

GOTHIC SPACE AND THE TECHNOLOGICAL UNCANNY IN J. G. BALLARD

O ESPAÇO GÓTICO E O ESTRANHO TECNOLÓGICO EM J. G. BALLARD

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Abstract

This article investigates the implications of J. G. Ballard's central concept of "inner space", a fictional zone of constant slippage between signifiers, to his poetics. Through a discussion of the secondary literature on Ballard, it attempts to contextualize Ballard's "inner space" with Gothic Space and what we could call "Technological Uncanny."

Keywords: Gothic; Inner space; Postmodernism; Science fiction.

Resumo

Este artigo investiga as implicações de um conceito central para a poética de J. G. Ballard, "*inner space*", uma zona ficcional de constante elisão entre significantes. Através de uma discussão da literatura secundária sobre Ballard, contextualizo o "*inner space*" com o espaço gótico e o que poderíamos chamar de "*technological uncanny*", ou o estranho tecnológico.

Palavras-chave: Gótico; Espaço; Pós-modernismo; Ficção científica.

J. G. 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" (BALLARD, 1996, p. 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

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unconscious, “the first rumblings of the volcano that will overwhelm us” (PRIESTLEY, 1957, p. 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 (PRIESTLEY, 1957, p. 22).

Ray Bradbury used the tropes of science fiction to express his deepest feelings, according to Priestley (1957). Similarly, Ballard noted that Bradbury could transform these conventional tropes into “an enthralling private world” (BALLARD, 1996, p. 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, 1983, p. 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 (BALLARD, 1996, p. 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 (BALLARD, 1996, p. 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” (BALLARD, 1996, p. 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 (BALLARD apud FRANCIS, 2011, p. 67). The shifting nature of his view of inner space, later modified to comport “real” spaces is reflected in his work.

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” (GREENLAND, 1983, p. 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 (GREENLAND, 1983, p. 54).

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, 1983).

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. They represent this almost interchangeable quality between outer and inner space, neatly summarized by Burroughs, who described himself as a “cosmonaut of inner space” (BURROUGHS *apud* GREENLAND, 1983, p. 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, 1983, p. 68).

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, 1956-1965, 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, 1966-1975, 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 (1979) 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. 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 (1979) 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 (PRINGLE, 1979, p. 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 (1979) suggests that Ballard's use of symbols is consistent and revolves around four categories: water, sand, concrete, and crystal. 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. 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" (PRINGLE, 1979, p. 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” (PRINGLE, 1979, p. 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” (PRINGLE, 1979, p. 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” (PRINGLE, 1979, p. 30) and a way to “make a ‘whole’ out of a quantified universe” (PRINGLE, 1979, p. 32). 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 *apud* PRINGLE, 1979, p. 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” (PRINGLE, 1979, p. 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” (PRINGLE, 1979, p. 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 (GREENLAND, 1983, p. 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 (BALLARD *apud* GREENLAND, 1983, p. 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.¹ 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 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

¹ "Having a Wonderful Time" is the exception to this rule, as it has a female protagonist.

which have effectively concealed their distant origins in human agency (PUNTER, 1985, p. 09).

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, again recognizing different power structures and roles in those spaces (FOUCAULT, 1998). 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" (McHALE, 1987, p. 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 (GREENLAND, 1983). 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.

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, 2012, p. 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. 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 *apud* GREENLAND, 1983, p. 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" (GREENLAND, 1983, p. 102). Ballard's non-fiction piece "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 (BALLARD, 1996, p. 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" (BALLARD, 1996, p. 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" (BALLARD, 2012, p. 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’” (BALLARD, 1996, p. 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 *apud* STEPHENSON, 1991, p. 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” (GASIOREK, 2005, p. 12), as they combine analytical and synthetic tendencies to lay bare “the unconscious processes that informed key aspects of external public life” (GASIOREK, 2005, p. 08). 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” (GASIOREK, 2005, p. 09). 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” (BAXTER, 2009, p. 09). 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” (BAXTER, 2009, p. 09). 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” (BAXTER, 2009, p. 08), 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’” (BAXTER, 2009, p. 06) has, for Baxter, surrealist origins, and in her attempt to reinstate surrealism as a governing influence on Ballard, she criticizes Gasiorek for ignoring its “historical, political or visual dimensions” (BAXTER, 2009, p. 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 (2005) 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" (GASIOREK, 2005, p. 08). 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" (GASIOREK, 2005, p. 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 (BALLARD *apud* GASIOREK, 2005, p. 13).

In his introduction to *Crash* (1973), Ballard takes on this role of an artist on safari, testing out fictional experiments². 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

² 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*).

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” (GASIOREK, 2005, p. 13), often seen as lacking moral engagement. 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 contradictions” (GASIOREK, 2005, p. 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” (BUKATMAN, 1993, p. 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, 2005, p. 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 ... (BALLARD, 1996, p. 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” (GASIOREK, 2005, p. 15) and Pop Art was better equipped to deal with this scenario. “In essence”, Ballard writes, “science fiction is a response to science and technology as perceived by the inhabitants of the consumer goods society” (BALLARD, 1996, p. 2057). 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, 1993, p. 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” (BUKATMAN, 1993, p. 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. 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, 1993, p. 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*.” (McHALE, 1987, p. 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” (McHALE, 1987, p. 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, 1993, p. 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" (BUKATMAN, 1993, p. 46), but the act of acceptance, Bukatman claims, is paramount.

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 *apud* GODDARD & PRINGLE, 1976, p. 33).

Bukatman (1993) sees this acceptance as particularly influential, especially in cyberpunk, 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" (STEPHENSON, 1991, p. 01). 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" (STEPHENSON, 1991, p. 02). 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” (STEPHENSON, 1991, p. 64), 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” (STEPHENSON, 1991, p. 161) – the Gothic novel being its chief manifestation. 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” (FRANCIS, 2011, p. 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” (PUNTER, 2003, p. 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” (PUNTER, 2003, p. 392), an approach reflected in the “empty” characters attempting to construct identity in a world that appears to deny it. 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” (PUNTER, 2003, p. 399), and make it into some semblance of coherence.

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" (PUNTER, 1985, p. 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, 1985, p. 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" (LUCKHURST, 1997, p. 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" (LUCKHURST, 1997, p. 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, Luckhurst identifies spaces that, by their very design, are sites of “violent eruptions of uncanny traces – ‘dead’ concepts that cannot be eliminated” (LUCKHURST, 1997, p. 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*, is uneven, filled with detritus of past systems of technical order (VIDLER, 1992). 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 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 (CERTEAU, 1998, p. 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, 1997, p. 135). They exist in a complex relation between a projected dream of a technological sublime and the uncanny eruption of the detritus from 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” (LUCKHURST, 1997, p. 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 (BALLARD, 2006).

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 (BALLARD, 2006).

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 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” (FOSTER, 1993, p. 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” (VIDLER, 1992, p. 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.

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