

**”Sex(ual identity) Is Dead: J.G. Ballard’s
Post-Humanist Myths of the Near Future,”**

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Out of nowhere,
To Jovan Kostov,
Topsy-turvy.

Sex (ual identity) is Dead :
J. G. Ballard's Post-Humanist Myths of the Near Future

Didier Girard

Je marchais fier parmi les héros,
Le ciel brillait d'étoiles,
Et une étoile, comme un héros du ciel d'Anou
Est tombée vers moi.
J'ai voulu la porter, elle était trop lourde.
J'ai voulu la pousser, je n'ai pu la bouger.
Autour d'elle, les gens du pays s'assemblaient
Et lui baisaient les pieds.
Je l'ai aimée et je me suis penchée sur elle
Comme on se penche sur une femme
Je l'ai soulevée et déposée à tes pieds
Et toi tu l'as rendue égale à moi.
<...>
Des hommes-scorpions gardent sa porte
Ils inspirent la peur et la terreur
Leur vue c'est la mort
Leur majesté terrifiante règne sur les montagnes.
Ils gardent le soleil
A son lever et à son coucher.
Lorsque Gilgamesh les voit
Son visage pâlit d'effroi
Mais il reprend sa force et s'approche d'eux.

The study, initially intended to explore the mythic dimension in the
twenty five — or so — novels or collections of short stories by J. G. Ballard from a

purely literary point of view, has evolved to another level of analysis by considering that the author's output for about fifty years is one of the very rare artistic cases in the twentieth century which reads like a head-on confrontation with a single and simple truth : humans do rely on myth-making to achieve, on the one-hand, some kind of self-assertion or definition by building up a persona (the correlative process being structuring) and, on the other hand, to homogenize the world in which they live, in other words to locate themselves in it or to fuse it with their own inner worlds. Because of its subject-matter which is always quite actualized, recognizable, palpable, sometimes obscene and trivial, this work has been very popular ; probably because of the brutal provocation and dream (or nightmare)-like quality of his images and ruthless treatment of anything "human", the author is at the same time experimental and vastly ignored by scholars. Ballard resorts to his own brand of myth-making not to ironize on the comic frailties of human nature but to expose more heterological facts, observable in and inseparable from human nature, mere variations — depending on the adaptation to historical and technological circumstances — on the same motif, namely excremental functions in Man : sex, laughter, shocks, murderous or mutilation drives, breakdowns, nervous or arterial disfunctions etc. Despite its somehow shocking content, Ballard's fiction can also be singled out by its impurity as the material used by the author is not only literary and the genres themselves in which he weaves his personal visions can go from science fiction to detective novel and many other textual forms. Another characteristic of its impurity has something to do with the author's use of a strange, often repulsive to many, indifferenciation he shows in his treatment of the organic and of the mechanic, especially when the human body is involved : it is often described in its interaction with plants, machines, electronic

components, the natural elements, pieces of architecture etc., anything in fact that is usually considered as impossible to fuse with one's or some other's body, what is called in French a *corps étranger*. Even stranger in our present globally tolerant society is the fact that the film adapted from the novel *Crash* is still officially banned in some areas of central London — a rather rare thing nowadays for any kind of film — and that Ballard's experimental *The Atrocity Exhibition* has become something of a cult book after many years of censorship in the late 60's and 70's. So what does the obscene really consist of in the case of this novelist as everything in his *œuvre* seems to be made to find an echo in a world which celebrates multiple identities and self-propelled avatars as passports to many different layers of reality or sur-realities ? Today, critical debates abound on these much hyped issues and despite the scepticism inherent to homogeneous post-modern approaches, there usually is an undisputed optimism among experts in mankind's ability to integrate and absorb the vertiginous potentialities of new technologies gradually. Hopefully, Ballard's illustrated edition of the *Atrocity Exhibition* and the mental images disseminated throughout the pages of his novels are there to remind us the frailty of the human body, hence both its formidable complexity and erotic powers as the main component of sexual desire is, whether we like it or not, violence of a heterological kind and love is to be understood as a multi-optional mental and emotional retro-process (understood in the sense of a retro-virus for instance). Virtual realities may indeed offer human beings with a myriad of new objects and routes of desire but they also contain the danger of eradicating the desiring-stage in human development. It is also one of the great challenges of the present days : sex has always been used as either a cop-out or as a subversive human activity the purpose of which being to counteract or undermine

stereotypes and established stifling social structures ; today, we might fear with Ballard that sex and its suburbanisation through the democratization of softened and safer versions of sexual perversions might indeed be part of the big boredom program.

As a genre, science-fiction, if theoretically accepted and discussed, remains on the whole, a sub-cultural movement even if we live in a VR age, when the 60s' dreams of parallel worlds have not only come true but also become common and quite vulgar in "real" daily life. No doubt, there is much material in science-fiction to consider if we want to deal with the values attached to sex and identity in our present societies. Secondly, it is astonishing to imagine anyone who has read a single early book by Ballard who would not have grasped at once the transformation that he has imposed on the genre (not to mention the fact that more than half of his numerous novels are not science-fiction narratives at all!) : there is no intergalactic war, no space shuttle, no alien but more disquieting truths : the alien is the human — not to say neo-humanist — being ; the time is that of the near future and the space invaded is that of the inner voyage : as William Burroughs once remarked on *The Atrocity Exhibition*, "The line between inner and outer landscapes is breaking down", a statement on porosity which is in itself an invitation to explore what is *per se* a matter of interaction with something external, whether fantasized or solid, in other words, sex. The author in question has developed worlds and inner spaces marked by a very special and radical kind of post-humanism, a term which requires some kind of attempt of a definition as the term seems to cover so many different things in today's critical discourses. To put it in a nutshell, Ballard's brand of post-humanism could be said to be a form of post-apocalypticism ; in other words, it is no so much that there is "no

future” in store, neither an “Apocalypse, now!”, but rather that ideals, hopes and phallogocentric beliefs in collective solutions would be far too disingenuous to be true and relevant. With authors and artists such as Ballard, Burroughs, Will Self, Irvine Welsh, pop-art artists and a few nihilist rock and punk poets, ranging from Patty Smith to Marilyn Manson or Trent Raznor, the aim of post-humanist artistic visions or expressions appears to resume its somewhat romantic function : a form of subversive resistance (to a ‘positivist’, ‘progressive’, ‘democratically orientated’ high-tech world — all adjectives to be understood at least in the public (re)presentation of this world —) taking place after centuries of a humanist ideal which is quite dubious, ambiguous and definitely not operational (although universally condoned by the representatives or agents of today’s ruling classes) in the daily lives of inhabitants of the earth at the turn of the twenty-first century — the social, cultural and economic context offering in fact more constraints than nourishment to the individual. This is what Ballard calls “suburbanization” a phenomenon that he predicts will soon be applied to the soul as well, and which marks the general atmosphere of all his novels from *The Drought* to *Rushing to Paradise*. As an inheritor of the surrealist tradition, Ballard has never seen a clear-cut partition between imagination and technology, which in itself is far from being an original stance as science fiction has always been a by-street of the main street of literary history and also, at the same time, the only art form — together maybe with some poetry — capable of blending these two qualities of human industry.

Ballard has also been very busy at installing a fictional world in which the porosity between inanimate reality and biological mutability is overwhelming. His

latest novel *Super Cannes* is still a fiction which operates on the utopian/dystopian axis but in this case, an apparently utopian and yet actual retirement resort is in effect the villain. This is also what draws a link between science-fiction and another genre that Ballard has exploited for years : the detective novel or to be more precise the pulp narrative, another sub-genre or should we call it another avatar of the development of the various forms of mass-culture. "Ten thousand years in the future, long after the Côte d'Azur had been abandoned, the first explorers would puzzle over these empty pits, with their eroded frescoes of tritons and stylised fish, inexplicably hauled up the mountainsides like aquatic sundials or the altars of a bizarre religion devised by a race of visionary geometers." Thus we are in familiar and unfamiliar territory, in a world we think we know but which is perhaps meaningful only retroactively. And such is the case with virtual realities, too. The kind of virtual reality Ballard is interested in — he hates all the VR films Hollywood has been producing over the years and on which teenagers from the global village and professional observers of the related phenomena alike have been feeding their imaginations — is a-temporal as he tends to treat things external (traditionally considered to be “reality”) in the reverse : what is heralded as reality should be first approached as a big superimposition of fictions (politics, the media, any kind of corporate discourse, medical reports, environmentalist issues, global humanitarian hazards, scientific discoveries, etc. leading to the awareness that the less commented upon, the “rawer”, the more fictional information is) whereas anything coming from the inside is much more reliable in terms of reality : the body and its functioning, obsessions, dreams or pathologies. In that view, the problematics of sex, gender and sexual identity boil down to a literal negation of the notion of sexual identity or such notions as “psychological sex” which are nothing but mere

social constructs, however deviant they might be from the norm : In fact, sexuality is what you do with parts of your body interacting with animate or inanimate objects of desire whereas identity rather appears as a by-product of consciousness in which sex and sexuality play one role among many others. That is why the notion of totem as the link between the individual and the collective myths (any 'desire' being the projection and distortion of one's image of one's own physical body) is so essential in such a debate. In other words, what we have to consider is a form of *Cogito ergo sum* as revised by the surrealists : " I see therefore I imagine " A seminal book from the surrealist library can be of some help here : Hans Bellmer's *Petite anatomie de l'inconscient physique* literally applies this motto onto a clinical and poetical representation of the mechanics of sex and sexual drives. Ballard is very much indebted to the surrealist tradition, there is first of all in his fiction some embarrassing dead-pan Glen Baxter kind of humour that might descend into the ludicrous at any moment but never does. A much more relevant comic analogy is to be found with Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* as this text is a comedy in which the narrator picks up all possible myths to rework and rearrange them to show what life is about and especially the playful cruelty with which some treat each other as developed for instance in the story of Cupid and Psyche but also those of Thelyphron or of Aristomenes. Ballard is also a mythographer in so far as he dwells on an irresistible — although somehow repulsive — human/too human fascination for cannibalism, a theme which haunted the surrealists and helps us to understand how we are related to mythmaking in order to get closer to identification, whether sexually or otherwise in our relation to others. With René Crevel, for instance, the taste of the flesh in the desired raises the poet to a state of divine power through the absorption/consumption of the other. The idea was

not new, Montaigne many years before the surrealists had written that “L’humanité est anthropophage” but the artistic representation of such drives was premonitory in the iconography it installed. Montaigne’s famous statement might prove to be even more relevant and less and less metaphorical in the future to come.

In *The Kindness of Women*, which is autobiographical, one can read “ <as students> began to dissect this unknown woman, opening flops of skin in her limbs, neck and abdomen, she seemed to undress in a last act of self-revelation, unpacking herself of all the mortal elements in her life.” In the same book, the reader will go through the description of the narrator’s wife’s corpse (163), will not fail to be shocked by the author’s references to Burroughs’s flirting with SM practices or Dalí’s concerns with voyeurism and to go through the incestuous act of sodomy (189), shortly followed by a scene made of a car crash accident which triggers off unease but also sexual arousal.

One of the key sentences at the end of the novel then reads : “Right until its end, the decade continued to unravel its lurid mythologies”. When we turn to fiction, things become much more disturbing as writing departs from some horrific human experience, that of the writer who is a man after all (Ballard as a public figure once wrote : "Fiction is a branch of neurology : the scenarios of nerve and blood vessel are the written mythologies of memory and desire") to enter realms of another nature : in books such as the *Atrocity Exhibition*, perspectives loom larger, far larger, from downright social and political to something visionary and almost poetical. In fact, the obscene in Ballard mainly results from the combination of a post-humanist,

post-apocalyptic melancholy and a sheer lack of sublimation. In an interview on William Burroughs' work, Ballard commented : "I've always used a kind of scientific vocabulary and a scientific approach to show the subject matter in a fresh light. <...> Now, you get an unnerving window onto a new kind of reality. I did this a lot in *The Atrocity Exhibition*." So if one flips through the pages of this book, one will quickly realize that it is anything but a catalogue of human perversions or exotic exhibits but rather in a Burton kind of way an anatomy of bodies and their perceptions, stretched to a collective consciousness of the world around them, the space and time that they inhabit but rediscovered in all their violence and erotic dimension. So of course, VR beings, cybersex, and any A.I. assisted gadget or half-human partners can have an erotic and sexual function for human beings of the near future. It would be naive to believe that mere biological switch from one gender to another by an author or even one character of a novel or an autobiography through transexuality automatically implies some kind of erotic effect in the reading act. The present revival of interest (or fascination) with anything related to cross-gender is perhaps to be read in a social, economic, maybe Marxist view, and would probably reveal an opportunistic attempt by the gay community to "protect" a sub-sub culture that it tries to establish in order to assess its own recently-gained economic and ideological power. More generally speaking, today's "hot" chat-rooms on the net, supposedly shameless blogs and pornographic websites convey less erotica as such than a melancholy catalogue of bodyparts and predictable combinations of poses. An anatomy of bodies' autopsy is still to be written or artistically expressed with adequate and imaginative VR tools. No context makes no sex.

The sexual identity or orientation, as we all know has nothing to do with biological data but it might also be regarded soon as having very little too with social constructs or persona. Ballard as well as most his characters are what is traditionally described as heterosexual and yet episodes such as the following one are not rare in his work :

I visualized his handsome mouth locked against my own, strong teeth cutting my gums. In many ways Stark resembled a muscular, blond-haired woman. I felt attracted to him, not by some deviant homosexual urge the crash had jerked loose from my psyche, but by an almost brotherly intimacy with his body, with his thighs and shoulders, arms and buttocks, as if we had shared a bedroom through our childhoods. (39) <...> For a few final seconds he soared within me, as I rode his body through its last night. Riding him, I became an androgyne of multiple sex, an angelic figure raised upon the body of this young man. I embraced him within me as I embraced myself. (TB 180)

So, the criterium on which sexuality is described in Ballard's novels does not depend on sexual identity but should be considered in terms of penetration : is there any, is there any possibility for human entities to visit one another ? If so, what, who, which penetrates whom or what? What is the mode of this penetration? Is the penetration purely physical or is it assisted by other devices? As a matter of fact the only eroticism present in Ballard's and maybe in the near future with virtual realities permeating our world will be one which does not consider only the purely physically sexual aspect? Sexuality has a value, though, it establishes the conditions of a psychic phenomenon known since Jung as catatonia : "An undefined anxiety has begun to spread across the deserted square. The symmetry and regularity of the arcades conceal an intense inner violence ; this is the face of catatonic withdrawal. This space within this painting, like the intervals within the arcades, contains an oppressive negative time. The smooth, egg-shaped heads of the mannequins lack all

features and organs of sense, but instead are marked with cryptic signs. These mannequins are human beings from whom all time has been eroded, and reduced to the essence of their own geometries.”

William Burroughs in his introduction to *The Atrocity Exhibition*, insisted on what he read as the major idiosyncrasies of the book which he included in the great erotic writings of the twentieth century all marked by the great twin leitmotifs of the 20th century : sex and paranoia. Among them, he sees “the non sexual roots of sexuality are explored with a surgeon’s precision” and he believes “this book stirs sexual depths untouched by the hardest-core illustrated porn” leading to the conclusion that sexual arousal results from the repetition and impact of image.

Pornography and not eroticism is at the core of Ballard’s artistic gesture. In *Running Wild*, one character says : “If you want to find the real porn have a look underneath”. I pushed back the diving caps and lifted out the top three magazines. Below them were a dozen copies of various gun and rifle publications. *Guns and Ammo*, *Commando Small Arms*, *The Rifleman*, and *Combat Weapons of the Waffen SS*. Speaking about his novel *Crash*, in which Vaughan, a TV scientist experiments with erotic atrocities among crash victims, each more sinister than the last and ultimately, craves a union of blood, semen and engine coolant in a head-on collision with Elizabeth Taylor, Ballard said : “As such the novel has a political role quite apart from its sexual content, but I would still like to think that *Crash* is the first pornographic novel based on technology. In a sense, pornography is the most political form of fiction, dealing with how we use and exploit each other, in the most urgent

and ruthless way.” And it is true that the reader witnesses such scenes as those picturing the lungs of elderly men punctured by door handles, the chests of young women impaled by steering-columns, the cheeks of handsome youths pierced by the chromium latches of quarter lights. For Ballard, these wounds were the keys to a new sexuality born from a perverse technology.

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* The titles with an asterisk are collections of short stories. All the other ones are novels except in the case of *The Atrocity Exhibition* the structure of which is very singular. James Graham Ballard is also the author of two autobiographical bestsellers that are not considered in this study : *Empire of the Sun* 1984 & *The Kindness of Women* 1991.