

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## From a 'metallized Elysium' to the 'wave of the future': J.G. Ballard's Reappraisal of Space

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### Abstract:

This essay argues that the 'concrete and steel' trilogy marks a pivotal moment in Ballard's intellectual development. From an earlier interest in cities, typically London, *Crash* ([1973] 1995b), *Concrete Island* (1974] 1995a) and *High-Rise* ([1975] 2005) represent a threshold in Ballard's spatial representations, outlining a critique of London while pointing the way to a suburban reorientation characteristic of his later works. While this process becomes fully realised in later representations of Shepperton in *The Unlimited Dream Company* ([1979] 1981) and the concept of the 'virtual city' (Ballard 2001a), the trilogy makes a number of important preliminary observations. *Crash* illustrates the roles automobility and containerisation play in spatial change. Meanwhile, the topography of *Concrete Island* delineates a sense of economic and spatial transformation, illustrating the obsolescence of the age of mechanical reproduction and the urban form of the metropolis. Thereafter, the development project in *High-Rise* is linked to deindustrialisation and gentrification, while its neurological metaphors are key markers of spatial transformation. The essay concludes by considering how *Concrete Island* represents a pivotal text, as its location demonstrates. Built in the 1960s, the Westway links the suburban location of *Crash* to the West with the Central London setting of *High-Rise*. In other words, *Concrete Island* moves athwart the new economy associated with Central London and the suburban setting of Shepperton, the 'wave of the future' as envisaged in Ballard's works.

Keywords: J.G. Ballard, Automobility, Urban Problematic, Suburbia, Technology and Globalisation.

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The problem is one of geometry, what these slopes and planes mean. (Ballard 2001b: 58)

The reality of life in the late twentieth century demands analytic tools that can come to grips with it [...] The wave of the future breaks in the suburbs. (Dibbell 1989: 53)

Between these two quotes – from *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and a 1989 interview – lies approximately twenty years, a period in which J.G. Ballard's spatial thought profoundly changed. This essay explores the underlying significance of a thematic shift in his works. From an early concern with urban centres through to suburban towns such as Shepperton, this essay argues that, while Ballard's interest in suburbia crystallises in his later works, the novels from the mid-1970s mark a transitional point in his spatial thought.

From their outset, Ballard's works were exercised by questions of space. In early short stories such as 'The Concentration City' ([1957] 2006), which depicts an infinitely expanded urban space, and 'Chronopolis' ([1960] 2006), a city figuratively out of time, through to 'Billennium' ([1961] 2006), in which the countryside is wholly commodified, the question of defining the city was at the forefront of Ballard's thematic concerns. By the time of his early novels, this interest in the city becomes framed around ecological catastrophe: *The Wind From Nowhere* ([1961] 1974) and *The Drowned World* ([1962] 2008) respectively depict London ravaged by wind and rain. The concrete and steel trilogy (*Crash* ([1973] 1995b), *Concrete Island* ([1974] 1995a) and *High-Rise* ([1975] 2005), I argue, consolidates Ballard's earlier critique of London. Though the 'wave of the future' specifically manifests as suburbia from *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979) onwards, the trilogy prepares the way for a figurative distancing from the capital that is characteristic of many of his later novels, whose protagonists typically depart from a central London location (Ballard 1996a: 14; Ballard 2000: 43; Ballard 2007: 38). While Shepperton has yet to become 'the everywhere of suburbia, the paradigm of nowhere' (Ballard 1981: 35), the trilogy's thematic shift from London represents a nascent synthesis of the author's interests in the automobile, technology and subjectivity into a coherent theory of space.

#### From *The Country and the City* to *The Urban Revolution*

*Concrete Island* begins with architect Robert Maitland crashing off the Westway at a very particular time: the afternoon of April 22nd, 1973 (Ballard 1995a: 7). It was also around this period that Ballard's spatial thought fundamentally changed. *Crash* was published in 1973, together with Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*. The latter work illustrates comparative approaches to representing space in light of the profound changes that were besetting their contemporaneous world. Williams's influential work details changing cultural responses to the country-city relationship with an historical authority beyond the remit of this essay. What the present work does take issue with is the contention that this binary approach remains useful in terms of understanding the complexities of contemporary space. I contend that the contemporary period – as read

through the lens of Ballard's works – can no longer be understood in terms of the 'traditional poles' (Williams 1973: 1) of the country and the city. The changes of this time were of such a magnitude that they engendered a new type of space that was neither city nor countryside as conventionally understood: with the epochal restructuring of capitalism came an urban 'revolution'. 'Urban society', Henri Lefebvre reasons, 'transcends the opposition between nature and culture created by the ideology of the industrial era' (2003: 144). Thereafter, the conventional contrast between the country and the city no longer makes sense of a radically changing world: 'any contradictions that do occur no longer take place between city and country' (170). While Lefebvre eschews the task of defining the precise nature of this new space – his work offers a negative definition of what it is not before developing a virtual concept of the urban problematic – Ballard's works help us to understand what form the future might assume.

Lefebvre's thesis suggestively weds economic transformation with spatial change. Published in 1970, *The Urban Revolution* (Lefebvre 2003) distinguishes between the city as a social and a physical geography: while its physical form remains, the social significance of cities radically changes. This contention is key to understanding Ballard's growing focus on suburbia as the 'wave of the future' (Keyes 2013): with their demography fundamentally transformed by gentrification and the interests of tourism, the 'great dying city centre dinosaurs' (Ballard 2001a: 33) are the backdrop to Ballard's suburban reorientation. This critique, however, is one Ballard develops over the course of his career. While recognising that his works frequently explore how changing physical environments prompt the emergence of new subjectivities (Taylor 2002: 97), this essay concentrates on contextualising Ballard's thematic switch to suburbia as it emerges in the trilogy. For this, Lefebvre's periodising concept of an urban 'revolution' elucidates Ballard's own sense of discontinuity.

*The Urban Revolution* helps explain the transformation of urban centres underpinning Ballard's suburban reorientation. Lefebvre's thesis is that, with real-estate speculation and financial derivatives replacing industrialisation as the principal means of accumulating surplus capital, an 'urban revolution' occurs. Simply stated, this structural transformation in capitalism radically changes the production of space. This is tantamount to a fundamental break with conventional ideas of the country and the city. Read alongside Lefebvre's understanding of gentrification and financial and real-estate speculation, Ballard's works help illustrate how automobility and later technological changes augment the urban revolution such that the function of the city changes. Amid the migration of industrial production, real-estate speculation reorganises the city. While its physical being continues to exist – often aestheticised for the benefit of tourism (Harvey 2001; Lefebvre 1996: 73; Urry 2002) – the social makeup of the city has been fundamentally transformed: 'the concept of the city no longer corresponds to a social object' (Lefebvre 2003: 57).

I have elsewhere argued that Ballard's concept of the 'virtual city' represents a logical conclusion to his interest in spatial matters (Keyes 2013). With respect to the present essay, the trilogy formalises a critique of urban centres that presages Ballard's thematic switch to suburbia. To appreciate its significance, first consider Williams's more orthodox account of spatial change:

A contrast between country and city as fundamental ways of life reaches back into classical times. In our own world, there is a wide range of settlements between the traditional poles of country and city: suburb, dormitory town, shanty town, industrial estate. (Williams 1973: 1)

For Williams – *contra* Ballard – suburbs exist between the ‘traditional poles’ of the country and the city. Neither country nor city, suburbs are nevertheless ontologically distinct. To be sure, Williams credibly argues that a large part of the history of the country and the city in England is inextricably linked to the expansion of capitalism (Williams 1973: 279). That said, this essay disputes that such an age old contrast is essential to understanding ‘our own world’. Such was the magnitude of the changes besetting Williams’s world of 1973 that they fundamentally reorganised its physical and social geography: these ‘traditional poles’ no longer provide a privileged means of understanding contemporaneous Britain. Traditional ways of understanding the movement of capital and labour across space were becoming redundant as these flows were increasingly subject to rapid migration and the transformational processes of globalisation.

### On Automobility

Amid this increasingly globalised world, Ballard’s works help illustrate the unfolding of some of these profound changes:

My glimpse of an unmoving world, of the thousands of drivers sitting passively in their cars on the motorway embankments along the horizon, seemed to be a unique vision of this machine landscape [...] This nexus of concrete and structural steel, this elaborately signalled landscape of traffic indicators and feeder roads, status and consumer goods [...] car-hire firms, all-night cafeterias, airfreight offices and filling stations. The evening air was crossed by the navigation lights of airliners and maintenance vehicles. (Ballard 1995b: 54, 107, 159)

Given its etymological origins as something ‘very much a part of human culture’, that which ‘includes nature, rather than something that is wholly consistent of it’ (Farley and Roberts 2012: 26), Ballard’s use of ‘landscape’ is apposite. Notice how its form is defined by accommodating the automobile. The physical geography of this ‘unmoving world’ of traffic consists of ‘motorway embankments along the horizon’ illuminated by ‘navigation lights’. Little else appears noteworthy; it is a ‘machine landscape’ insofar as it appears to be *more* a manifestation of human culture – a ‘nexus of concrete and structural steel’ – than something that is ‘wholly consistent’ of nature.

As Ballard often pointed out, the automobile was a fundamental factor in transforming Britain. ‘If I were asked to condense the whole of the present century into one mental picture’, Ballard notes in a 1971 article, ‘I would pick a familiar everyday sight: a man in a motor car, driving along a concrete highway to some unknown

destination' (Ballard 1996b: 262). Inside the 'machine landscape', it follows that the car-hire offices and filling stations are all components within the system of automobility, the neologism John Urry coined to denote the material infrastructure of the car. The proliferation of what Urry calls 'car-only' or 'car-dependent environments' demonstrates the extent to which automobility comes to shape space: vehicles exert an 'awesome spatial and temporal dominance over surrounding environments, transforming what can be seen, heard, smelt, and even tasted [...] They are sites of pure mobility' (Urry 2003: 10, 11). *Concrete Island* most explicitly illustrates how the automobile transforms the physical environment. This 'small traffic island, some two hundred yards long and triangular in shape' comprises 'the waste ground between three converging motorway routes' (Ballard 1995a: 11). Maitland's environment – and his situation – is seemingly defined by the automobile: the 'northern wall of the island' consists of the 'thirty-foot-high embankment of the westbound motorway', while the 'steep embankment of the three-lane feeder road which looped in a north-westerly circuit below the overpass and joined the motorway at the apex of the island' constitutes its 'southern boundary' (12). The base on which Maitland is marooned consists of the 'southbound overpass that swept past seventy feet above the ground', a series of 'massive concrete pillars' that support 'six lanes of traffic' (11). Such is the individualising effect of these technologies, the novel suggests, that the very measures taken to protect the driver are the means by which Maitland remains isolated: 'the metal crash barriers screened the island from the drivers' (12). Accordingly, *Crash* and *Concrete Island* illustrate the extent to which automobility has come to shape contemporary Britain.

In more general terms, although the trilogy does not explicitly attribute changes in the material environment to the car – unlike Ballard's later works, where 'The future is going to be like a suburb of Stuttgart', 'Nature [...] was giving way for the last time to the tax shelter and the corporate car park' (Ballard 2000: 201, 356), 'I needed to pace a car park somewhere to clear my head' (Ballard 2007: 56-7) – the sensorial range of the trilogy's characters is broadly shaped by the car. While this process has yet to crystallise, the 'huge tidal race of metal' that constitutes a 'zone of nightmare collisions' in *Crash* (Ballard 1995b: 59, 11) is ostensibly post-natural:

The hard jazz of radiator grilles, the motion of cars moving towards London Airport along the sunlit oncoming lanes, the street furniture and route indicators – all these seemingly threatened and super-real, as exciting as the accelerating pintables of a sinister amusement arcade released on to the highways [...] this immense corona of polished cellulose that extended from the southern horizon to the northern motorways. (Ballard 1995b: 49, 50).

There is little, if any, reference in these works to the natural world. Note how the natural world is refracted through the language of culture: the 'hard jazz' of traffic is the only audible presence – there are no birds or animals in these works. It is more a techno-scape than a landscape. By the same token, there are few if any traces of plants or trees. An exception is the setting of *Concrete Island* – itself a suggestive play on natural and man-made elements – which contains numerous references to grass.<sup>1</sup> Such images are

exceptions to the rule, however; they do not connote a living environment so much as foreground its *lifelessness*, as when the grass 'flashes with an electric light' (Ballard 1995a: 68). Consequently, the view from the island is remarkable for its lack of animation: 'Silhouetted against the evening corona of the city, the dark facades of the high-rise apartment blocks hung in the night air like rectangular planets' (23).

This lifelessness poses a wider question about status of the natural world within the trilogy. Therein, the 'immense corona of polished cellulose' connotes the collapse of the nature-culture divide. In common with what Urry dubs 'car-environments or non-places', *Crash's* motor-scape may be said to be 'neither urban nor rural, local nor cosmopolitan' (Urry 2003: 11). Within this 'super-real' world, the ontological distinction between nature and culture is blurred:

Modern communications has usurped and hijacked everyday reality—it gets between us and [...] any kind of original response by imposing its own myths and fictions on us all. The reality of life in the late twentieth century demands analytic tools that can come to grips with it. (Dibbell 1989: 52)

The proliferation of the media (a subject most closely associated with *The Atrocity Exhibition*) is another factor that transforms Ballard's understanding of space and the nature-culture divide. Here, a new set of 'analytic tools' is required if we are to appreciate the means by which automobility has transformed personal and social conceptions of space, together with the physical world itself. Accordingly, Ballard's descriptions of the natural world are typically refracted through the lens of the 'machine landscape'. Car roofs comprise a 'lake of metal'; what little semblance of greenery remains is tinged by corrosion ('rust-stained grass'); brake lights illuminate a 'huge pool of cellulosed bodies'; the 'concrete walls of the slip road reared over us like luminous cliffs' and the 'marker lines [...] formed a maze of white snakes' (Ballard 1995b: 76, 79, 151, 196). Even 'the oncoming cars were carrying huge cargoes of cool light, floats loaded with electric flowers' (197). The extension of mobility associated with automobility further encompasses the aeroplane: 'tracts of landing lights formed electric fields like the sections of an overlit metropolis'; an airport evokes 'constellations of green and red lights that seemed to be shifting about large pieces of the sky'; and Catherine's aircraft is described as 'a glass dragonfly carried by the sun' (92, 139, 209). In the 'metallized air' of extended mobility that marks Ballard's contemporaneous world, even the idea of paradise – 'metallized Elysium' (77, 198) – is recalibrated by automobility. By transcending Williams's 'traditional poles' of the country and the city, Ballard's language of space predates the 'late-modern experience' of the city as an 'all-encompassing, 'infinite' urban space' (Skeates 1997: 8).

Skeates's periodising use of the term 'late-modern' raises the question of the trilogy's relationship to the modern period,<sup>2</sup> a concern that can be indexed to the image of street lighting. In his seminal analysis of Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin argues that gaslights are an image closely linked to the presence of the flâneur (Benjamin 1973: 50-1). The central point here concerns the relationship between street lighting and mobility. On Benjamin's reading, the flâneur is associated with both gaslights and a

particular configuration of the city: the 'labyrinth' of the city in its modern form. Therein, the 'defining mobility' of the flâneur is that of an 'indefatigable walker' (Ferguson 1994: 32). Amid gaslights, on foot, within the labyrinth of the modern metropolis: these are hallmarks of the flâneur.

Ballard takes a different approach. Where there is light in the concrete and steel trilogy, it is typically artificial: in *Crash*, for instance, the 'warning headlamps' from 'oncoming traffic' combine with 'the overhead lights of the expressway, the emblematic signals and destinations' (Ballard 1995b: 137). *Concrete Island* extends this logic further, with the view from the island illuminated by automotive and navigation lights: 'Brake lights pumped, and the sunlight flared off the windshields in electric lances [...] sodium lights shone down on the high span of the overpass, rising into the air [...] The illuminated route indicators rotated above his head, marked with meaningless destinations [...] An aircraft swept overhead, its navigation lights pulsing in the rain-clouded sky' (Ballard 1995a: 11, 26, 49, 54). The broader point about these and numerous other references to automotive and navigation lights – for instance the 'light along Western Avenue [which] illuminated the speeding cars' and the 'tracts of landing light [that] formed electric fields like sections of an overlit metropolis' (Ballard 1995b: 18, 92) – is not simply that they connote a post-natural state. For while the 'true light of the high-rise' may indeed be 'the metallic flash of the polaroid camera' (Ballard 2005: 109), their more general significance concerns the fact that they illustrate how city lighting was, by 1970, primarily given over to accommodating the needs of automotive transit (Thrift 2004: 46).

From this perspective, the ubiquity of the 'unvarying yellow glow of the sodium lights' (Ballard 1995a: 23) in *Concrete Island* is a more general metaphor for modern Britain. As befits this age of increased mobility, the sensorial adjustment of Ballard's characters to an environment increasingly shaped by the needs of the automobile indicate a fundamental shift in the understanding of space. Where the modern form of the metropolis is the 'privileged figure of capitalist modernity, the essential "site" of modern experience' (Cunningham 2005: 16), so the archetypal Ballardian character is not a flâneur 'botanizing on the asphalt' (Benjamin 1973: 36) of the modern metropolis but a motorist or international tourist gazing out from their vehicle or airplane. As if aping Baudelaire, Vaughan's singular experience of walking is itself inextricably linked to driving: 'He would saunter through the parking lots of the Western Avenue supermarkets as if strolling around a beach colony' (Ballard 1995b: 170).

#### Suburbia as the 'wave of the future'

Where the image of street lighting in the concrete and steel trilogy connotes a break with the modern form of the metropolis – and its associated consciousness of the country and the city – the history of suburbia forms an important context for understanding Ballard's altered conception of urban space. For to understand how suburbia was produced, is produced and continues to be reproduced 'is an essential precondition for an understanding of the twentieth century [and] the emerging character and contradictions of our everyday life' (Silverstone 1996: 5). By one definition, suburbs are 'residential areas

built outside the core of the inner city, as distinctly lower density but linked to it through continuous development' (Rogers and Power 2000: 69). An important historical link here emerges between the definition of city and ideas of the 'periphery'. While Ballard's works from the 1970s are, in part, responses to the process of post-war suburbanisation in Britain – set among what he later calls 'the motorway towns that had grown unchecked since the 1960s' (Ballard 2007: 7) – the growth of suburbia dates back to at least the previous century.<sup>3</sup>

To the extent that 'rapid transit and the residential suburb were conceived as the most practical and benign remedies for the physical and moral "problems" afflicting the impacted populations of great cities' (Lampard 1973: 29), Victorian and Edwardian London experienced 'the enormous increment of suburbia' (Summerson 1973: 311). Between 1850 and 1920, suburban growth was largely prompted by technological developments facilitated by electrification, for example streetcars (Lampard 1973: 30), railways (Chadwick 1973: 252) and the underground (Mumford 1987: 573). In time, this increment was to become a deluge. Once 'suburban growth became untrammelled', Lewis Mumford pessimistically writes, 'the open plan made rapid locomotion and an extravagant road system a necessity' (558-9). By 1945, improvements in London's transport infrastructure (Hall 2004: 48-86; Porter 1994: 397-418) facilitated substantial suburban growth, as exemplified by the notion of Metroland, which was created in the 1930s by the Metropolitan Railway Company and promoted by London Underground (Ackroyd 2001: 732-3). At the same time, a significant decentralisation of industry occurred, with traditional manufacturing 'leaving the core for the outer suburbs' (Porter 1994: 400). This centrifugal movement was compounded by a number of post-war efforts to 'redress' what Sir Patrick Abercrombie called the 'unbalanced developments' that had occurred 'as a result of no sort of planning of a broad character in the past'. Abercrombie's rationale was simple: by stemming the 'sprawl' he could 'return' London 'to a smaller unit than the whole city' (Abercrombie 1943: 229, 230; see further Hall 1995; Thomas 1963).

The theory and the reality of the process were, however, in conflict. Designed to accommodate London's 'overspill' population, the 'satellite' towns were to greatly change the character of London. For Peter Ackroyd, they were:

Part of an historical process which was also too powerful—too instinctive—to be 'reversed' [...] The 'new towns' ineluctably became as much part of London as their predecessors; instead of restricting the size of the city, its post-war planners immeasurably expanded it until the whole south-eastern area became 'London'. (Ackroyd 2001: 757)

In this context, Ballard's interest in suburbia is not whimsical: it represents a serious inquiry into the character and condition of contemporary Britain. 'The contrast of country and city', Raymond Williams argues, 'is one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of our society' (Williams 1973: 289). A central part of the experience of contemporaneous Britain in Ballard's works, conversely, is the waning of this form of consciousness. 'Something



about the word "suburb", Ballard writes in 1973, 'convince me that I was on the right track in my pursuit of the day after tomorrow'. This 'pursuit' directly raises the altered relationship between the city and suburbia:

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. (Ballard 1985: 7)

The languid time of Ballard's suburbia marks the death knell of Williams's 'contrast' and its associated consciousness. Consider the diminishing significance attached to the countryside, cloaked by a 'top-dressing of chemicals'. This suggestive metaphor connotes the need to reappraise ideas of the 'natural' realm in light of what he elsewhere calls the 'advanced late-20th-century technologies', those 'invisible and electronic-computers, microwave data links, faxes and VDUs' that 'are the stuff of which our dreams are made' (Ballard 2001b: 75). The conspicuous absence of natural space in Ballard's works thereby compels a re-evaluation of critical distance – hence the dwindling value attributed to the city, that 'essential "site" of modern experience' (Cunningham 2005: 16). Transformed by automobility into 'little more' than 'traffic intersections', such metropolitan centres become, in Ballard's later works, notably devoid of experiential value (Ballard 1997; Ballard 2001a). Contrary to Williams's elemental contrast, Ballard's suburbs come 'into their own' at precisely the moment the country-city relationship is brought into question.

In both historical and intellectual terms, Ballard's critique of cities overlaps with that of Lefebvre. '*The urban fabric*' – a term that 'does not narrowly define the built world of cities but all manifestations of the dominance of the city over the country' (Lefebvre 2003: 3-4) – denotes a fundamental transformation in the production of space. Where it 'grows, extends its borders, corrodes the residue of agrarian life', Lefebvre writes, so 'a vacation home, a highway, a supermarket in the countryside are all part of the urban fabric' (3-4). Lefebvre's explicit association between the extension of mobility and the rise of supermarkets with spatial transformation helps clarify the significance of those 'status and consumer goods' (Ballard 1995b: 107) underlying the 'pleasant island of modern housing units, landscaped filling stations and supermarkets' (42) that is the trilogy's archetypal landscape. Such goods are part of the expanding supply chain connoted by the shipping containers that were, at the time of the novel's publication, fundamentally changing the global economy and the social and physical fabric of cities.

In general terms, former hubs of maritime commerce witnessed the rapid decline of their waterfronts. The causes were twofold: docks were either obsolete, unsuited to the new container freight, or unnecessary, as manufacturers relocated because reduced transit costs meant they could exploit lower labour overheads elsewhere. 'Sprawling industrial complexes where armies of thousands manufactured products from start to finish', Marc Levinson notes, 'gave way to smaller, more specialized plants that shipped components and half-finished goods to one another in ever-lengthening supply chains' (Levinson 2006: 2). The process was by no means uniform across countries. Given

Ballard's interest in London at this time, however, the capital provides a pertinent example.

### Ballardian London

After its highpoint in 1964, when it dealt with in excess of 61 million tonnes, the Port of London's trade figures declined substantially (Port of London Authority 2015). With the notable exception of Tilbury, which by 1972 was the leading container handling port in the UK, the docks were in dire straits. Given its easier access, shorter sea routes and greater space for container stacking areas, Tilbury thrived while the other docks diminished. Enclosed docks underwent gentrification, as did the majority of riverside warehouses by 1981. Following the closure of the East India, London, Surrey and St Katherine docks in the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the West India, Millwall and The Royal Docks closed in the period 1980-3 (Port of London Authority 2015). Their demise connotes both a changing physical geography and social landscape, illustrating the effects of gentrification alongside the redundancy of the stevedore and associated jobs linked partly to containerisation.

The point at which Ballard's reappraisal of space intersects with the changing economy connoted by shipping containers is precisely the waning significance of the capital. In his later works, central London becomes associated with dissimulation: witness the descriptions of the South Bank and its surroundings in *Millennium People*, where the 'dealing rooms were a con, and only the river was real', even if it sits adjacent to 'two more fakes, the replica of Shakespeare's Globe, and an old power station made over into a middle-class disco, Tate Modern' (Ballard 2003: 180). By the turn of the century, central London in Ballard's work becomes debased through its associations with mass tourism: 'Tate Modern, the Royal Academy, the Hayward...they're Walt Disney for the middle classes [...] St John's Wood was unchanged, an enduring stage set constructed in calmer times. The tourists and Beatles fans haunted the Abbey Road', at one with 'Parliament, the West End, Bloomsbury, Notting Hill, Hampstead – they're heritage London' (61, 268; Ballard 2007: 101). This is a long and complicated process, but Ballard's critique of London is inextricably linked to the social and economic effects of gentrification (Keyes 2013). And the lens of the urban revolution brings into focus how the concrete and steel trilogy represents a critical break away from central London.

*Crash* begins a distancing process from the 'distant bulk' of London (Ballard 1995b: 48) that is figuratively associated with the automobile and the new economic geography of the container. In thematic terms, the deindustrialisation of industrial complexes alluded to by the supermarkets in *Crash* – their produce supplied by shipping containers, themselves associated with altering the social and physical fabric of cities – becomes, in *High-Rise*, the site of gentrification. Situated 'on a bend' in the Thames, the tower block in the latter novel is 'sharply separated' from the 'rundown areas around it, decaying nineteenth-century terraced houses and empty factories already zoned for reclamation' (Ballard 2005: 8). Through the prism of the shipping container – that 'essential image of our epoch' (Farley and Roberts 2012: 50) – and deindustrialisation more generally, the project anticipates the Docklands development of the 1980s. In other words, the

reclamation results from the gentrification of the enclosed docks and factories prompted by, among other things, the automobile and lengthening supply chains providing the consumer goods in *Crash*.

These profound transformations clarify the manifest sense of periodization in *High-Rise*. After selling his Chelsea house and purchasing a high-rise flat, Dr Laing 'travelled forward fifty years in time' (Ballard 2005: 9). He redoubles this difference when surveying the surrounding cityscape:

For all the proximity of the City two miles away to the west along the river, the office buildings of central London belonged to a different world, in time as well as space. Their glass curtain-walling and telecommunication aerials were obscured by the traffic smog, blurring Laing's memories of the past [...] Each day the towers of central London seemed slightly more distant, the landscape of an abandoned planet receding slowly from his mind. (Ballard 2005: 8, 9)

This acute sense of temporal and spatial periodisation is linked to information and communications technologies (ICTs). The evocative conjunction of Laing's waning memories of the past, modern technologies and spatial change is discussed by geographer Matthew Gandy. In his essay 'Cyborg Urbanization' (2005), Gandy uses *High-Rise* to illustrate a neo-organicist conception of space. As opposed to an organicist assemblage of organs associated with the industrial city of the nineteenth century, Ballard's various neurological metaphors – the auditorium as an 'unconscious diagram of a mysterious psychic event'; the 'dark bands stretched across the face of the high-rise' at night 'like dead strata in a fading brain' (Ballard 2005: 25, 75) – conceptualise space as a 'prosthetic extension of the human body' (Gandy 2005: 29) which Gandy associates with the growing social and technological complexity of the late-twentieth century. Accordingly, 'the ragged skyline of the city resembled the disturbed encephalograph of an unresolved mental crisis' (Ballard 2005: 9). With this, the communications aerials notable in Laing's cityscape are part of a 'ragged skyline' resembling a 'disturbed encephalograph', a neurological analogy that figuratively offsets the rise of ICTs with increasing temporal and spatial distance from central London.

The key difference between Ballard and Williams concerns their respective means of conceptualising change: Williams's work details the origins of the 'perpetual retrospect' (Williams 1973: 96) which informs F.R. Leavis's essentialist concept. Rather, it concerns their respective means of conceptualising change. 'The common image of the country is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future', Williams writes. 'That leaves, if we isolate them, an undefined present' (297). Williams's 'present' remains undefined only if it is to be understood within the strictures of the country and the city. Such conceptual stasis cannot account for the effects of ICTs, automobility and containerisation underpinning Ballard's enterprise. Ballard's sense of the suburbs 'at last coming into their own' provides an account of suburbia that is unshackled from traditional derogatory associations. For example:

It is not merely that life, from having been pre- dominantly rural and agricultural, has become urban and industrial. When life was rooted in the soil town life was not what it is now. Instead of the community, urban or rural, we have, almost universally, suburbanism. (Leavis and Thompson 1933: 2)

In the absence of community, Leavis and Thompson argue, comes 'suburbanism'. Williams has little time for such pejorative adjectives, yet between the two perspectives lies a similar conceptual absence. For Leavis and Thompson, the breakdown of community is akin to the dissolute state of suburbanism: what remains are the vestiges of past integrity. However, Williams avoids the state of dissolution only at the cost of retaining the conceptual baggage of the country and the city. On the one hand, Williams recognises that between the various historical forms of urban space 'there is a connection of name and in part of function, but nothing like an identity'. Yet the present is to be understood only in terms of the country and the city, recalling that 'wide range of settlements' spanning the 'traditional poles of country and city' (Williams 1973: 1). Anything outside of these 'traditional poles' is, for Williams, 'undefined'. Conversely, for Ballard and Lefebvre, the contemporaneous world is to be understood in terms of discontinuity. The suburbs 'come into their own' precisely because they better make sense of the changing character and historical circumstances of Britain.

In posing the 'critical question' regarding the city as accounting for the relationship 'between digital technologies and urban life' (Graham 2004: 3), Stephen Graham recognises the extent to which ICTs have greatly changed the social and physical landscape of the contemporary world. Since the publication of Ballard's trilogy, the growth of unseen technologies has prompted a reappraisal of the intersection between material and virtual worlds. Viewed accordingly, and in tandem with the effects of automobility, the following ruminations illustrate the need for a new language of space:

Looking closely at this silent terrain, I realised that the entire zone which defined the landscape of my life was now bounded by a continuous artificial horizon, formed by the raised parapets and embankments of the motorways and their access roads and interchanges [...] the human inhabitants of this technological landscape no longer provided its sharpest pointers, its keys to the borderzones of identity. (Ballard 1995b: 48-53)

Shaped by the consumerist imperatives underlying the rise of supermarkets and the expansion of automobility, Ballard's 'silent terrain' figuratively captures the changing landscape of the 1970s such that traditional terms like the country and the city no longer adequately convey their complexity. Accordingly, this technoscape's 'borderzones of identity' are not evoked by an organicist metaphor of human organs but a neo-organicist 'neurological' account of space as 'a diffuse and interconnected realm of human interaction' (Gandy 2005: 29). Therein, the emphasis on demarcating boundaries connoted by the image of a regulated body is replaced by a neurological metaphor to convey a more intricate sense of selfhood related to increasing complexity across the social, economic, technological and spatial realms: 'The residents moving along the

corridors were the cells in a network of arteries, the lights in their apartments the neurones of a brain' (Ballard 2005: 40). In retrospect, the 'continuous artificial horizon' connotes the collective effects of automobility, ICTs and containerisation, which together surmount traditional ideas of boundaries. *Crash's* 'silent terrain' is therefore neither city nor country. In a 1974 interview, Ballard offers a negative definition of contemporaneous space. 'We tend to assume that people want to be together in a kind of renaissance city', Ballard muses, 'strolling [...] across a crowded piazza [...] One is not [however] living in something like an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century city' (Ballard 2012: 70). If, at this point, the 'borderzones of identity' are not akin to that of a renaissance city, for Ballard they will in time come to be defined by suburbia.

### Delineating the Future

To recount, Ballard's works delineate the following spatial logic: the consumer and automobile landscape of *Crash* is associated with the changing economic geography of the container, which in turn affects the physical and social geography of cities as witnessed in the high rise development. The latter project is itself set apart, in geographical and temporal terms, from the City. While the titular high rise is adjacent to central London, it is its figurative distance from the City that is of interest here. Though suburbia does not represent an idealised antidote to the pressures of the city – Ballard is acutely aware of their ambiguity, as suggested by the claim towards the end of his life that 'The suburbs dream of violence' (Ballard 2007: 3) – it nevertheless follows that, for Ballard, the departure from the city as it is traditionally understood is a move into the future, into suburbia.

Having set forth Ballard's thematic shift from the 'metallized Elysium' of *Crash* to the suburban 'wave' in his later works, the remainder of this essay will explore how *Concrete Island* provides a form of 'urban parallax'. I use this term to explain how the novel occupies an interstitial position between past forms of spatial organisation and the modern urban problematic. For where the metropolis is, as David Cunningham notes, 'a form of the urban that is in the process of becoming historically surpassed in an age of the so-called network society' (Cunningham 2005: 14), Ballard's works help us to understand the contemporary 'form of the urban'. In its modern guise, the island is the product of automobility. When Maitland crashes off 'the high-speed exit lane of the Westway interchange', he enters an interstitial space 'sealed off from the world around it by the high embankments on two sides and the wire-mesh fence on its third' (Ballard 1995a: 13). The connection between automobility and the changing physical landscape becomes more evident in the topography of the island. When uncovering 'parts of the island' that 'dated from well before World War II', especially the 'eastern end, below the overpass' (69), Maitland's discoveries directly result from the construction of the Westway.

Built between September 1966 and July 1970, the Westway linked up with the existing Western Avenue (A40) at Wood Lane, which itself coupled the White City Stadium with the Marylebone Flyover at Paddington Green. Accordingly, while connoting a changing media and finance economy, the outlying views of the 'distant

television studios at White City' and the 'towers of distant office-blocks' at Marylebone (Ballard 1995a: 11, 16) are facilitated by the Westway development. 'Environmentally brutal, with no attempt at landscaping' (Porter 1994: 440), the Westway illustrates the physical effects of automobility. Moreover, it forms a geographical and intertextual nexus for Ballard's works: the Westway directly links central London to the west, including Shepperton. The connection between James Ballard's Shepperton flat in *Crash* and the central London development of *High-Rise* is precisely the Westway in *Concrete Island*.

This geographical and intertextual link forms one aspect of the transitional nature of *Concrete Island*, to which an underlying sense of economic transformation provides a second dimension. In the course of traversing the island, Maitland stumbles across Jane's room, replete with images of Che Guevara, Charles Manson and Black Power, together with a poster for a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musical (Ballard 1995a: 80, 91). With their outmoded iconography taken from the ideological stock of 1960s radicalism and the golden age of cinema, the posters recall an era of mass production at odds with the image economy associated with the distant television studios at White City. The contrast between these forms of economic organisation qualifies the sense in which Jane's room occupies the 'interstices of the new economy' (Luckhurst 1997: 136). Linked to the 'communications landscape' (Ballard 1995b: 4), the television studios are determinedly part of a new economy of ICTs that were to fundamentally transform physical, social and economic geographies. Another way of thinking about this urban parallax is that, as Maitland figuratively looks out to a new economy, he inhabits an older world associated with Jane's room.

Having briefly touched on the parts of the island that were uncovered during the construction of the Westway, its topography reveals a further sense of spatial transformation:

The surface of the island was markedly uneven [...] A broad valley ran down the central spine of the island, marking out the line of a former neighbourhood high street [...] a stucco Victorian house [...] Below the grass he could identify the outlines of building foundations, the ground-plans of Edwardian terraced houses [...] a World War II air-raid shelter, half-buried by the earth and gravel brought in to fill the motorway embankments [...] the ground-courses of Edwardian terraced houses...the still identifiable streets and alleyways [...] air-raid shelters [...] ground-plan of a post-war cinema. (Ballard 1995a: 40, 38, 69)

Maitland here uncovers the remnants of past spatial forms. The dwindling vestiges of houses and streets appear as outmoded historical and ideological foundations, relics of what the 1960 short story 'Chronopolis' calls the 'fossil city' (Ballard 2006: 212). These strata are distinct from the nascent spatial form the trilogy uncovers. It is no coincidence that the high-rise development frequently eclipses the surrounding streets: a 'massive palisade' that 'plunged the suburban streets [...] into darkness' and which is 'sharply separated' from the 'rundown areas around it, decaying nineteenth-century terraced houses' (Ballard 2005: 19, 8). Ballard's works here delineate a nascent spatial form within the remains of past configurations. 'It is a recognition of the distance from the urban

form of the city', David Cunningham writes, 'that is the precondition of any philosophically critical engagement with the modern urban problematic' (Cunningham 2005: 15). The 'distance' between the modern metropolis and the nascent spatial form delineated in the concrete and steel trilogy is great: it encompasses the effects of automobility and the expansion of the media, the rise of ICTs and the effects of containerisation, while it anticipates the social effects of gentrification and how real-estate speculation was to radically change the demography of cities.

The concrete and steel trilogy points to a suburban future without yet formalising Ballard's critique of cities. While the 'great dying city-centre dinosaurs' (Ballard 2001a: 33) have yet to materialise, the 'wave of the future' that is suburbia is a nascent undercurrent throughout Ballard's works at this time. In many ways, the concrete and steel trilogy reads as a contemporaneous illustration of the limitations of Williams's approach. Where *Crash* documents the effects of automobility in 'the age of the automobile accident' (Ballard 1995b: 57), *High-Rise* figuratively portends the effects of gentrification and deindustrialisation at the same time as using neurological metaphors to convey underlying social and spatial complexity. *Concrete Island* lies athwart these texts. Maitland looks out to an economy increasingly formed of the tertiary sector – a section of society that lends *High-Rise* its 'virtually homogeneous collection of well-to-do professional' characters (Ballard 2005: 10) – without quite managing to leave its interstices. By the same token, the strata of past spatial forms uncovered on the island point towards a future away from the city, one which for Ballard is decidedly suburban in nature. The Westway is especially pertinent in this respect, figuratively and literally moving from central London to Shepperton and beyond. In this light, Ballard's suburbia represents the 'wave of the future' insofar as it departs from what Cunningham calls the 'urban form of the city' – an older spatial form, akin to the metropolis – in order to engage the 'modern urban problematic'. It is a future in which the country and the city are no longer organising experiential co-ordinates so much as vestiges of the past.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the representation of grass in *Concrete Island*, see Sue Robertson's (2016) contribution to this special issue.

<sup>2</sup> Ballard was not the first writer to note the environmental impact of the automobile – Forster, Orwell, MacNeice and Betjeman previously made similar connections. My argument is that Ballard's works, arriving at a particular historical conjuncture, illustrate some of the most significant sociospatial transformations of late capitalism.

<sup>3</sup> Suburbs are often considered to be as old as cities themselves: in respect of London, see Ackroyd 2001: 747; Lampard 1973: 29; Mumford 1987: 549-50.

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