The Electric Sheep Nightmare
J. G. Ballard and the Perverse Use of Technology

Andrea Chiurato

The Dramatic Turn:
From the Post-Apocalyptic Wastelands to the «Inner Space»

Over the last twenty years James Graham Ballard (1930-2009) has been definitively included in the official canon of British literature. The proliferation of studies on his works, especially after his death, is impressive and even the famous Collins Dictionary has recognized his influence, adding the voice "ballardian"[1] to the English lexicon. The process of 'canonisation' has redefined the image of a writer once considered an outsider, shedding a new light on the «obsessive metaphors» (Mauron 1963) perpetually re-elaborated in his works.

Looking backwards at the imaginary map of «airport concourses, business parks, suburban estates, dumping-grounds, gated communities, retirement pueblos» (Gasiorek 2005: 206) explored in his novels, we can take a look at the post-metropolitan labyrinth described by

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[1] «Resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in Ballard's novels and stories, especially dystopian modernity, bleak man-made landscapes, and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments». "Ballardian", *Collins English Dictionary*,
http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/ballardian.html, web (last accessed 19/02/2013).

Edward Soja (2000) and reflect on the crisis of modern urban patterns. We can also see how Ballard tended to represent the ever-changing relations between technological innovation and the different spheres of human existence mainly through the category of space.

> The two issues that are most closely intertwined in [his novels] are [the depiction] of technology and [the] treatment of [the] urban space. The ordinary, normally unexamined world of the everyday is defamiliarised and shown to be the source of threats to personal and social existence. These threats stem from the technologies that make modern life possible, not only because they have destructive and unintended consequences, but also because they create human beings who are utterly reliant on them. (Gasiorek 2005: 111-112)

The inclination emerged at the beginning of the Sixties when Ballard made his debut, and was shared by other writers within the so called New Wave of science fiction which revolved around the magazine *New Worlds*[2]. In those years Ballard published four novels (*The Wind From Nowhere*, 1961; *The Drowned World*, 1962; *The Burning World*, 1964; *The Crystal World*, 1966) that, from a thematic perspective, composed a post-apocalyptic tetralogy. Choosing this type of setting had a peculiar relevance from an historical point of view: there was in fact a sharp contrast between the heydays of the space race and these persisting variations on the same theme, the end of the world. In such wastelands technology was always described in terms of ruins, waste, dissolution; its dispersed signs (crumbling high-rises, rusty cars, empty highways) were the traces of a forgotten language, or in other worlds, a pale remainder of a lost world.

That was the easiest way for Ballard to undermine one of the traditional foundations of the genre – the celebration of Progress – but there was something more at stake. According to his provocative and experimental attitude, in the same period, he proposed a broader re-

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[2] «Science fiction offered Ballard a way of exploring and perhaps coming to terms with the unprecedented scale of twentieth-century social and technological change, a way of grasping how and why human life had developed in the ways that it had» Gasiorek 2005: 9.

definition of the limits and the possibilities of science fiction[3], encouraging the more conservative writers to abandon all «their cherished gadgets: the rocket ship, the satellite, the computer, the cybernetic stuff» (Baxter 2011: 124).

The message was clear: to continue dreaming about space odysseys and distant galaxies was a naive form of escape, when the actual technological change was taking place here, on Earth, inside our souls and our minds. That was the reason why, in his opinion, science fiction should have passed through a Copernican revolution, shifting its main focus from the representation of the outer space to the «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 need to be explored. The only truly alien planet is Earth. In the past the scientific bias of science fiction has been towards the physical sciences – rocketry, electronics, cybernetics – and the emphasis should switch to the biological sciences. Accuracy, that last refuge of the unimaginative, doesn't matter a hoot. […] It is that inner space-suit which is still needed, and it is up to science fiction to build it. (Ballard 1996: 197-198)

This radical project, re-elaborated in various essays, had several consequences. First of all a repositioning of science fiction within the postmodern taxonomy of literary genres: a redefinition of the relationship with the so called mainstream and, as an ideal goal, an explicit intent to find a way out of a relatively small niche of the fiction market.

But perhaps more important was the philosophical perspective. Born in the Nineteenth century as an imaginative response to scientific and technological progress, science fiction refers to two fundamental domains defined by Kant in his *Critiques*: the "pure reason" and the "practical reason"[4]. The first involves ethical and political issues; the

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[3] «Ballard's polemics and manifestos in *New Worlds* called for a science fiction of the present and in many ways his texts are echo boxes of contemporaneous thought, less of hard science than of anthropology, philosophy, psychology, media theory and so on» Luckhurst 1997: 50.

[4] Immanuel Kant defines the "practical reason" as the general human capacity for resolving through reflection, and not by any kind of abstract, metaphysical principle, the issues of ethics. The "practical reason" regulates the interactions within societies and it is used by each individual in everyday life for decision-making. The "pure

second instead regards questions about perception, psychology and epistemology. On one side, in fact, technological innovation determines our way of living, reshapes social relations, poses new challenges to the reproduction of our cultural system. On the other, produces also radical changes in the sensemaking process, modifying the categories and the forms through which we give sense to and shape our existence. Ballard's project was to reconcile these two dimensions in a new kind of cautionary and speculative narrative (Ballard 1996: 204). One of the early attempts in that direction was the controversial *Crash*, published in 1973.

In this provocative book, the highway system around London becomes the main stage for an 'anthropological' study, where the ambiguous Dr. Robert Vaughan invites us to find the «keys to a new sexuality born from a perverse technology» (Ballard 1995: 13).

Shocked by the superficial, pornographic aspects of the plot, many critics missed this crucial point, blaming the author for a lack of moral judgment. Others, like Jean Baudrillard, appreciated this absence of a moral perspective as the most interesting element of the novel[5]. Behind the deconstruction from the inside of an old avant-gardist myth – the car – in fact Ballard's characters proposed a wide set of alternative, transgressive uses of a now familiar technology. In some way they tried to reinvent the traditional mythology, the symbolic universe of one of the most common means of transportation in the Western world.

In this symbolic universe eroticism has always been present (take for example the rhetorical strategies of advertising), but always disguised. Through the «icy neutrality of [his] prose», and the «affectless monologic style» (Luckhurst 2005: 515) of his namesake narrator, Ballard reveals this hidden link and demystifies the process of eroticization of the machines in an attempt to unveil the reasons for their fascination.

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reason", conversely, determines the apriori forms of sensibility and the apriori categories (space, time, cause and effect, etc.) which are the essential prerequisites of rational thinking, or in other terms, of the "objective reason".

[5] «Is it good or bad? We can't say. It is simply fascinating, without this fascination implying any kind of value judgment whatsoever. And this is the miracle of *Crash*. The moral gaze cannot touch it» Baudrillard 1991: 319.

This remark leads us to a further consideration that regards both the new modalities through which subjectivity is constructed and controlled in the neo-capitalist society and the different paces of evolution in science and in ethics. We know that technological innovation plays a prominent role in the «cultural saturation» of the body (Grosz 1995: 108-109): as Michel Foucault observed in his *History of Sexuality*, the regulation of its representation, which includes the "discourse" on sexuality, is one of the most effective ways to ensure not only control but also a stronger form of discipline.

Take for example this brief passage in which the protagonist of *Super-Cannes* discusses with his wife the all-embracing health service of Eden-Olympia, a cutting-edge business park in the south of France:

> "Every morning when they get up people will dial the clinic and log in their health data: pulse, blood-pressure, weight and so on. One prick of the finger on a small scanner and the computers here will analyse everything: liver enzymes, cholesterol, prostate markers, the lot". "Alcohol levels, recreational drugs…?". "Everything. It's so totalitarian only Eden-Olympia could even think about it and not realize what it means. But it might work". (Ballard 2000: 67)

Ballard was aware of the growing disharmony between the possibilities offered by scientific progress and the traditional values of a liberal democracy, hence the final conclusion («it might work») can be considered as an enigmatic warning or as an ironic commentary.

After *Crash*, especially over the following three decades, hyper-controlled urban environments – gated communities, high-rises and other kinds of enclosed enclaves – became a sort of personal obsession for him. These different spaces, all belonging to the ever widening galaxy of Marc Auge's *non-lieux* (1992), represented the advanced outposts of an upcoming civilisation, born out of the ashes of the old nation-state model. An ideal place for self-realisation with all the possible commodities; but, at the same time, an 'iron cage' where every emotion or desire (even the dreams of sex and violence that haunt the collective unconscious) is controlled by unethical demiurges.

Freedom from Morality and Postmodern Ethics

As in the Sixties, the choice of the novels' settings is crucial. Ballard re-elaborates in many allusions and explicit quotes the main motifs of the British dystopian tradition, from George Orwell to Aldous Huxley, translating them in a different ideological framework. In novels like *Cocaine Nights* (1996) and *Super-Cannes* (2000) we can see for example how the recalcitrant slaves of the post-war era, have become a diligent new breed of executives, controlled by invisible technocrats and eager to embrace alienation as a paradoxal, definitive form of liberation.

As Dr. Penrose – one of the most zealous Eden-Olympia's supervisors and a sort of ideal heir of Vaughan – says, morality is an overestimated concept that should be superseded in the third phase of industrial revolution. His provocative theories lead us to reconsider some common stereotypes about the representation of this kind of scenario: even if Eden-Olympia's inhabitants can be described as 'prisoners', they appear to be wilful prisoners. They belong in fact to a brand new imagined community and identify themselves with the logos of their credit cards, rather than with the flag of a nation. In their minds «economics substitutes politics in giving sense to space» (Ilardi 2007: 37)[6], that becomes a dependent variable in the economical process:

> Freedom. A giant multinational like Fuji or General Motors sets its own morality. The company defines the rules that govern how you treat your spouse, where you educate your children, the sensible limits to stock-market investment. The bank decides how big a mortgage you can handle, the right amount of health insurance to buy. There are no more moral decisions than there are on a new superhighway. Unless you own a Ferrari, pressing the accelerator is not a moral decision. Ford and Fiat and Toyota have engineered in a sensible response curve. We can rely on their judgement, and that leaves us free to get on with the rest of our lives. We've achieved real freedom, the freedom from morality. (Ballard 2000: 95)

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[6] Translation mine.

«Freedom from morality» is the existential condition assured by the technological change in the wake of the new millennium, and Ballard tries to investigate once again the psychological effects of this liberation. Through the metamorphosis of the anachronistic 'mad scientist' figure in up-to-date crazy 'gurus' like Vaughan and Penrose, he highlights the empty space left in the public sphere by the decline of traditional institutions. Their theories are radical and extreme, but all the middle-class ballardian protagonists are fatally seduced by them because they represent an imaginary response to the urgent need for a different system of values.

Trapped in «a border-zone between the restrictions demanded by the law and the liberation offered by desire» (Gasiorek 2005: 203), they face an eventless world where politics is over. Even if they successfully unveil those unconscious, perverse logics there's no true possibility of rebellion against the system. Therefore, under the inescapable influence of social and technological pressures beyond their control and their rational comprehension, they try to escape to a «voluntary and elective psychopathy» (Ballard 2000: 264).

Comparing the novels written in the latest part of Ballard's career, we can identify two general patterns: a regression to a primitive form of community, as in *High-Rise* (1975) or in *Millennium People* (2003); and a wilful alienation, as in *Cocaine Nights* (1996), *Super-Cannes* (2000) or *Kingdom Come* (2006). These were, in his opinion, the two alternative outcomes at the end of the present process of civilisation.

On the one hand the «death of affect» (Gasiorek 2005: 67), the weakening of social bonds lead to a state of permanent conflict between small communities, or 'tribes'. Adopting the definition proposed by Michel Maffesoli, we can define it as «neotribalism» (1996: 11). On the other, we have the rise of a new kind of totalitarianism, where social order is maintained through deviant forms of institutionalised violence.

Technology plays a crucial role on both sides. In the first case offers the ideal environment for the "expression"[7] of repressed, «devi-

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[7] «Secure within the shell of the high-rise like passengers on board an automatically piloted airliner, they were free to behave in any way they wished, explore the darkest corners they could find. In many ways, the high-rise was a model of all that

ant» and «wayward impulses» (Ballard 2006: 36), speeding up the collapse of the social order[8]. In the second it has a different but complementary function, giving the opportunity to manage this fragmentation by means of «an invisible infrastructure [which takes] the place of traditional civic virtues» (Ballard 2000: 38).

Thus the old dream of a representative democracy slowly fades away, replaced by a narcissistic egotism that obeys only to the principle of pleasure, or by the even more dangerous seduction of a new authoritarianism. Besides, whatever choice is made, whatever path is chosen, no space is left for hope of change, because these opposite alternatives seem to be in some way 'programmed' in our minds, that's to say they are constitutive parts of the «cultural logic» (Jameson 1991: 6) that regulates the production and reproduction of our collective imagery.

> [Ballard's] characters are the mass-produced exemplars of technological modernity – all their tastes, attitudes and values, right down to the belief in the liberatory power of transgressive behaviour, have been programmed into them. […] Imbued with the belief that by rejecting civilised values they are uncovering an authentic mode of existence and a true sense of identity, they merely externalise the logics that impel them into action. (Gasiorek 2005: 128, 127)

In this distressing vision of the near future «body and machine cross-breed, machine becoming anthromorphised and humans becoming machinic» (*ibid.*: 207), suggesting a kind of hybridisation that is quite different from a simple fusion of two separated elements[9]. The

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technology had done to make possible the expression of a truly "free" psychopathology» Ballard 2006: 36.

[8] «It must be noted, however, that at the same time that it encourages attraction, even if plural, the feeling of belonging proceeds if not by exclusion then at least by exclusiveness. Indeed, the characteristic of the tribe is that by highlighting what is close (persons and places), it has a tendency to be closed in on itself» Maffesoli 1996: 140-141.

[9] «Ballard practices a narrative technique which involves switching the registers normally assigned to two broad lexical fields: […] emotional traits are given to inanimate objects while character descriptions are drained of emotivity» Bonacina 2005: 134 (translation mine).

distinction between the two opposites blurs[10], and the result of this process can best be described as the result of an implosion: «the notion of an identity thought of as centrally composed around a human "core" is […] displaced by a view of the subject as a functional mechanism to be engineered and/or coded» (*ibid.*: 208).

The Last Question:
High-Tech Paranoia or Technological Sublime?

Do we have to blame Ballard for the lack of psychological depth of his characters, as many critics did especially at the beginning of his career? Or should we perhaps consider the question from a different point of view[11]?

True, the notion of 'inner space', proposed in the mid-seventies reflects the increasing reification of the human subject in late capitalism, but equally 'objects' are considered as something more than mere objective correlatives of the conscience. They don't express a pre-existent 'content', instead they are the 'forms' through which we can recognize our hidden desires and their artificial nature. They are, in other words, the ciphered signs of the postmodern cultural logic and, even if Ballard was quite skeptical about the possibility of politics, his novels can be considered as an endless effort to decode these traces.

For him, as for writers like Philip Dick, technology was so mesmerising and fascinating «not so much in its own right», «but because it [seemed] to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our

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[10] «The discomfort that Ballard's work produces in numerous critical communities is not simply due to the failure to find the right protocol or the right frame, but that the Ballard oeuvre is nothing other than a prolonged meditation on the question of protocols, boundaries, frames and the evaluations they set in train» Luckhurst 1997: xiii.

[11] «Inasmuch as all Ballard's characters notoriously lack psychological 'depth', it is above all the male protagonist who are represented as outmoded or half-alive, as lacking any viable models for the development of a new gendered subjectivity and thus as particularly vulnerable to a remoulding or a programming that is instituted from elsewhere» Gasiorek 2005: 203.

minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentred […] network» of global capitalism (Jameson 1991: 37-38).

A similar gap between the categories of "pure reason" and the actual chances of "practical reason" could be the source of an «high-tech paranoia»[12] as Frederic Jameson rightfully said, but also of a new kind of «technological sublime». It's quite hard to separate these two aspects in Ballard's novels, nevertheless, whatever choice we make, we could read them as an obsessive reflection on the multilevered space where the postmodern body is constantly «reexplored, transformed, contested, reinscribed» (Gasiorek 2005: 207). And if today Dick's androids seem more human to us than Ballard's characters, perhaps it would be wise to stop worrying about the harmless sheep those androids dream of and rather concern ourselves with our own more dangerous nightmares.

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[12] «This is a figural process presently best observed in a whole mode of contemporary entertainment literature – one is tempted to characterize it as "high-tech paranoia" – in which the circuits and networks of some putative global computer hookup are narratively mobilized by labyrinthine conspiracies of autonomous but deadly interlocking and competing information agencies in a complexity often beyond the capacity of the normal reading mind» Jameson 1991: 38.

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