

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Grass in an Expanding Field: Sensing the Unmapped in *Concrete Island*

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Abstract:

Ballard's complex evocation of the spaces of *Concrete Island* (1974) belies the simplicity of the structures that surround them. Before the construction of the Westway in the late 1960s the huge motorway intersection was shown as a smooth plastic ribbon laid atop the grittiness of run down and densely occupied 19th century housing of North Kensington. The spaces between were not considered. But *Concrete Island* celebrates this disappearing domain by tracing out fragments of its history, drawing an archaeology, but also expanding the ways that architectural spaces may be understood by paying attention to their sensual qualities. This paper examines the ways that the spaces of *Concrete Island* can be understood in the context of Rosalind Krauss's concept of the expanded field, and suggests that considering the novel as an example of the expanded field helps us to pay attention to 'spaces between'. Situated at a very specific moment of change, in the arts and in technological advances, Ballard looks backwards and forwards in time, and questions the stability of time and place. By taking de Certeau's understanding of the detailed movements of pedestrians in the city as analogous with writing, I seek to develop a way forward to the production of drawn responses that acknowledge this expanding field. My argument focuses on Ballard's metaphorical use of tactile, material qualities, demonstrating how rapid changes in the environment may be *felt* through his representation of the grass that thrives in between the giant structures of the Westway and M4 motorways. By reference to historical and contemporary writing on the psychogeographic affects associated with walking through the urban environment, I reveal how Ballard tells the story of a destabilised understanding of place that is, all the same, responsive to human intervention.

Keywords: expanded field, mobile practices, neglected landscapes, multi-sensory design.

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Expanding Fields in Architecture and Art in the 1960s and 70s

In 1960 Kevin Lynch, the American architect and planner, published what was to become one of the most significant and influential books on city form of the 20th century. In *The Image of the City* Lynch developed a theory of visual perception which brought together the roles of different senses of space and time as elements of how cities, and city spaces, may be understood: ‘At every instant, there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored. Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences’ (Lynch 1960: 1). This writing was in response to several decades of neglect by planners when there had been little or no concern regarding the experiential impact of the design of cities on city dwellers. Some years later Rosalind Krauss, the American art critic and theorist, published her seminal essay ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’ (1979) in which she develops a diagram to show that sculpture has also become ‘not architecture’ and ‘not landscape’ as it has moved on from previous traditions of being an object on a plinth in a fixed location. Sculpture, in Krauss’s analysis, had expanded into a multiplicity of potential relationships to site, to the human body and to the materials and practices that were employed in its production. While Krauss was discussing sculpture as a specific ‘art form’ it is not difficult to apply her thinking to art in general and then, by extension, to consider the previously understood disciplinary boundaries as becoming meaningless, or at least limiting. At the time that Ballard was writing his concrete and steel trilogy – *Crash* ([1973] 1995), *Concrete Island* (1974) and *High-Rise* (1975) – there was a concurrent explosion of multi-media, multi-sensory ‘happenings’ in London, experimenting with and combining a wide range of art practices in spaces that were neither gallery nor theatre; relationships between art installation, performance, film and music were explored, as was the potential offered by the instability of site, and a constantly evolving approach to practices and materials. Events such as the Destruction in Art Symposium, based in Notting Hill in September 1966 (see Stiles 2005), were designed as, by and for a counterculture, the expanded field of art becoming accessible to all.

In the liminal spaces described in *Concrete Island*, the extraordinary potential for the neglected wasteland and its abandoned occupants to transform and be transformed draws particular attention to the power of Ballard’s writing in re-imagining the built environment. In this paper I draw attention to Ballard’s treatment of broader socio-political concerns regarding an increasing separation of technologically enabled construction projects and the wastelands of abandoned spaces left as residue. This tension is a prominent feature of *Concrete Island*, calling for the expansion of fields of perceptions across disciplines. Towards the beginning of the novel, for example, Ballard writes:

Although no more than a hundred yards away, this freshly grassed slope seemed hidden behind the over-heated light of the island, by the wild grass, abandoned cars and builders equipment [...] The compulsory landscaping had yet to be carried

out by the contractors, and the original contents of this shabby tract, its rusting cars and coarse grass, were still untouched. (Ballard 1974: 12-3)

I am interested in Ballard's demonstration of local knowledge (in relation to both time and place) and the politics of a very specific urban condition resulting from the radical imposition of new infrastructures such as the Westway, beneath which the novel is set. In particular, I want to explore the tendency of these new infrastructures to produce 'waste' or 'leftover' space, something that the novel signals by its persistent mobilisation of the metaphor of grass.

The Westway's Neglected Spaces

I first discovered Ballard's *Concrete Island* almost by accident. The focus of my research at the time was the multiple and contested experiences of the Westway, an elevated urban highway I was considering as material form, machinic entity and cinematic experience. I was interested in how the Westway addresses broader concerns of the multiple understandings of contemporary landscapes and articulates the mobile and the modern in material and sensual terms, not diagrammatic and machinic ones. By analysing the cinematic quality of travel, I was also reconnecting the body to space and form in an exploration of landscapes of mobility (Robertson 2007).

The glamour and romantic associations inspired by driving the Westway were developed into eroticised events in Ballard's novels *Crash* and *Concrete Island*, both of which are set on and under the Westway, and mix alienation with a celebration of cars and speed, leading to their protagonists becoming, according to Jonathan Bell, 'mutant cyborgs [...] fusing meat and metal' (Bell 2001: 32). At the time, Ballard was, in his words, 'enraptured by the notion of organisms with radial tyres, etc. – how dull life seems today' (Ballard, cited in Self 1993). The focus of *Concrete Island* is the enormous interchange between the Westway and the West Cross Route. However, Ballard's description of this place belies the oversimplification indicated by the designers. The story reveals the complexities of the interchange, way beyond its physical and material arrangements, and identifies a threatening sense of the danger of isolation in the slow and static spaces between and beneath the continual movement at speed above.

The Westway was developed as a major route to the West of England from London. Early ideas from the 1920s had resulted in the construction of the 12-mile Western Avenue. In 1943 the County of London Plan was published by one of the most important British planners, Patrick Abercrombie. In response to the major 'defects of present-day London' identified by Abercrombie and Forshaw (1943: 3), the plan indicated a scheme that showed the significant role that the Westway was to play in a proposed network of orbital ringways and radial roads. Eventually, in 1966, a booklet was published by the Greater London Council for public distribution at the start of the construction of what was to become a part of the much larger scheme of arterial roads proposed by Abercrombie (see 61-3). The project was characterised as very progressive and was promoted as providing economic, social and cultural advantages over the prevailing conditions, both locally and nationally: the project was described as 'bold and

imaginative' (Greater London Council 1966a) and the engineering and construction were to be highly mechanized and technologically innovative. The Belgian Inspector-General of the Administration of Highways was invited to officiate at the commencement ceremony, emphasising the project as of European significance (Greater London Council 1966b). However, the attempt to establish the Westway as comparable to the radical remodelling projects in Paris and Brussels was not entirely successful: the full scheme never materialised and the increasing public awareness of the social and environmental impacts of such a scheme were ultimately broadcast through protests and reported in the popular press.

Ballard's status as a cult writer in continental Europe coincided with the positioning of the Westway as an important European project, an attempt to locate London alongside Paris, which was considered at the time to be the most progressive of European cities. However, the contemporary discourses of architects and planners did not consider London to be the equal of Paris and Brussels at that time and the project was seen as a chance to redress the balance in the absence of the radical remodelling projects of Haussmann and 'Builder King' Leopold II from the mid- to late 19th century. In the *London Illustrated News* the larger project of radial routes connected to cross-country motorways, put forward by Abercrombie in 1945, was linked to the Boulevard Périphérique in Paris by drawing comparisons to a number of Parisian public spaces and promoting the project to avoid 'condemning us to bump along behind our European neighbours' (Wilkins 1972: 31). Elevated highway projects had already been completed in Boston, USA (Architectural Forum 1959 and AIA Journal 1969) and in Rome and Genoa, Italy (Concrete Quarterly 1960, Casabella 1960 and 1965). These projects had all been covered extensively in the architectural design and art journals of the time, linking the plastic sculptural qualities to art practice (*Aujourd'hui art et architecture* 1957) and, to some extent, preparing the ground for Krauss's analysis, since the art form or design of the projects were not exclusively sculpture, landscape or architecture.

Ballard lived in Shepperton, west of London, and was very familiar with the main roads in that area. While he may not have read all of the material available from the engineers, it is likely that he was very aware of the progress and commentary on the project through the national and local press and other London-based journals; and of course the material impact of this major project on his doorstep was unavoidable. Local government notices and technical reports provide a sense of the language of communication between different parties; local and national press reports reflect a 'public' view, giving a sense of prevailing cultural and political views; local papers establish locality and respond to changes at a particular time. The Westway is located across the boundaries of three London Boroughs with significant differences in the social, economic and cultural circumstances of those who live there. These were even more marked at the time of construction, and the time that Ballard was writing *Concrete Island*. The eruption of violence in the Notting Hill race riots of 1958 and the first Carnival in 1966 provided vivid recent memories of alternative spatial practices that are evidenced in Ballard's characterisations of Maitland and Proctor, their appearances and their performances: Maitland's 'jacket and trousers studded with windshield fragments like a suit of lights' (Ballard 1974: 7) and Proctor's delight in wearing Maitland's dinner

jacket later spoiled by Jane's admonishment 'They'll spot you a mile off in that fancy dress!' (88).

In 1972, just two years after the official opening of the Westway, Ballard was involved in a car crash in Chiswick, and it was only a matter of months later that the final draft of *Concrete Island* was written (see Beckett 2015 for a detailed chronology of the writing of the novel). These events are inextricably linked and the clarity of the experience of a crash, along with the familiarity of the excitement and potential harm of the Westway, are implicitly identified as the provocations for the novel: as Ballard writes, 'This section of the motorway and its slip roads to the west of the interchange had been opened to traffic only two months earlier, and lengths of the crash barrier had yet to be installed' (Ballard 1974: 10). On completion the Westway project was described by journalists as efficient, fast and exhilarating, and referred to in the press as the '3-minute motorway' (The Times 1970: 3). The technologically advanced construction, the transformation of the experience of travelling into and out of London, and the sculptural qualities of the elevated highway all captured the imagination and were to provide the canvas for Ballard's projections and critique of the social, environmental and experiential impacts that were to transpire. Specifically, the relationship between body and space experienced and described through the interactions with the grass in *Concrete Island* is employed as a metaphor for the issues and concerns of the time.

In David Pringle's (1979) analysis of symbolism in Ballard's fictions, water represents the past. However, in the metaphorical use of grass in *Concrete Island* we can see that this is not consistently the case. The collisions of past and future are readily captured in descriptions of the architect protagonist, Robert Maitland, as he progresses through the grass. For instance, Ballard writes, 'Below the grass [Maitland] could identify the outlines of building foundations, the ground-plans of Edwardian terraced houses. He passed the entrance to a World War II air-raid shelter, half buried by the earth and gravel brought in to fill the motorway embankments' (Ballard 1974: 38). And later, he writes: 'Around him the high nettles rose into the sunlight, their tiered and serrated leaves like the towers of Gothic cathedrals, or the porous rocks of a mineral forest on an alien planet' (70). These collisions can be understood in a number of ways and destabilise any sense of time and place, not least insofar as Ballard's depictions of the spaces of *Concrete Island* can be conceived of as both dystopian and utopian.

Utopia, Dystopia and the Cold War of *Concrete Island*

The representation of grass provides an opportunity to understand *Concrete Island*'s complex relationship with utopia and dystopia. Landscape geographer Kenneth Olwig asserts that 'the modernist dialectic has been embodied in the landscape of a utopian dream of progress as conceived by the architects of modernity' (Olwig 2002: 52). Olwig continues by suggesting that 'it is time we moved beyond modernism's *utopianism* and postmodernism's *dystopianism* to a *topianism* that recognizes that human beings [...] consciously and unconsciously create places' (52). It appears that Ballard was also not content to position his fiction so neatly into one camp. It is worth reflecting, for instance, that in *Concrete Island* the interaction of the straight, modernist and 'utopian' contours of

machine, column and rope traps and ultimately kills Proctor, whereas Maitland's non-linear, postmodern and promissory navigation of the island reverses Olwig's characterisation of utopia and dystopia.

Certainly, Ballard's fiction can be understood as fluctuating between Olwig's definitions of dystopia and utopia. W. Warren Wagar maintains that Ballard's work is topographic in its explorations of both internal and external landscapes and there may well be merit in thinking of *Concrete Island* as 'utopographic', a term used by H.G. Wells in 1906 to describe the visualisation and critique of imagined, idealised, social worlds (Wagar 1991: 53). The space of *Concrete Island* may be mistakenly considered as dystopian; however, Maitland's relationship with and attitude towards the space changes according to his state of mind and physical health. In his discussion of Maitland's psychological journey Samuel Francis suggests that it is the disruptions of relations between Maitland's self and his different worlds that indicate schizophrenic alienation (Francis 2011: 121). So, the inner and external worlds of Maitland are both disrupted and at the same time open to a fluctuating sense of hope and despair. The flux continues throughout, and is noticeable in the way that Ballard's descriptions of the sensual qualities of the light in the space of the island shifts in tone from despair to hope. Early on in the novel, he writes that '[a] thin yellow light lay across the island, an unpleasant haze that seemed to rise from the grass, festering over the ground as if over a wound that had never healed' (Ballard 1974: 14). Shortly after, however, he writes more optimistically that 'the warm sunlight was drawing from the damp grass the faint yellow haze that had hung over the island the previous afternoon, blurring the perimeter walls' (38). Later still, he writes, 'The dense grass and the foliage of a stunted elder sealed off all but a faint glow of the late afternoon sunlight, and [Maitland] could almost believe that he was lying at the bottom of a calm and peaceful sea, through which a few bars of faint light penetrated the pelagic quiet' (75). By contrast, in describing the nature of the grass, used as a medium and instrument in this field of mobilities, the sense of hope rapidly changes to one of threat. Initially '[s]tirred by the night air, the grass pressed closer against the windows, shutting out the embankments of the motorways' (27) and it subsequently 'flashed with an electric light, encircling his thighs and calves' (68). The flickering changes in the relationships between Maitland and the grass are especially fast and vivid in Chapter 9, significantly entitled 'Fever', which demonstrates that inner and outer worlds are inseparable as the physical and mental effects of delirium combine and interact with the tactile characteristics of the grass. The spaces of the island thus seem to have myriad ways of being experienced: just one example is by bodily movements through the medium of the grass, which Maitland considers to possess agency and intention.

We can make further progress with establishing the power of Ballard's use of the grass as representative of the environment when we look at the conflicting and often indirect references to the perceived political and cultural threats of the time. Wagar claims that the place of the transforming moment, in the repeated and often precarious spiritual quest for fulfilment, is always utopian; the characters in the 'utopian cell' are described as 'experimentalists, eager to travel wherever their obsessions lead them, at no matter what cost' (Wagar 1991: 61). In a broader discussion on dystopian fiction, Andrew Hammond notes the symptoms of the Cold War and the accompanying nuclear anxieties

that, although not overtly mentioned in *Concrete Island*, are nonetheless omnipresent in Ballard's fiction, at least up until the 1980s (Hammond 2011: 667). Averting catastrophe became a preoccupation in fiction between 1945 and 1989. The sense of threat that pervades *Concrete Island* is a clear indication that Ballard's writing was very much a part of the prevailing dystopian literary mode, though at the same time it simultaneously engages with earlier utopian responses to modernity, which had themselves started to look dystopian. As Fredric Jameson writes, by this period, '[u]topia had come to designate a program which [...] betrayed a will to uniformity and the ideal purity of a perfect system that had to be imposed by force on its imperfect and reluctant subjects' (Jameson 2005: xi). We can trace these conflicting ideas in Maitland's attempts to control both the social and physical world in which he finds himself. In this respect, Maitland's attitudes are an extension of those embodied by the Westway itself, which was also to some degree a product of the geopolitical anxieties of the Cold War period. At the time of writing *Concrete Island*, Ballard may well have been aware that the Department of Transport answered to the Ministry of Defence in designing the Westway to support the weight of armoured tanks (de Rijke 1999: 28). While this aspect of the structure's design was not widely published, it was common knowledge, and demonstrates that it may have been understood not only as technologically innovative in its construction but also as contributing to both the protection of London and the perception of military threat at the time.

However, the Westway was also considered a cultural image of modernity, and shown as a clean sinuous form laid over the messy background of deteriorating North Kensington housing, the existing grain of West London providing a canvas onto which this new artistic vision had been painted. In Cold War fiction, the potential impact on culture was as important as the military threat (Hammond 2011: 666), and here Ballard's connection with Krauss's concept of the expanding field presents itself. Ballard uses the term 'motion sculpture' a number of times in his 'urban disaster' or 'concrete and steel' trilogy (*Crash*, *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*) when describing the concrete structure of the Westway and interchange. For instance, in *Crash*, narrated by a fictional character who is also named James Ballard, he writes: 'I gazed down at this immense motion sculpture, whose deck seemed almost higher than the balcony rail against which I leaned. I began to orientate myself again around its reassuring bulk, its familiar perspectives of speed, purpose and direction' (Ballard 1995: 48). This passage speaks of Ballard's appreciation for the confluence of changes in several hitherto separate fields in the arts and sciences and points to his acuity in perceiving how these fields developed, overlapped and were interwoven.

Sensing Mobilities

Edward Dimendberg writes of the freeway occupying 'an ambiguous status within the branches of knowledge devoted to the study of modern space' (1995: 93), and this ambiguity links to a broader set of ideas that became prevalent in the arts and social sciences at around the time that the project of the Westway was being developed. The shifts in scale and time evident in *Concrete Island* make a more 'conventional' reading of

narrative elusive. In an interview in 1971, Ballard talks about the increasing difficulty of separating fiction from reality in ‘modern life’ and therefore the logic of examining a ‘new reality’ by bringing both together: ‘What I try to depict in my novels are changes in the external environment that match exactly changes in the internal environment, so there are certain points where these two come together’ (Ballard, cited in Ballard and Hennessy 1971: 61). Ballard talks about the fragmentation of narrative in his writing, and suggests that his works all have ‘a strong story’ but an unconventional narrative. This insistence on a ‘story’ and the way that the story is told through a focus on mobility connects with the thinking of philosopher Michel de Certeau whose ‘spatial stories’ are told through mobile practices. While de Certeau’s work looks at the proliferation of meanings, it also looks for ‘myriads of almost invisible movements [...] to become a “proper place for people”’ (de Certeau 1984: 41), finding a place for individual practice within an overarching knowable system. In this, de Certeau may seem contradictory, but he is drawing attention to the potential of ‘thin’ practical tactics that may operate with agility and stealth within, or in spite of, ‘fat’ governing strategies that are cumbersome and unresponsive. Ballard had already expressed his concerns with changing social relationships: as he wrote in 1971, ‘The social novel is reaching fewer and fewer readers, for the clear reason that social relationships are no longer as important as the individual’s relationship with the technological landscape of the late 20th century’ (Ballard 1971: np).

De Certeau usefully distinguishes between the fixed relative positions of *place* as opposed to the simultaneous overlaying of spatial concerns. This opposition is useful to consider in the context of Ballard’s work. De Certeau’s assertion that ‘space is a practiced place’ (1984: 117) and his understanding that psychoanalytical space allows for simultaneous and overlaid experience, as opposed to the fixed and absolute understanding that may be gathered from historicised space, is worthwhile. As we have already seen, Ballard maintains a fluctuating sense of time and place throughout *Concrete Island* and the simultaneous and interpenetrating experience is most vividly evoked in his description of grass and in the chapter entitled ‘Fever’. However, we can make further connections between de Certeau’s thinking that allows for new layers to be added, or superimposed, over an existing world in relation to the ‘tabula rasa’ that allows an urban planner to over-write the city. De Certeau’s concern with making a mark on a previously blank canvas brings together the modernist design of the Westway and Ballard’s descriptions of Maitland’s spatial strategies in *Concrete Island*. De Certeau explains how the scriptures of mediaeval times were understood to *speak* but that later maps lost all traces of the practices that made them. Instead, they became the very structure of the world they were mapping; thus while mediaeval maps offered illustrated stories, these were replaced in modernity by spatial representations of the earth’s surface. In focusing on the evidence of Ballard’s ‘external environment’ and how it is manifested through a sensual bodily engagement with the place we can observe that Ballard effectively draws and redraws the landscape through the intimate relationship of sensing body to space, using the grass as the medium, or possibly as an active ‘foil’, or a more passive ‘canvas’. As Ballard writes:

For Proctor, as Maitland had seen already, the deep grass was his vital medium. His scarred hands felt the flexing stems, reading their currents as they settled around him. He thought of Proctor emerging from his den in the seconds after the crash, feeling the impact of the Jaguar jarring through the grass in a series of warning ripples. (1974: 127-8)

The role and status of the protagonist, the architect Maitland, is significant in this question of drawing or making the landscape. And, in a way, this closes the loop of my discussion as it comes back to the seemingly shocking negligence of *not* thinking about the spaces under and around this interchange at the time it was designed. Ballard provides a damning critique of the arrogance of architects and in this we should include those responsible for ignoring the spaces that are described in *Concrete Island*. He draws attention to the desire of the architect to control, but also the futile attempts at controlling the social makings of space. In Ballard's characterisation, Maitland's fundamentally domineering and rationalising role as an architect does not actually change. What does change is the means by which he is able to dominate the island, which begins as cognitive and visual but increasingly becomes affective and tactile. It is in this respect that the novel's relationship with Krauss's concept of the expanding field is revealed.

Expanding the Field

If left without the cognitive and visual possibility of representing space or understanding the spaces of representation, according to Lefebvre's trialectic of spaces (1991), how can we manage with only the lived experience? Initially in *Concrete Island*, it seems that the architect struggles to relinquish certain desires and habits and so tries to map out the territory in order to represent space; however, it is his movements across and into this landscape that transform it into a practiced place as de Certeau would have it. Maitland's praxis of feeling the space becomes a way of mapping weak points and possibilities for escape or, failing that, identifying opportunities to reinvent the island. This releases Maitland from the constraints of previous ways of seeing, and reveals submerged ways of being in a space that open up the possibility of remaking it as part of an expanded field.

In Krauss's essay the notion of an 'expanded field' is a way of describing specific artworks as interventions in the landscape, thus expanding the term 'sculpture'. Indeed, like Maitland's journeys across the island within the novel, *Concrete Island* itself could be seen as part of an expanded field. In keeping with the author's description of himself as a 'frustrated painter' (Ballard, quoted in Baxter 2009: 17), we can think of Ballard as an artist, a painter critiquing his imagined landscapes and allowing his protagonists to effect changes through their affective engagement with space. In this context it is worth looking again at the 19th century painterly and filmic prose and poetry of Charles Baudelaire, who speaks of the relationship between the flâneur and a way of being in the urban milieu organised around a form of satisfied control but with reference to natural flows, and thus a coming together of nature and culture that can be extended to the relationship between the inner and outer geographies that are so prevalent in Ballard's

writing. In Baudelaire's 1957 poem 'Rêve Parisien' in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the direct and vivid sensual imagery, concerned with time and space but avoiding a logical, steady pace, draws attention to wild fluctuations with bursts of colour and light:

Architecte de mes féeries,
Je faisais, à ma volonté,
Sous un tunnel de pierreries
Passer un océan dompté;

Et tout, même la couleur noire,
Semblait fourbi, clair, irisé;
Le liquide enchâssait sa gloire
Dans le rayon cristallisé.

Nul aster d'ailleurs, nuls vestiges
De soleil, même au bas du ciel,
Pour illuminer ces prodiges,
Qui brillaient d'un feu personnel!

Et sur ces mouvantes merveilles
Planait (terribles nouveautés!)
Tout pour l'oeil, rien pour les Oreilles!
Un silence d'éternité.

(Baudelaire 1982: 285-6)

Architect Rem Koolhaas uses this quote from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* as part of the song that the prisoners sing to the enclosing architecture of his 1972 *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture* project. This project was originally entered for an Italian competition, 'The City as Meaningful Environment', and as Koolhaas described it, is a product of the 'visionary 1960s [...] a period that was "relentlessly optimistic and ultimately innocent"' (Scott 2003: 82). The project was based on a study of the Berlin Wall considered as architecture, and proposed to remove a section of London and to replace it with an area of metropolitan life as inspired by Baudelaire. Walls were proposed to protect this area and to emphasise the contrast from the spaces outside the walls. Londoners could then choose to become 'voluntary prisoners' of the enclosed hyper-dense and intensely vivid architecture (83). There is considerable overlap in the ideas of this architectural project and Ballard's *Concrete Island*, both conceived in 1972 and concerned with containment, separation and immersion in an intensely experienced environment. *Concrete Island* may be seen as a critique of spatial practice that echoes Koolhaas. In Krauss's expanded field there was a move to 'unfix' place, allowing for a different sense, or multiple senses, of place. And this 'unfixing' may be activated by, in de Certeau's words, the 'intersections of mobile elements' thus implicating both time and place through occupations and mobile practices (de Certeau 1984: 117).

In *Concrete Island* the boundaries of both space and time are uncertain: space here is ever changing, shifting, expanding, contracting and referring to previous archaeological constructions. The extended scale of a landscape allows architects to experiment, expanding the field of operations as Maitland does on his island of uncertain boundaries. It is the unmapped and uncertain boundaries of *Concrete Island* that I want to investigate further now, seeing how Ballard's visions fill the gaps, revealing and saturating the ground, and providing the expanding field with a sense of place. In a 1971 interview, Ballard voices frustration with the status of 'experimental' writers in the UK, arguing that '[t]he main tradition of the fine arts – painting and sculpture – is the tradition of the new. In literature, if you say anything new people are thrown into a rictus of hostility and fright, like experimental animals being shown too many confusing signs' (Ballard and Hennessy 1971: 64). The relationship between the expanded field and postmodernism is not constant across disciplines. If artists were recognised in the 1960s and 70s as borrowing from other fields, then there was certainly a delay in architects borrowing from artists. At the 8th Venice Architecture Biennale in 2002, French architects Décosterd & Rahm produced an alpine climate by means of light and atmospheric installations to create a sensual 'endocrine architecture' that could be seen and felt on the skin and breathed in (Décosterd & Rahm 2002). Décosterd & Rahm might say that the more fixed, stable material constructs of glass, steel and masonry provide (only) a framework from or onto which architecture may be projected. This is in opposition to the conventional understanding of what architecture is and expands the field to what it may be, proposing an architecture that is 'an "effect" of architecture' (Rendell 2006: 56, emphasis in original). The active creation of an atmosphere by controlling and mixing elements of, for example, humidity and aroma takes the process of architectural design in a very different direction from the conventions of designing materially bound spaces that passively allow atmospheres to develop according to unpredictable occupations.

Although Koolhaas's *Exodus* project could be seen as a forerunner to these more recent developments, his approach was not materially tested. American architects Diller + Scofidio completed a pavilion called *Blur* for the Swiss Expo in 2002 that was installed on Lake Neufchâtel at Yverdon-les-Bains (Diller + Scofidio 2003). The idea for the project was to create an ephemeral architecture in which electronic images were projected within and onto the shroud of fog that permeated and enveloped a simple structure in the lake reached by a footbridge. Initially sounds and smells were also to have been included in the project but these were omitted due to cost constraints. The aims of the project were to create 'a striking architecture of atmosphere' that was also 'an anti-spectacle', as it was constantly undergoing transformation (81). The fog was seen as both natural (from the lake) and man-made, and could be felt on the skin of visitors. This work clearly draws attention to architecture's relationship to the landscape and reflects on the disciplinary definitions of architecture, something that Ballard's characterisation of Maitland in *Concrete Island* anticipates many decades ahead of its time, since he is, likewise, reflecting on the limits of his discipline, along with the many other unresolved aspects of his life. Maitland struggles to come to terms with the environment:

No grass grew under the overpass. The damp earth was dark with waste oil leaking from the piles of refuse and broken metal drums on the far side of the fence. The hundred-yard-long wire wall held back mounds of truck tyres and empty cans, broken office furniture, sacks of hardened cement. Builder's forms, bales of rusty wire and scrapped engine parts were heaped so high that Maitland doubted whether he would be able to penetrate this jungle of refuse even if he could cut through the fence. (Ballard 1974: 39)

In this passage Ballard is clearly showing how alien Maitland is to this neglected environment of waste and pollution, whose 'dark earth [is] as impenetrable as sodden leather' (39). Not only is the earth unworkable but it is also too polluted for grass to grow. However, Maitland realises that there is 'enough signal material to light up the entire island' (50) in an early hint that there are ways to adapt to and exploit what is found there. A little later he sees a discarded sandwich that he ravenously consumes, oblivious to the grit attached and his filthy fingers – his first scavenge. Maitland's first encounter with another occupant of the island is with a rat, at home in this place and taking the opportunity to investigate Maitland as a meal. By contrast his first physical encounter with Proctor is characterised by the strength and surprise of an unforeseen attack: 'Maitland was only aware of the panting, bull-like figure dragging him up the slope' (76). Proctor uses the island's derelict structures as camouflage from which to spring his attack: he is virtually a part of the island, as his acrobat-like agility signifies in striking contrast to Maitland's lumbering and episodic adaptations. In this respect, Ballard seems to import into his experiments with literature a similar imperative that motivated Krauss when she developed her concept of the expanded field in relation to sculpture. This is to say that both Ballard and Krauss were influenced by concepts circulating within the discipline and practice of architecture long before that discipline itself began to engage on a similarly wholesale interrogation of its own procedures. As Jan Avgikos suggests,

the expanded field that opened in the 60s and 70s described by Krauss in relation to newly imported categories of architecture and landscape extends far beyond the historical practices she identifies as postmodern art. In the same period, evidence of other ruptures and expanded fields occur in genres of body and performance art, photography, and art inspired by feminist politics. Much of the art of the 70s concerned with problems of identity and representation is *grounded in the figure*. (Avgikos 1998: np, emphasis added)

While this assertion is interesting in art it works less well with architecture. Conventionally there is a tendency to fix, stabilise and materialise architecture that closes down other possibilities. Thus, in architecture, 'postmodernism' became most commonly evidenced by the use of simple historical motifs (seen, for example, in the 1990s work of James Stirling in the UK, and Michael Graves and Philip Johnson in the US), in contrast with the multiple possibilities demonstrated, for instance, in Bernard Tschumi's design for the Parc de la Villette in Paris (1982-1998) (see Hardingham and Rattenbury 2012).

But if postmodernist architects were unwilling to reflect on their practice to quite the extent described by Avgikos in relation to Krauss's discussion of sculpture, Ballard's fictional architect, by his wilful decision not to escape the island, gives himself the space and time to do exactly that. Over time he recognises his inability to control the island using conventional means, and attempts to overcome this by using a stick or his body to mark out trails in the grass, writing messages to be seen from above, overpowering and exploiting Proctor to elevate himself, and adapting, re-making or extending a shelter at different times and with varying degrees of success (initially for his own satisfaction but later for an audience, as suggested by the admiration expressed by Jane Sheppard). So Maitland's understanding of what architecture is or could be expands as he spends more time in this changing environment; he is refining his abilities to dominate space by learning to sense place.

Mobile Practices and Tactile Interventions

As the Westway draws a sinuous line through the urban landscape, so Maitland draws his body across this abandoned place. But it is more than simply a plot of land, and its interstitial quality functions to expand the notions of both landscape *and* architecture. Both are treated as sacrificial; the landscapes beneath the Westway were not considered at all until after the structure was completed, and general landscaping was only considered a few weeks before the motorway construction was due to finish (Baxter, Lee and Humphries 1972). Nonetheless, Maitland's island quite quickly becomes infused with the potential to become a place, its occupants and its mobile practices open for exploitation. While this is a more forceful term than 'borrowing', Ballard makes his point without needing to spell it out. As architects have to 'redefine their operations', reading Ballard provides a 'wonderful opportunity to recalibrate and reconsider who and what architecture is actually for' (Clear 2009: 9). Ballard's message is thus profound.

It is worth briefly looking at other writing that evokes a sensual engagement with urban space in ways that mitigate against any danger of 'fixing' space. To this end, we might consider the writing of geographer David Pinder (2001) on the experience of Janet Cardiff's *The Missing Voice* (1999). In this article, Pinder makes his reader experience Cardiff's audio walk, echoing her urge for the participant to follow, and describing the experience that one would have if one were to undertake the walk. The reader's senses are alerted; she can feel the cold wind and smell the banana skins. The description of cross cuts is vivid as, for example, in the collision of seasons: 'But the description of tulips and the smell of flowers here makes me wistful for other seasons as a winter's evening closes in.' (5). The reader feels as if she is participating and playing a part, albeit in someone else's play. The influence of earlier modernist writing is evident in Pinder's sensory fragments: Baudelaire's poetry, as we have seen, is episodic, filmic in its effect, a kind of shorthand that epitomises the fragmented nature of the experience of the city and modernity, whilst Benjamin represents the city as fleeting and ephemeral. The interweaving in italics of Cardiff's voice is like tuning in to a radio station, moving between stories and exploring multiple selves: 'Later while standing at Liverpool Street Railway Station, the scene again shifts unexpectedly and it appears as *empty, blackness and*

rubble everywhere, holes in the glass roof (10). Such shifts are much as Pinder describes the changing experience of the different voices on the tape, giving emphasis to the ephemeral nature of the urban environment. We can see Ballard's depictions of the vivid, fleeting and ever changing experience of *Concrete Island* providing a very significant stepping stone between Baudelaire's mid-nineteenth-century poetry through to Cardiff's late-twentieth-century artwork – which, incidentally, can also be seen as an example of the expanded field. Throughout *Concrete Island* Ballard infuses the grass with multiple identities with dramatically shifting characteristics. With emphasis in the chapter entitled 'The Messages', Ballard writes, 'Around the smoke-streaked windows the tall grass swayed in the warm air.' (Ballard 1974: 57) suggesting that the grass revels in this microclimate. Moments later the grass is attacking Maitland but is forgiven: 'He leaned against the seat as the blades of crushed grass sprang through the open door, reaching into the car against his leg. The resilience of this coarse grass was a model of behaviour and survival.' (58) Shortly after this the grass provides a protective haven as 'Maitland crouched in the grass, grateful to this deep bower for hiding him from the approaching figure' (60).

It is apropos of the ephemerality of the urban experience in Pinder and Cardiff's work that the metaphor of the grass in *Concrete Island* becomes significant once more. The paths that Maitland forms over the island become obscured surprisingly quickly. The traces fade and disappear, become less important, and the grass becomes an ocean that constantly reforms itself: as Ballard writes, 'Covering everything in its mantle, the grass rose and fell like the waves of a brisk sea' (Ballard 1974: 40). This is an underwater city, otherworldly and fantastical. The grass is the medium onto which to draw. However, it is flexible as it can reform, recover, take an imprint, grow and filter. This field of mobilities, this field of senses, does not accumulate historical layers that may be read and interpreted. The minutiae of movements and emotions are taken in by the swaying of the grass; it reflects the 'inner' world of the protagonist, the scars and marks on the landscape providing a flickering palimpsest or an archaeology of sorts:

Submerged in this green bower, Maitland lay for some time in a hammock of crushed nettles. The dense grass and the foliage of a stunted elder sealed off all but a faint glow of the late afternoon sunlight, and he could almost believe that he was lying at the bottom of a calm and peaceful sea, through which a few bars of faint light penetrated the pelagic quiet. This silence and the reassuring organic smell of decaying vegetation soothed his fever. (75)

Maitland's interactions with the grass capture episodes of intense sensual evocations. The description above is reminiscent of the warm golden glow that seems to infuse the descriptions of a rural idyll in Laurie Lee's 1959 *Cider with Rosie* (2002) but also the pungent, and overpowering, intimacy of the mother's skirts at the start of Günter Grass's 1959 *Tin Drum* (2010). Throughout *Concrete Island* there are many direct connections between the grass and parts of Maitland's body: his waist and hands, his face and feet. These are parts of the body with high levels of nerve endings, as Ballard, who studied medicine, would know – thus his selection of body parts is unlikely to be random or

careless. The key themes may be summarised by looking at the dominance of the tactile sense in holding and revealing perceptions of fragmentation and cohesion and the ambivalent relationship between protector and aggressor, through the filter of the natural versus the man made in the environment and the simultaneity of mobile (time affected) practices. The senses are activated and become receptors, but it is the tactile sense that dominates and Maitland's sensing body receives messages from the grass.

Conclusions

At the beginning of *Concrete Island* Ballard establishes Maitland's first material engagement with the island as he plunges through the grass and nettles, whose domain he is entering. Throughout, there is a narrative about the changing relationship between the natural, protective, cleansing role of the grass and the harmful, polluted, aggressive creature that it becomes. Using the metaphor of the grass as an ocean allows Ballard to make rapidly changing historical and internal conditions *felt*. This ocean changes from haven to a dangerously deceptive appearance of calm in the blink of an eye. In the transmission of messages into Maitland's body, the grass is humanised: it chats and guides and heals, and this is partly by dint of being not only human but, importantly, 'natural'. Ultimately, therefore, nature is humanised and humans naturalised. As the story develops there is increasing uncertainty of the roles of the actants: Maitland merges with the grass and adapts to take on a way of being in this other world; thus, to survive, it is essential to adopt new ways of dwelling. The frequent references to fragmentation and occasional re-unification give a strong indication that a singular 'totalising' understanding of space is not possible; a completely rational reading or mapping cannot be grasped and fixed for any length of time. The fluctuations in control pass back and forth between Maitland, who is of the material world, and the grass, which the novel constructs as slippery and immaterial. At the end of the novel, Maitland has learned to rely on his own sensing body and has no further need of a beast of burden, a weapon or an aide. His desires for control have been subdued; he has started to delight in its sensual embrace. He has become naturalised into this once alien world. Maitland and his environment have become one. De Certeau insists that space exists through practices and that the many concurrent understandings of space are contingent on each unique practice. Ballard reveals some of these practices in *Concrete Island*. Maitland develops a new kind of spatial practice as he learns to assimilate new forms of perception into his domineering, rationalising way of thinking about space. While the lack of design attention given to such spaces as exist under motorways might seem scandalous, Ballard also reveals that the multiple practices of his own island are rich with potential and, indeed, provides a call to avoid over-writing the city so that gaps remain that may allow a proper place for all people. These gaps provide the fertile ground for experimentation that is temporally, materially and socially flexible, continually expanding the field.

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