

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Richard Brown, Christopher Duffy and Elizabeth Stainforth (eds) (2016) *J.G. Ballard: Landscapes of Tomorrow*. Brill. xii + 170 pp., € 85.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-04-31385-9.

The stated aim of *J.G. Ballard: Landscapes of Tomorrow* is to ‘address the various kinds of landscapes in Ballard’s writing and respond to the “spatial turn” in the arts and humanities, which opens a rich new vista for the reading of narrative fiction’ (Brown, Duffy and Stainforth 2016: 1). Ballard’s fiction is easily read in relation to the larger shift in attitudes towards the representation of spatiality that has occurred over the course of the last few decades. Its striking preoccupation with how space is imagined and produced, and how it occupies and reshapes the psyches of those who presume mastery over it, has been the source of critical fascination since at least the 1980s. In other ways, however, deploying the heuristics of the ‘spatial turn’ to understand Ballard’s fiction poses a challenge, not least because it is so reflexively preoccupied with spatiality as to risk crowding out the critic altogether. Indeed, Ballard’s novels and short stories often subject their own landscapes to such insistent hermeneutic acts that they restrict the reader to the uncomfortable position of voyeur. In his late dystopias *Cocaine Nights* (1996) and *Super-Cannes* (2000), for instance, Ballard includes the seer-like characters Bobby Crawford and Wilder Penrose, who explain the spatial logics of their respective milieus in a way that is curiously disempowering, robbing both the reader and the detective-protagonists of these novels of their central critical function. Recent scholarship on Ballard has insisted that the kind of voyeuristic spectatorship that his writing produces is far from passive and that the strategies by which it is produced are neither purposeless nor apolitical. Yet an abiding irony of the famous dictionary definition of ‘Ballardian’ – which emphasizes the alienating nature of the author’s spatial imaginary and the alienated behaviour of the characters who populate it – is that it describes so heteronomous an understanding of the relationship between outside and inside, landscape and psyche, text and reader, spectacle and audience, as to render the task of the critic (compulsively) difficult.

In response to this challenge, criticism in the first decade following Ballard’s death has adopted a more archival, intertextual and even genetic approach to its subject – focusing on the manuscripts, proofs and early variants that represent what Jean Bellemin-Noël (2004) might describe as the lesser-known ‘avant-textes’ to Ballard’s well-known novels and short stories – than was the case during his lifetime. And it is really in how it engages this critical trend with the still-unfolding consequences of the spatial turn that recommends Brown, Duffy and Stainforth’s collection both to Ballard scholars and to critics working within the field of literary geography. As Sheila Honess (2018) has pointed out in the pages of this journal, there has at times been a tendency for the spatial turn to direct attention away from the specific approaches afforded literary studies by the field of literary geography. The opening up of Ballard’s archive – the archive of an author whose writing foregrounds not just a

discrete spatial imaginary but a lived experience of geographic displacement within a context of colonial occupation, war, migration, decolonisation, suburbanisation and urban regeneration – affords an opportunity to consider where literary studies, literary geography and the spatial turn interact.

The book comprises ten chapters preceded by a short introductory piece of expressive writing by Ballard's daughter, Fay. 'Shanghai/*Shepperton*', which echoes the subtitle of Ballard's late memoir *Miracles of Life* (2008), intercuts staccato descriptions of the landscapes of Ballard's youth with italicised passages – expressed in similarly fragmented syntax – that delineate Fay's upbringing among the '[g]reen lawns of Shepperton' (8). The piece captures nicely the characteristic opposition of Ballard's writing: detached visions of cool domesticity split apart by flashes of disorientation and trauma. But what is most striking about it is the continuity that Fay Ballard appears eager to identify between her father's childhood and her own. James's wartime internment, alluded to in 'Shanghai death and trauma' (8) is, for instance, immediately concatenated with the domestic devastation that arrived with the death of his wife, Mary, at the age of 34, when their daughter was just seven years old. Such an effort to establish continuity across the fractured and fragmented geography of Ballard's life and writing continues into the critical essays that follow.

Graham Matthews begins by folding together subtropical Shanghai with the entropic London of *The Drowned World* (1962) and mobilising 'the advertisements, newspaper articles, stories, rhymes, travelogues, essays, and memoirs that surrounded Ballard as he grew up' in order to make sense of the 'post-war devastation' in which he composed his first considered piece of long-form fiction (10). The similarity of these locales has been noted before; what makes Matthews's contribution valuable, however, is the detailed nature of the connections that it draws between the colonial milieu in which Ballard lived as a child and popular representations of China written for Western audiences during the early twentieth century.

Matthews's chapter is followed by another by Thomas Knowles which places Ballard's work within a literary lineage stretching back to the Romantic poets. Stylistically, at least, this connection is easy to recognise: although the supernal language of *Vermilion Sands* – the focus of this chapter – has been understood as gesturing back to Surrealism's preoccupation with the contradictions of the individual psyche, Knowles persuasively suggests that the collection also 'perpetuate[s] and critique[s] the Romantic drive to synthesize the dichotomous relationship between subject and object' (24). The discussion that follows advances some intriguing claims about the connections between the Aeolian harp that fascinated Coleridge and the sonic sculptures scattered among *Vermilion Sands*, concluding that 'a lyricism [...] resonates throughout the collection' in which acts of aesthetic creation 'are fleeting, momentary, and [...] soon destroyed' (31). It is not obvious how far this proposed Romanticism extends across the rest of Ballard's *oeuvre* – a shorter discussion of *The Atrocity Exhibition* suggests that *Vermilion Sands* is perhaps something of an outlier – but the chapter establishes useful bridges to a movement with which Ballard is not commonly associated.

Following this is the first of two chapters in the collection which are separated – for reasons that are not clear – by chapters on quite different topics, focusing on Ballard's relationship with what he called 'invisible literature'. As Catherine McKenna explains, this term refers to the 'US government reports, scientific journals, technical manuals and medical textbooks' that made up a substantial part

of Ballard's library (41). And, together with Elizabeth Stainforth's later chapter on similar archival materials, McKenna's examination of this literature represents some of the more original and useful commentary in the collection, insofar as it characterises Ballard as, in Stainforth's words, 'a distinctive sort of reader in relation to his writing' (101). Far from the popular tendency to characterise Ballard's style as singular, even *sui generis*, what becomes clear in these essays is the extent to which his writing developed out of a quasi-obsessive attention to the rhetorical structure of written materials that are by no means conventionally literary.

Both Stainforth and McKenna treat Ballard's 'invisible literature' as, on the one hand, a formal resource that produced the 'affectless' style of his output during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and, on the other, a kind of Surrealist archive charged with the technological unconscious of a dangerously destructive Cold War society. In this respect they are indebted to the influential work of Jeannette Baxter, whose essay on Ballard's final novel *Kingdom Come* (2006) closes the book. Baxter's contribution to the field has been orientated by Ballard's interest in Surrealist painting; thus, her chapter uses Giorgio de Chirico's painting 'Le Muse Inquietanti' (1947) and novel *Hebdomeros* (1929) to grapple with Ballard's understanding of fascism's ahistorical character and the threat that it continues to present in the twenty-first century. Ballard's last novel has often come in for criticism; far from attesting to his waning powers as a writer, however, Baxter argues that *Kingdom Come* is a serious moral fiction, if a slippery one, which 'is alive to the threat and allure of fascism in all its forms' (154). Just as his attraction to 'invisible literature' shaped his critique of the psychopathologies of the Cold War period, so it directed him, towards the end of his life, to the insidious logics by which political violence structures the unconscious of consumer society today.

A great deal more is present in this collection, with some chapters revisiting established critical debates in the field where others seek to establish new intertextual relationships. Andrew Warstat's careful reading of 'The Dead Astronaut' (1968) returns to longstanding debates concerning Ballard's relationship with postmodernism, suggesting that this story's striking temporality represents an early attempt to grasp how capitalist modernity had delivered itself into 'the grave of the future' (62). By contrast, Richard Brown offers a detailed examination of Ballard's relationship with literary modernism – and James Joyce in particular – concluding that he 'revitalized and re-energized Joycean experimentation' in the middle of the twentieth century (84).

In one of the more theoretically-informed chapters of the book, Guglielmo Poli reads *The Atrocity Exhibition* in relation to Alfred Korzybski's aperçu 'The map is not the territory' (qtd. 87), made famous by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson. Poli suggests that Ballard's more radical fiction offers an aesthetic mechanism for negotiating the relationship between map and territory, identifying fruitful connections between Bateson's belief that, 'in order to deepen our comprehension of these connections, non-familiar languages must be used' (92-93) and the capacity of Ballard's experimental work to 'bring into relation the different levels that are traditionally disjointed, such as form and substance, body and mind, concreteness and imagination' (93).

This discussion, along with Christopher Duffy's chapter 'Hidden Heterotopias in *Crash*', is the closest that the collection gets to addressing some of the more fundamental questions of the spatial turn. Foucault is, of course, the major thinker alluded to in Duffy's title, though it is in this chapter that Marc Augé's concept of the 'non-place' is also addressed most fully. Like Peter Merriman (2007),

Duffy is keen to complicate a straightforwardly dystopian reading of automobility in Ballard's most notorious novel, contending that '*Crash* can be read as a text which systematically destabilizes non-place' instead of revelling in it. Indeed, to the extent that the novel is preoccupied with (sexual) revelry, it is 'subversive' and 'rebellious' (123) precisely because the acts that take place within automobiles, upon carriageways and inside car parks reconfigure the bland narcissism of non-place as a promissory heterotopia. A similar logic is at work in William Fingleton's chapter on *High-Rise* (1975), which observes the ways in which the homogeneous social milieu of the titular building is violently displaced by a '*sub rosa* revolution' (139) as a consequence of what R.D. Laing termed 'metanoia': '[t]he idea that a psychotic breakdown is not a symptom of genetic abnormality or neurological disorder, but an existential crisis' (qtd. 129). One does wonder, however, whether a specifically political subversion is too easily attributed to the kind of dissidence that has long been detected in Ballard's representation of the urban landscape. Recent Ballard scholarship – often under the influence of Baxter – has sought to test the extent to which, rather than positioning psychopathology as subversion, its subject's work is ultimately motivated by a moral sensibility than has not often been attributed to it. This discussion has still to run its course, but *J.G. Ballard: Landscapes of Tomorrow* represents a helpful contribution and many of its chapters offer important new avenues of enquiry into a writer whose works and archive continue to be of singular interest literary studies, not least insofar as it represents an attempt to make sense of the geographic fractures and dislocations of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Works Cited

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