

**“Extreme Possibilities”: Mapping “the sea of time and space” in  
J G Ballard’s Pacific fictions**

***Simon Sellars***

One of the more enduring misconceptions surrounding the work of J G Ballard is that it operates in the classical dystopian narrative mode,<sup>1</sup> supposedly mining pessimism, repression and the negativity of a post-industrial age. Robert Collins’s commentary is typical, placing Ballard’s *Crash* (1973) at number three in a list of “the top 10 dystopian novels”:

Fictional dystopias are almost always cautionary tales – warnings of where our political, cultural and social surroundings are taking us. The novels [on this list] share common motifs: designer drugs, mass entertainment, brutality, technology, the suppression of the individual by an all-powerful state – classic preoccupations of dystopian fiction. These novels picture the worst because, as Swift demonstrated in his original cautionary tale, *Gulliver’s Travels*, re-inventing the present is sometimes the only way to see how bad things already are.<sup>2</sup>

However, as this paper will argue, to locate Ballard within this literary tradition is a fundamental misreading. The “state,” for example, barely features in his writing, and politicians or any kind of external authority are almost wholly absent. This is amplified to comical proportions when the police make a token appearance in *High-Rise* (1975), which depicts the breakdown of the social order in a high-tech apartment block. At first suspicious

about the building's car park, with its damaged vehicles and debris thrown from balconies, they are quickly turned away by a group of residents, who set about "pacifying the policemen, reassuring them that everything was in order, despite the garbage and broken bottles scattered around the building";<sup>3</sup> the police duly leave and are never seen again, even as the high-rise descends further into anarchy. The residents prefer to remain *within* their "dystopia," rather than reacting against it, embracing the "brutality and technology" that Collins thinks they should be reacting against – there is no external "Big Brother" forcing their hand. For the residents:

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.<sup>4</sup>

This dynamic is even more apparent in the subset of "Pacific fictions" in Ballard's oeuvre, stories set on abandoned Pacific islands where there is no need to even allude to the presence of the State, for these are *stateless* worlds – "between owners." They are neither straight utopia nor classical dystopia, but an occupant of the imaginative space between: what might be termed "affirmative dystopias," which, as this paper will argue further, reach similar conclusions as to the question of how to "revive the spirit of utopia" that Fredric Jameson does in his exhaustive study, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. As such, they provide an enduring template for Ballard's more well-known urban works, of which *Crash* is the exemplar.

Ballard's fascination with the Pacific stems from his childhood in Shanghai, where he was born and where he lived until he was 16. His semi-autobiographical novel *Empire of the Sun* (1984) draws on his experiences as an internee in the Lunghua civilian camp, and it ends with Jim (the character based on the young Ballard) witnessing the atomic flash over Nagasaki, enabling a potent metaphor for the post-war era that Ballard would consistently return to throughout his career:

The B-29s which bombed the airfield beside Lunghua Camp, near Shanghai, where I was interned during the Second World War, had reportedly flown from Guam. Pacific Islands, with their silent airstrips among the palm trees, Wake Island above all, have a potent magic for me. The runways that cross these little atolls, now mostly abandoned, seem to represent extreme states of nostalgia and possibility, doorways into another continuum.<sup>5</sup>

In Ballard's short story "My Dream of Flying to Wake Island" (1974), he re-

turns to these “extreme states of possibility,” which overwhelm the account. The story remains in perpetual fugue – a concrete narrative arc never coalesces, and there is perpetual yearning enveloping the central character, Melville, a former astronaut who flew a solitary mission in space, during which he suffered a mental breakdown broadcast live to millions of viewers on Earth. Humiliated, he resolves to fly to remote Wake, fascinated by the island’s geographical isolation and “psychological reduction” (deriving from its real-world role as a former World War Two military base; Wake has never had a permanent indigenous population), which mirrors his own. For Melville, Wake Island is a portal. Referring to photographs of the military airstrip, he enthuses: “Look at those runways, everything is there. A big airport like the Wake field is a zone of tremendous possibility – a place of beginnings, by the way, not ends.”<sup>6</sup> The story is indicative of Ballard’s deployment of the rich seam of metaphor provided by the region, and the manner in which he uses abandoned Pacific islands as sites of radical reinvention, imagistic buffer zones representing the sovereignty of the imagination.

According to the anarchist author Hakim Bey, classical utopias – “from Plato’s republic to Brook Farm” – depend on abstraction, which renders them susceptible to “a correspondingly high level of *authoritarian control*. As a result, most Utopias in practice have proven oppressive and deadening – ‘social planning’ would seem to be an offense by definition against the ‘human spirit’.”<sup>7</sup> In the novel *Rushing to Paradise* (1994), Ballard is also concerned with social planning, which, similarly, is seen as eventually numbing and destroying the human spirit. In fact, the novel indicts the very idea of utopia.

*Rushing to Paradise* is set on the remote (and fictional) Pacific island of Saint-Esprit, claimed by France as a site for possible nuclear testing, where the renegade Dr Barbara has gathered a ragtag crew on the premise of saving the island’s endangered albatross (the French have relocated the original inhabitants and set up their nuclear equipment, but abandoned the island for Mururoa). Although the mission is initially pitched as environmentalist, each crewmember has wildly differing, concealed motives for making the journey, thus rendering impossible the idea of a genuinely shared utopia. The Hawaiian, Kimo, dreams of establishing an independent Hawaiian kingdom, “rid forever of the French and American colonists,”<sup>8</sup> while the boy Neil is obsessed with the relics of a bygone nuclear age, and excited by the news that the French might be returning to the island for testing:

For all Dr Barbara’s passion for the albatross, the nuclear testing-ground had a stronger claim on his imagination. No bomb had ever exploded on Saint-Esprit, but the atoll, like Eniwetok, Mururoa and

Bikini, was a demonstration model of Armageddon, a dream of war and death that lay beyond the reach of any moratorium.<sup>9</sup>

Dr Barbara has her own, highly secretive, and ultimately destructive, reasons – not to save the albatross, but to establish Saint-Esprit as a radical feminist enclave. She is determined to achieve this by any means: “If Saint-Esprit, this nondescript atoll six hundred miles south-east of Tahiti, failed to match her expectations, it would have to reshape itself into the threatened paradise for which she had campaigned so tirelessly.”<sup>10</sup> Superficially, this echoes Ballard’s *Concrete Island* (1974), in which the architect Robert Maitland, after a car accident, is stranded on a triangle of wasteland underneath a busy motorway. Feverish from his injuries, he imagines the physical environment as an outcrop of his psyche: “More and more, the island was becoming an exact model of his head.”<sup>11</sup> Yet the fundamental difference is that Dr Barbara wants the island of her mind to reshape everyone else’s reality, too. This makes *Rushing to Paradise*, at one level, an allusion to utopian gurus such as David Koresh and Jim Jones, similarly charismatic leaders who built isolated, essentially micronational, communities and coerced others into joining them, before destroying everything as the authorities closed in. As one character says to Neil, after the boy asks whether Dr Barbara’s mission is how new religions start: “there’s nothing new here. It’s the oldest religion there ever was – sheer magnetic egoism.”<sup>12</sup>

In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson devotes considerable space to analysing failures in the wider utopian imagination. In his attempt to re-map the potential of utopian desire, he concludes:

What is Utopian becomes ... not the commitment to a specific machinery or blueprint, but rather the commitment to imagining possible Utopias as such, in their greatest variety of forms. Utopia is no longer the invention and defense of a specific floorplan, but rather the story of all the arguments about how Utopia should be constructed in the first place. It is no longer the exhibit of an achieved Utopian construct, but rather the story of its production and of the very process of construction as such.<sup>13</sup>

Re-placing *Rushing to Paradise* within Jameson’s framework, it becomes possible to read the story of Saint-Esprit as “the story of all the arguments” about how *the Pacific* should be constructed.

The region has always had an unstable identity and an especially volatile sense of nationalism, from perpetually coup-ridden Fiji in the South Seas to the perpetually colonised islands north of the equator. The Republic of Palau in Micronesia is sometimes cited as an archetypal tropical utopia, but could in fact embody the root definition of “utopia,” as “no place.” It

has been used as a pawn by various colonial powers almost continuously since the late 17th century, rapidly lost its traditional culture and become a melange of other cultures. It has changed hands between Spain, which enforced Christianity on the Palauans; Germany, which commanded them to work as plantation slaves; Japan, which forced them to speak a subservient form of Japanese and turned the main island into a closed-off, heavily fortified military base; and the US, which bombed the islands to get at the Japanese in a series of bloody World War Two battles and then claimed them as American territory until 1994.

Mimicking the Pacific's jagged history, Ballard populates Saint-Esprit with idealistic Germans, scientifically-minded Japanese and single-minded Americans, as well as Kimo, symbol of an oppressed indigenous people, Dr Barbara, an archetypal British colonialist, and, crucially, Neil, an echo of young Jim himself, both teenagers obsessed with dreams of nuclear war and of holding their own among deluded and dangerous adults in an artificial community. After the death of the character Mark Bracewell, the American, Carline, verbalises a metaphor that neatly sums up these duelling versions of utopia:

Contrary to the general belief, no-one's death diminishes us. Nature in its wisdom created death to give each of us our unique sense of life. We're not part of the main. Each of us is an island, every bit as real as Saint-Esprit, and death is the price we pay to keep ourselves from drowning in the larger sea. Like Kimo here, we're all island people ... especially young Neil, dreaming about another kind of island. Mark Bracewell lived for twenty-seven years, and his island still floats in the sea of time and space.<sup>14</sup>

This seems to correspond with Jameson, who proposes to "think of our autonomous and non-communicating Utopias ... as so many islands: a Utopian archipelago, islands in the net, a constellation of discontinuous centers, themselves internally decentred."<sup>15</sup> This discontinuity suggests the ideal resting state for Ballard's ideal of a neural, free zone of the imagination – a "morally free psychopathology of metaphor, as an element in one's dreams,"<sup>16</sup> which, although powerful and liberatory, has a dark underside. If one tries to apply it to other people, then micronationalism<sup>17</sup> – the utopian imagination, no less – turns into dangerous cultism through which lives can be destroyed, a very real danger that arises when the metaphor is literalised into "the domain where it has no place, an id-driven psychopathology that lays waste to human life."<sup>18</sup> Neil's surreal, internalised visions of nuclear war therefore contrast markedly with Dr Barbara's hard, external authoritarianism, further corresponding to Jameson's conception of utopian

desire, which "must be marked as Utopian and thereby as partaking in a specific and very special kind of aesthetic unreality: otherwise it falls into the world and, particularly if realized, spells the end of Utopias in the way wryly distinct from the usual prognoses of their current disappearance."<sup>19</sup> Subsequently, the novel sours traditional utopian thought by highlighting the oppressive hypocrisy of its "abstracted authoritarianism," to appropriate Bey's term. Once Kimo has used his muscle to build the community and Neil his youth to impregnate the idealistic women who flock to the island, they become expendable, with no place in a feminist paradise.

Indeed, Dr Barbara manages to kill off almost all the men (although Neil survives) when they contract fever and she administers fake medicine. By the novel's end, she is feverish and hiding out in the forest, burrowing deeper and further away from the French authorities that have come to re-take the island. This seems a deliberate reference to the legendary stories of Japanese soldiers hiding out in the Pacific jungles of Guam long after the war had ended, terrified, as is Dr Barbara, at the prospect of an imperialism perishing with the onslaught of newer, more localised and "internally decentred" voices, American-led globalism, no less – overrun by an "anti-anti-utopian" imagination (again, after Jameson, in opposition not to straight dystopia, but to *unworkable* utopia) that has evolved organically from the discontinuities and disjunctions of the modern world, and that is centrally represented by Neil. As Jameson writes of the wider dynamic:

Multiplicity becomes the central theme of this imaginary resolution, whose conceptual dilemma remains that of closure. Yet we may well suppose that this new development will have had some impact on the Utopian form itself, accounting for the seeming extinction of the traditional kinds and the emergence of newer more reflexive forms.<sup>20</sup>

Neil, with his dreams of nuclear war, symbolises this "more reflexive form" and the perverse and paradoxical "absolute freedom" it brings. He comes to embody the "anti-anti-utopian" spirit of the book, or, more accurately, he embodies the Ballardian sense of "affirmative dystopia," a sense of which is given by Gregory Stephenson's overview:

The themes of transcendence and illusion inform nearly all of Ballard's work, and have often been misconstrued by critics as representing a nihilistic or fatalistic preoccupation on the part of the author with devolution, decay, dissolution and entropy ... these themes represent neither an expression of universal pessimism nor a negation of human values and goals, but, rather, an affirmation of the highest humanistic and metaphysical ideal: the repossession for humankind of authentic and absolute being.<sup>21</sup>

*Rushing to Paradise* is not a disaster novel per se, but in his reimagining of the apocalypse, Neil virtually wills the disaster to happen. In so doing, he does not “colonize the future with Utopian blueprints,” as the Pacific’s invading powers have so wilfully done (indeed, as Dr Barbara has done), but rather, embodies what Jameson defines as:

Disruption ... the name for a new discursive strategy ... which insists that its radical difference is possible and that a break is necessary. The Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system. But it asserts this by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break.<sup>22</sup>

Jameson briefly touches upon this strain of disruption in Ballard, without referring directly to the stories under discussion here: “Ballard’s work – so rich and corrupt – testifies powerfully to the contradictions of a properly representational attempt to grasp the future directly.”<sup>23</sup> Extrapolating from there, my contention is that, in his Pacific fictions, Ballard “forces us to think the break” by repeatedly drawing on the spectre of nuclear testing, of which there are numerous real-world examples in the region. French Polynesia, for instance, was employed as a testing site for almost 10 years, with the result that high radiation levels were detected 4,500km away in Fiji. Bikini Atoll was rendered uninhabitable by American nuclear tests, its inhabitants forcibly relocated, like those of Saint-Esprit, never to return. The inhabitants of Eniwetok were also forcibly relocated in 1948 to make way for American atomic bomb tests; only comparatively recently has the US government, under overwhelming global pressure, cleared the island of active waste, allowing the islanders to resettle the southern part of the atoll after 33 years in exile. In Ballard, the thermonuclear age brings with it an advanced technology that renders objective perception meaningless, thus beginning the era of simulation, an increasingly abstracted, stylised and mediated realm, riding on the decline of Japanese imperialism and the rise of American-led globalisation.

To examine this motif, it is interesting to contrast Ballard’s reworking, and remapping, of the region to that of the travel writer Simon Winchester, whose *The Pacific* provides a thorough history of changes since the war. Ballard has written: “I used to dream of the runways of Wake Island and Midway, stepping stones that would carry me back across the Pacific to the China of my childhood.”<sup>24</sup> Compare with Winchester’s account of American mariners at the start of the 19th century, seizing and settling “Midway, Wake, Guam ... thus creating a series of stepping-stones, a lifeline of tropi-

cal islands that led all the way to that greatest and most elusive prize, the Middle Kingdom, China"<sup>25</sup> – a process that leads eventually to the bombing of Japan and subsequent irradiation of Pacific islands like Eniwetok. The similarities (references to Wake Island, Midway, China, especially "stepping stones") are startling, yet these positions are opposed nonetheless. Ballard wants to resettle, and bulwark, the imagination, where the American forces wanted to colonise and wipe clean whole territories. One wishes to explore hidden folds within the map, the other to claim every available point on the map; both coexist in paradoxical dreams of the Pacific. The paradox is even rooted in temporal reality, as Winchester notes, when he visits the island of Tonga. There, he ponders the arbitrary division of the dateline, which ensures that Tonga sees the world's first dawn each day:

I had imagined ... that I would be able to catch a glimpse of Mount Silisili [in Samoa] ... just a few miles away across the water. [It] would be enjoying precisely the same clock time as here in Tonga, but exactly one day before. The simultaneous sighting of two periods of time separated by an entire 24 hours seemed a paradox well worth experiencing.<sup>26</sup>

In Ballard, these paradoxical time tracks form a lasting metaphor for a certain nexus of confusion in the post-war world, a notion made explicit in the note that begins *Empire of the Sun*: "The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour took place on Sunday morning, 7 December 1941, but as a result of time differences across the Pacific Date Line it was then already the morning of Monday, 8 December in Shanghai."<sup>27</sup> For Ballard, the bomb signifies the end of history and the coming of an age of surfaces, a recombinant age of planing identities, as he makes clear in the introduction to *Crash*, which applies the metaphor of chronological confusion to the mediated reality of the Western world:

Increasingly, our concepts of past, present and future are being forced to revise themselves. Just as the past, 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 ... Options multiply around us, and we live in an almost infantile world where any demand, any possibility, whether for life-styles, travel, sexual roles and identities, can be satisfied instantly.<sup>28</sup>

The past "as a casualty of the nuclear age" would be reframed 11 years after *Crash*, in *Empire of the Sun*, the latter part of which is set in a destroyed stadium filled with prisoners and the detritus of war. Suddenly, the stadium

is illuminated by light from the atom bomb exploding on Nagasaki – a blinding, overwhelming orb. Andrés Vaccari correctly identifies the world “presided over by this nuclear sun” as the “real Empire of the Sun. It is the metaphoric birth of the post-war world, the omnipresent subject of Ballard’s fiction”<sup>29</sup> – the coming of a nihilistic world with no boundaries, no spatial coordinates except those of inner space, the cognitive remapping of a world that has lost its bearings in time and space.<sup>30</sup>

This notion of planing identities (planing time tracks) is also embodied in Ballard’s short story “The Terminal Beach” (1964), set on Eniwetok, in which the character Traven, an ex-air force pilot, finds himself similarly searching for identity among the island’s abandoned concrete bunkers and blockhouses, which have been used for thermonuclear trials. He comes across plastic, human mannequins used in the weapons testing, with their “half-melted faces, contorted into bleary grimaces [gazing] up at him from the jumble of legs and torsos.”<sup>31</sup> Attempting to escape from US servicemen who appear on the island, he hides “in one of the target basins, lying among the broken bodies of the plastic models. In the hot sunlight their deformed faces gaped at him sightlessly from the tangle of limbs, their blurred smiles like those of the soundlessly laughing dead.”<sup>32</sup> When he scavenges among “the litter of smashed bottles and cans in the isthmus of sand separating the testing ground from the air-strip,”<sup>33</sup> we find layers of recent cultural history, buried and then recovered as if in an archaeological find. Confronted with this effacement of geographical and human boundaries (the latter effectively represented by the undifferentiated slagheap of molten mannequins), Traven is, in a sense, reborn, scrambling for meaning among the detritus of the old world.

The effect is replicated in *Concrete Island*, in which the patch of underpass comes to symbolise the archetypal liminal space of Ballardian fiction. It is a zone of buried layers of urban cartography comprising “the unintended, forgotten, abjected corners of town planning.”<sup>34</sup> In the fragmented post-war world, with its shifting national boundaries and national identities, Ballard seems to suggest the only effective strategy is to remake the world through bricolage, or what Andrzej Gasiorek terms “a kind of fugitive reappropriation of an otherwise seemingly monolithic set of structures and relations.”<sup>35</sup> In *Concrete Island*, Maitland, the architect, was all too willing to submit to the conformity of capitalism, favouring the demands of finance and big business over any sense of public obligation or civic duty. Gasiorek observes that he had “a predilection for modernism,” specifically “hard, affectless architecture” and “stylised concrete surfaces,” marked as “hostile to the forging of human relations ... a kind of dead end for life.”<sup>36</sup> Before his crash, Maitland seemed a ruthless autocrat forcing people into inhumane

living conditions to justify his ego, but he is confronted with the underside of this "dead end for life" when, marooned on the concrete island, he is required to come to terms with the tradition he wilfully discarded in his work. Like Traven, he uncovers historical layers paved over by the demands of the motorway system – the strictures of advanced technology:

Parts of the island dated from well before World War II. The eastern end, below the overpass, was its oldest section, with the churchyard and the ground-courses of Edwardian terraced houses. The breaker's yard and its wrecked cars had been superimposed on the still identifiable streets and alleyways.

In the centre of the island were the air-raid shelters among which he was sitting. Attached to these was a later addition, the remains of a Civil Defence post little more than fifteen years old.<sup>37</sup>

Maitland meets the human equivalents of this discarded landscape in the form of Proctor and Jane, two homeless dwellers who have made the island their own, both on the run from oppressive systems of control. Jane is a victim of patriarchy, hiding from an apparently abusive husband and bitter memories of her father, and now working as a motorway prostitute. Proctor is an old tramp who has suffered ritual humiliation at the hands of the local police. The island, reconfigured by Ballard as a "container of social debris (both geographical and human, as in "The Terminal Beach") becomes a space where social relations can begin again, where the social order is de-commissioned, recombined, reconstructed and reshaped in ways that subvert dominant systems of thought. Maitland comes to see the island much as Proctor and Jane do, as a psychic "go-zone" where he can escape the pressures of his relationships with his wife and mistress and of his job – free "to rove forever within the empty city of his mind."<sup>38</sup>

In his later career, immediately after *Rushing to Paradise*, Ballard embarked on a cycle of novels in which he would explore a much harder version of micronationalism, manifest in the savage gated communities of *Cocaine Nights* (1996) through to *Kingdom Come* (2006). It would no longer be necessary to look to mythical lands to remake and remodel maps of alienation – instead he began to focus on a parallel examination of the type of urban "non-place" that has come to be associated with the anthropologist Marc Augé. For Augé, our world is so saturated by superabundant fictions that it produces a conception of simultaneous time, representative of a homogenous, mediated society. The physical result is non-place, transitional zones detached from history and culture, inorganic, in-between zones where individuals are linked by this superabundance of information and technology rather than community or historical awareness, which paradoxically

cally creates a pervasive sense of inwardness and isolation. Examples of non-place include motorways, hospitals, airports (especially duty-free zones), gated communities, business parks and housing estates – rich Ballardian territory, as the “urban disaster trilogy” of *Crash*, *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* makes abundantly clear.

Ballard anticipates Augé, whose anthropological studies turned away from the “foreign field [towards] more familiar terrain,” due to the fact that “the contemporary world itself, with its accelerated transformations, is attracting anthropological scrutiny: in other words, a renewed methodical reflection on the category of otherness.”<sup>39</sup> In “The Terminal Beach,” Ballard describes Eniwetok as “synthetic, a man-made artefact with all the associations of a vast system of derelict concrete motorways.”<sup>40</sup> This is a description that foreshadows *Concrete Island*, and in the introduction to the latter, Ballard makes the link explicit: “The Pacific atoll may not be available, but there are other islands far nearer to home, some of them only a few steps from the pavements we tread every day. They are surrounded, not by sea, but by concrete, ringed by chain-mail fences and walled off by bomb-proof glass.”<sup>41</sup>

Just as Traven declares Eniwetok a “state of mind,”<sup>42</sup> so, too, does Maitland, indirectly, in *Concrete Island* when he insists: “I am the island.”<sup>43</sup> Here, “state” has a double meaning, as a condition of being, but also as a sovereign, independent territory. Both locations are potent symbols of the post-war era: Eniwetok, a tabula rasa of nationalism and patriotism; the motorway underpass, the archetypal non-place of supermodernity. As Traven’s existence in Eniwetok’s “thermonuclear noon” becomes increasingly hallucinatory (it is not clear whether he is dead, dying or feverish from irradiation), he finds that by saying goodbye in his mind to the disasters of the external world, he can come to terms with it. Standing among the abstract concrete blocks of the testing bunkers, he produces a strange incantation:

“*Goodbye Eniwetok*” ... Somewhere there was a flicker of light, as if one of the blocks, like a counter on an abacus, had been plucked away.

*Goodbye Los Alamos.* Again, a block seemed to vanish. The corridors around him remained intact, but somewhere in his mind had appeared a small interval of neutral space.

*Goodbye, Hiroshima.*

*Goodbye, Alamogordo.*

*Goodbye, Moscow, London, Paris, New York ...*<sup>44</sup>

The opening up of this "small interval" of neu(t)ral space represents a kind of psychological DMZ, an imaginative form of resistance that, along with Neil's apocalyptic dreams, symbolises an intent that is the polar opposite to that of Dr Barbara (who, we recall, literalised a megalomania that proved unstoppable, and fatal). Traven surmises that time on Eniwetok has become "quantal," an eternal present obliterating past and future. But is Ballard's sense pejorative?<sup>45</sup> As Traven declares: "For me the hydrogen bomb was a symbol of absolute *freedom*. I feel it's given me the right – the obligation, even – to do anything I want."<sup>46</sup> This may well be the defining statement of the author's career, brought into sharp relief by John Gray's perceptive appraisal that Ballard's "achievement is not to have staked out any kind of political position. Rather it is to have communicated a vision of what individual fulfilment might mean in a time of nihilism."<sup>47</sup> It is a concept Ballard has alluded to in interview, when asked if his writing is interested in decadence:

Decadence? I can't remember if I ever said I enjoyed the notion, except in the sense of drained swimming pools and abandoned hotels, which I don't really see as places of decadence, but rather ... as psychic zero stations, or as "Go," in Monopoly terms.<sup>48</sup>

Here, Ballard appears to inform the concept of the "Temporary Autonomous Zone" (TAZ), codified by Bey in 1985 and enormously influential on anarchists, musicians and a myriad of underground artists. The TAZ calls for a mode of radical intervention in the form of creation of temporary spaces – whether "geographic, social, cultural, imaginal"<sup>49</sup> – that will serve to confound formalised control systems. Bey's main focus was on the liberation of mind states, what he terms "psychotopology (and -topography)" as an antidote to the State's "psychic imperialism":

Only psychotopography can draw 1:1 maps of reality because only the human mind provides sufficient complexity to model the real. But a 1:1 map cannot "control" its territory because it is virtually identical with its territory. It can only be used to suggest, in a sense gesture towards, certain features.<sup>50</sup>

This particular strategy within the TAZ can be traced to Alfred Korzybski's oft-repeated remark that "the map is not the territory," since duplication is simply simulation, and able to be recouped as such. In opposition, Bey suggests that these sovereign mindscapes are enfolded within the folds of the cartographical matrix: "We are looking for 'spaces' with potential to flower as autonomous zones – and we are looking for times in which these spaces are relatively open, either through neglect on the part of the State

or because they have somehow escaped notice by the mapmakers, or for whatever reason.”<sup>51</sup>

Ballard actually paraphrases Korzybski in *Empire of the Sun*: “Never confuse the map with the territory,”<sup>52</sup> while the patch of underpass in *Concrete Island*, built over the leavings of industrial culture, has been neglected by the State, and is so far off the map as to be invisible. Moreover, Maitland liberates an area of land or imagination (depending how we read the novel), without ever engaging directly with systems of control, with the State. As Ballard makes clear in the introduction: “What would happen if, by some freak mischance, we suffered a blow-out and plunged over the guard-rail onto a forgotten island of rubble and weeds, out of sight of the surveillance cameras?”<sup>53</sup> For Bey, confrontation with the State occurs through “the Spectacle,” in Guy Debord’s sense, where images rule by virtue of their monopoly of social space. Because society defines itself through the dissemination and experiencing of this space, the process appears natural, a self-contained feedback loop: “What appears is good; what is good appears.”<sup>54</sup> Such confrontation is doomed to failure since the machinery of simulation will merely absorb any display of “spectacular violence”. For Bey, as for Ballard, radical action therefore lies not in the deployment of spectacular violence, but in withdrawal, in becoming invisible, in merging with, and therefore rehabilitating, the by-products of supermodernity.

Elsewhere, Ballard’s prototypical Pacific fictions seem an obvious influence on Bey’s “Visit Port Watson!,” which uses their cue to forecast similar micronational and imaginative possibilities in the region. Written as a faux travel guide, it describes the micronation of Port Watson on the Pacific island of Sonsorol (the island actually exists – it is part of Palau – but Port Watson does not). Bey charts the history of Sonsorol and its colonisation by Spanish, Dutch, Japanese, New Zealand and Australian forces. He writes that when the island finally gained independence, the Port Watson enclave was set up by the island’s “Sultan” (a legacy of Sonsorol’s fictional 17th-century invasion by Moorish pirates), who had been influenced by libertarian-anarchist philosophy while studying in America. Offshore banking funded the enclave: “the creation of wealth out of nothing, out of pure imagination.”<sup>55</sup> Port Watson therefore develops as a libertarian-anarchist micronation with no laws or currency save for a “computerised” barter system, where a hamburger stand is called “McBakunins,” most people refuse to work since everyone has stakes in the banking system, and “public fucking” is encouraged.

This notion of a libertarian-anarchist enclave powered by “pure imagination” has clear Ballardian overtones,<sup>56</sup> especially in light of Ballard’s ca-

reer-long "libertarian and anarchic stance ... [a] scepticism about all communal laws."<sup>57</sup> As Ballard himself wrote in *Empire of the Sun*: "After three years in the camp the notion of patriotism meant nothing."<sup>58</sup> As in Ballard, Bey's external mapping of utopian space can in fact be read as a travel guide to inner space, unlocking the potential of the imagination to transcend laws, authority and corporate structure, all built upon the metaphorical/micronational possibilities of the Pacific. In "Visit Port Watson!," this is consummated in the final paragraph, where Bey "quotes" an editorial from the local gazette, written by the Sultan, in answer to whether such a utopia can exist only on a tropical island: "Sonsorol could be created anywhere – nothing stands in the way but false consciousness and the grim power of those rulers who feast on false consciousness like vampires ... 'Don't despair: Port Watson exists *within you*, and you can make it real'."<sup>59</sup>

This internal collapse – this conflation of inner and outer space – reminds us of the power of Ballard's original Pacific fictions, which reinhabit the frame to present a clearinghouse in which corporate and national governance is overthrown and regoverned as a "state of mind" – dystopia becomes the real utopia, and utopian ideals, typically represented as a stifling of the imagination, the true dystopia. But Ballard's insistence that the imagination must remain sovereign territory – the "last nature reserve," as he has termed it<sup>60</sup> – also aligns him once more with Jameson, who describes "anti-anti-utopian" thought as:

a new form of thinking ... a new dimension of the exercise of the imagination. It's only when people come to realize that there is no alternative that they react against it, at least in their imaginations, and try to think of alternatives ... [affording] a process where the imagination begins to question itself, to move back and forth among the possibilities.<sup>61</sup>

Ballard's reimagining of the Pacific archipelago – as a vast, disjunctive region of abandonment and reinvention, with multiple islands floating in the "sea of time and space" – and its subsequent superimposition onto urban landscapes, provides an excellent example of a pluralism of utopias (multiple subjectivities) steeped in an "aesthetic unreality": affirmative dystopias that are finally, unmistakably, *Ballardian*.

Monash University

Simon.Sellars@arts.monash.edu.au

- <sup>1</sup> According to Tom Moylan: "The critical logic of the classical dystopia is ... a simplifying one. It doesn't matter that an economic regime drives the society; it doesn't matter that a cultural regime of interpellation shapes and directs the people; for the social evil to be named, and resisted, is nothing but the modern state in and of itself." Tom Moylan, "The moment is here ... and it's important": State, Agency, and Dystopia in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Antarctica* and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Telling* in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, eds Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (New York and London: Routledge, 2003) 136.
- <sup>2</sup> Robert Collins, "Robert Collins's top 10 dystopian novels," *The Guardian*, 24 August 2008, date of access: 29 November 2008, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/aug/24/top10s.dystopian.novels>>.
- <sup>3</sup> J G Ballard, *High-Rise* [1975] (London: Flamingo, 1993) 131.
- <sup>4</sup> Ballard, *High-Rise* 47. David Cronenberg, discussing his film version of *Crash*, identified this dynamic as a cornerstone of the Ballardian technique: "The police are a very minor presence in the book and in the film, because the exercise is not to see what would happen realistically now if people did this, it's to allow them to do it unhindered, to see where it takes them psychologically ... it's still legitimate to say that the movie is not to be taken literally or realistically but as more metaphorically." Chris Rodley, "Crash Talk: David Cronenberg and J G Ballard in conversation with Chris Rodley," *Guardian Lecture* [transcript], British Film Institute, 10 November 1996, date of access: 29 November 2008, <[http://www.rickmcgrath.com/jgballard/jgb\\_cronenberg\\_1996.html](http://www.rickmcgrath.com/jgballard/jgb_cronenberg_1996.html)>.
- <sup>5</sup> J G Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition* [1970] (London: Flamingo, 2001), annotations 52.
- <sup>6</sup> J G Ballard, "My Dream of Flying to Wake Island" [1974], *The Complete Short Stories: Volume 2* (London: Flamingo, 2001) 337.
- <sup>7</sup> Anonymous, "Visit Port Watson!" in *Semiotext(e) SF*, eds Rudy Rucker, Peter Lamborn Wilson and Robert Anton Wilson (New York: Autonomedia, 1989) 317. Although this piece was published anonymously, it is generally agreed that Hakim Bey wrote it, given the identical stylistic and thematic consistencies to his work ("Hakim Bey" is the pseudonym of the *Semiotext(e) SF* co-editor, Peter Lamborn Wilson).
- <sup>8</sup> J G Ballard, *Rushing to Paradise* [1994] (New York: Picador, 1996) 12.
- <sup>9</sup> Ballard, *Rushing to Paradise* 15-16.
- <sup>10</sup> Ballard, *Rushing to Paradise* 10.
- <sup>11</sup> J G Ballard, *Concrete Island* [1974] (London: Vintage, 1994) 69.
- <sup>12</sup> Ballard, *Rushing to Paradise* 94.
- <sup>13</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* [2005] (London and New York: Verso, 2007) 217.
- <sup>14</sup> Ballard, *Rushing to Paradise* 74.
- <sup>15</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* 221.
- <sup>16</sup> Graeme Revell, "Interview with JGB by Graeme Revell" in *RE/Search #8/9: J G Ballard*, eds V. Vale and Andrea Juno (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications,

1984) 47.

- <sup>17</sup> In a forthcoming essay, I examine in detail Ballard's mapping of micronational space, which I describe as "predicated on a vocabulary of secession, and ... filled with depictions of colonies, anomalous enclaves, virtual city-states, 'zones of transition.'" To quote further from that piece: "The political (or, rather, anti-political) potential of these spaces is interesting, since their structure and interaction with the outside world strongly parallels the successes and failures of the real-world phenomenon of micronations. The term 'micronation' refers to an attempt, usually by small groups of individuals, to found small, often ephemeral 'nations', often without land, but sometimes claiming the types of 'non-space' Ballard describes. Micronational enterprises can be satirical, or a component of an art project, but occasionally they can have serious political intent. Micronations are sometimes called 'model nations', since they mimic the structure of independent nations and states, but are not recognised as such by established states." Simon Sellars, "Zones of Transit: Micronationalism in the work of J G Ballard" in *J G Ballard: "From Shanghai to Shepperton"*, eds Jeannette Baxter, Mark Currie and Rowland Wymer (Palgrave, projected date of publication: 2009).
- <sup>18</sup> Andrzej Gasiorek, *J G Ballard* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005) 212.
- <sup>19</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* 234.
- <sup>20</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* 216.
- <sup>21</sup> Gregory Stephenson, *Out of the Night and Into the Dream: A Thematic Study of the Fiction of J G Ballard* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991) 2-3.
- <sup>22</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* 231-2.
- <sup>23</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* 288.
- <sup>24</sup> J G Ballard, "Airports," *The Observer*, 14 September 1997.
- <sup>25</sup> Simon Winchester, *The Pacific* (London: Arrow Books Limited, 1991) 17.
- <sup>26</sup> Winchester, *The Pacific* 12.
- <sup>27</sup> Ballard, *Empire of the Sun* [1984] (London: Grafton Books, 1988) 5.
- <sup>28</sup> J G Ballard, "Some words about *Crash!*: 1. Introduction to the French edition of *Crash!* [sic]," *Foundation, The Review of Science Fiction* 9 (November 1975) 47-8.
- <sup>29</sup> Andrés Vaccari, *Awakening the Entropy Within: The Novels of J G Ballard*, unpublished monograph, 1996.
- <sup>30</sup> This is core subject matter that would endure right across Ballard's career, beginning with his 1962 short story, "Thirteen to Centaurus," and his novel from the same year, *The Drowned World*. While treating very different subject matters, both feature central characters haunted by dreams of a beating, burning, amniotic sun, a super-enhanced inner landscape of the mind that begins to merge with the burning sun of the external, overheated world.
- <sup>31</sup> J G Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" [1964] *The Complete Short Stories: Volume 2* 33.
- <sup>32</sup> Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" 44.

- <sup>33</sup> Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" 30.
- <sup>34</sup> Gasiorek, *J G Ballard* 110.
- <sup>35</sup> Gasiorek, *J G Ballard* 212.
- <sup>36</sup> Gasiorek, *J G Ballard* 120.
- <sup>37</sup> Ballard, *Concrete Island* 69.
- <sup>38</sup> Ballard, *Concrete Island* 142.
- <sup>39</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans John Howe (London and New York: Verso, 1995) 23-4.
- <sup>40</sup> Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" 30.
- <sup>41</sup> Ballard, *Concrete Island* 4.
- <sup>42</sup> Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" 30.
- <sup>43</sup> Ballard, *Concrete Island* 71.
- <sup>44</sup> Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" 45-6.
- <sup>45</sup> Augé argues that non-space is a negative aspect of supermodernity, as Gasiorek indicates in his overview of Augé's links to Ballard's work: "[In] Ballard [the] future is a dead zone already destroyed by the relentless drive to reduce everything to the present moment and thus to collapse all the time that has passed and is still to come into the tyrannic embrace of the ever-same now, hence his claim that "the future is ceasing to exist, devoured by the all-voracious present" ... Augé's contention that the question of space has come to the fore because it is 'difficult to make time into a principle of intelligibility, let alone a principle of identity' fits well with Ballard's concerns." Gasiorek, *J G Ballard* 110.
- <sup>46</sup> Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" 43.
- <sup>47</sup> John Gray, "Modernity and its discontents," *New Statesman* (10 May 1999) 42.
- <sup>48</sup> Thomas Frick, "The Art of Fiction: J G Ballard," *Paris Review*, 94 (1984) 138.
- <sup>49</sup> Hakim Bey, "The Psychotopology of Everyday Life" in *The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (New York: Autonomedia, 1985), date of access: 29 November 2008 <<http://www.hermetic.com/bey/taz3.html#labelThePsychotopology>>.
- <sup>50</sup> Bey, "The Psychotopology of Everyday Life."
- <sup>51</sup> Bey, "The Psychotopology of Everyday Life."
- <sup>52</sup> Ballard, *Empire of the Sun* 129.
- <sup>53</sup> Ballard, *Concrete Island* 5.
- <sup>54</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* [1967], trans Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 2006) 9-10.
- <sup>55</sup> Anonymous, "Visit Port Watson!" 317.
- <sup>56</sup> The fact that "Visit Port Watson!" was published in an anthology along with two Ballard stories, along with an editorial acknowledgement of Ballard's influence on the writers within, also seems to affirm, as with the links with the TAZ, Ballard's shaping of Bey's worldview.
- <sup>57</sup> Gasiorek, *J G Ballard* 1, 2.

<sup>58</sup> Ballard, *Empire of the Sun* 169.

<sup>59</sup> Anonymous, "Visit Port Watson!" 330.

<sup>60</sup> J G Ballard, *Super-Cannes* [2000] (New York: Picador, 2002) 264.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Joshua Glenn, "Back to utopia: Can the antidote to today's neoliberal triumphalism be found in the pages of far-out science fiction?," *The Boston Globe* (20 November 2005).