

УДК 82-3  
ББК 83.3(4БЕЛ)-8  
БАЛЛАРД Д.Г.

### **St. Schlensag**

**COLLAPSING BUILDINGS  
AND HALLUCINATORY HELL:  
NATURE AND URBANITY  
IN SELECTED NOVELS BY  
J. G. BALLARD**

**ПАДАЮЩИЕ ЗДАНИЯ  
И ВООБРАЖАЕМЫЙ АД:  
ПРИРОДА И ГОРОД  
В ПРОИЗВЕДЕНИЯХ  
ДЖ. Г. БАЛЛАРДА**

Целью статьи автор видит аргументированное представление Дж. Г. Балларда как писателя, творчество которого выходит за рамки жанра научной фантастики. Противопоставляя романы двух трилогий, посвященных, соответственно, пейзажу природному и городскому, Ш. Шлензаг определяет характерные модальности, созданные в них.

**Ключевые слова:** «Затонувший мир», «Сожженный мир», «Хрустальный мир», «Автокатастрофа», «Бетонный остров», «Высотка», научная фантастика, природа, урбанизм, антиутопия, интертекстуальность.

**Штефан Шлензаг** – доктор наук, преподаватель отделения Британской культуры в Дортмундском техническом университете.  
E-mail: sschlensag@web.de

### **Access Roads**

Even though James Graham Ballard's powerful influence is clearly present in the works of a younger generation of writers such as Iain Banks, Will Self or Martin Amis academic research on Ballard's influence on other artists is still lacking. It seems that if it were not for David Cronenberg's controversial film *Crash* [Cronenberg 1996] or Steven Spielberg's adaptation of Ballard's fairly accessible novel *Empire of the Sun* [Spielberg 1987] his audience would still be limited to fans and experts of science fiction. But since Ballard's writings go beyond the boundaries of generic concepts there should be more topological research and comparative analysis in the future. Instead of exploring rather typical motifs of science fiction such as time travelling and the space age, Ballard focuses on the development of the psyche of his characters against the background of natural and urban landscapes. Ballard's texts are allegories of contemporary alienation.

There is a variety of possible approaches to Ballard's prolific body of work: According to Michael K. Iwoleit his short stories are not only of interest due to their excellent quality, but are often complementary to each other and throw an interpretive light on Ballard's work in general. Iwoleit compares this idiosyncrasy of Ballard's work to the writings of Philip K. Dick in which diverse texts such as short stories and novels form a complex but complementary whole dealing with questions of identity,

memory and, of course, the crisis of both [cf. Iwoleit 1983: 9 ff.]. Heinrich Keim suggests a division of Ballard's work into two distinct stages as to thematic aspects [cf. Keim 1983: 272 ff.]. First, there are his texts published during the 1960s dealing with a visionary natural landscape (which Ballard calls 'imaginary places') and the development of the human psyche which Ballard refers to as the 'inner space' of his characters [cf. Keim 1983: 275 ff.]. Second, there is a paradigmatic shift in Ballard's work marking the end of his interest in natural landscapes and introducing the reader to a nightmarish vision of the cityscape: no more but a maze of surreal motorways, airports, and apartment blocks.

My analysis will focus on Ballard's novels. I shall employ a topological and comparative approach giving special attention to the way landscapes and the psychological development of characters relate to each other. While keeping the division of Ballard's writings suggested above, I will look at two central trilogies of either stage: *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Drought* (1965), and *The Crystal World* (1966), three novels dealing with Ballard's 'imaginary places'; *Crash* (1973), *Concrete Island* (1974) and *High-Rise* (1975), three novels dealing with the urban landscape.

### **Collapsing Buildings**

In *The Drowned World* geophysical disturbances due to long-lasting solar storms result in a rise of world temperature. At the point at which temperatures have risen to tropical heights, water has begun to flood the surface of the earth. Mankind has already retreated for survival to the Antarctic plateau and to the northern borders of Canada and Russia (Ballard 1983: 21). The cities are almost completely covered by water, and only a biological testing station built on a lagoon remains for a group of scientists to conduct experiments. This is the setting of Ballard's story, and here the reader encounters the protagonists of the novel: Dr. Robert Kerans, his colleague Alan Bodkins and Beatrice Dahl – all members of a research group that is soon to be evacuated to the northern parts of the hemisphere. They are not sure where they are exactly located: The city beneath them could be Paris, Berlin, London or any major European city [Ballard 1983: 9]. This uncertainty does not seem to matter to any of the protagonists, because even before the cities were drowned by water they had ceased to function as centres of civilization:

Apart from a few older men such as Bodkin there was no-one who remembered living in them – and even during Bodkin's childhood the cities had been beleaguered citadels, hemmed in by enormous dykes and disintegrated by panic and despair, reluctant Venices to their marriage with the sea. Their charm and beauty lay precisely in their emptiness, in the strange junction of two extremes of nature, like a discarded crown overgrown by wild orchids. [Ballard 1983: 21]

In *The Drowned World* the city as space only exists in people's memory of an immediate past. Later in the novel, when the lagoon is eventually drained, it is seen as ruins overgrown by nature. Ballard renders the passage with a beautiful Gothic touch: "Looming just below the dark pellucid surface were the dim rectangular outlines of the submerged buildings, their open windows like empty eyes in enormous drowned skulls" [Ballard 1983: 120]. It is the interaction of nature and the city that creates the beauty of these passages. The forsaken cities besieged by the powers of nature are reminiscent of the Romantic's love of ruins, and Ballard's early novels of 'imaginary places' should be understood in this cultural context. In her famous analysis *The Pleasure of Ruins* Rose Macaulay explores the motif of ruined buildings and desolate landscapes within cultural history from the early writings of ancient Hebrew poets to its most aesthetic and eccentric expressions in the nineteenth century (cf. Macaulay 1953). Macaulay points to the attraction demolished cities, inhabited by screech-owls, serpents, bitterns, bats and jackals, offered to poets and painters looking on the fate of mankind in terms of a vindictive metaphysical judgement, or in terms of purely aesthetic pleasure. Destroyed cities – once great and fair and now lying waste among the briars – were contemplated as the ruinous results of man's endeavour to escape the transitory nature of civilization.

In *The Drowned World* only nature remains and the group of scientists is endangered by more water due to equatorial rain belts, boiling water reservoirs, and, additionally skin cancer when they decide to stay on the lagoon among the shrieking iguanas [cf. Ballard 1962: 26]. In spite of all warnings the group refuses evacuation and decides to stay on the lagoon. Haunted by a feeling of déjà vu and strange dreams, they begin to realize that the external changes in nature correspond to internal changes within their own psyche. While the surrounding flora and fauna resemble conditions present in the Triassic period, the memories of the main characters also regress in time [cf. Ballard 1962: 43]. According to David Pringle, Ballard uses a fourfold symbolism throughout his work in which water represents the past and sand the future, whereas crystal is symbolic of eternity and concrete of the present [Keim 1983: 276 ff.]. The state of the surrounding landscape corresponds to changes of the protagonists' psyches; and in *The Drowned World* these begin to fuse with man's past in terms of his biological origin [cf. Keim 1983: 276]. While discussing insomnia, dreams and a feeling of déjà vu that begin to haunt the scientists on the lagoon Beatrice Dahl for example admits to Kerans:

"Jungle dreams, Robert," she murmured ambiguously. "I'm learning my ABC again. Last night was the delta jungles." She gave him a bleak smile, then added with a touch of malicious humour: "Don't look so stern, You'll be dreaming them too, soon." [Ballard 1983: 50]

Ballard's 'imaginary spaces' are landscapes of ambiguity. The gigantism of the surrounding landscape, with the never-ending heat of the ceaselessly shining sun, the vast empty sky and the ubiquitous jungle housing shrieking reptiles are topological means by which Ballard creates natural landscapes of a psychological sublime which owe as much to Edmund Burke as to modern surrealist painters often acknowledged as an influence by Ballard [cf. Fox 2005: 162 ff.]:

Guided by his dreams, he was moving backwards through the emergent past, through a succession of ever stranger landscapes, centred upon the lagoon, each of which, as Bodkin had said, seemed to present one of his own spine levels. At times the circle of water was spectral and vibrant, at others slack and murky, the shore apparently formed of shale, like the dull metallic skin of a reptile. Yet again the soft beaches would glow invitingly with a glossy carmine sheen, the sky warm and limpid, the emptiness of the long stretches of sand total and absolute, filling him with an exquisite and tender anguish. [Ballard 1983: 83]

To the characters in *The Drowned World* the descent into their biological past means self-abandonment in physical terms since they face the dangers of the natural landscape but, also in psychological terms, escape. This ambivalence led critics to pessimistic interpretations of the function of Ballard's 'imaginary places' which leave suicide as the only solution of this conflict [cf. Keim 1983: 279 ff.]. Nevertheless I would like to stress that the natural landscape in Ballard's novel also offers a new modality of existence to people in an imaginary realm. Kerans, Dahl and Bodkins are characters who are willing to accept the ambiguity of the landscape for its possibilities of danger and beauty. A contrasting character in *The Drowned World* is represented by Strangman, a looter, dressed in a white suit and accompanied by an entourage of crocodiles and one-eyed mulattoes who follow him obediently [Ballard 1983: 90, 97]. He lacks the psychological complexity of the other characters. His only interest lies in draining the lagoon and raiding the sunken city for its forgotten treasures. Strangman eventually succeeds in his endeavour, and the characters find that the underwater city is, in fact, London [Ballard 1983: 120]. In the end Kerans wins over Strangman and fills the lagoon with water and the city drowns again. Kerans avoids evacuation and decides to head further south for a future existence that is not described in the novel [Ballard 1983: 173]. Thus *The Drowned World* ends open-ended.

The Drought may be regarded as a part of Ballard's trilogy of 'imaginary places', but nature in its relation to man has not the same function as in *The Drowned World* (Rottensteiner 1985: 130). This might be due to the nature of the catastrophe itself. Whereas in *The Drowned World* the overwhelming

power of nature is due to its abundance and gigantic scale, the lack of abundance sets *The Drought* apart. Due to industrial waste that is let into the sea, a monomolecular film makes natural evaporation impossible. The prevailing images of a dry and harsh landscape are reminiscent of some of Ballard's short stories and in this respect cannot be really compared to the imaginary landscapes of *The Drowned World* and *The Crystal World*, the last of Ballard's novel dealing with nature as an 'imaginary place' [cf. Rottensteiner 1985: 130]. *The Crystal World* smoothly follows *The Drowned World* by being set in the jungle of Africa. Dr Sanders, the viewpoint character of the novel, was assistant director of a leper hospital. An unresolved love affair leads him to leave and travel on a steamer to find his lost love, Suzanne Clair, who has married a former colleague, Max. The Clairs are in charge of a leprosy station at Mount Royal located in the middle of the jungle of Cameroon. Whereas critics have remarked that the form of the novel relies on the adventure books by Henry Rider Haggard or Edgar Wallace, Kingsley Amis compares it to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* [Rottensteiner 1985: 128]. Parallels exist throughout the novel, and despite the references to genre literature by Haggard or Wallace using simplified and stereotypical characters, *The Crystal World* is among Ballard's best literary achievements and probably his most visionary work.

Arriving at his destination Port Martarre, Sanders is struck by the darkness that hangs heavily over the town; by the way the jungle and the river seem to light up at night and by an immense crystal flower sold on a market [Ballard 1984a: 27, 39]. He soon learns that the town itself is to be evacuated, and that his initial plan to travel further up the river to meet Max and Suzanne Clair will be difficult to put into practice. The leprosy station where his friends live is in the midst of a region about to become blocked off by the army. Captain Radek, a scientist and military commander, warns Sanders that there is a plant disease spreading fast from Mount Royal [Ibid: 32]. But as in *The Drowned World* there is a cosmological explanation for the changes in nature. The 'Hubble-effect' causes a crystallization of organic life-forms and is already spreading globally [Ibid: 80]. The idea to put leprosy, one of the oldest infectious bacterial diseases, with its well-known horrifying results for man's physiognomy, into opposition with a visionary disease that changes man's physiognomy into that of shining jewellery, brings out the literary qualities of the novel. There is a sense of irony in Ballard that is sometimes missed by his critics.

Sanders manages to hire a small boat owned by a maverick and starts his trip up the river accompanied by Louise Peret, a journalist. There are beautiful interludes where the group touches shore visiting the remainders of civilization:

Louise had also withdrawn into herself. As she smoked her cigarette after the meal she avoided Sanders's eyes. Deciding to leave her alone for the time being Sanders walked along

the pier, picking his way across the broken boards until he reached the bank. The forest had re-entered the plantation, and the giant trees hung silently in lines, one dark cliff behind another. In the distance he could see the ruined plantation houses, creepers entwined through the rafters of the outside buildings. Ferns overgrew the garden of the house, running up the doors and sprouting through the planks of the porch. Avoiding this mournful wreck, Sanders strolled around the perimeter of the garden, following the faded stones of a pathway. He passed the wire screen of a tennis court, the mesh covered by creepers and moss, and then reached the drained basin of an ornamental fountain. [Ballard 1984a: 68]

Again Ballard uses rather conventional topoi of Romantic literature such as the 'sic transit gloria mundi' to create the melancholy atmosphere in this passage. The deserted buildings re-entered by nature are images that could have been taken out of William Gilpin's theory of the break with his novels of 'imaginary places' coincides with numerous statements made by the author in which he expresses the need to create a literature that deals with the present of the author and reader. Ballard was convinced that the task of literature is to unravel the ever-increasing complexities of post-industrial consumer-orientated societies by projecting contemporary needs, desires and behavioural patterns into texts. These in turn suggest and explore the manifold possibilities of technologies which have already emerged and are at the free disposal of consumers. [Keim 1983: 283 ff.; Körber 1985: 136] In his famous introduction to the French edition of *Crash* Ballard reflects on these complexities and formulates demands on literature:

In addition, I feel that the balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly in the past decade. Increasingly their roles are reversed. We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind -mass-merchandizing, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the instant translation of science and technology into popular imagery, the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities within the realm of consumer goods, the pre-empting of any free or imaginative response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. For the writer in particular it is less and less necessary for him to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent reality. [Ballard 1985c: 81]

A cityscape of concrete is the apt setting for the works of Ballard in his second stage of writing. Especially *Crash* and *High-Rise* are novels that correspond to the complexities of a consumer-orientated society in which it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between reality and fiction, or the past, the



present and the future. The 'imaginary places' of *The Drowned World* and *The Crystal World* which are dominated by a wild and rampantly growing nature are closely linked to Wordsworth's poetics and the paintings of Max Ernst. They are after all images of the past. One could argue that *The Drought* stands out and falls in with Ballard's urban landscapes because of its dryness and hardness. But *The Drought* fails to reflect the complexities of life in an urban landscape and its impact on man's psyche. The introduction to *Crash* gives proof of Ballard's interest in man's relation to contemporary culture, defined in Freudian terms as a 'space of conflict':

The marriage of reason and nightmare which has dominated the 20th century has given birth to an ever more ambiguous world. Across the communication landscape move the spectres of sinister technologies and the dreams that money can buy. Thermo-nuclear weapons systems and soft-drink commercials coexist in an overlit realm ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography. Over our lives preside the great twin leitmotifs of the 20th century - sex and paranoia. Despite McLuhan's delight in the high-speed information mosaics we are still reminded of Freud's profound pessimism in *Civilisation and its Discontents*. Voyeurism, self-disgust, the infantile basis of our dreams and longings - these diseases of the psyche have now culminated in the most terrifying casualty of the century: the death of affect. [Ballard 1985c: 5]

With his collection of non-linear short stories, published as *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) for the European market and as *Love and Napalm: Export U.S.A.* (1972) for the North American one, Ballard successfully translates his ideas into a literary form. The techniques of reproducing works of art and their semiotic fragmentation characterize the emerging Pop-Art of the 1960s. The impact of Pop-Art on Ballard can be seen in the fact that the characters in *The Atrocity Exhibition* oscillate between subject and object positions in a media landscape that constantly blurs the line between fact and fiction [cf. Fuchs, Körber 1985: 116] Ballard shares a pessimism that one associates with some of the best fragmentary works by Robert Rauschenberg and the anxieties of Andrew Warhol's reproductions in the *Death and Disaster* series.

### Hallucinatory Hell

For some critics Ballard's short stories or 'condensed novels', as Ballard would call them, remain the apogee of his achievements [cf. Keim 1983: 290 ff.]. *The Atrocity Exhibition* is certainly Ballard's most drastic and radical work. But a radical non-linear narrative like this lacks accessibility. His rather conventional novels *Crash*, *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* are not only more accessible to the reader, but also allow the author to create more complex

characters and portray their psychological development in relation to the urban landscape in more detail.

*Crash* deals with a group of characters whose polymorph perverse existence consists of a symbiosis of technology and self-destruction which find their expression in a dark obsession that involves sexuality and cars and is taken to its ultimate consequence when the characters deliberately provoke crashes. The view point character of the novel is named Ballard. He is drawn into this strange group of sexual deviants after being involved in a car crash. Vaughan is the central character of the novel and might be regarded as the spiritual leader of the group. The story, however, is told in retrospect by Ballard:

Vaughan died yesterday in his last car-crash. During our friendship he had rehearsed his death in many crashes, but this was his only true accident. Driven on a collision course towards the limousine of the film actress, his car jumped the rails of the London Airport flyover and plunged through the roof of the bus filled with airline passengers. The crushed bodies of package tourists, like a haemorrhage of the sun, still lay across the vinyl seats when I pushed my way through the police engineers an hour later. Holding the arm of her chauffeur, the film actress Elizabeth Taylor, with whom Vaughan had dreamed of dying for so many months, stood alone under the revolving ambulance lights. As I knelt over Vaughan's body she placed a gloved hand to her throat. [Ballard 1985a: 11]

The introductory passage from *Crash* sums up the most important motifs of the novel: Vaughan's obsession with car crashes; his deliberate death; the motorways and overpasses surrounding London Airport [c.f. Keim 1986: 346]. It is this concrete maze of motorways where Vaughan and Ballard spend most of their time looking for ways to explore their sexuality and merge it with the technology of the car: his fears and to understand the ambiguity of the changing landscape. On leaving the crystallized forest Sanders finds refuge in a church. During his trip he has found out that jewellery slows down the process of crystallization that sweeps in waves through the forest. So he protects himself with a cross from the church encrusted with jewels. On his way out of the jungle he comes across a group of lepers from the station at Mount Royal. Holding tight to the cross Sanders witnesses how the bizarre group of outcasts passes him by. Like the crippled and the lame in the Bible, they seem to enter a new paradise where their sickness does not matter any more:

As Sanders stood by his cross a small party came over to him in a series of leaps and jumps, then gambolled around him like newly admitted entrants to paradise serenading an attendant archangel. An old man with a deformed light-filled face passed Sanders, gesturing at his fingerless hands



as the jewelled light poured from his stunted joints. Sanders remembered the lepers seated beneath the trees near the mission hospital. During the previous days the whole tribe had entered the forest. They danced away from him on their crippled legs, holding their children by the hands, grotesque rainbows in their faces. [Ballard 1984a: 207]

To the lepers nature offers a new mode of life. Sanders eventually finds his way out of the forest and arrives at Port Matarre. But as Kerans in *The Drowned World* he resists evacuation. He refuses to resume his medical profession and to deal with further leprosy cases. Sanders decides to return into the jungle instead. [Ballard 1984a: 218 – 219] He has realized that there is indeed a new form of life out there.

### Divergence

In the next group of novels *Crash*, *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* nature almost does not exist any more. The prevailing image is that of concrete symbolizing the present as David Pringle has put it [cf. Keim 1983: 283 ff.]. All three novels are set in the London of the 1970s and deal with the urban landscape in which concrete was one of the favourite building materials used by architects who shaped the modern cityscape from the 1960s onwards. In England one thinks of the Barbican Estate in the City of London as an extreme example. The gigantic residential area with its huge concrete tower blocks was officially opened in the late 1960s and might have served as an inspiration for Ballard's novels dealing with an urban instead of a natural landscape.

Concrete in contrast to water, sand or crystal is not a natural element. Concrete is the product of a chemical process in which natural elements are mixed and the compounds react. In analogy to David Pringle's analysis of Ballard's picturesque. The deeper Sanders travels into the jungle, the more the crystallization of organic forms has already progressed. The beauty of the crystalline forms of rampantly growing nature adds surreal touches to the text, but also evokes memories in Sanders, as the abundance of water in *The Drowned World* brought back primeval memories of a biological origin to the characters:

The beauty of the spectacle had turned the keys of memory, and a thousand images of childhood, forgotten for nearly forty years, filled his mind, recalling the paradisaal world when everything seemed illuminated by that prismatic light described so exactly by Wordsworth in his recollections of childhood. The magical shore in front of him seemed to glow like that brief spring. [Ballard 1984a: 85]

In order to create visionary landscapes Ballard needs visionary poetics. The intertextual relation to the poetics of Wordsworth is a point in case. In

his reading of *The Crystal World* and of the function of Ballard's 'imaginary places', Franz Rottensteiner draws an analogy to the philosophy of Ludwig Klages and his dichotomy of "Seele" and "Geist" that separates man from nature - a separation that results in the alienation of man and the destruction of nature [Rottensteiner 1985: 126 ff]. Ludwig Klages's biocentric worldview is linked to romantic transcendental philosophy as put forward by philosophers like Johann Gottlieb Fichte or Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling. And it underlines the ambiguous aspect of natural landscapes as 'imaginary places' being beautiful and yet destructive. As I understand it, Ballard creates a Utopia with metaphysical and religious undertones rather than a dystopia in *The Crystal World*. Sanders can only slowly accept the changes brought about by nature. As with leprosy he associates the crystallization process with death. On his journey through the crystalline forest Sanders finds Captain Radek who has crashed an army helicopter in the jungle. Radek's body has already been crystallized and has begun to merge with the natural surroundings. Sanders tries to help him by breaking him free from the ground, tying the body to a branch and pushing him into the water so that the crystallization might be reversed. But in doing so he breaks off some of the crystal parts of Radek's body [Ballard 1984a: 121]. Shortly before Sanders arrives at Mount Royal, they meet again in the forest. Radek appears like a dead corpse nailed to a cross with some parts of his body missing and others hanging loose. Nevertheless the maimed Radek urges Sanders to take him back into the jungle. Sanders finds himself trapped between the fear of the physical mutation and the man's wish to get back [Ballard 1984a: 146 ff]. Arriving at Mount Royal Sanders learns that Suzanne Clair accepts the correspondences between changes in nature and the mutation of the human body and has lost all fear [Ballard 1984a: 157]. On the contrary: She yearns for the possibilities of metaphysical relief. Consequently, she disappears into the jungle leaving Sanders and her husband behind at the leper station. [Ballard 1984a: 179] Sanders has yet to learn to deal with

For Vaughan the car crash and his own sexuality had made their final marriage. I remember him at night with nervous young women in the crushed rear compartments of abandoned cars in breakers' yards, and their photographs in the postures of uneasy sex acts. Their tight faces and strained thighs were lit by his Polaroid flash, like startled survivors of a submarine disaster. These aspiring whores, whom Vaughan met in the all-night cafés and supermarkets of London Airport, were the first cousins of the patients illustrated in his surgical textbook. During his studied courtship of injured women, Vaughan was obsessed with the buboes of gas bacillus infections, by facial injuries and genital wounds. [Ballard 1985a: 13]

The bleakness of the concrete landscape serves as the background for the deviant sexuality of the characters and contrasts it with the possibilities of a consumer society: The airport being a transitory pathway allowing people to go anywhere; the supermarket with its shopping potential and the all-night cafés offering a non-stop service. But the characters in Ballard's novel have lost every interest in the original functions of these places. They do not get away from their enclosed environment, they do not purchase anything of importance, and they do not visit the cafés for entertainment. The strange gap between the urban landscape and the characters underlines Ballard's scepticism concerning the manifold range of options in consumer society: Having travelled everywhere, having bought everything and having been entertained in every conceivable manner, the diversity at disposal has lost its function. Coming home from the hospital near the airport, Ballard looks down from the balcony of his apartment and reflects upon the lack of involvement between the cityscape and the identities of its inhabitants:

Our own apartment house at Drayton Park stood a mile north of the airport in a pleasant island of modern housing units, landscaped filling stations and supermarkets, shielded from the distant bulk of London by an access spur of the northern circular motorway which flowed past us on its elegant concrete pillars. I gazed down at this immense motion sculpture, whose traffic deck seemed almost higher than the balcony rail against which I leaned. I began to orientate myself again round its reassuring bulk, its familiar perspective of speed, purpose and direction. The houses of our friends, the wine store where I bought our liquor, the small art-cinema where Catherine and I saw American avant-garde films and German sex-instruction movies, together realigned themselves around the palisades of the motorway. I realized that human inhabitants of this technological landscape no longer provided its sharpest pointers, its keys to the border-zones of identity. The amiable saunter of Frances Waring, bored wife of my partner, through the turnstiles of the local supermarket, the domestic wrangles of our well-to-do neighbours in our apartment house, all the hopes and fancies of this placid suburban enclave, drenched in a thousand infidelities, faltered before the solid reality of the motorway embankments, with their constant and unswerving geometry, and before the finite areas of the car-park aprons. [Ballard 1985a: 41 – 42]

As a consequence, Ballard's characters move like disoriented guinea pigs through a maze of urban architecture and are thrown back on their inner drives as a means of finding orientation in a new kind of psycho-pathological

sexuality. In his novels *Crash*, *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* Ballard puts his characters into a hermetically sealed world [cf. Körber 1985: 138]. They are separated from their environment, and the only way they make contact with each other is via psycho-pathological sexuality. After Vaughan's death at the end of the novel there is nothing left of the eschatological and utopian expectation that the 'imaginary places' offered to the characters. The urban landscape of concrete, incorporating the past (water) and the future (sand), is man made-hell. The characters are trapped and go nowhere. Ballard looks at the urban landscape once more. What he sees is not a mythological vision but an urban hallucination:

Glass aeroplanes climbed into the sky above the airport. Through the brittle air I watched the traffic move along the motorway. The memories of the beautiful vehicles I had seen soaring down the concrete lanes transformed these once-oppressive jams and tailbacks into an endless illuminated queue, patiently waiting for some invisible slip road into the sky. From the balcony of my apartment I gazed down across the landscape below, trying to find this paradisaical incline, a milewide gradient supported on the shoulders of two archangelic figures, on to which all the traffic in the world might flow. [Ballard 1985a: 159]

*Concrete Island* is basically a reworking of the genre of a castaway story. The architect Robert Maitland crashes his car into a traffic island. Due to his injuries and the reckless traffic surrounding the island Maitland cannot leave the patch of waste ground enclosed by motorways and overpasses. At first sight it seems that *Concrete Island* develops further the themes and motifs of *Crash* [cf. Körber 1985: 137]. But at a second look the little plot of untamed nature forgotten by and closed off from the cityscape may be regarded as an echo of the 'imaginary places' Ballard had sketched in his earlier novels [cf. Keim 1983: 308 ff.]. But neither does *Concrete Island* deal with the merging of technology and the human psyche, nor with the fusion of the protagonists with nature. All elements appear separated from each other as the setting of the island within the urban landscape suggests:

Shielding his eyes from the sunlight, Maitland saw that he had crashed into a small traffic island, some two hundred yards long and triangular in shape, that lay in the waste ground between three converging motorway routes. The apex of the island pointed towards the west and the declining sun, whose warm light lay over the distant television studios at White city. The base was formed by the southbound overpass that swept past seventy feet above the ground. Supported on massive concrete pillars, its six lanes of traffic were sealed

from view by the corrugated metal splash-guards installed to protect the vehicles below. [Ballard 1984b: 11 – 12]

What follows is a genuine mocking of genre literature. The wrecked car is worthless to the castaway; he uses its parts to light a signal fire or to write messages on the concrete walls with little pieces of rubber [Ballard 1984b: 53 – 54]. Soon Maitland finds out that he is not alone on the island. He receives help from Jane Sheppard, a dubious fugitive from society and from Proctor, a former trapeze artist, whose grotesque appearance and imbecility make him live outside society. What ensues is a power struggle between Maitland and the two misfits. At first Maitland depends on the help of Sheppard and Proctor, but soon their roles are reversed. Maitland makes the island his own. The allusions to well-known castaway stories are too obvious to be analyzed in detail. The only psychological development of importance is Maitland's discovery of his primitive self. At the end of the novel, after Sheppard has left the island and Proctor has died in an accident, Maitland decides to stay on the island until he feels he can leave without depending on others [Ballard 1984b: 176].

It seems that the novels *Concrete Island* and *The Drought* located in the middle of each period within Ballard's work are, as it were, resting points. As to their literary qualities they fall a little behind compared with the first and the last novel of each trilogy. In the same manner in which *The Crystal World* took *The Drowned World* a step further, *High-Rise*, the last novel of Ballard's urban trilogy, also presents a climax. The hermetic cityscape of *Crash*, resembling a maze or labyrinth from which the characters are detached and cannot escape, is turned into the claustrophobic extreme of a multi-storey building. The psychological impact of the urban landscape on its inhabitants is revealed in more detail: they actually merge with the building and the only kinetic energy in the novel is directed upwards towards the sky:

Later, as he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous three months. Now that everything had returned to normal, he was surprised that there had been no obvious beginning, no point beyond which there lives had moved into a clearly more sinister dimension. With its forty floors and thousand apartments, its supermarket and swimming-pools, bank and junior school – all in effect abandoned in the sky – the high-rise offered more than enough opportunities for violence and confrontation. [Ballard 1985b: 7]

As in *Crash* the opening sequence of *High-Rise* sums up the main themes and motifs of the novel: Dr. Robert Laing, one of the viewpoint characters of the story, has moved into a multi-storey building that offers every conceivable convenience to its tenants. Violence has resulted from confrontations between

the different parties but has eventually calmed down. We learn all this from a character who is sitting on his balcony eating a dog. Something must have changed.

Dr Robert Laing, a medical professor at a university in London, has moved into the multi-storey building after the divorce from his wife. He enjoys the vicinity to the university, the conveniences offered to him and above all the isolation. From very early on he feels the impact of the gigantic dimension of the building:

He leaned out over the rail and peered up at the face of the building, carefully counting the balconies. As usual, though, the dimensions of the forty-storey block made his head reel. Lowering his eyes to the tiled floor, he steadied himself against the door pillar. The immense volume of open space that separated the building from the neighbouring high-rise a quarter of a mile away unsettled his balance. At times he felt that he was living in the gondola of a Ferris wheel permanently suspended three hundred feet above the ground. [Ballard 1985b: 8]

It is of course one of the peculiarities of multi-storey buildings that their dimensions expand vertically instead of horizontally. Thus a high-rise creates the optical illusion of appearing infinite whereas the space it really embraces is clearly defined. This is especially true for those multi-storey buildings that offer all kinds of services to its tenants. Future residents are its customers. Along with shopping malls or multiplex cinemas their architecture is closely aligned with the identity of customers already before they actually enter the building itself. During the stage of architectural design the open space was mapped out by architects and marketers with regard to the various levels of available identities. A high-rise or a complex of multi-storey buildings such as the Barbican Estate in London represents the ultimate consumer landscape. The high-rise in Ballard's story corresponds to the idea of identity constructs on various levels. It is built for the well-to-do young urban professionals as its reference group. Tenants are subdivided into the three classical sociological groups: lower, middle and upper classes. This division depends on income and vocation and mirrors the way space has been allocated to the inhabitants. Air hostesses and film technicians live on the lower floors, lawyers, accountants and doctors occupy the middle floors, and small tycoons, actresses and careerist academics form a kind of oligarchy on the upper floors of the building. [Ballard 1985b: 53] This division also applies to the planning of the car park. Residents from the higher apartments park closest to the building and its elevators.

Predictably, the traditional subdivision into classes among the same reference group of residents as customers leads to conflicts. What starts as a series of noisy parties reaches its first climax when an Afghan hound is found drifting dead in the swimming pool after a blackout in the building. [Ballard

1985b: 21] The dog was killed by Richard Wilder, a small-time filmmaker, as an reaction to the quarrels between residents with children (lower floors) and dog owners without children (upper floors). The rivalries grow, and more provocation and violence ensues. The school auditorium, for example, where educational films were shown is turned into a porn-cinema by members from the lower floors, who also participate in the movies. [Ballard 1985b: 31] A first climax is reached when a man is thrown from one of the balconies of the upper floor apartments. [Ballard 1985b: 41] A little earlier Laing observes the pressure of shifting loyalties among the residents on the middle floors who have been beset by an unusual calm:

Alternatively, their real needs might emerge later. The more arid and affectless life became in the high-rise, the greater the possibilities it offered. By its very efficiency, the high-rise took over the task of maintaining the social structure that supported them all. For the first time it removed the need to repress every kind of anti-social behaviour, and left them free to explore any deviant or wayward impulses. It was precisely in these areas that the most important and most interesting aspects of their lives would take place. 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 technology had done to make possible the expression of a truly 'free' psychopathology. [Ballard 1985b: 36]

Soon everything in the building goes completely out of hand. Under the leadership of the filmmaker Richard Wilder the lower floors start a revolt and try to fight their way up. The upper floors under the leadership of Anthony Royal, one of the architects of the high-rise, fight back. People are molested, hurt, raped and raids of their apartments take place at night. What at first seems to re-enforce the already existing class barriers leads to a violent and archaic state of tribal anarchy. [Ballard 1985b: 75, 130, 133] In general Ballard achieves a closeness between the characters and the urban landscape that is intimate and less detached than in *Crash*. In *Crash* the characters try to become one with the car but the machine remains only a technological device of the urban landscape. In *High-Rise* the multi-storey building seems organic, and long before the conditions turn into mayhem, the architect Royal perceives the failures in his design as some kind of sickness in the building itself:

The air conditioning had ceased to function, and the absence of its vague familiar hum – once a source of minor irritation – made Royal restless. However reluctantly, he was now forced to recognize what he had been trying to repress for the past month, despite the evidence of his eyes.



This huge building he had helped to design was moribund, its vital functions fading one by one – the water-pressure falling as the pumps faltered, the electrical sub-stations on each floor switching themselves off, the elevators stranded in their shafts. [Ballard 1985b: 68]

It seems that the idea of the ‘sick building syndrome’ is explored here in the full sense of the term: The high-rise – ill-conceived as it was – is technically defective whereas its inhabitants are mentally defective. The multi-storey building represents a self-contained world and *High-Rise* appears to be the most comprehensive novel of Ballard’s urban trilogy.

### Exit

The purpose of my essay was two-fold: First, I have analyzed Ballard’s writings in order to discuss ambivalent landscapes. I have shown in what ways nature in surreal landscapes as imagined by the author is closely related to the psychological development of the characters. In Ballard’s earlier works as a novelist nature retakes civilization and characters recall former modes of existence, their biological origin or possibilities for new forms of life in the future. During the mid-1970s Ballard changed his focus and created visions of the cityscape as a world made of concrete. Here urban architecture and modern technology dominate nature. The only way out for man in this alarming scenario is to practise and yield to self-destructive psycho-pathologies.

Second, my aim was to understand Ballard as a writer of original literature and not as a writer of Science Fiction. The juxtaposition of natural landscapes and urban cityscapes also touched upon a number of intertextual topics such as Romanticism – something entirely overlooked in secondary literature on Ballard so far – the fine arts and psychology.

Ballard is still writing and being published. I hope there will be more academic research in the future.

### Bibliography:

#### *Primary Literature:*

Ballard, James Graham. *The Atrocity Exhibition*. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1970.

----. *Love & Napalm – Export USA*. New York: Grove, 1972.

----. *The Drowned World*. London: Dent & Sons, 1983 (Reprint) (New York: Berkley, 1962).

----. *The Crystal World*. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1984a (Reprint) (1966).

----. *Concrete Island*. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1984b (Reprint) (1974).

----. *The Drought*. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1984c (Reprint) (1965).

----. *Crash*. London: Triad/Panther, 1985a (Reprint) (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1973).

----. *High-Rise*. London: Triad/Panther, 1985b (Reprint) (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1975).

### *Secondary Literature*

1. *Ballard, James Graham*. "Introduction to the French Edition of Crash (1974)." // *Crash*. 5 – 9.
2. *Fox, Lynne*. James Graham Ballard Interviewed by Lynne Fox (1991). // *Vale, Vic* (ed.). 162 – 98.
3. *Heuermann, Hartmut* (ed.). *Der Science-Fiction-Roman in der Angloamerikanischen Literatur*. Düsseldorf, 1986.
4. *Iwoleit, Michael, K.* "Raum, Zeit und Entropie. Eine Einführung in J. G. Ballards Kurzgeschichtenwerk". // *Körber, Joachim* (ed.). 9 – 23.
5. *Keim, Heinrich*. *New Wave – die Avantgarde der modernen anglo-amerikanischen SF?*. Meiningen, 1983.
6. *Keim, Heinrich*. "James Graham Ballard, Crash!" // *Heuermann, Hartmut* (ed.). 346 – 54.
7. *Körber, Joachim* (ed.). *J. G. Ballard: Der Visionär des Phantastischen*. Meiningen: Corian Verlag, 1985.
8. *Körber, Joachim*. "Die hermetische Welt der Moderne" // *Körber, Joachim* (ed.). 133 – 41. 9. *Macaulay, Rose*. *Pleasure of Ruins*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953.
9. *Rottensteiner, Franz*. "Die Einheit der Welt. Zu einigen Romanen von J. G. Ballard." // *Körber, Joachim* (ed.). 123 – 32.
10. *Vale, Vic*. (Ed.) : *J. G. Ballard Conversations*. San Francisco: RE/Search, 2005.

### Films

*Crash*, Canada/Great Britain: Fine Line Features, 1996, D: David Cronenberg.  
*Empire of the Sun*, USA: Warner Brothers, 1987, D: Steven Spielberg.