

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Neural Spaces in J. G. Ballard's *Vermilion Sands*

C. Bruna Mancini

University of Calabria

Abstract:

The interrelated concepts of 'space' and 'place' are often confused, even if many critics have defined them as the basic components of our lives and of our imaginary/literary imagination. Essentially, 'space' is defined as freedom, openness, threat, movement, and 'place' as pause, security, familiarity, home. J. G. Ballard, one of the most famous (post)apocalyptic/sf authors of the last century, has been much affected by questions of space from the beginning of his career. Turning his back on the 'outer space' of so many traditional sf stories, he imagined a new and renewable form of sf writing that set off a surreal 'inner space': a series of shifting, uncanny imaginative geographies in which the outer world of so-called 'reality' and the inner world of the psyche melt and swap their places. In Ballard's narrative, the two concepts of space and place fuse and overturn, just like internal and external worlds, imagination and reality. Indeed, in Gasiorek's words, Ballard's neural spaces can be defined as "borderzones of identity". In *Vermilion Sands*, one of the most appreciated among Ballard's writings, the inflamed, tired, surrealistic landscape is taken from a dream, or from a nightmare: it is a flamboyant suburb of the mind in which the narrators are a reflection of Ballard himself, and the female characters are avatars of the unconscious. All the short stories of this collection seem to evolve into a kind of a metanarrative discussion on the idea of art and life: the surreal artists and their creations can revive their inner worlds while isolated in the desert resort of Vermilion Sands.

Keywords: inner space; map; literary cartographer; post-geography; space/place; metanarration.

Author contact: bruna.mancini@unical.it

Our capacity to affect, think, imagine, speak, indeed to act in any manner whatsoever in society, is both enabled and bounded by a mental ‘map’ which is at the same time a spatial map. (Cameron and Palan 2011: 80)

Literary Cartography: Space, Place, Maps, and Literature

In his preface to *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies*, Robert J. Tally affirms that the Spatial Turn of the 1950s in the humanities and social sciences has occasioned an explosion of innovative, multidisciplinary scholarship:

Spatially oriented literary studies, whether operating under the banner of literary geography, literary cartography, geophilosophy, geopoetics, geocriticism, or the spatial humanities more generally, have helped to reframe or to transform contemporary criticism by focusing attention, in various ways, on the dynamic relations among space, place and literature. Reflecting upon the representation of space and place, whether in the real world, in imaginary universes, or in those hybrid zones where fiction meets reality, scholars and critics working in spatial literary studies are helping to reorient literary criticism, history, and theory. (Tally 2014: IX).

In exploring such matters, spatial criticism – Tally observes – spreads to the spaces of the ‘real’ world, and it sometimes calls into questions what Edward Soja has defined as the ‘real-and-imagined’ places we experience in literature and in life (Soja 1996: 57). In fact, Tally recalls that a great deal of important research has been devoted to the literary representation of certain identifiable places – such as Dicken’s London, Baudelaire’s Paris, Joyce’s Dublin, Pasolini’s Rome, for example – even if many critics have also explored ‘otherworldly spaces of literature, such as those to be found in myth, fantasy, science fiction, video games, and cyberspace’ (Tally 2014: IX). For Tally, spatial criticism is interested in the relationship between spatiality and the different media and genres: ‘Thanks to a growing critical awareness of spatiality, innovative research into the literary geography of real and imaginary places has helped to shape historical and cultural studies in ancient, medieval, early modern, and modernist literature, while a discourse of spatiality undergirds much of what is still understood as the postmodern condition’ (X). Indeed, spatial criticism examines the experience of place, of displacement, of belonging, and the interrelations between lived experience and a more abstract or unrepresentable spatiality, positioned among space, place, literature and mapping.

In recent years, a great number of scholars have focused their attention on map-producing narratives of the real and imaginary places represented in literary (and not only strictly literary) texts. Obviously, these representations are connected to the changing social and political spaces of the world in which their authors lived or live. Space – whether geographical, narrative, or literary – has to function as the product of action: ‘an active dimension of interrelations, intertextualities, and multiplicity’ (Hones 2014: 9). In the “Editorial” to the journal *Literary Geographies* published in 2015, Hones, Alexander, Cooper, Kneale, and Ridanpää write that, conventionally: ‘if (...) literary

geography can be understood as an approach to literary texts, a geographically-attuned way of reading fiction or poetry or drama', it can also be perceived as a way of reading 'while making connections between geography and literature, but also making connections while reading scholarly work in geography and literary studies' (Hones et al. 2015: 2). With(in) literary geography, indeed, scholars become more and more willing to read and write across disciplines. Moreover, also the border between academic and creative work on literary geography has started to be broken down (2), including different perspectives and approaches.

As Peter Turchi puts it in his *Maps of the Imagination*, every writer is also a kind of a cartographer: 'We organize information on maps in order to see our knowledge in a new way. As a result, maps suggest explanations; and while explanations reassure us, they also inspire us to ask more questions, consider other possibilities' (Turchi 2004: 11). Maps are strange and wondrous things that reveal as much as they obscure. In fact, David Ian Paddy writes that: 'Maps are not so innocent as may seem, but then again neither are the landscapes they are meant to represent. On the one hand, a map is obviously not the same thing as a territory but is instead a simplified rendering of complex space. It is a selective representation that is riddled with conundrums of what can or should be included and what can or should not; conundrums rich with the sedimentation of history and politics' (Paddy 2015: 24). Our own relationship to our environment is built and negotiated through complex systems of thought that are both conscious and unconscious. Thus, real landscapes are also symbolic. After all, also for Edward Said there are no apolitical ways to map or discuss a landscape. Therefore, in literature landscapes are saturated with meanings: 'For every landscape an author uses as setting there is a pre-history of rich associations already built into that place that an author builds upon as he or she adds significations anew' (24). Maps suppose and presuppose a narrativity, which functions as a map. The writer is a literary cartographer and all spaces are necessarily embedded with narratives, just as all narratives build and organize spaces: 'In mapping a place, one also tells a story' (Tally 2014: 2). Again, from a very personal point of view, Tally observes that 'literary cartography' is a fundamental aspect of storytelling, showing how narratives are used to map, to understand and to interpret the real-and-imagined spaces of human experience (3). As readers, we can only position these narratives into a spatial-temporal context in order to give a meaningful shape to the world in which we live. After all, in her 2014 book, Hones believes that: 'fiction happens in space, is the product of interrelations, emerges in the dimension of coexistence, and is always in the state of becoming' (Hones 2014: 69). In short, fiction is just like place, which – following Doreen Massey's definition – happens in space as 'here' and 'now' (Massey 2005: 139), made up of multiple interrelations and 'interacting theres and thens' (Hones 2014: 70).

In *Space and Place*, Yi-Fu Tuan (2010) affirms that a place, unlike undifferentiated space, embraces the resting of the eye, a pause of narration, in which the viewer apprehends that portion of space as something to be interpreted, understood, and known. Therefore, Massey notes that for Tuan space is more abstract and global, while place is associated with the local and the meaningful. Indeed, as Hones recalls, recent developments in spatial theory have widened its scope and its vocabulary, with readers

becoming able to engage with ‘texts not only as narratives of plot events *situated in space* but also as a literary recognition of the ways authors, characters, plot events, and even readers participate in the making of narrative space’ (Hones 2014: 76). Hones cites Marcus Doel who suggests that space is a verb: ‘To space – that’s all. Spacing is an action, an event, a way of being’ (Crang and Smith 2000: 125). The way in which every single narrative writes/maps spaces is constantly under construction, and has to be considered from very different perspectives. In particular, I am very much concerned with J. G. Ballard’s narratives and the way he explores and literally depicts his heuristic notion of ‘inner space’. A careful analysis of his writings requires a creative dialogue across different disciplines and arts (literature, philosophy, architecture, music, painting, cinema, psychology, and so forth): an interdisciplinary convergence of cross-fertilisations ‘at the juncture where geography and literature meet’ (Hones et al. 2015: 2). A perspective Ballard would have adored.

J. G. Ballard’s Inner Spaces

James Graham Ballard was one of the most famous (post)apocalyptic writers of the last century. He is known for his dystopic, catastrophic, visionary stories centered on symphorophilia, technological fetishism, ecological crisis, urban ruination, suburban mob culture, and the so-called ‘death of affect’ – just to mention some of the themes he seems to be concerned with. In particular, he was fascinated by the uncanny effects of technological, social and environmental developments upon the human psyche, as well as upon the natural and urban landscapes of everyday life. For his prophetic analysis he has been considered a precise and cruel reader/critic of our times; in fact, Jeannette Baxter writes that: ‘Ballard, the so-called Seer of Shepperton, has acquired something of a reputation for predicting some of the more unusual shifts within contemporary culture’ (Baxter 2008: 1). His novels and short stories, or condensed novels (March-Russell 2016: 439), came to be associated with the so-called British New Wave Science Fiction,¹ an anarchic movement in SF produced in the 1960s and 1970s, and characterized by a high degree of experimentation, both in form and content. As Colin Greenland affirms in *Entropy Exhibition: Michael Moorcock and the British New Wave in Science Fiction* (1983), this singular literary phenomenon shows how science fiction can articulate some of the most elusive, often ambiguous, ideas and problems of modernity, questioning the same notion of an “SF field”: ‘(...) the term ‘New Wave’, which is as misleading as most critical labels, signifies only that the writers were considered together, as a collective movement sharply distinct from and hostile to what they saw as the old order’ (Greenland 1983: 79).²

In contrast to ‘the parochialism of mainstream literature’ (Baxter 2008: 4), these writers promised to respond to the competing vocabularies of the late twentieth century, based on science, technology, advertising, capitalism, and consumerism. In particular, Ballard – the ‘Voice’ of the New Wave SF movement – refused to adopt the most traditional and mainstream science fiction tropes and conventions: interstellar travels, extraterrestrial life forms, galactic wars, physical scientific facts, and so on (4). Turning his back on the rocket ships, the ray guns, the bug-eyed aliens, and the outer space of so

many traditional science fiction stories, Ballard imagined a ‘renewed and renewable form of science fiction writing’ (4) which set off in search of a Surreal ‘inner space’. It consists of a series of shifting, hybrid, uncanny imaginative and recognizable geographies in which the outer world and the inner world of the psyche melt and overturn. In fact, in a short essay written in 1963 entitled ‘Time, Memory and Inner Space’, Ballard defined the ‘inner space’ as:

(...) the internal landscape of tomorrow that is a transmuted image of the past, and one of the most fruitful areas for the imaginative writer. It is particularly rich in visual symbols, and I feel that this type of speculative fantasy plays a role very similar to that of surrealism in the graphic arts. The painters de Chirico, Dali and Max Ernst, among others, are in a sense the iconographers of inner space, all during their most creative periods concerned with the discovery of images in which internal and external reality meet and fuse. [...] (Ballard 1963).

Ballard’s haunting, disorienting writings – as Samuel Francis also describes them in his book published in 2011 – portray psychic/psychotic, or neural landscapes, which can be read within the framework of Surrealism, and that represent metaphors for states of mind and soul, like in the paintings of Ernst, Delvaux, Duchamp, de Chirico, Bacon and Dali. Moreover, Ballard parodically³ swallows up images, myths, events, characters, icons taken from the media landscape, from the politics, from the show business, from the movies, from advertising – in strong affinity with Pop Art⁴ – and brings them back to a new/fetishicized life, through an irrational, eccentric, estranged perspective. As a result, the texts create a displaced and transgressive way of seeing the universe around and inside of us: mindscapes and mediascapes fuse and melt, continuously.

Obviously, in Ballard’s texts, one can recognize patterns of repetitions, as Roger Luckhurst stresses, and some stories obsessively rewrite the same scenario and the same obsessions. Indeed, even if the structure of Ballard’s narrations seem to be very similar and recognizable, it is also true that they have developed and explored different themes and perspectives. Nevertheless, his prolific itinerary appears coherent and cautiously analyzed, with a gaze constantly focused on humanity and its surrounding and inner spaces. Since the early stages of his career, Ballard’s elusive and uncanny mindscapes show and investigate how the hardware of objects and environments affects the software of human psyche. As I have written elsewhere, his characters are timeless pilgrims traveling surrealistic/visionary spaces in search of themselves and of a way to survive, or to give a meaning to their meaningless existences. In those neural areas, suspended between time and space, the characters try to reach their highest point possible of self-consciousness and repossession of an authentic, atavistic and absolute being, beyond good and evil, following the mechanisms by which dreams and nightmares are constructed (Mancini 2012: 265-6).

Since his first stories and essays, written in the so-called ‘Space Age’, Ballard reconfigured the concept of outer space, so used and abused in many of the science fiction novels, short stories, movies and comic strips of the period, trying to rewrite and invert the icons and clichés of the mainstream science fiction. He wrote that to avoid

self-destruction, sf writers had to discover new routes and to draw on more abstract, speculative and experimental techniques, like those used in other innovative literary genres of the period and/or in other media, such as modern art. Inner space could represent such a route. He also referred to his historic context in order to justify this change in themes and style, because since Armstrong had put his foot on the moon, outer space could be no more the real subject of science fiction: in fact, it had become part of our reality, of our known world(s). As he wrote in his controversial, provocative 1962 manifesto, 'Which Way to Inner Space?': 'The biggest developments of the immediate future will take place, not on the Moon or Mars, but on Earth, and it is inner space, not outer, that needs to be explored. The only truly alien planet is Earth' (Ballard 1996: 197). That is why – it seems to me – the concept of 'space' is essential to his poetics. Thus, it can be extremely useful to analyze Ballard's fiction in order to understand how the concepts of space and place are re-written, re-imagined, re-configured, and finally fused together. Without forgetting that, as Paddy recalls in his 2015 book, Ballard agreed with Self's assertion that 'a writer's body of work, taken as a whole, is a kind of aerial shot of a foreign territory through which you are conducting the reader. And, further, a sense in which all these topographies join up into some other, numinous parallel world' (Self 1995: 341).

In 'From a 'metallized Elysium' to the 'wave of the future': J. G. Ballard's Reappraisal of Space', Jarrod Keyes argues that: 'From their outset, Ballard's works were exercised by questions of space' (Keyes 2016: 49). From Keyes' point of view, in Ballard's texts the complexities of contemporary concepts of space and place merge with each other and can no longer be understood in terms of the traditional poles of good and evil, positivity and negativity (see 49-50). In fact, Ballard's characters usually move in a landscape taken from a dream, or from a nightmare, a terrain of submerged fears and desires. In the first part of his career, his characters are set in a 'Daliesque' stopped or melting time, in which every element appears symbolic or arbitrary. Indeed, in my opinion, also later, when the landscapes he depicts are recognizable on a map, there is something – an apocalyptic mood, a state of disseminated violence and nonsense, an attitude of apathy and impotence – that transfigures them. They appear strange, enigmatic, uncanny, neural. The individual exists in an environment penetrated by the forces and forms of technology, of advertisement, of media landscape, so he/she can no longer separate reality from fiction and dreams/nightmares. For this reason, maybe, Paddy calls Ballardland the world that Ballard has shaped, selected and imagined in his fiction.

As Ballard himself wrote in his Introduction to the French edition of *Crash* (1973), the marriage of reason and nightmare that had dominated the twentieth century had given birth to an ever more ambiguous world; thus, the balance between fiction and reality had changed significantly. Increasingly, their roles were definitively reversed, like in a perfect reproduction of what Baudrillard would have defined the 'society of simulacra'.⁵ He affirmed: 'We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind - mass-merchandizing, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the pre-empting of any original response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. It is now less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional

content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality' (Ballard 1995: 4).

Indeed, in Ballard's kind of narrative, also the borders between the two concepts of space and place seem to melt and fuse, just like internal and external reality, outer and inner worlds, fiction and reality. The inner space of the psyche overflows and submerges everything. For Ballard the science fiction writer had to wear a kind of diving (or inner-space) suit in order to dive into the unconscious, as Dalì did in 1936 during a famous lecture he gave at 'The International Surrealist Exhibition' in London. In his study on Ballard, Andrzej Gasiorek defines these neural spaces as 'borderzones of identity': the indeterminate, shifting spaces in which the exploration of subjectivity - typical of the Ballard's novels - plays itself out (Gasiorek 2005: 87). Hence, the very concept of place, seen as an intimate, private part of space, a resting of the eye, something to be understood, known, interpreted, becomes a reflection of the psyche and transforms itself into the landscape in which the story develops and the characters move. In this strange, metamorphic, ambiguous terrain, there is no longer any meaningful distinction to be made between some inner authenticity and the alienated external reality. Lost in an over lit desert of endless streets, motorways, car parks, strange buildings, the anti-heroes of Ballard's extreme adventures experience a transgressive dream of a perfectible world where everything will make sense, in a way or another.

For example, in the end of *The Drowned World* (1962), Dr. Robert Kerans decides to lose himself in the endless lagoon, like a second Adam in search of the forgotten paradises of the reborn sun. Again, in *High-Rise* (1975), Robert Laing and the other tenants of their tower block on the outskirts of London gradually become disinterested in the outside world, and end up by abandoning all social restraint. They all start devoting themselves to an apparently senseless escalation of violence that leads them to re-evolve a primordial/primitive way of life. Soon, skirmishes occur throughout the building and bodies begin to pile up. Degeneration rules. In the end, Laing – free for the first time to explore himself – decides to stay and master the new context, waiting for a new world order to come: 'Laing looked out at the high-rise four hundred yards away. A temporary power failure had occurred, and on the 7th floor all the lights were out. Already torch-beams were moving about in the darkness, as the residents made their first confused attempts to discover where they were. Laing watched them contentedly, ready to welcome them to their new world' (173).

Usually, Ballard's surreal stories focus on a community of the reborn, consisting of one, or several, or many individuals who have passed successfully through 'the kairotic moment' (Wagar 1991: 58). After the disaster, the characters decide to live dangerously, and move towards their own death, or return to a primordial state: a new psychology in which contemporary civilization seems to disappear in a space where fears and dreams seem to collide. As he wrote in 'Time, Memory and Inner Space', referring to *The Drowned World*:

One of the subjects of the novel is the journey of return made by the principal characters from the 20th century back into the paradisaic sun-filled world of a second Triassic age, and their gradually mounting awareness of the ambivalent

motives propelling them into the emerging past. They realize that the uterine sea around them, the dark womb of the ocean mother, is as much the graveyard of their own individuality as it is the source of their lives, and perhaps their fears reflect my own uneasiness in reenacting the experiences of childhood and attempting to explore such dangerous ground. (Ballard 1963)

Evidently, Ballard maps the psyche of his characters (and of himself, as well) which floods the landscape surrounding them, with the expertise and creativity of a Surrealist painter, a true iconographer of inner space.⁶ For example, the natural topographies of the ‘concrete island’, on which Maitland is marooned, form a ‘labyrinth of dips and hollows’ (1994: 74), and the protagonist identifies himself with it: ‘I am the island’ (45), he says to himself. His task is to interpret and repossess it, in order to find his true self. Moreover, the bull-like Proctor, a modern day Minotaur, has fashioned his own maze-like network of tunnels inside the urban island: ‘a pavillion of rust, which Proctor had built around him out of the discarded sections of car bodies. A semicircle of doors formed the sides, tied together by their window pillars. Above, two hoods completed a primitive roof’ (162). As Jeannette Baxter observes in ‘Sounding Surrealist Historiography: Listening to *Concrete Island*’, within the Surrealist imagination the labyrinth motif represents an unconscious space: ‘a typically nameless, nowhere place of displaced dreams, memories, desires and nightmares’ (Baxter 2016: 21). Moving through the labyrinthine bowels of his minds, Ballard depicts the landscape of emotional experiences or emerging past, providing an inescapable background to his writing. As he wrote, again, in ‘Time, Memory and Inner Space’:

In many respects this fusion of past and present experiences, and of such disparate elements as the modern office buildings of central London and an alligator in a Chinese zoo, resembles the mechanisms by which dreams are constructed, and perhaps the great value of fantasy as a literary form is its ability to bring together apparently unconnected and dissimilar ideas. To a large extent all fantasy serves this purpose, but I believe that speculative fantasy, as I prefer to call the more serious fringe of science fiction, is an especially potent method of using one’s imagination to construct a paradoxical universe where dream and reality become fused together, each retaining its own distinctive quality and yet in some way assuming the role of its opposite, and where by an undeniable logic black simultaneously becomes white. (Ballard 1963)

For Ballard, the act of writing is like a mapping of the internal landscapes of the writer’s mind, and the reader must interpret them on this level, distinguishing between the manifest content, which may seem obscure, meaningless or nightmarish, and the latent content, the private vocabulary of symbols drawn by the narrative. For this reason – as Ballard asserts – these synthetic landscapes are often time-sculptures of terrifying ambiguity. The awareness that they reflect some interior reality of our mind is ‘a pointer to the importance of speculative fantasy in the century of Hiroshima and Cape Canaveral’ (Ballard 1963), but also beyond. As David Paddy (2015) observes in *The*

Empires of J. G. Ballard. An Imagined Geography, the map geographically represents Ballard's resistance to 'Englishness' (and his sense of English writing) as a kind of parochialism: it takes in the world. In this sense, many settings were chosen in order to show where new forms of imperialism have come into being or where a locale is being transformed by globalization, for example. From this point of view, Ballard is a postmodern writer who discredits such outdated notions as the nation-state and traditional geography. In the documentary *William Gibson: No Maps Out of These Territories* (2000) Gibson himself uses the phrase 'post-geography' to convey the experience of occupying multiple nations and nationalities, or trans-nationalities at once. Ballard explores similar landscapes, even if sometimes he also shows that borders remain, and old nationalisms return (Paddy 2015: 28). Anyway, Ballard's landscapes are always Ballardian. The labyrinthine, secret, obscene map inside his characters' head reflects upon the space surrounding them. The readers follow the characters' internal maps, but they are also guided through the strange world(s) imagined by Ballard's own internal maps. Paddy writes:

This is the world before us, but it has been defamiliarized and made strange by Ballard's special merger of Surrealism and science fiction. But far from being an escape from Planet Earth, the map of Ballardland is a vehicle for making the map for making the Earth strange so that we may look at it afresh. When we look at the map of Ballard's world we can see his own imperium – Ballard's own empire of the imagination. It is the world as he remade it, but it is also a world out there that has intruded on his imagination. It is the world as seen from the man sitting at his desk in Shepperton, and it is the world seen through the psychological limits of his characters. (Paddy 2015: 30)

Vermilion Sands: an Overlit Suburb of the Mind

[...] Vermilion Sands is a place where I would be happy to live. I once described this overlit desert resort as an exotic suburb of my mind, and something about the word 'suburb' – which I then used pejoratively – now convinces me that I was on the right track in my pursuit of the day after tomorrow. As the countryside vanishes under a top-dressing of chemicals, and as cities provide little more than an urban context for traffic intersections, the suburbs are at last coming into their own. The skies are larger, the air more generous, the clock less urgent. Vermilion sands has more than its full share of dream and illusions, fears and fantasies, but the frame of them is less confining. I like to think, too, that it celebrates the neglected virtues of the glossy, lurid and bizarre. (Ballard 1988: 7)

Particularly revered and appreciated among Ballard's writings, but little analyzed as a whole, is Ballard's short-story collection entitled *Vermilion Sands*, published in 1971. In his Preface, Ballard describes this overlit resort town as an exotic suburb of the mind, and of the future, with the word 'suburb' clearly offering a peripheral, spatial perspective to his kind of writing and his imagination. 'Suburbs' signal the shifting and permeability, or porosity of borders, and represent the spaces *of* transition, or better, the spaces *in*

transition. As Roger Luckhurst wrote in *The Angle Between Two Walls: The Fictions of J. G. Ballard*: 'geographical marginality [...] is a wilful perversity, or [...] an affront to the pretension of the centre' (Luckhurst 1997: VI). After all, both on the expressive and on the content plane, also Ballard's writing is in the place of the 'hinge': 'the device which at once joins together and separated two planes or surfaces' (XI, XIII).

Once again, reading all the detailed descriptions of this formless, vague, strange, infinite landscape, *Vermilion Sands* seems to have all the characteristics of intimacy, pause, quest, interpretation, and reflection we have associated with the concept of place, even if here the space in which the characters move loses every kind of boundary. In fact, this inflamed, tired landscape – taken from a dream, or from a nightmare – mirrors the deep world(s) of the psyche. As Schuyler observes in 'Portrait of the Artist as a Jung Man: Love, Death and Art in J.G. Ballard's *Vermilion Sands*', the Ocean – source of life and the archetypal symbol of all human potential and creativity – has dried up. All that is left is the sand of the ocean bed, which is a symbolic loss of meaning. Its residents' unconscious is freed from every kind of protection, or constraint. Yet, the desert holds still the very key to survival. Those who arrive at *Vermilion Sands* need to face a rite of passage in which the Ego has to accept and recognize the Self in its entirety by getting in touch with the Unconscious, source of all meaning. Indeed, in Schuyler's point of view, that is why the stories take place during 'the Recess': 'that world slump of boredom, lethargy, and high summer which carried us all so blissfully through ten unforgettable years' (Ballard 1988: 31). During this long period of holy-day, some rites of passage can be accomplished in order to achieve a higher degree of consciousness: psychic and artistic evolution will continue. From this point of view, *Vermilion Sands* can be seen as a glossy, lurid, and bizarre 'holy place' to which one resorts in time of need to undergo certain ordeals and take part in certain rites to become truly conscious and thereby human, achieving one's wholeness (Schuyler 1993: 10-1).

The stories of the collection are set in a near future both recognizable and transmuted, full of alienated characters and surreal atmospheres. The inhabitants of this bizarre, sandbound resort town come from Ballard's personal Hall of Myths: forgotten movie stars and starlets, insane heirs, drugged beachcombers, eccentric artists, bizarre and perverted (or inverted) human beings living in a journey of initiation. The space in which they are scattered, like insane fragments of our present, appears as a weird and exotic landscape of the mind where its twisted denizens live violent and nightmarish dramas, heightened by their strange, overlit emotions. Some 'intimate' places so dear to Bachelard – such as houses, apartments, rooms, closets, attics – instead of being 'secure retreats' for the Ballardian characters who inhabit them, represent uncanny/surreal sanctuaries, where the inner and irrational drives of the psyche can take place. They represent the uncanny recesses of the psyche, or the hallways of the mind, which affect the individuals and, in the end, allow their dispersion in the paradises, or hells, of their mind, in search of their real self. In fact, even if, at first, Ballard's characters don't feel at ease there, they end up by recognizing what surrounds and pushes them, accepting their own destiny of rebirth and throwing themselves completely in their new neuronomic odyssey.

In the *Preface to Vermilion Sands*, Ballard wonders:

Where is Vermilion Sands? I suppose its spiritual home lies somewhere between Arizona and Ipanema Beach, but in recent years I have been delighted to see it popping up elsewhere — above all, in sections of the 3,000-mile-long linear city that stretches from Gibraltar to Glyfada Beach along the northern shores of the Mediterranean, and where each summer Europe lies on its back in the sun. That posture, of course, is the hallmark of Vermilion Sands and, I hope, of the future — not merely that no-one has to work, but that work is the ultimate play, and play the ultimate work. (Ballard 1988: 7-8)

Vermilion Sands represents the no-where (or now-here?) of many dystopian, but also utopian, literature. In Ballard's intention, it represents what he guessed the future would actually be like, as well the place where he would be happy to live. This says a lot about the dystopian characteristics of his narrative. As I wrote in 'Utopia and Dystopia in J. G. Ballard's Fiction' (2012): '[...] if utopia is a place where all is well, a place of joy and perfection, characterized by a total reconfiguration of the relation between human and nature, and dystopia is exactly its contrary, a world of anxiety, pain, exclusion, and environmental ugliness/anonymity, then the psycho-physical landscapes of Ballard's fictions are evidently both of them at a time' (Mancini 2012: 267). In fact, the author sees Vermilion Sands as a utopian place, even if there are undeniable uncanny/anxious elements in it. Anyway, in the end, his characters seem to feel in perfect consonance with the surrounding landscape.

In the short stories set in Vermilion Sands, singing plants, non-aural music, sound jewelry, poetry-composing computers, sonic sculptures, self-painting canvasses, psychotropic houses – fed by Eros and Thanatos – are the psychological drivers for some macabre, grotesque, strange psychodramas. In addition, it is meaningful that, on the map of the world, Vermilion Sands has not a real position but a 'spiritual home'. We come to know that it lies between South America and Brazil (Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, Columbia, Guatemala, Perù, Nicaragua, who knows?), but the narrator/author has already seen it popping up elsewhere; for example, between Spain and Greece, along the glossy, sunny shores of Italy, France, Tunis, maybe Africa. In other words, using a 'post-geographical' perspective, he positions it in the warmest places on earth, but also the most exploited from a commercial and touristic point of view. In fact, to lie on one's back in the sun is the hallmark of Vermilion Sands, celebrating 'lethargy, beach fatigue and shifting perspectives' (Ballard 1988: 19). For Ballard, this inflamed landscape is a very transient kind of world: a psychic battleground and the wavefront of the future, where strange crossovers from the communications world – such as psychopathology, experimental applied psychology, commercialism – are trying to sell whatever is possible; even dreams, desires, fears, nightmares (Cott 1987: 7).

As the sometime international model and epitome of eternal youthfulness – a victim of serial plastic surgery, like the character of Ida Lowry in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) – Reine Channing affirms in the short story "Say Goodbye to the Wind" (1970): "Nothing in Vermilion Sands ever changes" (Ballard 1988: 132). Its desert horizon is an abstract landscape, a psychotic, ambiguous mindscape built on the barest geometry of

time and space, full of cyphers, myths, metaphors, dreams, illusions, nightmares, undulating dunes, triangles of sails, strange art works, uncanny characters who decide to live their insanity as a way to survive in order to reach their kairotic moment. As Chris Becket observes in the essay 'Near *Vermilion Sands*. The Context and Date of Composition of an Abandoned Literary Draft by J. G. Ballard' (2014), these stories establish a world cumulatively:

An incidental map of sorts of the desiccated narrative neighbourhood is gradually unrolled from tale to tale: the road from the inland sand-lake of Lagoon West – 'like a segment of embalmed time' – that travels past the coral towers; the gravel track through the sand reefs with their convoluted cathedrallike hanging galleries of rock and massive towers of gloomy obsidian 'like stone gallows'; the Van Stratten summer house with its collapsed ornamental gateway; the mineral island of Lizard Key; and the road that forks by the gas-station in Ciraquito to Red Beach and to Vermilion Sands. (Becket 2014: 2)

The first short-story of the collection, 'The Cloud-Sculptors of Coral D' (1967), opens during the performance of some surreal artists who are able to carve the clouds, while crowds of spectators are watching them from their cars. Their painted gliders sail above the coral towers⁷, rising like white pagodas beside the highway to Lagoon West. The tallest is Coral D. It is a strange place where music, technology, science, sculpture, and creativity intimately connect: 'here the rising air above the sand-reefs was topped by swan-like clumps of fair-weather cumulus. Lifted on the shoulders of the air above the crown of coral D, we would carve horses and unicorns, the portraits of presidents and film stars, lizards and exotic birds' (Ballard 1988: 11). The narrator is a retired pilot who arrived in Vermilion Sands three months earlier. We do not know exactly when and where. One day, he was driving into the desert, and he stopped near the coral towers on the highway to Lagoon West:

As I gazed at these immense pagodas stranded on the floor of this fossil sea, I heard music coming from a sand-reef two hundred yards away. Swinging on my crutches across the sliding sand, I found a shallow basin among the dunes where sonic statues had run to seed beside a ruined studio. The owner had gone, abandoning the hangar-like building to the sand-rays and the desert, and on some half-formed impulse I began to drive out each afternoon. From the lathes and joists left behind I built my first giant kites and, later, gliders with cockpits. Tethered by their cables, they would hang above me on the afternoon air like amiable cyphers (Ballard 1988: 11-2).

In a post-apocalyptic atmosphere, a 'day after' landscape full of cyphers that prefigures the endless deserts of Wim Wenders' *Until the End of the World* (1991), the protagonist meets three strange characters: Petit Manuel, a small hunchback who was an acrobat and weight-lifter, Nolan, an artist/sculptor who created the sonic statues⁸ that animate that Daliesque (inner)space, and the blond-haired pirate Charles Van Eyck, who recalls,

inevitably, the Flemish court painter Jan van Eyck, one of the founders of the Early Netherlandish painting school and one of the representatives of Northern Renaissance Art. Together they form the cloud-sculptors of Coral D, using silver iodide⁹ to carve the clouds and performing an astronomy of dreams and nightmares. ‘Spraying the sides of the clouds with iodite crystals and cutting away the flock-like tissue’, they perform their artistic evolutions:

Van Eyck was producing a pastiche Mona Lisa, a picture postcard Gioconda as authentic as a plaster virgin. Its glossy finish shone in the over-bright sunlight as if enameled together out of some cosmetic foam.

Then Nolan dived from the sun behind Van Eyck. Rolling his black-winged glide past Van Eyck’s, he drove through the neck of the Gioconda, and with the flick of a wing toppled the broad-cheeked head. It fell towards the cars below. The features disintegrated into a flaccid mess, sections of the nose and jaw tumbling through the steam. (Ballard 1988: 16)

The desert in which the group of artists/acrobats perform their creations is the space of the unconscious, but also of dreams and (artistic as well as intimate) research. In a Daliesque atmosphere – like in *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), *Naked Woman in the Desert* (1948), *The Invisible Afghan Hound* (1938), *The Elephants* (1948) and many others – the sky becomes an infinite canvas for their evolutions, air piracies and artistic transgressions, profanations, or desecrations. Their infinite production and reproduction of ephemeral and volatile artistic portraits, parodies, satires, caricatures¹⁰ range from Michelangelo and Jan van Eyck to Dalí, Magritte, Warhol, Bacon. As in *The Temptation of Saint Antony* (1946), animals, portraits, and female body parts appear weightless in the sky, rewriting the history of art. A glossy portrait of Gioconda recalls Da Vinci’s portrait of Mona Lisa, but also Dalí’s *Colored Mona Lisa* (1963) and the 1919 version of Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.*. Later, when they come to be invited by Leonora Chanel to perform at Lagoon West, her last refuge, ‘the only retreat for her fugitive self in its flight from the world’ (Ballard 1988: 22), we come to know that the strange patroness of Lagoon West possesses many portraits of herself in her villa. One of these is by the President of the Royal Academy, another by Annigoni, and there are also the bizarre psychological studies by Dalí and Francis Bacon. Moreover, in the studio on the roof, the narrator discovers that she hides her personal ‘portrait of Dorian Gray’ that had just been varnished by Nolan: ‘The artist had produced a deliberate travesty of the sentimental and powder-blue tints of a fashionable society painter, but beneath this gloss he had visualized Leonora as a dead Medea. The stretched skin below her right cheek, the sharp forehead and slipped mouth gave her the numbed and luminous appearance of a corpse’ (Ballard 1988: 22). Evidently, the portrait showed too much of herself, because she refused to have it framed and shown. It is clear that she wants to have it painted again. This time, the size of the sky. Soon the two spaces (the private studio in the attic and the public sky of Lagoon West) will correspond and reflect one another.

During their performance dedicated to Miss Chanel, ‘the clouds appear like the twisted pillows of a sleepless giant’, dark billows hanging like shrouds: ‘Those are tigers,

tigers with wings. We're manicurists of the air, not dragon-tamers' (Ballard 1988: 20), the narrator says to Beatrice Lafferty, Miss Chanel's assistant. Here, it is possible that the painting Dali's *Gala and the Tigers* (1944) can emerge into the mind of the reader like a repressed remembrance, maybe a quotation. It is just a premonition. During the first day of performance, Van Eyck excels himself by carving a portrait of Leonora that earns himself an applause from the guests seated on the terrace. On his turn, Petit Manuel carves the approximate contours of a woman's head and a second round of applause breaks out; then, the sculptured cloud begins to tilt, rotating in the air, followed by laughters and shouts of amusement because the glazed smile of the cloud becomes that of an idiot's. In the end, Nolan's portrait is wholly lifelike, with cruel irony, perfectly resembling his painting in the studio. Each of the artists has a personal approach to art and to portrait painting/sculpturing, and Nolan's irritates Leonora more than ever (together with his attitude towards her). The last performance by the cloud-sculptors of coral D takes place the 'day after'. The lake is plunged into a dim light, with 'immense tiers of storm-nimbus' (25), almost predicting an imminent cataclysm. This time the clouds are 'like madmen' (26), and a storm is on its way. In Leonora's face, the diagram of the bones forms 'a geometry of murder' (27), as if the atmospheric elements and the surrounding space were a reflection of her deepest feelings. In fact, during the performance Van Eyck's glider is hurled back in an explosion of vapour. Then, Petit Manuel carves a woman's head with satanic eyes and a sliding mouth, and this immense face swallows the glider: the spectacle of Manuel's death within the exploding replica of Leonora's face puts an end to the performance. In the end, Nolan's glider flies inside the black tornado and, like a pilot fish, steers the tornado towards Leonora's villa that explodes, like in the unforgettable final scene of Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970):

An explosion of dark air overwhelmed the villa, a churning centrifuge of shattered chairs and tiles that bursts over the roof. (...) As the tornado moved away, fading into the storm-filled sky, a dark squall hung over the wretched villa, now and then flicking the debris into the air. Shreds of canvas and peacock feathers fell around us. (...) Hundreds of smashed glasses and broken chairs littered the terrace. At first I could see no signs of Leonora, although her face was everywhere, the portraits with their slashed profiles strewn on the damp tiles. And eddying smile floated towards me from the disturbed air, and wrapped itself around my leg. Leonora's body lay among the broken tables near the bandstand, half-wrapped in a bleeding canvas (Ballard 1988: 29).

Leonora's body lays on the damp terrace of her house/refuge, covered with the shreds of canvas, the torn faces of herself. Every kind of border is shattered, transmuted, overcome, as the very nature of inner space demonstrates. The distinction between a character's mind and external geography is uncertain, or better, overturned. Likewise Ballard's international settings, even when they are recognizable and traceable on the map have little to do with the 'actual places' the author refers to. As Paddy puts it, they are inflected with the stylistic and imaginative concerns that preoccupy the author and are transformed by the obsessions of his characters. Actually, Ballard (re)works on a

great quantity/mess of myths, pre-histories, ideologies, experiences, and narrations connected to a certain space in order to transform it into a surreal “inner” space. Here, time is suspended, and reality is transformed into a kind of a fiction, a narration that goes beyond the usual concepts of nation and nationalism, verisimilitude and logic. In “The Singing Statues” (1962), for example, the desert of Lagoon West is full of sonic statues, fragments of music, and echoes of the love song of Lunora Goalen, a surreal patron of modern arts. At the beginning of the short story, the narrator wanders through the darkness among these metal gardens, following his inner impulses in order to search for Lunora’s voice. The space is rich in quotations, parodies, travesties, references, symbols. And again, in “Cry Hope, Cry Fury!” (1967), a parodic rewriting¹¹ of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), the abstract landscape, ‘composed of the flying rays, the undulating dunes, and the triangle of the sails’ (Ballard 1988: 91-2), opens up to critical decoding: ‘Here the long evenings made brilliant sunsets of the sky and desert, crossing the sails of the sand-yachts with hieroglyphic shadows, signatures of all the strange ciphers of the desert sea’ (91). This desert/sea of dreams/nightmares, set in a mysterious atmosphere of suspension and destruction, has to be read as a surreal work of art:

For hours I lay in the empty sand-sea, burned by the air, the giant ray my dead companion, Time seemed suspended at an unchaining noon, the sky full of mock suns, but it was probably in the early afternoon when I felt an immense shadow fall across the yacht. I lifted myself over the corpse beside me as a huge sand-schooner, its silver bowsprit as long as my own craft, moved through the sand on its white tyres. Their faces hidden by their dark glasses, the crew watched me from the helm. (Ballard 1988: 93)

Rescued by Hope Cunard, a jeweled Coleridge’s nightmare witch, Robert Melville reaches Lizard Key, a strange island that seems to float upon the air, as in a Magritte painting. On it, a villa seems to spring from some mineral fantasy, a pathway of wild sculptures leading to it. Hope tells that she comes every summer on this private paradise to sail and paint. The canvasses – principally re-producing images of whatever still life or landscape they were exposed to – recapitulate in reverse, like some bizarre embryo, a complete phylogeny of modern art, ‘a regression through the principal schools of the twentieth century’ (Ballard 1988: 98): Picasso, Monet, Renoir, Gainborough, Reynolds, Balthus, Moreau, Pollock. Thus, the island soon becomes a strange museum, an island of overlapping illusions and nightmares, a (psychic) laboratory of monstrous saturnalia recalling the black landscapes of Hieronymus Bosch. Once again, the inner spaces of the characters reflect on and refract the external landscapes, uncannily confusing imagination and reality, security and freedom, creativity and danger. Moreover, as Laura Di Michele writes in ‘Conoscere l’uomo: il paesaggio della catastrofe nella narrativa di Ballard’ (1985), Ballard lays claim to the individual fantasy of the primacy or artistic invention and of life. In ‘The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista’ (1962), the last short story of the collection, all the weird places described in the previous short stories are finally defined:

No one ever comes to Vermilion Sands now, and I suppose there are few people who have ever heard of it. But ten years ago (...) the colony was still remembered as the one-time playground of movie stars, delinquent heiresses and eccentric cosmopolites in those fabulous years before the Recess. Admittedly most of the abstract villas and fake palazzos were empty, their huge gardens overgrown, two-level swimming pools long drained, and the whole place was degenerating like an abandoned amusement park, but there was enough bizarre extravagance in the air to make one realize that the giants had only just departed. (Ballard 1988: 185)

The narrator and his wife, Fay, face the disquieting and highly technologized psychotropic houses of Vermilion Sands, a playful and ironic reference to Le Corbusier's and Lloyd Wright's housing projects in Chicago or Tokyo. Etymologically, 'psychotropic' means that the houses physically react to their residents' mood and stress, and thus adapt their spatiality to them, their minds, and their inner worlds; but, in the end, they also have an effect and affect the characters' psychological processes. When the protagonist of the short story sees their house for the first time, he gets the impression that it seems nervous of something: as they step forward it, the house suddenly jerks away, almost in alarm; the entrance seems to retract, sending a low shudder. The narrator thinks that something terrible had happened there: 'As it (the house) responded to me, the ceiling lifted slightly and the walls grew less opaque, reflecting my perspective-seeking eye' (Ballard 1988: 187). In this case, one of the most 'intimate' places – 'our corner of the world', as Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space* (Bachelard 1994: 4) – becomes the ultimate space of the unconscious, a living and reacting neural space in a continual state of evolution. Thus, even the very notion of 'home' seems to visualize perfectly the intimacy of the inner mental space of the characters. It is no more a space of security and protection, but the place where personal experiences reach their epitome. In every sense. Moreover, it allows what, in his *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard defines as 'topoanalysis', the systematic psychological studying of the sites of our intimate lives. For Bachelard, when we enter a new house we are flooded with the experiences of prior homes. In a certain sense, all the homes of our life trace back to the early house of our childhood. In this collection, houses and intimate spaces reflect the deepest obsessions of their owners, using art and science as the medium, the one and only vehicle of communication.

In 'The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista', Ballard's psychotropic houses take their inhabitants' vices, diseases, and obsessions, to the point that 'living in one was like inhabiting someone else's brain' (Ballard 1988: 190), being immersed completely in someone else's personality. Obviously, it is possible to recognize in each house the presence of its previous residents, in particular, if they had suffered some mental insanities, or if they were delinquent and dangerous. Thus, as the protagonists' house resonates with the angry and violent personality of Miles Vanden Starr, the narrator begins to assume Starr's character, recapitulating the steps of his own tragedy. The antagonism, which the house had accumulated during Vanden Starr's marriage to Gloria

Tremayne, is venting itself on the new couple that is living there, until the house itself tries to kill Fay:

Often when I returned in the evening, eager to relax over half a decanter of Scotch, I would find the ghosts of Miles Vanden Starr and Gloria Tremayne, in full flight. Starr's black and menacing personality crowded after the tenuous but increasingly resilient quintessence of his wife. This rapier-like resistance could be observed literally – the walls of the lounge would stiffen and darken in a vortex of anger that converged upon a small zone of lightness hiding in one of the alcoves, as if to obliterate its presence, but at the last moment Gloria's persona would flit nimbly away, leaving the room to seethe and writhe. (Ballard 1988: 203)

In a senseless manner, also after this attempted homicide, the narrator refuses to get the circuits of his house checked again and decides to stay there all alone, in order to resist and nurse the house: if the place is insane, it needs a psychiatrist to straighten it out. The narrator's role – in his point of view – is to reconstruct the original traumatic situation and release the repressed material; indeed, he is extremely fascinated by the deformed rooms and twisted corridors. Even if the house had to be switched off after trying to kill the protagonist too, he often unlocks the control console and examines the memory drum, because he is afraid to damage Gloria Tremayne's personality. 'To live with it might well be madness for me, as there's a subtle charm about the house even in its distorted form, like the ambiguous smile of a beautiful but insane woman. (...) One day soon, whatever the outcome, I know that I shall have to switch the house on again' (Ballard 1988: 208). As always, the principal character has to face his own (but even others') surrounding neural spaces in order to accept and come to terms with his own fears, feelings, and psychological drives, transforming his own adventure into an initiatic quest/journey/therapy.

Conclusion: Metanarrative space in *Vermilion Sands*

The female characters of these short stories are *femmes fatales*, hybrid parodies of the most famous Hollywood divas, modern and classical myths, beloved celebrities, all enchained by their obsessions, and captives of their own past.¹² Aurora Day and Jane Ciracylides, in particular, are commanding and abruptly arriving avatars of the unconscious: they provoke change and transformation in order to enliven the monotony and the 'beach fatigue' that *Vermilion Sands* represents, before suddenly departing somewhere as unexpectedly as they came. As a whole, the *Vermilion Sands* stories seem to evolve also into a kind of metanarrative discussion on the idea of art and life, from the first short story of the collection, set in the sky with the cloud-sculptors of Coral-D, until the last one, set in houses replaying the ill, nervous, mad personalities of their (past and present) residents. This, circular meta-narrative structure moves from open to closed spaces, from the outside towards the inner sections of humans' life and psyche. In the end, the narration leads the reader backwards, to the first story of the collection, in order to start again its own initiatic quest. In fact, as we have seen before, in the last lines of 'The

Thousand Dreams of Stellavista’, the narrator and protagonist of the story has to recognize that soon, whatever the outcome, he will have to ‘switch on again’ the mechanism that puts to a test his own mind, his capacity for existence, his ability to resist, re-act, and re-create a counter-narrative leading him to a new level of (self)knowledge.

In *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977) Roland Barthes observed: “To write by fragments: the fragments are then so many *stones* on the perimeter of a circle: I spread myself around: my whole little *universe* in crumbs; at the center, what?” (Barthes 1997: 92-3). In *Vermilion Sands*, Ballard seems to build a kind of spiral itinerary, with each amazing short story representing a stone, a crumb of sand, a fragment spreading around on the perimeter of a circular narrative: the labyrinthine pathway of the author’s mind and/or of his visionary stories. Each short story of the collection could be seen as a mosaic tile. As a matter of fact, they were put together following a thematic *fil rouge*, not the chronological order of their composition. So, they should be seen as a whole, following the order in which they have been placed. As also Schuyler observed, Ballard also rewrote an early story – “Mobile” (1957) which becomes “Venus Smiles” – in order to put it in the sequence:

(...) (H)e arranged them in an order which is not the order in which they were written and which is not in chronological order for *Vermilion Sands* either. The sequence has a larger plan than those of the individual stories. It may have been imposed by Ballard after some of the stories had already been written, but it is none the worse for that. When we read through the stories in the order in which they are placed in the collection, what appears is a meta-narrative in symbolic form constructed by the juxtaposition of disjoint parts. (Schuyler 1993: 10)

Vermilion Sands tells the odyssey of the Self and of the artistic (re)creation. It is a metaphorical, surreal, fragmented narrative centered on artistic creation in the age of mechanical reproduction, and the long list of amazing artefacts created by the fantastic artists isolated in the desert resort can easily demonstrate that. Maybe, at the center of the circular, fragmented construction of stories, we can find the artists and their need to repossess an authentic form of art, to express their inner worlds freed from easy clichés clear cut definitions. On the other hand, it is also true – as Paddy and others have observed – that Ballard put a European perspective to his description of the world, and interrogates the power of consumerism and the media as imperial forces (Paddy 2015: 36-42). In fact, this vague, post-geographical neural-psychic zone represents an international, imaginary setting where the author can map the inner obsessions of the European last century: consumerism, death of affect, ecological crisis, advertising, social psychopathologies, dreams and desires that only money can buy. As in “The Screen Game” (1962), where the desert drifts against the yellowing shutters of the cigarette kiosks, surrounding the town with immense banks of luminous ash, and massive towers of obsidian rears over the road like stone gallows:

The beachhouses had been empty for weeks, and abandoned sand-yachts stood in the centre of the lakes, embalmed in the opaque heat. Only the highway showed any signs of activity, the motion sculpture of concrete ribbons unfolding across the landscape. (...) For half a mile we followed the road as it wound like a petrified snake above the reefs, and our conversation became more sporadic and fell away entirely, resuming only when we began our descent through a shallow valley. A few abstract sculptures stood by the roadside. Once these were sonic, responding to the slipstream of a passing car with a series of warning vibratos, but now the Lincoln passed them unrecognized. (Ballard 1988: 47-8)

The narrator is a painter and scenic designer who thinks that the whole landscape is a map of (lost?) illusions, with its imperceptible transition between the real and the superreal: 'the hulks of fabulous dreams drifting across it like derelict galleons' (Ballard 1988: 48). Terraces and balconies appear deserted, buildings are streaked and lifeless, staircases end in midflight, floors hung like marquees. Only in the centre of one of the terraces the screens stay with their zodiacal emblems, ready to start again to play the screen game: 'pushing the screens along their intricate pathways, advancing and retreating across the smooth marble floor' (49). In a subtle displacement of space and time, the whole of Lagoon West has the atmosphere of shifting illusion and reality: 'The great hoardings seem to be both barriers and corridors, leading away radially from the house and breaking up the landscape, of which they revealed sudden unrelated glimpses, they introduced a curiously appealing element of uncertainty into the placid afternoon (...)' (56). In order to stage *Aphrodite 80*¹³, the film directed by Orson Kanin that the Orpheus Productions is going to make at Lagoon West, Paul Golding, the narrator of the story, has the task of repainting the entire desert. He prepares his designs for the hoardings, and each morning he works among the reefs, adapting the designs to the contours and colours of the terrain. In a short time, Van Stratten's summer-house is surrounded by a labyrinth of great hoardings. All day the producer wanders among them: 'pacing out the perimeters and diagonals as if trying to square the circle of some private enigma, the director of a Wagnerian psychodrama that would involve us all in its cathartic unfolding' (58).

Soon, the labyrinth of hoardings enlarges itself more and more, 'rearranged to form a narrow spiral corridor' (Ballard 1988: 60). Huge blocks of colour superimpose a new landscape upon the desert, wavering in the haze, like the shifting symbols of a beckoning dream, or maybe a nightmare. All the characters become the supporting players in a gigantic, enigmatic charade, at the point that Golding wonders: 'how far all of us were becoming ensnared by Charles Van Stratten, by the painted desert and the sculpture singing from the aerial terraces of the summer-house' (65). The centre of the maze hides the Minotaur, the innerscape of the psyche, but also the repressed desires on an overlit, exhausted society where the elements of Ballard's fiction – 'anything invented to serve to imaginative ends, whether it is invented by an advertising agency, a politician, an airline or what have you' (Sellars and O'Hara 2012: 62) – are now crowded all around the characters, and all around us as well. After all, as Ballard himself affirmed in 1971, in a conversation with Eduardo Paolozzi, the role of the artist is to illuminate the brave

new world that technology and communications have created (45). In his point of view, the technology of the information-retrieval system that we employ is incredible primitive. Technology has created the possibility of (at least, apparently) knowing everything about everything, but the individual feels alone, isolated, and lost in a media landscape that he defines as ‘violent’ and ‘Dionysiac’ (33). Obviously, art and artists can do a great deal in helping people to decode the fictional spaces surrounding us all. This is one of the most important tasks of art, and of Ballard’s own kind of narrative. As he wrote in a prose poem, originally published in French in January 1984, entitled *What I Believe*:

I believe in the power of the imagination to remake the world, to release the truth within us, to hold back the night, to transcend death, to charm motorways, to ingratiate ourselves with birds, to enlist the confidences of madmen. (...)

I believe in maps, diagrams, codes, chess-games, puzzles, sir-lines time-tables, airport indicator signs. (...)

I believe in all mythologies, memories, lies, fantasies, evasions.

I believe in the mystery and melancholy of a hand, in the kindness of trees, in the wisdom of light.

(Ballard 1984)

Notes

¹ In the mid-sixties many practicing science fiction authors (Michael Moorcock, Brian Aldiss, John Brunner, James Graham Ballard, and others), self-conscious of SF’s immediacy and possibilities, started to consider and discuss their works essentially as a form of art, requiring experimentation and innovation, as well as new approaches to the present and to the future of humanity. It was the birth of the literary movement that came to be known as ‘New Wave Science Fiction’, challenging the limits of the traditional genre, and moving towards the transgressive areas of psychology and sexuality. (See also March-Russell 2011: 432, 438.)

² See also the Special issue of *Literary Geographies* (2:1) dedicated to Ballard in 2016 and edited by Alexander Beaumont and Daryl Martin (<http://www.literarygeographies.net/index.php/LitGeogs/issue/view/4>).

³ See Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (1985), and *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006).

⁴ See Bukatman 2013.

⁵ As Simon Sellars affirms in “Extreme Metaphors: ‘A Launchpad for Other Explorations’”: ‘Anticipating Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard, Ballard demonstrated how encroaching advertising and mass consumer culture played on

submerged desire, implanting new, artificial subjectivities to create a schizophrenic underclass' (Sellars 2014).

⁶ In an interview with Robert Louit in 1971, Ballard affirmed: 'I am very interested in a certain period of surrealism, particularly among the painters, for it seems to me that I recover from them a demeanour of the spirit close to my own. Dali splits up the elements of reality and assembles them to constitute a kind of Freudian landscape. We entertain certitudes about the subject of reality which permit us to live: I'm sure that there is an elevator at the end of this corridor which will bring me to a level whose solidity is not in doubt. The work of Dali and other surrealist painters is to undermine these certitudes. There again, it's necessary to propose an extreme hypothesis' (Sellars and O'Hara 2012: 76).

⁷ There is a clear reference to R.M. Ballantyne's *Coral Island* (1858), an adventure story inspired by Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719, that functioned itself as the inspiration for William Golding's dystopian novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954). See Paddy 2015.

⁸ And here I want to recall Luke Jerram's artistic projects (see: <https://www.lukejerram.com/>), and in particular his *Aeolus* (2011), an acoustic wind pavilion "designed to make audible the silent shifting patterns of the wind and to visually amplify the ever changing sky": <https://www.lukejerram.com/aeolus/>.

⁹ Science and the (futuristic and surreal) use of it are essential elements in Ballard's writing. In this case, for example, the author refers to the so-called "Cloud seeding", a form of weather modification, or better, a way of changing the amount or type of precipitation, by dispersing substances into the air that serve as cloud condensation which alter the microphysical process within the cloud. Silver Iodide (or AgI) is a compound commonly used in cloud seeding, because it shares a similar crystalline structure to that of ice crystals. See the project by the sculptural artist Adren Segal, entitled "Cloud Seeding": Adrien Segal, a sculptural artist based in Oakland, worked on a project entitled "Cloud Seeding": <https://www.adriensegal.com/cloud-seeding-structures>.

¹⁰ See Linda Hutcheon and her books on parody, rewriting, and postmodernism (e.g. 1988).

¹¹ See Brown 2016.

¹² Just remember Venus, Diana, Hecate, Eurydice, Europa, Ariadne, Gala Dalì, Jane Hudson, Monna Lisa, Marilyn Monroe, Mae West, Judy Garland, Jackie Kennedy, Coco Chanel, Liz Taylor, and many others.

¹³ In Charles Van Stratten's words, the film deals with: "(t)he whole questions of the illusions which exist in any relationship to make it workable, and of the barriers we willingly accept to hide ourselves from each other. How much reality can we stand?" (Ballard 1988: 55).

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