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# **‘The landscape is coded’: Visual Culture and the Alternative Worlds of J.G. Ballard’s**

## **Early Fiction**

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Jeannette Baxter, in her comprehensive evaluation of J.G. Ballard’s relationship with visual culture, states that Ballard’s fiction constitutes a ‘a radical Surrealist experiment in the writing of post-war history and culture’<sup>1</sup> and argues that Ballard displays a perpetual ‘desire to penetrate the myriad surface realities of our disturbed modernity, to tap into its hidden subtexts and to mobilise its unconscious energies.’<sup>2</sup> In Baxter’s view, Ballard adopts Surrealism’s ambition to juxtapose overt rationality with unconscious desire and applies it to the specificity of postwar culture as a way of infiltrating underlying codes of meaning beneath ‘the consumer landscape.’<sup>3</sup> While Baxter is correct to cite Surrealism as a key influence on Ballard’s literary experimentations, it is also important to recognise that Ballard’s ‘painterly’ fictional landscapes incorporate a collection of artistic inspirations to create estranged or ‘alternative’ visions of contemporaneous culture. Keeping in mind Roger Luckhurst’s argument that Ballard’s fiction represents ‘the place of *the hinge*’<sup>4</sup>, this chapter will focus on three early narratives and consider how Ballard’s unique near-future landscapes emerge from a collision of various artistic and literary forces. By fusing perspectives in visual art with science fictional motifs, Ballard’s early narratives produced unsettling socio-political messages that concurrently challenged literary orthodoxies during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeannette Baxter. 2009. *J.G. Ballard’s Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship*, Surrey, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Baxter, *J.G. Ballard’s Surrealist Imagination*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Baxter, *J.G. Ballard’s Surrealist Imagination*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Luckhurst. 1997. *‘The Angle Between Two Walls’: The Fiction of J.G. Ballard*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, xiii.

Exploring Ballard's first published short story 'Prima Belladonna' (1956), his ecological disaster novel *The Drowned World* (1962), and Cold War meditation 'The Terminal Beach' (1964), this chapter will consider how each work interacts with both Surrealism and developing imagery within Science Fiction and Pop Art (specifically the work of the Independent Group). In assessing Ballard's wilful mixing of styles this chapter will argue that Ballard's fiction supplies an alternative literary representation of a world grappling with the emergence of consumer culture and the concurrently 'hot' moments of the Cold War. These science fictional near futures provide both a reflective critique of mid-twentieth century culture, while simultaneously, through applying the aesthetics of Pop Art and Surrealism, they deliver a revelatory exposition of the psychological forces undercutting human behaviour.

Ballard is often cast as one of the major figures in the development of the British New Wave in Science Fiction during the 1960s. His quartet of disaster novels published between 1962 and 1966, as well as his later collection of experimental stories which would form *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), represented a radical reorganisation of British SF to incorporate an avant-garde aesthetic. Nonetheless, Ballard also published SF stories throughout the late 1950s and it is appropriate to explore the domestic cultural environment from which his work emerged. Ballard spent his childhood and the Second World War in Shanghai and upon arriving in an austerity gripped Britain in 1946 noted how London 'looked like Bucharest with a hangover – heaps of rubble, an exhausted ferret-like people defeated by war and still deluded by Churchillian rhetoric, hobbling around a wasteland of poverty, ration books and grotesque social division.'<sup>5</sup> The malaise of postwar Britain, struggling to hold on to its empire and suffering social and economic hardship, failed to inspire Ballard who states in his autobiography that 'hope itself was rationed'<sup>6</sup> in the late 1940s. This sense of being an uneasy 'outsider' therefore prompted a marked reaction

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<sup>5</sup> J.G. Ballard. 1997. 'First Impressions of London', in *A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews*, London: Flamingo, 185.

<sup>6</sup> J.G. Ballard. 2008. *Miracles of Life: Shanghai to Shepperton*, London: Fourth Estate, 123.

in terms of the iconography and imagery that Ballard would latch on to and develop when writing his early fiction. From the beginning, Ballard's work sought to transcend Britain's social stasis, turning to the consumer landscape of the United States for an alternative visualisation of modernity as well as to the colourful visions of a hi-tech future in pulp SF magazines and the multifaceted collages and paintings of Pop Art and Surrealism.

While critical of Britain's social mood in the late 1940s, the transformative vocabulary of Ballard's early work was also a reaction to a crisis in British fiction in the years following the war. Lyndsey Stonebridge and Marina MacKay argue that the 'historical resonances'<sup>7</sup> of two world wars and the onset of a potentially apocalyptic new conflict left literary fiction grasping for an appropriate socio-political response. Robert Hewison explains that the subsequent re-energising of realist style in Britain during the 1950s compounded a feeling that when confronted with the challenge of postwar representation, writers often sought 'the recovery of old forms, rather than the evolution of new ones.'<sup>8</sup> The conservatism of 'serious' fiction in the fifties signalled, for Ballard, Britain's wider cultural unease towards the re-alignments taking place in postwar western society – particularly the growth of a technologically driven consumer culture. Influenced by the popular magazines he read whilst serving in Canada with the RAF, Ballard resultantly turned to Science Fiction, which he saw as the only literary genre that was appropriately tuned to contemporary culture. While Ballard was dismissive of the prevalence handed to space operas in certain SF publications, he praised the near future narratives he encountered for their ability to examine the workings of developing social paradigms:

These I seized on and began to devour. Here was a form of fiction that was actually about the present day, and often as elliptical and ambiguous as Kafka. It recognised a

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<sup>7</sup> Lyndsey Stonebridge and Marina MacKay. 2007. 'Introduction: British Fiction After Modernism', in Lyndsey Stonebridge and Marina MacKay (eds) *British Fiction After Modernism*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Hewison. 1988. *In Anger: Culture in the Cold War 1945 – 60*, London: Methuen, xi.

world dominated by consumer advertising, of democratic government mutating into public relations. This was a world of cars, offices, highways, airlines and supermarkets that we actually lived in, but was completely missing from almost all serious fiction.<sup>9</sup>

What is noticeable about Ballard's description of these themes is their interconnection with a cultural terrain influenced by image, advertising and simulacra. The cultures of consumerism which crossed the Atlantic with increasing regularity in the late 1950s were not, for Ballard, an inherent threat to British cultural life but a much needed glimpse of a possible future that countered the greyness of Britain in the postwar years.

It is unsurprising therefore that a large proportion of Ballard's early short stories and particularly those that would later be collected in *Vermillion Sands* (1971), look to American settings dominated by consumerism and hi-technology for inspiration. Yet, what also underlies the imagery of these texts is an alignment with a certain strand of visual culture emerging from Britain in the 1950s. The *This is Tomorrow* exhibition held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1956 represented for Ballard 'the most important event in the visual arts in Britain until the opening of the Tate Modern.'<sup>10</sup> The exhibition itself displayed works by a range of artists, graphic designers and architects, many of whom were loosely associated with the Independent Group. The event aimed to exhibit what the press release called 'the Art of the Future'<sup>11</sup> with the artworks on display engaging with the intricacies of developing popular trends. Ballard attended the exhibition which, among its various rooms, included the collages of Richard Hamilton, an 'as found' installation of ephemeral objects by Alison and Peter Smithson, and Robby the Robot from the American SF movie *Forbidden Planet*. One of the most famous images from the

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<sup>9</sup> Ballard, *Miracles of Life*, 166.

<sup>10</sup> Ballard, *Miracles of Life*, 187.

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Alloway. 1990. 'Press Release for *This is Tomorrow*', in David Robbins (ed) *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 37.

exhibition was Hamilton's collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* which Ballard later declared to be 'the greatest ever work of pop art'<sup>12</sup>.

The appeal of these works to Ballard was located in their willingness to interact with American consumer culture, which was beginning to filter into Britain during the mid-to-late fifties. For Ballard, artists like Hamilton were tapping not only into contemporary trends, but speculating on the near future. Indeed, Ballard comments specifically on the prescient quality of Hamilton's collage from the exhibition by noting that it 'depicted a world entirely constructed from popular advertising, and was a convincing vision of the future that lay ahead'<sup>13</sup>. Like Science Fiction, Pop Art was a form that openly contemplated and embraced the changing nature of the contemporary. It also shifted away from the trappings of an austere postwar Britain that was struggling to assert a definable national and global identity in the aftermath of an economically shattering war. Instead, such articulations of the contemporary were constructed according to the consumerist visions of American cultural life during the opening decades of the Cold War and supplied snapshots of a future removed from the social and political malaise of austerity Britain.

This Pop Art sensibility and in particular its expression of an ever-present consumer and leisure culture, is articulated in Ballard's first published story, 'Prima Belladonna', which was printed in *Science Fantasy* in 1956. The story is the first of a series of narratives set in the affluent resort, Vermillion Sands, seemingly located on the west coast of the United States. As described in the opening paragraphs of the story, Vermillion Sands and its residents are surrounded by technological opulence, yet feel a sense of listlessness and ennui:

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<sup>12</sup> Ballard, *Miracles of Life*, 187.

<sup>13</sup> Ballard, *Miracles of Life*, 188-9.

We spent most of our time in those days on the balcony of my apartment off Beach Drive, drinking beer [...]. None of the others did any work; Harry was an architect and Tony Miles sometimes sold a few ceramics to the tourists, but I usually put a couple of hours in at the shop each morning, getting off the foreign orders and turning the beer.<sup>14</sup>

The Vermillion Sands resort is governed, in Andrzej Gasiorek terms, ‘not by work but by leisure’<sup>15</sup>, with labour supplanted by conspicuous consumption. Ballard’s resort therefore sits in a liminal space between a utopian realm of pleasure and relaxation and a dystopian terrain of boredom and anomie, a feature that Tilman Osterwold marks as typical of Pop Art’s uncertain relationship with consumer culture, which stands ‘for both dreams and traumas, luxury and poverty.’<sup>16</sup> On a more overt visual level, the Vermillion Sands resort also pre-empted a later Pop Art style that would appear most prominently in the work of David Hockney in the late 1960s, with recognisable links being drawn between Ballard’s luxurious but decadent hinterland and Hockney’s curiously de-populated swimming pool and villa in his painting *A Bigger Splash* from 1967.

‘Prima Belladonna’ follows the narrator Steve and his two friends Tony and Harry whose languid existence within Vermillion Sands is temporarily ignited by the arrival of a mysterious female character named Jane Ciracylides. Similar to the female figures in the Pop Art collages of Eduardo Paolozzi and Richard Hamilton, Jane is represented as an evocative, enticing but ultimately mystifying figure, who casually enters the Vermillion Sands casino and astonishes the clientele with her remarkable voice:

The woman was strolling around the lounge, rearranging the furniture, wearing almost nothing except a large metallic hat. Even in shadow the sinuous lines of her thighs and

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<sup>14</sup> J.G. Ballard. 2006. ‘Prima Belladonna’, in *The Complete Short Stories: Volume One*, London: Harper Perennial, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Andrzej Gasiorek. 2005. *J.G. Ballard*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 26.

<sup>16</sup> Tilman Osterwold. 2003. *Pop Art*, Cologne: Taschen, 2003, 11.

shoulders gleamed gold and burning. She was a walking galaxy of light. Vermillion sands had never seen anything like her.<sup>17</sup>

In assessing the role of femininity in Pop Art politics, Cécile Whiting notes that postwar consumer culture ‘assumed that the principal consumer of quotidian objects of everyday life, and hence the consumer that mattered, was female.’<sup>18</sup> Jane is cast as a potent symbol of consumerist femininity – she is immediately contrasted with the lethargy and social impotence of the male figures, providing the necessary glamour to invigorate an otherwise anaemic cultural existence within Vermillion Sands.

Yet, Pop Art’s appropriation of the feminine through consumerism has remained problematic and this fraught relationship, which Whiting characterises as ‘multifaceted and vexed’<sup>19</sup>, is also recognisable in Ballard’s Pop Art inspired narrative. Jane’s overt appearance is comparable to that of a glossy magazine model, yet she simultaneously demonstrates mesmeric power and authority in manipulating the narrator, Steve, into carrying out her demands. An alternative way of considering Jane’s role in the narrative may therefore be to recognise her as part of Ballard’s initial investigation of, as Gasiorek argues, ‘metamorphosis and transfiguration.’<sup>20</sup> Jane, who Harry describes as ‘poetic, emergent, something straight out of the primal apocalyptic sea’<sup>21</sup>, represents for Gasiorek ‘an image of inexplicable sexual potency with the capacity to destabilise social relations and a dream figure who offers to re-enchant the world through the visions she induces.’<sup>22</sup> Jane’s siren-like voice, golden skin and captivating eyes that resemble ‘insect legs wavered delicately round two points of purple light’<sup>23</sup> make her as much a dream vision as she is symbolic of the glistening Pop Art or consumerist aesthetic. Her

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<sup>17</sup> Ballard, ‘Prima Belladonna’, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Cécile Whiting. 1998. *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender and Consumer Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Gasiorek, *J.G. Ballard*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Ballard, ‘Prima Belladonna’, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Gasiorek, *J.G. Ballard*, 27.

<sup>23</sup> Ballard, ‘Prima Belladonna’, 5.

mysterious departure at the story's conclusion necessitates an end to what Gasiorek describes as 'the visionary, sensual realm'<sup>24</sup> and a return to the unsatisfactory functions of the everyday.

While 'Prima Belladonna' was Ballard's first published short story and is a work that suggests he was still trying to locate his own distinct literary voice, it does nonetheless demonstrate his willingness to layer his fiction with a collection of cultural and visual references. The opulent suburbia of Vermillion Sands offers a useful articulation of a hi-tech, consumer led future, taking the contemporaneous aesthetic of Pop Art collage as a crucial reference point. The story's final representation of singing plants who communicate with the dream-like Jane also underlines Ballard's emerging eye for Surrealist re-assessments of postwar culture. 'Prima Belladonna' ultimately offers an early glimpse into Ballard's transgressive interpretation of the near future, characterising it as a place of not only technological change, but more importantly, as a site of psychological reorganisation and individual transformation.

Ballard's second novel *The Drowned World* (1962), which followed his commercially motivated work *The Wind from Nowhere* of the same year, has often been recognised as Ballard's most extended engagement with Surrealism following its initial infiltration into his earlier short fiction. Baxter describes it as his 'most painterly novel'<sup>25</sup>, identifying it as 'a collage of twentieth-century Surrealist fictions.'<sup>26</sup> While Baxter is correct to emphasise the nods to Max Ernst, Salvador Dali and Paul Delvaux it is also a work that reassesses a certain style in English catastrophe writing that had been successfully developed by writers such as John Wyndham during the 1950s. Ballard's novel is set in a post-apocalyptic world following the melting of the ice-caps. London, the novel's principle setting, is submerged under a dense lagoon, which is covered in tropical vegetation as a result of a drastic shift in climate. Unlike certain catastrophe

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<sup>24</sup> Gasiorek, J.G. *Ballard*, 28.

<sup>25</sup> Baxter, J.G. *Ballard's Surrealist Imagination*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Baxter, J.G. *Ballard's Surrealist Imagination*, 17.

novels of the 1950s – notably Wyndham’s *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) where civilisation teeters on the brink of collapse only to be offered the prospect of redemption by the narrative’s close – Ballard’s novel traces the inevitable breakdown of technocratic structures in the face of all-encompassing catastrophe and the subsequent rise of a wholly transformed post-apocalyptic landscape.

A direct comparison can therefore be made between the opening of Wyndham’s novel and the initial observations in *The Drowned World*. Wyndham’s narrator, Bill Masen, notes the misplaced but nonetheless recognisable sounds of the post-apocalyptic London outside his hospital room:

When a day that you happen to know is Wednesday starts off by sounding like Sunday, there is something seriously wrong somewhere.

I felt that from the moment I woke. And yet, when I started functioning a little more sharply, I misgave. After all, the odds were that it was I who was wrong, and not everyone else – though I did not see how that could be.<sup>27</sup>

Masen wakes up to a world where things are out of place – a Wednesday sounds like a Sunday – yet as the novel progresses he seeks to reassert some kind of familiar order onto the Triffid infested island. However, in the opening lines of *The Drowned World* the apocalyptic dislocation is stark, with London taking on a near unrecognisable form:

Soon it would be too hot. Looking out from the hotel balcony shortly after eight o’clock, Kerans watched the sun rise behind the dense groves of giant gymnosperms crowding over the roofs of the abandoned department stores four hundred yards away on the east side of the lagoon.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> John Wyndham. 1999. *The Day of the Triffids*, London: Penguin, 1.

<sup>28</sup> J.G. Ballard. 2008. *The Drowned World*, London: Harper Perennial, 7.

Rather than the apocalyptic setting being the location for survivors to potentially recover some sense of rational order in the recognisable ruins, Ballard's catastrophe instead offers a re-formulation of the geographical terrain to reflect both the Surrealist juxtapositions of the post-catastrophe world (the remnants of the Ritz hotel jutting out from the primordial swamp) and as a means of investigating the unconscious impulses experienced by the novel's protagonist in a landscape devoid of organising, 'rational' forces.

Rather than picturing his post-apocalyptic world as a site for potential re-building – as was often witnessed in preceding British catastrophe narratives – Ballard instead revels in the surreal combinations necessitated by disaster and indulges in lengthy and vivid descriptions of a topography increasingly attuned to the unconscious. The apocalypse of *The Drowned World* is accordingly one of revelation for it breaks down the surface realities of postwar technocratic order and enters into, as Mary Ann Caws notes in her analysis of Surrealism, 'a *dialogue* with the other'<sup>29</sup> – in this case the emerging territory of what one character, Bodkin, names as 'ancient organic memory.'<sup>30</sup> The surrealist landscape of the novel is therefore not only a route to the unconscious, but equally, a comment on the formal constraints of British disaster fiction to-date, with Ballard seeking an alternative articulation of the apocalyptic imagination.

In his 1966 essay 'The Coming of the Unconscious', Ballard highlights Surrealism's relevance to the cultural mood of the 1960s:

The techniques of surrealism have a particular relevance at this moment, when the fictional elements in the world around us are multiplying to the point where it is almost

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<sup>29</sup> Mary Ann Caws. 2004. *Surrealism*, London and New York: Phaidon, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Ballard, *The Drowned World*, 74.

impossible to distinguish between the ‘real’ and ‘false’ – the terms no longer have any meaning.<sup>31</sup>

This psycho-social tension is examined in *The Drowned World* as the protagonist, Kerans, soon senses that dream and reality are beginning to merge within the fantastically re-formulated landscape. The narrator informs us that ‘just as the distinction between the latent and manifest contents of the dream had ceased to be valid, so had any divisions between the real and the super-real in the external world’<sup>32</sup>. Stripped of the pretences of order and tradition, Ballard’s alternative, drowned world reveals a complex mesh of submerged visions and desires that would increasingly fascinate sections of sixties culture, from advertisers to the counter culture.

Kerans’ desire to head south and towards certain death as well as the novel’s backward geological projections found in the pseudo-scientific concept of ‘archaeopsychic time’<sup>33</sup> also reflect a broader contemporaneous unease. Published in 1962, the same year as the Cuban Missile Crisis, *The Drowned World* illustrates the perceived unavailability of far future projections during the ‘hot’ moments of the Cold War. The novel retreats into the neurological mythologies of the human psyche as a method of uncovering the processes that have led to such a point in human history. ‘Archaeopsychic time’ pulls Kerans away from speculations of a non-existent future and forces him to step backwards and dig for the geological clues of the past:

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 represent one of his own spinal levels.<sup>34</sup>

*The Drowned World* does not offer solace for a nervous Cold War readership by offering the hope of post-apocalyptic redemption, but instead, as Luckhurst states, Ballard’s disaster fiction exists

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<sup>31</sup> J.G. Ballard. 1997. ‘The Coming of the Unconscious’, in *A User’s Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews*, London: Flamingo, 88.

<sup>32</sup> Ballard, *The Drowned World*, 74.

<sup>33</sup> Ballard, *The Drowned World*, 44.

<sup>34</sup> Ballard, *The Drowned World*, 83.

*'between catastrophes*, in the space after the initial catastrophe and the 'catastrophe' which follows: death'<sup>35</sup>. Throughout the novel the idea of re-building civilisation in line with the structures of the previous order is refused. Instead, the text sits within a liminal space that is concurrently pre- and post-apocalypse. The novel's protagonists are located spatially within an observable post-disaster world but are increasingly aware of their own forthcoming personal deaths and thus exist within a temporal 'zone of transit'<sup>36</sup> between disasters. Ballard's drowned world is neither a bleak dystopia or possible utopia, but an in-between, alternative space where it becomes possible to imagine 'the terrestrial and psychic landscapes'<sup>37</sup> underlying historical progress.

While 'Prima Belladonna' ostensibly makes use of Pop Art imagery to envisage near future consumerist society and *The Drowned World* latches on to Surrealism as a means of revealing alternative psychological perspectives beneath technocratic order, Ballard's slightly later story 'The Terminal Beach' (1964) fuses these two aesthetics together to excavate the underlying motivations driving nuclear build-up. Similar to *The Drowned World*, the story sets out to decode the networks of meaning underlying the nuclear age and once more conjures a parallel temporal and spatial realm to facilitate this exploration. Published in the wake of the 1963 Partial Test-Ban Treaty and visualising the abandoned remnants of a nuclear testing site, the story can be seen as Ballard's critical evaluation of an era of thermonuclear build-up. Additionally, the text represents a transition in Ballard's style, developing from the transformative apocalypses of his disaster quartet towards the contemporary dystopias that would preoccupy his fiction of the 1970s.

The story is set on the Eniwetok Atoll in the Pacific Ocean, the location for the first ever hydrogen bomb test in 1952 and a few hundred miles from Bikini Atoll, the site of the largest nuclear explosion by the United States in 1954. The protagonist, Traven, is a former air

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<sup>35</sup> Luckhurst, *The Angle Between Two Walls*, 38.

<sup>36</sup> Ballard, *The Drowned World*, 35.

<sup>37</sup> Ballard, *The Drowned World*, 74.

force pilot who has landed on the island following the death of his wife and son in a car accident. As with Kerans in *The Drowned World* – who repels collectivism to embark on his own personal journey into the psychic avenues of the new order – Traven is drawn to the almost entirely abandoned Atoll where he suffers increasingly from malnutrition and Beriberi, yet is concurrently offered revelatory glimpses of the latent desires that fuelled the thermonuclear age. Just as Kerans achieves some form of personal fulfilment as he sails relentlessly into the heat, here too Traven is drawn to the epicentre of destructive events in the hope of acquiring psychological nourishment. H. Bruce Franklin has criticised this tendency in Ballard, arguing that ‘he therefore remains incapable of understanding the alternative to these death forces’<sup>38</sup>, yet John Gray counters this by emphasising that Ballard is not interested in offering political solutions but rather in demonstrating ‘what individual fulfilment might mean in a time of nihilism.’<sup>39</sup> With this in mind, the overt Cold War setting of ‘The Terminal Beach’ does not necessitate a definable political message about the morality of nuclear testing, but instead purposefully complicates the prospect of any solid political conclusions by focusing on the abstract disruption of time, space and identity when living in a period of nuclear tension. As with *The Drowned World*, Ballard creates an overdetermined landscape akin to a Surrealist artwork or Pop Art collage that reflects the complex array of competing and contradictory signs that litter contemporary culture.

Indeed, the derelict Atoll is covered with the debris of the Cold War State – abandoned bombers, scientific testing stations, blockhouses. However, the State itself is absent. Simon Sellars, in analysing Ballard’s pacific fictions, argues that locations such as Eniwetok require ‘no need to even allude to the presence of the State, for these are *stateless* worlds – “between

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<sup>38</sup> H. Bruce Franklin. 1979. ‘What are we to make of J.G.Ballard’s Apocalypse?’, in Thomas Clareson (ed) *Voices for the Future: Essays on Major Science Fiction Writers*, Ohio: Bowling Green Popular Press, 93.

<sup>39</sup> John Gray. 1999. ‘Modernity and its Discontents’, in *New Statesman*, 10<sup>th</sup> May. Re-printed online: <http://www.newstatesman.com/199905100041> (accessed 10th January 2012).

owners.”<sup>40</sup> Eniwetok is not only a key locale in the sociological formation of what is defined in the story as the ‘Pre-Third’<sup>41</sup> – a period after the Second World War where the world was ‘suspended from the quivering volcano’s lip of World War III’<sup>42</sup> – but it is also a place for Cold War detritus, the storehouse for the junk left behind after the nuclear tests. As with many of Ballard’s protagonists, Traven wishes to stay amongst the wreckage of the island as it is within this space that he pieces together the processes that led to imminent nuclear conflagration. As he forages across the island, Traven begins to create collages from found objects, at one point attaching a list of popular songs to a chart of mutated chromosomes:

In the field office he came across a series of large charts of mutated chromosomes. He rolled them up and took them back to his bunker. The abstract patterns were meaningless, but during his recovery he amused himself by devising suitable titles for them. (Later, passing the aircraft dump on one of his forays, he found the half-buried juke-box, and tore the list of records from the selection panel, realizing that these were the most appropriate captions. Thus embroidered, the charts took on many layers of associations.)<sup>43</sup>

Ballard’s Atoll, abandoned by a nation-state no longer conducting atmospheric nuclear testing, is therefore a landscape littered with the cultural fragments of the immediate past. Sellars subsequently argues that the island ‘becomes a space where social relations can begin again, where the social order is de-commissioned, recombined, reconstructed and reshaped in ways that subvert dominant systems of thought.’<sup>44</sup> Just as Kerans is free to explore, without restraint, the geological layers of ‘archaeopsychic time’<sup>45</sup>, Traven, alone on the Atoll, is released amidst the

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<sup>40</sup> Simon Sellars. 2009. “‘Extreme Possibilities’: Mapping “the sea of time and space” in J.G. Ballard’s Pacific Fictions’, *Colloquy*, 17, 45.

<sup>41</sup> J.G. Ballard. 2006. ‘The Terminal Beach’, in *The Complete Short Stories: Volume Two*, London: Harper Perennial, 31.

<sup>42</sup> Ballard, ‘The Terminal Beach’, 32.

<sup>43</sup> Ballard, ‘The Terminal Beach’, 39 – 40.

<sup>44</sup> Sellars, “‘Extreme Possibilities’”, 53.

<sup>45</sup> Ballard, *The Drowned World*, 44.

crumbling infrastructure to re-interpret the codes of meaning subsumed beneath the militarised Cold War State.

Yet, the plethora of objects scattered across the irradiated island also captures the peculiar contradictions of the Cold War. Similar to the early collages of Independent Group member Eduardo Paolozzi, and Pop Art more broadly, ‘The Terminal Beach’ juxtaposes military violence and glossy modernity. Indeed, by collating ephemeral objects from around the island, Traven establishes ‘many layers of associations’<sup>46</sup>, which directly links to the aims of Pop Art as set out in Alison and Peter Smithson’s 1956 article ‘But Today We Collect Ads’, where they declare the importance of ‘the objects on the beaches, the piece of paper blowing about the street, the throw-away object and the pop-package.’<sup>47</sup> Traven’s collage is thus an attempt to decipher the subtexts of the everyday – a jukebox list and a chromosome chart from a science lab – and in doing so discover underlying explanations for the epoch of the ‘Pre-Third’.

As the narrative unfolds and Traven rummages further amongst the island’s cultural artefacts and remnants of its nuclear past, he begins to generate his own response to the hydrogen bomb, declaring to one of the remaining scientists, Dr. Osborne, that ‘for me the hydrogen bomb was a symbol of absolute *freedom*. I feel it’s given me the right – the obligation, even – to do anything I want.’<sup>48</sup> Colin Greenland interprets Traven’s somewhat frenzied embrace of the Bomb as Ballard’s attempt at counteracting the emotional opposition to nuclear weapons expressed most vocally by the protest movements of the fifties and sixties:

This deliberate suppression of expected emotional response separates Ballard from the protesters [...]. He perceives clearly man’s complicity with this catastrophe of his own

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<sup>46</sup> Ballard, ‘The Terminal Beach’, 53.

<sup>47</sup> Alison and Peter Smithson. 1990. ‘But Today We Collect Ads’, in David Robbins (ed) *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 186.

<sup>48</sup> Ballard, ‘The Terminal Beach’, 43.

making. While it seems a dreadful mistake and fills his conscious mind with horror, it is also the ultimate tool, the end of his technological drive. Man now has absolute power over his own existence: the power of uncreation.<sup>49</sup>

The hydrogen bomb is perceived as liberating to Traven for precisely this reason as it necessitates the terminal point in humanity's search for technological control. What is intriguing about Ballard's ostensibly nihilistic view of the contemporary is that while it correlates with Horkheimer and Adorno's assertion in 1944 that 'the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity'<sup>50</sup>, his fictions do not provide a fiery polemic against, or a necessarily meek submission to, the follies of human misadventure. Instead, his protagonists actively embrace the transformative process that confronts them and seek some form of explanation that reveals the subconscious motivations for human self-destruction.

Traven resultantly becomes immersed in the psychological space of the 'Pre-Third', which is contained within the frozen time system of the abandoned Atoll. He celebrates the liminality of his present condition as he re-configures the symbols of the past and future in his terminal bunker. Near the end of the story Traven embarks on a list of goodbyes to everything external as he attempts to remain within this new reality:

*'Goodbye, Eniwetok,'* he murmured.

Somewhere there was a flicker of light, as if one of the blocks, like a counter on an abacus, had been plucked away.

*Goodbye, Los Alamos.* Again, a block seemed to vanish. The corridors around him remained intact, but somewhere in his mind had appeared a small interval of neutral space.

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<sup>49</sup> Colin Greenland. 1983. *The Entropy Exhibition: Michael Moorcock and the British 'New Wave' in Science Fiction*, London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 111.

<sup>50</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. 2002. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, California: Stanford University Press, 1.

*Goodbye, Hiroshima.*

*Goodbye, Alamagordo.*

*'Goodbye, Moscow, London, Paris, New York...'*<sup>51</sup>

But by the story's conclusion Traven has not entirely constructed an alternative temporality. He remains haunted by ghostly visions of his wife and child and the 'burning bombers'<sup>52</sup> that plague his dreams. This illuminates the political ambiguity of Ballard's fiction. As Luckhurst states, Ballard's protagonists invariably encounter and revel in moments of transcendence yet such transcendence is simultaneously 'offered, but denied'<sup>53</sup> in his fiction. Traven's expedition into the condensed landscape of the Atoll presents him with a frozen image of the amassed symbols of the 'Pre-Third'. By attempting to piece them together he is able to unpick their latent content, yet as he stands outside his bunker alongside the dead Japanese pilot that he has positioned as a sentry, Traven continues to feel the presence of external time systems speeding away from the condensed temporality of the island. These early fictions therefore provide provocative alternative interpretations of mid-twentieth century culture which break away from popular consensus or the politically fashionable, yet their dystopian energies ensure that functional solutions to apocalyptic crisis are resisted and Ballard's 'painterly' alternative visions of the near future or recent past remain dominant.

Ballard's interaction with visual culture in his early works is represented through a continual layering of visual motifs. The Pop Art images of the Vermillion Sands stories are increasingly mixed with emerging unconscious terrains and visions, until in *The Drowned World*, the glitz of early 1960s London is fully submerged beneath a vivid Surrealist dreamscape. The transition in 'The Terminal Beach' towards visualising the architectures of space and time would further solidify in the 1970s through the publication of, most notably, *Concrete Island* (1974) and

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<sup>51</sup> Ballard, 'The Terminal Beach', 45.

<sup>52</sup> Ballard, 'The Terminal Beach', 50.

<sup>53</sup> Luckhurst, *The Angle Between Two Walls*, 69.

*Highb-Rise* (1975). What persists throughout Ballard's work is a desire to fuse contemporaneous visual cultures with experimental fictional forms and establish a set of alternative cultural landscapes that reveal the latent content of modernity.

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