the entrances to their deaths with ironic gestures, solemnly kissing their executioners' gun-butts, desecrating imaginary flags. Surgeons would cut themselves carelessly before making their first incisions, wives casually murmur the names of their lovers at the moment of their husbands' orgasms, the whore mouthing her customer's penis might without offence bite a small circle of tissue from the upper curvature of his glans. That same painful bite which I once received from a tired prostitute irritated by my hesitant erection

reminds me of the stylized gestures of ambulance attendants and filling station personnel, each with their repertory of private movements. (23, 24)

Not only does the language keeps coming back to sex, but also we can see Ballard's incendiary rhetoric, concerned with stirring up and destabilizing moral boundaries. The passage recalls *Atrocity* in its collage-like feel of random images. The underlying logic of the first part seems to be one of divesting acts of killing and death of meaning, setting them into a stylized scene. The second part appears to be doing the exact opposite, in which some harm is actually done, mostly to the body, possibly to ground whatever mundane act into the reality of the body, of some feeling. Žižek's commentary on the practice of "cutters," people who will inflict some kind of harm to their own body at will, bears some relevance here:

Far from being suicidal, far from signaling a desire for self-annihilation, cutting is a radical attempt to (re)gain a stronghold in reality, or (another aspect of the same phenomenon) to firmly ground our ego in our bodily reality, against the unbearable anxiety of perceiving oneself as non-existing.  
(*For They Do Not Know What They Do*, lxxvi)

What this speaks to is the notion that the world itself has become so virtualized that it is necessary to "test" reality through pain. It is a practice of affirmation amid a sense of emptiness of existence. Ballard takes this a little further in his "Introduction," "The most prudent and effective method of dealing with the world around us is to assume that it is a complete fiction—conversely, the one small node of reality left to us is inside our own heads" (96).

Ballard expands this logic and has his characters learn how to "feel" the world again, how to sensualize it, and invest it with some kind of meaning, and thus *Crash* continues *Atrocity's* project of remaking the world. "This obsession with the sexual possibilities of everything around me had been jerked loose from my mind by the crash" (29), James

observes. That “small node of reality left to us” speaks to a different world that exists alongside this one that needs to come back to light, through the defamiliarization and recontextualization of the body, hence the obsession in *Crash* with anatomy and bodily functions: “For the first time I was in physical confrontation with my own body, an inexhaustible encyclopedia of pains and discharges” (39). The crash and the advent of Vaughan reawaken him, making him aware of the sexual possibilities around him. He reveals his inclination, two months before, to touch a strange woman’s buttocks in an airport for the sheer excitement caused by the “conjunction of [her] skirt on the escalator in front of me and the distant fuselages of the aircraft, each inclined like a silver penis towards her natal cleft” (41). Even before James suffers his first car crash, he is already vulnerable to the peculiar aestheticization of reality—effected by the media—and the crash only organizes his incipient desire for the conjunction of body and machine, as it allows him to bring it all to the surface. This helps us to set the narrative of *Crash* in a world that is separate from our own, in which sexuality is repressed and replaced by its virtualized counterpart. The body is reawakened and sexuality begins to dominate the narrative, but in an estranging way, as if reconfigured. So in Ballard there is no return to the body or return of the real, but the emergence of a new cycle.

After being released from the hospital, James returns to his tenth-story apartment near Heathrow airport and observes: “I realized that the human inhabitants of this technological landscape no longer provided its sharpest pointers, its keys to the borderzones of identity” (48-49). His mind is unreeling and the pointers shifting to what Aidan Day calls “the principle of artifice dramatized and symbolized by the car and its roads” (280). Later, from the top of a car-park: “I realized that the entire zone which defined the landscape of my life was now bounded by a continuous artificial horizon, formed by the raised parapets and embankments of the motorways and their access roads and interchanges” (53). Thus, when

Vaughan, the central figure of the group of car crash victims, appears, he does so almost as if conjured by James's psyche, a double if there ever was one. James is "continually aware of Vaughan's presence," who "seemed to hover like an invigilator in the margins of my life, for ever monitoring my head" (65), and toward the end of the novel, he is convinced that Vaughan is a "projection of [his] own fantasies and obsessions" (220). He is an answer of the real for his spiritual awakening, a guru, or "nightmare angel of the expressways" (85) who guides his obsessions, as dependent on James as he is on him, and seeks, in the words of Scott Bukatman, "a joyful synthesis with precisely those objects that distance the subjects, the very objects that reinforce the discontinuous experience of being" (292). A "TV scientist" (63), he is associated with photographs and the media, always taking photographs of car crash victims, and his apartment is filled with photographs of himself as well: "Vaughan was self-consciously absorbed in these fading images, straightening their curling corners as if frightened that when they finally vanished his own identity would also cease to matter" (167). Vaughan is, in a sense, James completely filtered through the photographs he takes of crashes, a version of himself who has been through the looking glass, who dies by pursuing his obsessions to the very end—in his case, by crashing into Elizabeth Taylor's limousine.

Other characters share this colonization by the media, partaking in a sense that reality itself could be a consensual hallucination. When Catherine, James's wife, visits him in the hospital, her reaction is a desensitized one:

In her sophisticated eyes I was already becoming a kind of emotional cassette, taking my place with all those scenes of pain and violence that illuminated the margins of our lives—television newsreels of wars and student riots, natural disasters and police brutality which we vaguely watched on the color TV set in our bedroom as we masturbated each other. This violence experienced at so many removes had become intimately associated with our sex acts. ... Even

my own pain as I lay in the hospital bed, while Catherine steered the glass urinal between my legs, painted fingernails pricking my penis, even the vagal flushes that seized at my chest seemed extensions of that real world of violence calmed and tamed within our television programs and the pages of news magazines. (37)

In a consciousness completely filtered through the media, there is no ground for real feeling. In *Crash*, when the real intrudes in the form of the car crash, it is such a powerful event, that it is the only thing that is able to pierce through this desensitized reality. What they do not realize, is that, the real intrudes but James's reality is not really remade but reconstituted around itself, the signs shifted from one thing to the other. As in *Concrete Island*, in which Maitland tries to rebuild his identity as a technological Crusoe, but as Gasiorek puts it, "both the terrain on which he tries to achieve his self-exorcism and the identity he seeks to re-establish have been made out of the materials he proposes to discard" (119). In *Crash* those materials are sex and violence, excesses that are not properly contained and just keep being displaced, perpetuating a cycle in a system that is already in place from the first sentence of the novel.

### **Conceptualized Psychopathology: The "Crashed Cars" Exhibition**

*Crash* was not an easy novel to write, as one can gather from the surviving typescripts of the novel, overridden with hand scrawls and corrections. Its history is also one of aborted starts and rehearsals in other media. In April 1970, Ballard put together an exhibition of crashed cars culled from scrapyards on the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London, titled "Jim Ballard: Crashed Cars." He produced a handout for the exhibition, based on passages from *The Atrocity Exhibition*, and quoted here in full:

Each of these sculptures is a memorial to a unique collision between man and his technology. However tragic they are, automobile crashes play very different roles from the ones we assign them. Behind our horror lie an undeniable fascination and excitement, most clearly revealed by the deaths of the famous: Jayne Mansfield and James Dean, Albert Camus and John F. Kennedy. The 20th century has given birth to a vast range of machines—computers, pilotless planes, thermonuclear weapons—where the latent identity of the machine is ambiguous. An understanding of this identity can be found in a study of the automobile, which dominates the vectors of speed, aggression, violence and desire.

In particular, the automobile crash contains a crucial image of the machine as conceptualised psychopathology. Apart from its function of redefining the elements of space and time in terms of our most potent consumer durable, the car crash may be perceived unconsciously as a fertilising rather than a destructive event—a liberation of sexual energy—meditating the asexuality [sic] of those who have died with an intensity impossible in any other form. In 20th century terms the crucifixion would be enacted as a conceptual car crash.

The car crash is the most dramatic event we are likely to experience in our entire lives apart from our own deaths.

In the chapter “The Exhibition” in *The Kindness of Women*, Ballard fictionalizes this episode, and the fictional text of the catalogue there incorporates passages from his 1974 introduction, describing the 1960s as the decade dominated by “sinister technologies,” of the “marriage and reason and nightmare”: “‘Crashed Cars’ illustrates the pandemic cataclysm that kills

hundreds of thousands of people each year and injures millions, but it is a source of endless entertainment on our film and television screens” (222). In the real exhibition, at Ballard’s invitation, a model was to appear naked and interview the guests, but when she saw the cars, she only agreed to appear topless, “a significant response in its own right” (*Miracles* 334). Ballard was even convinced that he had hit a nerve: the guests quickly became drunk, poured wine over the cars, broke their glasses, and, reportedly, even tried to rape the topless interviewer (335).

The guests’ reactions are embellished in interesting ways in *Kindness*: The topless model becomes Sally, Jim’s former lover, and she is nearly raped in the rear seat of a Lincoln Continental—not one of the cars that were used in the real exhibition, but the same model car Kennedy was shot in, and that Vaughan drives in *Crash*—just as she mimicked the “postures of the President’s widow” (223), Jacqueline Kennedy. The guests are “egged on” to commit these acts by Sally and David Hunter, who is a character that plays a similar role as Vaughan does in *Crash*. Curiously, David was with Jim in Lunghua camp (even though Ballard did not have such a friend), and expresses an exaggerated aggressiveness when driving a car, claiming, “I have to remind myself of Shanghai ... I’m starting to forget it... The damn thing is, there’s nothing else to remember” (213). Unfortunately, *Kindness* comes dangerously close to self-parody because Ballard attempts to *explain* everything in terms of cause and effect. Thus, when Jim reflects,

If death had outstared life, which the world seemed to believe, I could rest my case. In a desperate sense Miriam would be alive again, Kennedy would drive triumphantly through Dealey Plaza, the casualties of the Second World War would rest in their graves, and a Chinese youth at a rural railway station would at last have conveyed his desperate message to me. (224)

The book does show how Ballard is willing to make connections explicit, and those connections reveal something about the way his imagination and memory work. What the passage (and *Kindness* as a whole) strongly alludes to is a paranoid self-delusion that puts private and public tragedies all on the same plane. *Crash* and *Atrocity* are more successful because they take place in a heightened, nightmarish fictional reality, with a “psychopathic” viewpoint that gives them an edge, whereas *Kindness* appears to be realistic and earnest, tying all those loose strands into a pre-digested package.

### **Cinecity: *Crash!***

In 1970, the filmmaker Harley Cokliss directed a short film about *The Atrocity Exhibition*, titled simply *Crash!*, starring Ballard himself and Gabrielle Drake. In this film, which predates the writing of the novel *Crash*, Ballard is, most of all, an actor with a remarkable presence. *Crash!* runs for about seventeen minutes and shows Ballard driving around—in an American car—airport flyovers, a car showroom with Pontiacs and Cadillacs, stopping at a car wash and a junkyard. All were to become settings in the novel, and a character was to be named Gabrielle after Drake. There is some narration out from “You and Me and the Continuum” (from *Atrocity*) as some crash footage is shown, as well as an original text read by Ballard himself, in a voice that for Iain Sinclair, sounds like a “schizophrenic buzz” (30). Apart from a brief section of associative montage (in which car parts are paralleled with female body parts), Drake is a haunting apparition, materializing only briefly, an intrusion of a certain erotic charge, but also that of a gaze. Strangely, Ballard and Drake are here rehearsing the narrative of the novel, Cokliss’s film being a dress rehearsal for *Crash*.

There is some added gravitas for the presence of Ballard on the screen, and this probably inspired his own decision to lend his name to the protagonist in the novel. Based on

Chris Petit's assertion that Cokliss was unlikely to have a strong authorial voice,<sup>21</sup> Simon Sellars claims that the invisible guiding hand on this project was Ballard himself: "It's very much his film and he knows it. His voice takes command. His body language dominates. Here Ballard was testing riffs (or 'routines', as Sinclair calls them, after Burroughs) that would, in time, become familiar" (*Crash! Full-Tilt Autogeddon*). Indeed, there are a number of familiar echoes of fragments of Ballardian ideas here and there. For instance, in his "Introduction" he comments on the latent and manifest content of dreams as proposed by Freud, but it is already sketched in *Crash!*:

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<sup>21</sup> John Baxter's biography details the process by which the film came about. According to Baxter, Ballard assured Cokliss that the film was a major inspiration for the novel. "In October, Cokeliss [sic] taped a long interview with [Ballard] and used this to compile a four-page treatment. [In lieu of a script, Ballard] sent Cokeliss [sic] a list of ten locations, with notes on their possible use. The list included, as Ballard wrote in his synopsis, highways and freeways, cloverleaves, and multilevel interchanges, which he suggested should be shown as sculpture, and cinematically melded into images of a woman's body. He also wanted to shoot in multi-storey car parks, nominating one at Sunbury, near Shepperton. Car showrooms were important, particularly if they could incorporate a woman in some sort of erotic dream sequence. The breakers' yard, with wrecks, of course. And a carwash. [...] Ideally he wanted a girl in the car, and she should be nude. Including an attractive woman at every point of the film was very important to him—if only in the background, he said, like the artist's model in the paintings of Delvaux or Ernst. She would also feature in a dramatized sequence from *The Atrocity Exhibition*, showing a woman getting out of the automobile after a crash" (211-12). And this is what ended up in the film, except for the nudity.

It seems to me that we have to regard everything in the world around us as fiction, as if we were living in an enormous novel, and that the kind of distinction that Freud made about the inner world of the mind, between, say, what dreams appeared to be and what they really meant, now has to be applied to the outer world of reality.

Ballard takes on an estranging perspective toward the motorways and multi-story car parks (“one of the most mysterious buildings ever built”), as if seen by an alien, as well as to the car itself: “If every member of the human race were to vanish overnight, I think it would be possible to reconstitute almost every element of human psychology from the design of a vehicle like this.” The most relevant passage for the purposes of this dissertation is when Ballard conceives of the car crash as a major trauma:

If the man in the motor car is the key image of the twentieth century, then the automobile crash is the most significant trauma. The car crash is the most dramatic event in most people’s lives, apart from their own deaths, and in many cases the two will coincide. ... It’s always struck me that people’s attitudes towards the car crash are very confused, that they assume an attitude that in fact is very different from their real response. If we really feared the car crash, none of us would ever be able to drive a car.

Here Ballard comes close to discussing the death of affect, not just a numbing effect prompted by the media landscape, but a psychological safety net of sorts, hardwired into our brains. He proposes that there is something insidious about the way we just carry on after a trauma like that, the real of the car crash being repressed. Most fiction does not really explore our reactions to violence and death, *Crash* looks at it head on. The logic of *Crash*—which is the logic of the Freudian death drive—can be summed up with the questions: what if we do

not *fear* the car crash, but actually *desire* it? And if so, what would we find on the other side of this?

### **Autogeddon**

Late in *Crash*, James has a chance to find out. After the death of Seagrave in a reenactment of Jayne Mansfield's car crash, Vaughan is troubled and aware that his grip on James's imagination has begun to wane. This coincides with James having wholly accepted Vaughan's logic (190), and a reversal in their relationship as James begins to be the dominant one. This full acceptance of Vaughan's logic is described as a shift in James's reactions toward the injuries of car crash victims: "My horror and disgust at the sight of these appalling injuries had given way to a lucid acceptance that the translation of these injuries in terms of our fantasies and sexual behavior was the only means of re-invigorating these wounded and dying victims" (190). Vaughan takes James to a junkyard, and they take LSD on the way, inducing a Blakean hallucination that uncannily resembles the first drive home from the hospital after his crash, "as if my wounds had flowered into these paradisaal creatures, celebrating the unity of my crash and this metallized Elysium" (198). The creatures are probably the cars themselves, "their metal bodies ... held together by the force of my own vision" (197) or even the "armada of angelic creatures" that moments later lands on the motorway, in turn built by them "unknowingly for their reception" (199). Structurally, recalling that previous moment in the novel sets up this acid trip as a moment of heightened perception and realization, which involves an extreme depersonalization, and a turning point. When they reach the junkyard, they engage in sexual intercourse in the most vividly realized sex act in the novel and one of its most delirious moments.

Chapter 22, the chapter that follows, is one of the novel's true turning points, and one of its most overlooked moments. Still under the influence of LSD, James wakes up to see

Vaughan looking at him, covered in flies, there waiting “for the rancid liquors distilled from the body of a corpse” (204). In a way, he is already one, James having already *absorbed* him—he no longer represents this life after death, only death. *Crash* is one of Ballard’s most hermetic novels, as it takes place in a world that is fully urbanized, filled with concrete and metal, but in this chapter, we find a respite, as James walks into “an abandoned world” with some vegetation (“the weed-grown entrance of the breaker’s yard”), just some feet away from an overpass (205).<sup>22</sup> The brief appearance of the natural world, of the vegetation that was so abundant in *The Drowned World*, is striking, as if there is a lifting of the veil—the veil of Vaughan, who dominates the entire narrative and world-view from its very first line: “Vaughan died yesterday in his last car crash” (7). As the effects of LSD wear off, a car appears and tries to run James down, but he manages to save himself. James becomes rather a dominant, active figure in these last chapters (he is the one who sodomizes Vaughan and not the other way around; and Vaughan’s final crash seems to be out of despair that he is unable to crash into Catherine’s car), and here the reality of his body, of survival kicks in, as it did even during his hallucinations, when driving: “As Vaughan urged me again to crash the car

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<sup>22</sup> This is the world of *Concrete Island*, Ballard’s next novel, one that can be read as a tangent of *Crash*. In it, an architect crashes (perhaps deliberately) his car on a traffic island, and finding himself unable (or unwilling) to escape, he sets out to rebuild his world, Crusoe-like, in this deject space. This involves a movement toward dissociation (as in *Atrocity* and *Crash*) to then remake his own identity from the scraps, but the architect only manages to rebuild that self out of the very things he tried to dissociate himself from, a world that, as Gasiorek says, “has been entirely remade by technology and now exists in a self-perpetuating cycle that has spun out of control to service that technology” (118).

into the vehicles approaching us, I was tempted to obey him, making no effort to answer the teasing pressure of his hand” (198), but at the last minute, he is able to attain control.

What are we to make of this odd scene? After this episode, Vaughan barely appears again, engaged in bizarre attempts to kill Catherine before he finally crashes into Elizabeth Taylor’s limousine. I believe Vaughan should be seen less as a character and more as an embodiment of an idea, or a catalyst for James’s own repression. As James himself says in chapter 24, “Increasingly I was convinced that Vaughan was a projection of my own fantasies and obsessions, and that in some ways I had let him down” (220). He might have, but he also managed to survive—it is one thing to accept Vaughan’s logic, and another to let himself be consumed by him, by the vortex of death. We come to see, by the end of the novel, that Vaughan survives in an abstract way, carrying out *Crash*’s messianic theme. During his recovery, James fantasizes:

The wounds on my knees and chest were beacons tuned to a series of beckoning transmitters, carrying the signals, unknown to myself, which would unlock the immense stasis and free these drivers for the real destinations set for their vehicles, the paradises of the electric highway. (53)

Compare with the ending of chapter 21 and the climax of James and Vaughan’s sex act: “In our wounds we celebrated the re-birth of traffic-slain dead, the deaths and injuries of those we had seen dying by the roadside and the imaginary wounds and postures of the millions yet to die” (203). James and Vaughan seek to reinvigorate “wounded and dying victims” (190), in a way shepherd them to a new mode of existence (thus the appearance of the armada of angels during James’s LSD trip), and Vaughan’s death, far from being a dead-end, becomes a ritual self-sacrifice by his disciples (James, Helen, Gabrielle). His car becomes a sacred object, and James’s semen is purposefully spread over his car, recalling an earlier scene when Vaughan has sex with a prostitute, and James observes: “As I looked at the evening sky it

seemed as if Vaughan's semen bathed the entire landscape, powering these thousands of engines, electric circuits and private destinies, irrigating the smallest gestures of our lives" (191). This literal dissemination reoccurs in the closing line of the book: "The aircraft rise from the runways of the airport, carrying the remnants of Vaughan's semen to the instrument panels and radiator grilles of a thousand crashing cars, the leg stances of a million passengers" (224). Vaughan, like Traven in *Atrocity*,<sup>23</sup> becomes by the end a complete abstraction, and a myth of the near future.

What appears to be pornography (an empty aesthetic of sex) in *Crash* is in fact closer to reproduction, the biological underpinning of sex. It literalizes Warhol's wish to "become a machine," and Ballard's own pronouncement that science fiction is the "body's dream of becoming a machine" (*Project for a Glossary of the Twentieth Century*, 279). In that sense, *Crash* is science fiction, in that it describes how seductive the world of the death of affect and of virtualization is, and what would mean to *fully* embrace its logic, and this is what Ballard means that it was necessary to give his name to the protagonist to get an extra degree of honesty. *Crash* explores the powerful instinct that fuels desire, that sensation of being *driven* by a strange instinct, a sensation of otherness. In the throes of annihilation, the body turns itself to the instinctual life force, to sex and reproduction. In the world of virtualization, it means to become a machine, that which reproduces mechanically, without affect. Paradoxically, that also means death, but death is fine for the characters in *Crash*, as long as

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<sup>23</sup> The second coming of Christ, of course, is featured in "You and Me and the Continuum," chapter 9 of *Atrocity*, which closes with the line "As his own identity faded, its last fragments glimmered across the darkening landscape, lost integers in a hundred computer codes, sand-grains on a thousand beaches, fillings in a million mouths" (138), probably referring to Traven.

it has a point, as long as it makes sense, and as long as it is the goal of life, in another literalization, this time of the Freudian death drive. *Crash* is, ultimately, like *Atrocity* and most of Ballard's work, about the delusion of the acceptance of death.

### Hyperreality

The prevalence of tests, reenactments, and rehearsals in *Crash* (Vaughan is likened to a film director)—both in the novel as in its composition history—seem to speak to the nature of simulation, as Baudrillard has argued in his 1991 essay on the novel, published on *Science Fiction Studies* and received with hostility by critics and even Ballard himself. Baudrillard reads *Crash* as an illustration of his own theory of simulation, a novel within which distinctions between reality and fiction have been supplanted by a hyperreality. His solution to the moral quandaries of *Crash* is that the text is *outside* ethical and moral boundaries altogether.

In *Crash*, there is neither fiction nor reality—a kind of hyper-reality has abolished both. Even critical regression is no longer possible. This mutating and commutating world of simulation and death, this violently sexualized world totally lacking in desire, full of violent and violated bodies but curiously neutered, this chromatic and intensely metallic world empty of the sensorial, a world of hyper-technology without finality—is it good or bad? We can't say. It is simply fascinating, without this fascination implying any kind of value judgment whatsoever. And this is the miracle of *Crash*. The moral gaze—the critical judgmentalism that is still a part of the old world's functionality—cannot touch it. *Crash* is hypercritical, in the sense of being beyond the critical.

Baudrillard's essay is a brilliant piece of writing in its own right, but he might be more than a little disingenuous here. He focuses solely in the surface of the novel—because that is what Baudrillard is all about—and assumes that that is what Ballard is doing too. For Baudrillard, signs and images have supplanted their original meanings, and the world exists in appearances. The signs begin to embody, rather than point, the referent. Vaughan's contact with reality is wholly mediated by systems of reproduction: TV screens, photographs, and even the "screen" of his car's windshield (in British English, "windscreen"); he is deluded to the point he believes to be a messiah. Baudrillard is right in observing that the world of *Crash* has hyperreal elements, but a careful reading of the novel and knowledge of other works by Ballard point that the hyperreality (or third-order simulation) has not "abolished" fiction nor reality; it is there in a desperate attempt to break through this illusion (thus the text's insistent concerns about transcendence, Vaughan's messianic tendencies, and motifs of flight). The characters in *Crash* have, in some way, forgotten how to properly decode the world, but their problem is not one that the text itself shares, as it is a novel that is very much concerned with the decoding of the logics that drives this preference for the image over the real. Baudrillard seems to be in an analogous mental conundrum as the characters in *Crash*, unable (or unwilling) to make a distinction between the ideas expressed by the characters and the articulation of those ideas in the novel.

In her response to Baudrillard's essay in *Science Fiction Studies*, Katherine Hayles touches on a central question of the book:

The borders separating simulations from reality are important because they remind us of the limits that make dreams of technological transcendence dangerous fantasies. Hyperreality does not erase these limits, for they exist whether we recognize them or not; it only erases them from our consciousness.

For articulating those concerns, *Crash* became a touchstone in imaginative writing that prefigured the cyberpunk movement in the early 1980s, in which virtuality and technological transcendence were seen as ultimately seductive, and very dangerously so. For Hayles, *Crash*'s erotic transformations are expressions of a drive toward transcendence, one that "culminates in flight, a flight of death." Furthermore, Gasiorek suggests that there is a sort of "counter-narrative" that conceives the trauma, or wound as source of redemption, and imagines how out of the disaster the wound might be recreated: "For if the wound is troped as a vent that opens the way to a vision of hell, then it is also figured as a beacon signposting the path to paradise ... as if the writer is searching for some means technology can offer reparation for all this pain" (91). We see what happens when this delusion of technological transcendence is carried through: it either ends in death, jumping off a flyover and colliding with a limousine (in the case of Vaughan), or the reality of the body suddenly returns, through instinct, in the case of James (when Vaughan tries to run him over). Thus, the ending of *Crash* can be read allegorically: Vaughan, standing in for the dangerous, deathly pull of technological transcendence (which Baudrillard's text sympathizes with) is finally reconfigured not as an active presence, but as a memory and a metaphor, the only form that it can do some good.

**"If Christ came again, he would be killed in a car crash"**

Cokliss's film *Crash!* and the ICA exhibition were not the only rehearsals for the novel: in May 1968, Ballard planned, along with Eduardo Paolozzi and Christopher Evans (reportedly his inspiration for Vaughan) a play in the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London titled *Crash*. The narrative would involve a man buying his first car, his death in a

crash, and a transformation into a Christ figure. A report in the *Sunday Mirror* describes the project:<sup>24</sup>

all the horror and realism of an actual road smash will be played out in front of the audience. The young driver, in blood-covered track suit, will lie beside the mangled car. His girl friend will kneel beside him, caressing him. Dummies will mouth words about the beautiful and desirable features of the motor car. Behind them, film of cars crashing will make up the stark and terrible accompaniment.

More importantly, however, is how Ballard conceived of *Crash* in this early stage, from the same report:

Crash victims like Jayne Mansfield, James Dean, Aly Khan, Jim Clark and President Kennedy (the first man to be murdered in a motorcade) act out the Crucifixion for us. Their deaths heighten our vitality in a blinding flash. The death of Kennedy was a sacrificial murder, connived at the millions of people who watched it endlessly recapitulated on television. If Christ came again, he would be killed in a car crash.

This sensationalistic line about Christ—even used as the title of the report in the *Sunday Mirror*—reveals something about Ballard’s probable intentions for *Crash*, and how Vaughan was initially conceived. One of the most famous stories from *Atrocity* is precisely “The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race,” modeled after Alfred Jarry’s “The Crucifixion Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race,” in which he seeks to provide “a more satisfactory explanation” than the Warren Report (123). Jarry’s

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<sup>24</sup> These would later be incorporated into Ballard’s handout for the “Crashed Cars” exhibition (see above).

piece ends with the line “We know that [Jesus] continued the race airborne,” a possible influence in Ballard’s conception of the afterlives of Vaughan and Traven, an image that Dali was also obsessed with during the 1950s.

As a motif, it persisted after *Crash*—there are remnants of Christian rituals in *Concrete Island*, such as the scene in which Maitland, troubled by the pain of his own traumatized body, identifies himself with the island he is marooned in. He reflects on the places he suffered physical pain:

These places of pain and ordeal were now confused with pieces of his body. He gestured towards them, trying to make a circuit of the island so that he could leave these sections of himself where they belonged. He would leave his right leg at the point of his crash, his bruised hands impaled upon the steel fence. He would place his chest where he had sat against the concrete wall. At each point a small ritual would signify the transfer of obligation from himself to the island (71).

*Concrete Island* is Ballard’s most direct treatment of physical trauma and deprivation and its effects on the mind—many hallucinatory and feverish passages anticipate Jim’s walk back to Shanghai in *Empire of the Sun*. Maitland then speaks aloud, “a priest officiating at the eucharist of his own body”: “I am the island” (71). Later, Maitland and the island’s tramp, Proctor, set up an altar of “metal objects stripped from [Maitland’s] car, ... laid out like an elaborate altarpiece on which would one day repose the bones of a revered saint” (160). In these passages, we see the same kind of displacement that happens in *Crash*, but here Ballard gives a clue about what they are all about: a “transfer of obligation” from the self to something else. Ballard’s Christian motifs are not deployed in a systematic way, but Ballard seems to be interested in the metaphor of Christ, of his cultural-mythical power and the transcendence from the body and redemption for the sins and deaths of others (as in *Crash*),

in the form of a celebration. In *Concrete Island* we see how important it is to get *away* from that body, it being too burdensome, limiting, and too earthbound. By an enormous act of the imagination, it seems to be possible to “free” oneself.

### **Posthumous Fantasies: *The Unlimited Dream Company***

Ballard’s work after *High-Rise* presents interesting, if ambiguous, ripostes to the gloomy prognostications of the “urban disaster” trilogy. His longest story, “The Ultimate City,” is a fable that opposes two spaces: “Garden City” and the “Ultimate City” itself (a stand-in for New York, as it appears). Garden City is a pastoral, post-industrial society that ends up being boring, stifling and limited; thus, the protagonist returns to an ancient technological city that provides the tools and the means to fuel his imagination. Once there, everything gets out of hand because in rekindling industrialization, even if it is psychically fulfilling, that only serves to bring on its demise, yet again. *Hello America* (1981) is a rewrite of sorts, and explores the whole of America as an abandoned post-industrial world. *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979), however, would be located *within* Garden City itself, more precisely in Shepperton, the suburb of London where Ballard lived. The move from the technological world of concrete of the previous novels is startling, and here we see a development of a certain theoretical project—the escape from the shackles of late capitalism. If “The Ultimate City” and *Hello America* meant a return to technology, *Unlimited* postulates what would happen if such a return were not possible. I choose to discuss this novel precisely because it represents the other side of *Crash*, and because it is possibly Ballard’s fullest examination of his constant themes of transfiguration and transcendence.

To this day, it remains one of the strangest and most overlooked books in the Ballard canon, along with *The Day of Creation* (1987) and *Rushing to Paradise* (1994), all of which

share a concern with madness and imagination.<sup>25</sup> In Sam Scoggins's 1983 film *The Unlimited Dream Company*, Ballard introduces the novel:

*The Unlimited Dream Company* is set in Shepperton, where I live, and it's about a young pilot who steals a light aircraft and crashes into the Thames. He, in a sense, *dies*—he's trapped and drowns in his aircraft. He frees himself by an enormous effort of the imagination, and through his imagination, transforms Shepperton into an Edenic paradise full of exotic plants and animals. In many ways I feel that, without realizing it at the time, that I was writing a piece of my autobiography: it was about the writer's imagination—particularly my own imagination—transforming the humdrum reality that he occupies, and turning into an unlimited dream company.

The Shepperton of *Unlimited* is another of Ballard's conscripted spaces, the “everywhere of suburbia” and “paradigm of nowhere” (35) that becomes a lush jungle paradise to support the fantasy of his main character. Blake, whom Alistair Cormack calls “a case study we might find in the works of R. D. Laing” (147), is a troubled figure “acting a part to which someone else should have been assigned” (*Unlimited* 11), and by an “enormous act of the imagination,” imagines to have become a pagan god with the power to transform himself and the world. For Gasiorek, *Unlimited* “dreams a new life in which the sicknesses of a post-lapsarian realm are purged away through a rapturous fusion of all elements of the creation into a delirious unity” (133).

Like *Concrete Island*, the novel is an example of “fantastic hesitation,” “wherein the membrane between the fictive and the real is permeable, its textual world situated in that

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<sup>25</sup> *Hello America* (1981) and *The Wind from Nowhere* (1961, disowned by Ballard) complete the list of his least discussed novels.

liminal space between waking life and insubstantial dream” (Gasiorek 134), and it all hinges on a crash. This time, it is not a mundane, urban crash of everyday life but on a level hinted at in *Crash* (with Catherine’s flying lessons, for instance)—the protagonist is already looking for a transcendence of some kind. There are brief hesitations in the first half of *Concrete Island* that suggest that Maitland might still be trapped in the car: “Was the entire island an extension of the Jaguar, its windshield and windows transformed by his delirium into these embankments?” (67). But these are dropped as Maitland interacts with Proctor and Jane (the other inhabitants of the island). In *Unlimited*, Blake’s status is always hesitant. In a passage reminiscent of Maitland’s attempt to escape the island going over the embankment, Blake realizes that he is trapped in Shepperton:

Although I was walking at a steady pace across the uneven soil, I was no longer drawing any closer to the pedestrian bridge ... If anything, this distance between [me and the motorway] seemed to enlarge. At the same time, Shepperton receded behind me, and I found myself standing in an immense field filled with poppies and a few worn tyres. (*Unlimited* 38)

A field remarkably like the no-zone of *Concrete Island*, a place that seems to have a will of its own (which is the protagonist’s unconscious will) and intent on trapping him there. The way the fauna and flora of Shepperton explode in luxuriant growth is an extreme version of the “sentient” grass of *Concrete Island*, and more importantly, *part* of their protagonist’s bodies. *Unlimited* is, however, intent on distancing itself from the world of concrete and metal of the three previous novels, isolating its world geographically from London and its motorways. If the expulsion from reality in *Concrete Island* was only illusory—Maitland is after all, trapped inside the machine—in *Unlimited* Ballard is moving purposefully away from the technological, and wondering what could be created on its stead.

We can infer Ballard's probable intentions if we take his pronouncement seriously and read *Unlimited* as a "piece of his autobiography." In 1984, Ballard wrote "The Secret Autobiography of J. G. B.," a short but curious text if read alongside *Unlimited*. In it, "B" wakes up one morning and finds that Shepperton is deserted. After checking the nearby city of Walton and central London, "an immense city plunged into darkness, where the only lights were the reflections of his headlights" (*Complete Stories* 1190). In the coming days, he visits the empty flats of his friends in London and enters the Houses of Parliament, and finally finds that his only companions are the birds he unlocks from London Zoo. He crosses the Channel into France but soon decides to return to Shepperton to stay with the birds. The story ends, "Thus the year ended peacefully, and B was ready to begin his true work" (1191). The mysterious "true work" we can only speculate, the logical conclusion to this story (we learn that "B" has amassed a limited stock of tinned food) is that "B" will eventually be eaten by the birds and figuratively ascend and take flight with them.

Consider Ballard's answer in an interview about *Unlimited*: "It's a surrealist's vision of Shepperton where I live. But it's a sort of parable of my own life. I fell to earth there thirty years ago and got to work transforming the modest little town into this exotic pagan universe. I wait hopefully every day for the scenarios laid down in the book to come to pass" (*Extreme* 301). Forgiving Ballard this little bit of hyperbole, we can infer what *Unlimited* might be about: the power of the imagination to remake the world, come to terms with death, and live a meaningful existence. In the novel, Shepperton is much more than just a "modest little town," it is an ersatz world in which the logic of its real film studios have come to dominate, a gigantic film set peopled by "actors recruited ... to play their role in an elaborate conspiracy" (*Unlimited* 26). Blake's metamorphosing god enlists the help of the inhabitants of Shepperton and teaches them to fly, offering them "a sudden glimpse into that real world," as he draws back "the curtains that muffle Shepperton and the rest of this substitute realm" (90). That

approximates Blake to Vaughan, but the reality that Blake seeks to uncover with his Dionysian powers is one of social convention and sexual repression. At one point, Blake sees himself incorporating the inhabitants of Shepperton “into the host of my flesh ... merging with all creatures until I had taken into myself every living being, every fish and bird, every parent and child, a single chimeric god uniting all life within me” (182-3), not unlike Nietzsche’s Dionysus who “transforms things until they mirror his power” and who “enters into every skin, into every emotion ... continually transforming himself” (*Twilight* 82, 83). Even more appropriate than Nietzsche, is Norman O. Brown’s “polymorphous perversity” from *Life against Death*, a delight in the full life of the body rather than in rationalized “erogenous zones” or “sexual organizations”:

[A] man freed from all sexual organizations—a body freed from unconscious oral, anal, and genital fantasies or return to the maternal womb. Such a man would be rid of the nightmares that Freud showed to be haunting civilization; but freedom from those fantasies would also mean freedom from that disorder of the human body, which Freud pitilessly exposed. In such a man would be fulfilled the mystic hope of Christianity, the resurrection of the body, in a form, as Luther said, free from death and filth. (291)

Blake and Vaughan’s pull toward this “mystic hope of Christianity” is undermined by the text, since their attempts are doomed. Here the figures of Vaughan and Blake are less Christ-like but more Orphic: in Ovid, when Orpheus sings, young men, plants, and beasts gather around him, and he goes to the Underworld to charm Pluto and bring back Eurydice (*Metamorphoses* 482).<sup>26</sup> Orpheus’ body is later mutilated and his limbs spread to the four

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<sup>26</sup> Blake claims he has a Pied Piper complex (24). Again, it is hard to resist making comparisons to Ballard’s life—his young wife died of pneumonia during a holiday in Spain,

corners of the earth, killed by women with farmer's implements (484), instruments of dissemination that end up broadcasting Orpheus himself, instead of his voice, much like Vaughan and Traven.<sup>27</sup>

The theme of dissemination is taken up in Blake's mythic sexual fecundation of an entire neighborhood, engaged in a certain naiveté about the future of this new ontological order that is being created. After essaying a wedding in which his paramour Miriam St Cloud (dressed up like a bird, an allusion to Max Ernst's "The Robing of the Bride") is shot by the rebellious Stark, Blake loses his powers, only to be buried and reborn by the three children that witnessed his crash. In fact, Blake only interacts in any meaningful way with the people that composed the scene of his crash, and later spends a long time observing the size and shape of hands of the people he encounters, trying to match them with the bruises on his own chest. In the end he discovers that the hands are his very own, and the pilot—his former self—is still inside the crashed Cessna. In this act of regaining his strength to fight Stark—

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and left Ballard to raise their three children by himself. In *Miracles of Life*, he writes that, in fact, the children brought *him* up. After her death in 1964, his fictional practices were transformed and gave way to the "core" Ballardian fictions of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, *Crash*, and so on. In *Miracles*, he writes: "I felt that nature had committed a dreadful crime against Mary and her children. Why? There was no answer to the question, which obsessed me for decades to come" (279).

<sup>27</sup> Wilder, the documentarian who wanted to broadcast the revolution of the building in *High-Rise*, is killed at the end of his ascent by a horde of savage women armed with knives, "his new mothers" (168). Additionally, Pynchon makes a connection between the mutilated Orpheus and his scattered Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*, "one plucked albatross ... scattered all over the Zone" (712).

who, perversely, is trying to recover the aircraft in an attempt to show Blake the reality of his death—Blake does so by “giving himself away” (204) quite literally, like a benevolent messiah, by visiting a hospital and giving his blood and parts of his body to the diseased.<sup>28</sup> The townspeople then learn to fly and move on to another realm, leaving Blake to confront Stark and his own body, now “half-submerged, as if between two worlds” (214). The scene is oddly reminiscent of chapter 22 of *Crash*: Blake’s former self, a “skeleton,” “fights his way past my hands, his bony mouth clamped against my lips, trying to suck the air from my lungs,” but in the end Blake is able to “calm my dead self, taking my bones into me, my shins and arms, my ribs and skull” (215).

The final paragraph recounts Blake’s coming to terms with death, an act of “merging with the trees and the flowers, with the dust and the stones, with the whole of the mineral world, happily dissolving ourselves in the sea of light that formed the universe, itself reborn from the souls of the living who have happily returned themselves to its heart” (220). The first chapter, however, takes place after this, and depicts Shepperton being invaded by helicopters—an ominous Ballardian symbol, here representing the end of Blake’s “natural” flight, being superseded by a mechanical one, making his reign short-lived. Ballard’s endings are often like this: open-ended but with only one possible outcome. Whatever salvation Blake thinks he has brought to the townspeople, there is no rapture for him, as in these last moments he is hiding from the helicopters, dreading the final encounter that will make his own life (and death) narrative stop. It is as if Ballard does not fully believe in the eco-centric life after death imagined by Blake, and the realm of the technological appears at the very end of the narrative to undermine it. Freedom, as it seems, is just as inscrutable as death.

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<sup>28</sup> “Last of all, to a man with cancer of the mouth, I made the gift of my tongue” (204): a possible reference to Freud.

### **The Living and the Dead**

“Time was different here,” Ballard writes in “Memories of the Space Age,” “as it had been at Alamogordo and Eniwetok; a psychic fissure had riven both time and space, then run deep into the minds of the people who worked here” (*Complete Stories* 1042). The mention of these atomic test sites recalls Ballard’s earlier stories “The Voices of Time” and “The Terminal Beach.” In the latter, a pilot named Traven maroons himself on the former Pacific test site of Eniwetok, and there he tries to come to terms with the reality of World War III and the premature death of his wife and son. The physical description of the island is almost like a text version of Dali’s 1954 *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*, the painter’s reworking of his famous 1931 painting. In the story, Traven finds among the dunes “the tops of what seemed to be a herd of square-backed elephants” (595), that turn out to be two thousand cubes of “15 feet in height, regularly spaced at ten-yard intervals ... arranged in a series of tracts, each composed of two hundred blocks, inclined to one another and to the direction of the blast.” Dali’s 1931 *The Persistence of Memory* has the famous melting clocks, but the landscape remains consistent; in the later version, space itself seems to be disintegrating, revealing solid blocks like the ones in Ballard, like the atoms that comprise matter. The shadow of the atom bomb and quantum mechanics loomed large for Dali in the 1950s, and he sought to display the structural underpinnings of matter. Traven’s blocks have a similar visual effect.

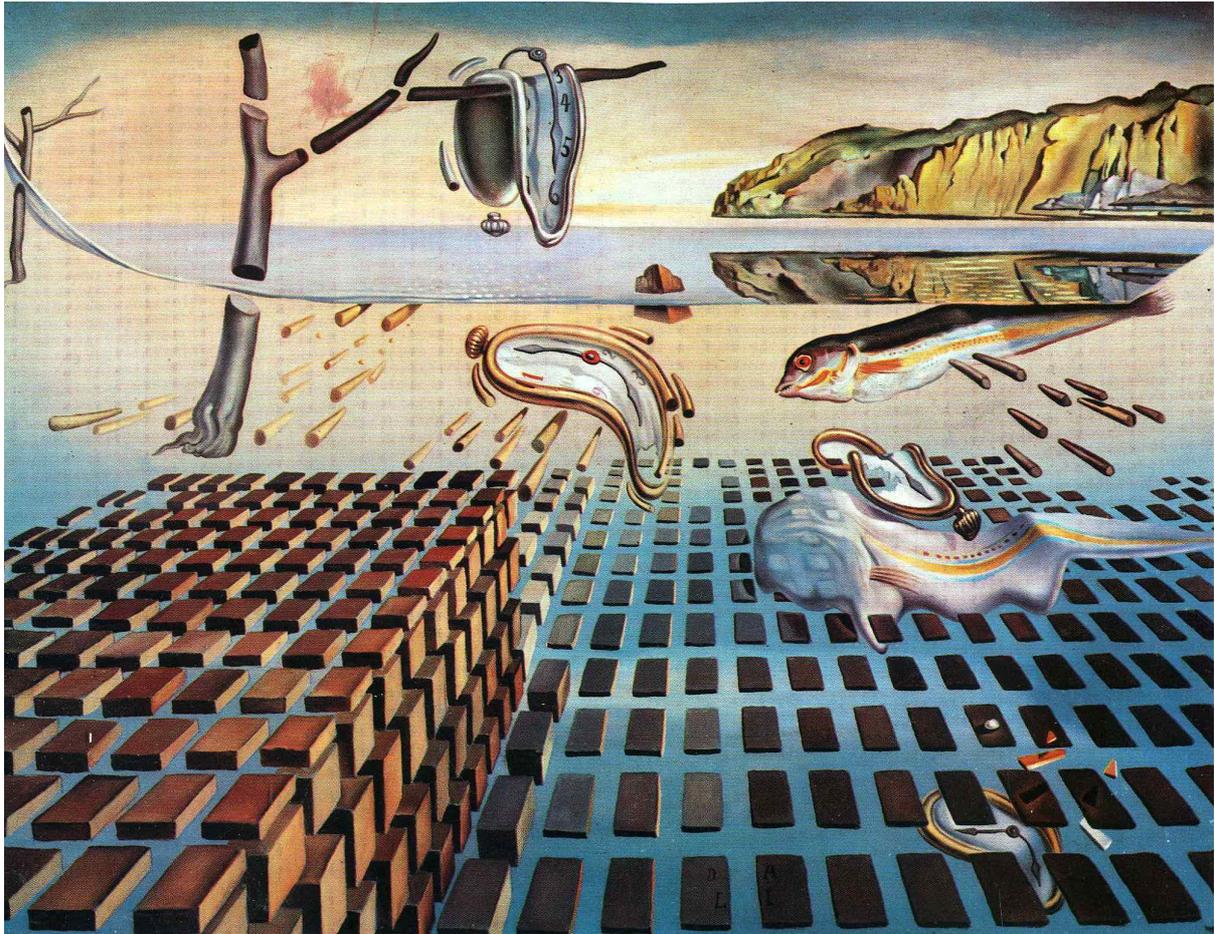


Fig 1. Salvador Dalí, *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory* (1954). Salvador Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida

Later in the story, in a section titled “The Catechism of Goodbye,” time becomes quantal: “For hours it would be noon, the shadows contained within the blocks, the heat reflected off the concrete floor” (601). Traven then bids goodbye to Eniwetok, Los Alamos, Hiroshima, Alamogordo, and each time, in “a flicker of light” each of the blocks, “like a counter on an abacus ... is plucked away,” creating in his mind “a small interval of neutral space” (601). This “megathlon farewell” is an act of fixing his signature, a deliberate act of forgetting but also of remembrance, as indicated in “The Voices of Time,” in which Powers, the protagonist, tries to do the same thing, and realizes that “systematically forgetting everything was exactly the same as remembering it, a cataloguing in reverse, sorting out all

the books in the mental library and putting them back in their right places upside down” (178).

Eniwetok in “The Terminal Beach” is one of such places of memory in Ballard’s fiction, a fictionalized space where mind, space, and body fuse into one to enact a double play of remembrance and amnesia, an “ontological Garden of Eden” and in the blocks, Traven finds an “image of himself free of the hazards of time and space” (603). At the height of his madness, in the section titled “Total Noon: Eniwetok,” the blocks carry Traven upwards into the sky, “and then down again through the opaque disc of the concrete floor” (601), an “ultimate rejection” that “gains him nothing,” and then he finds the corpse of a Japanese man in a crevice, with whom he imagines having a conversation. Traven has second thoughts about killing a fly—the only other living being in the entirety of the island—buzzing around the corpse’s face. The Japanese corpse, who he has named Dr. Yasuda, beckons Traven to “pursue a philosophy of acceptance” that involves losing himself in the world of “quantal flux” of the blocks and finally to kill the fly (603-4). Traven is skeptical about Yasuda’s argument that the wife and son that he seeks “are fixed in our minds forever,” and about killing the fly, Traven quips, “That’s not an end, or a beginning,” but finally and “hopelessly,” kills it (604). The story ends with Traven positioning Yasuda’s corpse, like a guard, in a point in between his bunker and the blocks. By doing so, Traven is able to retain some level of lucidity—he still hallucinates images of his wife and son—but now he is able to forage for food. The “dead archangel” of the corpse is guarding him from death, but this is not a promise of immortality. That would be closer to the ontological Eden that Traven is consciously trying to avoid. Here we can see parallels with Vaughan’s death in *Crash*—recall that he is also called an archangel—and Ballard seems to be saying that this deluded sacrifice is not really coming to terms with death at all, or maybe that is just an attempt to give meaning to the inscrutable void that is death. What we see in Ballard, notably in characters

such as Vaughan, is precisely intellectualized, aestheticized, and more importantly, deluded attempts to rob the other of death of its inscrutability, and thus injecting it with narcissistic meaning. The mystery of death, which Ballard probably came in contact early in his life in wartime Shanghai, is connected with the mystery of the body.

Writing about the *Death in America* prints by Andy Warhol (which undoubtedly share a thematic concern with Ballard), Foster comments on Lacan's attempt to define the real in terms of trauma. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan defines the traumatic as a "missed encounter with the real" (17) and thus can only be repeated, never encountered, differentiating *Wiederholen* (repetition) from *Wiederkehr* (return). In "Death in America," Foster argues that to repeat is to screen the real understood as traumatic: "But this very need [to repeat] *points* to the real, and it is at this point that the real *ruptures* the screen of repetition. It is a rupture not in the world but in the subject; or rather it is a rupture between perception and consciousness of a subject *touched* by an image" (Foster, "Death in America" 42). Lacan calls this the *tuché*, whereas Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* calls it the *punctum*.

Two general principles govern the psychic apparatus according to Freud: the pleasure principle and the reality principle. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud, after his study of war-related traumas, addresses the case of certain dreams that seem to go against the general rule of psychic activity, which is to avoid unpleasure. Freud postulated that these dreams generate fear because it was absent during a traumatic moment (122). In this sense, these dreams perform a function not unlike the feelings of anxiety, a signal or motive for defense (*Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* 28), always introducing the traumatic scene in a veiled or disguised form. As Freud writes in *Beyond*, "Let us conclude that the reality system [or reality principle], however far it develops, leaves an essential part of the real imprisoned within the snares of the pleasure principle (55). Lacan returns to this notion in *Seminar XI*, differentiating the reality principle from the real, and proposing that the unconscious should

be located between perception and consciousness (56). A perception, related to the real, can only come to consciousness (related to reality principle and the ego) if it passes through an unconscious filter, that of the symbolic order, governed by the pleasure principle. The referent in the real, or *Vorstellung*, is missing and unrepresented, but we have signs that point to it, *repräsentanz*, which presents but never represents. In this sense, the real cannot be found plainly in a dream or a literary text, as it is always disguised.

Ballard's preoccupations in *Atrocity* and *Crash* seem to collude with Warhol's, whose work touched on the operations of subjects becoming objects, humans becoming machines. In the *Death in America* series, Warhol achieves an eerie effect: when looking at the corpses of the series, it is the awareness of a lack of feeling is what elicits some kind of affect from the viewer. This is what Foster calls traumatic realism:

One way to develop this notion is through the famous motto of the Warholian persona: "I want to be a machine." Usually this statement is taken to confirm the blankness of artist and art alike, but it may point less to a blank subject than to a shocked one, who takes on the nature of what shocks him as a mimetic defense against this shock: I am a machine too, I make (or consume) serial product-images too, I give as good (or as bad) as I get. ... If you can't beat it, Warhol suggests, join it. ("Death in America" 39)

In Warhol, repetition works as a way to control and contain trauma, but as Foster argues, something always pokes through this screen. Like Traven and his reenactments or Vaughan in *Crash*, even if they appear to be cold and calculated and sterile, there is something deeply troubling and disturbing about them, and probably the effect for the reader is one of a shared feeling of the intimation of death, that deep-seated guilt that tugs at us when life carries on, even though the traumatic event, that "missed encounter with the real" might make us feel something quite uncanny: that it should not have, and to survive a traumatic event is to carry

that burden. Foster comments on the passerby in “White Burning Car III,” whose indifference is “bad enough,” but when it is repeated it becomes “galling” (43), an example of how the *punctum* works in Warhol. Repetition in Warhol can either fix on the traumatic real, screen it, or produce it (46), and the empty blank space in the sequence of “White Burning Car III” is probably one that produces it, having an effect of uncanny identification, as if this could be the viewer next time he enters into a car. This effect of something unfinished, a repetition that implies an end, but not an end that can be represented, an end that is outside of the frame, is analogous to the ending of *Crash*, in which James is “designing the elements of his own car-crash” (224). It is less an acceptance of death, but an acceptance of the inevitability of death.



Fig. 2. Andy Warhol, *White Burning Car III* (1963), The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, New York.

### Conclusion:

#### Exhausted Futures

In *The Kindness of Women*, the protagonist participates in the filming of an adaptation of his own novel. As he stands in a house doubling for his childhood home, he is asked how the house looks, to which he replies with the word, “Uncanny” (329). The feeling is of being in place and out of place at the same time. In “Unlocking the Past,” a piece that Ballard wrote about his actual return to his childhood home in Shanghai in 1991, he states that “one can never go home” (*User’s Guide* 173). The *locus suspectus* of 31a Amherst Avenue is one that haunts Ballard’s writing. Curiously, Ballard’s encounter with his memories was filmed in a BBC documentary, *Shanghai Jim*, in which he presents his former home to the viewer:

Coming back to Shanghai for the first time since 1946 has been a very strange experience and of course the house is the strangest of all. I spent my entire childhood here, and I really came something close to adult life here. So it is a strange experience. I keep trying to think what would have happened had the war not taken place. I would have gone on living here, and probably would have gone on living in Shanghai. So I see around me here a sort of alternate life that I never actually managed to live because of the war.

The strange experience is one that evokes an alternate existence, the existence of a double that is at the same time Ballard but with a completely different life and thus not Ballard. During the war, Ballard and his family were interned in Lunghua Assembly Centre just outside Shanghai, where the vast world of Shanghai and his comfortable home were drastically reduced to a minuscule room he had to share with his parents and sister. Ballard talks of this room in *Shanghai Jim*:

This little room is in fact probably as close as I'll ever come to home, surprisingly. ... I've really spent forty-five years looking for the place, and in many ways this is the most important place in my life, there's no question about it. ... [T]his is a kind of settling of account for me, coming here. It is a coming to terms with the past and the sort of dreams that to some extent have sustained me during the last forty-five years in England, where I've never really been all that at home.

He claims his memories of this place *sustained* him, of a place that was uncomfortable, filled with anxiety, hunger, and stress. Reading Ballard has a lot to do with this effect, rendering the familiar unfamiliar, and this is often due to a discontinuity in time. Ballard is obsessed with relics, be they of the past, the present, of an imagined future—the quintessential “Ballardian” images of drained swimming pools, abandoned hotels and hangars are everyday spaces or objects invested with Ballard’s wholly unique response to the postwar world and late capitalism.

Take the first sentence of *High-Rise*, certainly one of the most striking in all of Ballard’s fiction: “Later, as he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr. Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous three months” (7). The reader is already disoriented, grasping for the context of time. It is already “later,” after three months of “unusual events” that culminate into this character sitting, nonchalantly and affectlessly at a balcony eating a dog. Many of Ballard’s texts begin at this same moment—as close to the end as possible—and project backwards. And this is the moment that is after the system collapses, but before death itself. Still in *High-Rise*, Laing puzzles at the sight of derelict domestic machines of the building, finding it “hard to remember what their original function had been” (101):

Even the run-down nature of the high-rise was a model of the world into which the future was carrying them, a landscape beyond technology where everything was either derelict or, more ambiguously, recombined in unexpected but more meaningful ways. Laing pondered this— sometimes he found it difficult not to believe that they were living in a future that had already taken place, and was now exhausted. (121)

This vantage point in time allows Ballard to defamiliarize the very elements that comprise the contemporary world. The demise of the utopian projects of modernity after World War II— and later, in the 1960s, with the assassination of Kennedy and the gradual loss of interest in the Space Program—leave a void in its wake, with a rippling effect through time.

Extraordinary circumstances shaped Ballard's imagination, but his fictions resonate with great profundity at a cultural level. That is one of the reasons the self is so fragmented, displaced, and vague in Ballard—he is clearly interested in psychology, but not in the traditional depth psychology of cause and effect. Ballard's characters are one with the world and the word, the image—like a porous membrane or a conduit, through which electrical currents of history and change pass through. One of the true pivotal moments of the twentieth century (one that resonates not only in Ballard but also in a great part of the postwar literature) is the dropping of the atom bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As Ballard writes in *Miracles*, "Like my parents, and everyone else who lived through Lunghua, I have long supported the American dropping of the bombs" (127), and in "The End of My War" he defends his position, as the bombs did in fact put the war in the Pacific to an end. At the same time the bomb saved his life, it provoked a deep rift in the culture and our conception of history: "I think the future died in 1945 with the atomic bombs," Ballard speaks in an interview. "People were frightened of the future, and for the first time, too, they became frightened of science ... There was a danger humankind would lose its soul, that the soul

would be literally cut out of our brains” (*Extreme* 355).<sup>29</sup> There is a sense of unbelonging to the timeless present in which we live in, and Ballard probably felt it was borrowed time for him as well as for us. His fiction represents, in many ways, an act of learning of how to not only to keep living, but to mentally conceive a life in the aftermath of that should have been the end.

Even Lunghua or the atom bomb cannot be made to represent a single traumatic primal scene and no single, fixed home or past to be rescued. The appreciation of Ballard’s work has risen tremendously in the years after his death, but so have the myths about him. Even the British writer Will Self, a usually generous and perceptive reader of his work, claimed recently that Ballard suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome: that Ballard slept on a cot for forty years after his wife’s death, as if he was just camping there temporarily. One of Ballard’s daughters, Fay, later discredited the story. Ballard’s generally perceived morbid obsessions with trauma and death can now be construed as the product of a diseased mind—obviously saying a great deal more about our world than about his fiction. Fay provides a more illuminating anecdote about the way Ballard lived:

I hadn’t visited Shepperton for many years. I remembered a dried-up orange sitting on the mantelpiece in the nursery. I walked through the door and it was still there. I said, “Oh my goodness, you still have the orange.” He looked at me and he said, very quietly but seriously, “It’s a lemon.” It must have been

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<sup>29</sup> This recalls Jim’s doubts about his own soul after the bomb in *Empire*: “Perhaps his soul, instead of leaving his body, had died inside his head?” (273); he also imagines that the white flash of the Nagasaki bomb was a premonition of his death, “the sight of his small soul joining the larger soul of the dying world” (267), and the only way the war would ever end (266).

there for at least forty years. I don't see the lemon as something eccentric. It's not a relic. It's covered in dust. It hasn't been moved. It's obviously important to him. And it's very beautiful. (qtd. in Baxter, *Inner Man* 340)

This story is far more significant and resonant than the claim about the cot simply because in it we recognize Ballard and his obsessions; not a reductive symptom, but rather something unique and poetic. The action of time upon that piece of fruit effects such a radical transformation that it becomes *out of time*. Whatever reasons Ballard had for keeping it, it reveals something about his preoccupation with the nature of time, death, entropy, and beauty. It is as if the mysterious agency of time could have been contained inside the home, the cosmos as a regular household ornament.

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