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J G Ballard and the Phenomenology of the Absence of Law.

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Abstract

The British writer J G Ballard is known for his distinctive treatments of the familiar and the everyday in organized society as vulnerable to rupture and descent into violence and chaos. Never straightforwardly dystopian, Ballard was capable of insightful analysis that revealed the strangeness of particular qualities of lived experience, challenging his audience to question their place in the order of things. Raised in Shanghai, Ballard's wartime experiences exposed him to the extremes of human behaviour and to the stripping away of the veneers of conventional civilized norms. More than mere biographical markers, this article argues that through a range of works, Ballard offers us a phenomenological account of the worst of the conditions under which he lived, particularly at the close of the Japanese war in Shanghai, one that captures the lived experience of the absence of law.

Key words

Ballard, law and literature, phenomenology, lawlessness.

JG Ballard and the Phenomenology of the Absence of Law.

While the Shanghai childhood of the late British author JG Ballard is acknowledged as an important influence on his work, the nature of that influence has not been sufficiently considered. That it should be is partly evidenced by Ballard's observation on Shanghai in his autobiography, '*In many ways it was like a stage set, but at the same time it was real, and I think a large part of my fiction has been an attempt to evoke it by means other than memory.*'¹ This quote captures a tension, one that partially defines the Ballardian, between the 'natural attitude', a phenomenological term referring to the unexamined acceptance of the everyday world and our place in it, and the many challenges to describing the phenomenal world of consciousness, particularly so elements that do not present as objects of perception.² It is Ballard's ability to illuminate the essential strangeness of the everyday present and the elusive phenomena within the taken for granted world that make his work unique.

Ballard barely figures in law and literature scholarship. It is the crime, terrorism and racism of Ballard's last four novels, *Cocaine Nights* (1996), *Super-Cannes* (2000), *Millennium People* (2003) and *Kingdom Come* (2006) that generated most interest, but largely from a socio-political or geo-political perspective than for their debt to detective fiction. Matthews reads the novels as presaging the end state of consumerism in which violence offers the only release from boredom.³ For Ostrowidzki, Eden-Olympia, the gated community in *Super-Cannes*, encapsulates the threat posed to civil society by neo-fascism.⁴ That the political messages of these novels are deemed ambiguous by Noys, prompting him to ask whether Ballard was in fact a reactionary, signals one of the challenges Ballard presents to academic inquiry.⁵ In fact, these later novels are neither as politically radical nor as subversive of crime fiction as might be thought. Murderous revolt against perceived oppression set in the consumerist perfection of a gated community was a theme Ballard had explored a decade earlier, through a form of detective novella, *Running Wild* (1988).⁶ If Ballard deserves a place in law and literature it is unlikely to be for his engagement with certain genres. The aim here is to examine some fundamental currents underlying Ballard's fiction that make it relevant, namely his phenomenological renderings of the disintegration and absence of law.

Extreme alienation and psychopathology, disassociation, self-destructiveness, even the psycho-dynamic housing of the Archigram era, have invited phenomenological readings of

¹ James G Ballard, *Miracles of Life* (Fourth Estate 2014) 6.

² The Collins Dictionary definition of the adjective *Ballardian* is well known: "*resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in Ballard's novels and stories, esp. dystopian modernity, bleak man-made landscapes, and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental development.*"

³ Graham Matthews, 'Consumerism's Endgame: Violence and Community in J G Ballard's Late Fiction' (2013) 36 *Journal of Modern Literature* 122.

⁴ Eric Ostrowidzki, 'Utopias of the New Right in J G Ballard's Fiction Space and Culture' (2009) 12 *Space and Culture* 4.

⁵ Benjamin Noys, 'La Libido Reactionnaire? The Recent Fiction of J G Ballard' 37(4) (2007) *Journal of European Studies* 396.

⁶ For a different approach to a legal theme in Ballard see Mark Thomas, 'The Rules of Autogeddon, Sex Death and Law in J G Ballard's *Crash*' 20(2) (2011) *Griffith Law Review* 333, in which Thomas briefly discusses the absence of social and institutional restraints in *Crash* as a metaphor for the characters inability to control their perversity: modernist legal conventions being unable to engage with human-machine sexuality in a postmodern world.

Ballard's fiction.⁷ Of the major works on Ballard that apply phenomenology, three examples are useful to establishing the approach adopted here.

Roger Luckhurst employs the Derridean concept of the "hinge" to argue that Ballard's fiction sits at the juncture of different genres, themselves overlaid by multiple theoretical and cultural frames, a complexity that subverts literary conventions. A wide range of interpretive devices is employed by Luckhurst to show that Ballard's work, '*at once constantly activates theoretical models, but it is also awkward, didactic, and overtheorized, tending to evade or supersede the theories meant to "explain" it*', an insight that underscores the observations above on Ballard's last four novels and also what follows.⁸

Luckhurst demonstrates the hinge thesis by applying Camus, Heidegger and Jaspers, psychoanalytic theory (Freud, Jung) and imperialism to Ballard's four early 'catastrophe' novels. In *The Drought* (1964), an 'existential catastrophe', Heidegger's relational conception of human being (*Dasein*) is stressed. To be human is not merely to be one of a number of separate entities but to exist in a relation of being (being-in the world) in the face of multiple possibilities. Authenticity comes from acting in the knowledge of being-in the world, a relation exemplified by the character Ransom whose potentially self-destructive but 'owned' acts have the potential to liberate from inauthenticity.⁹

The *Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), 'a surrealist potpourri' indebted to the technique of decalcomania offers, Gasiorek argues, a 'transformative aesthetic' intended to restate conventional understandings of social and phenomenal reality in new forms, albeit one tied to a particular historical period.¹⁰ The two main characters Traven, for whom, as he suffers a breakdown, '*the phenomenology of the world is a nightmarish excrescence*,' and Nathan, an emotionally distant scientist make the text '*profoundly dialogic*.'¹¹ Ballard's comment on the two oppositional figures is revealing. Since the rational but insulated Nathan suggests the 'pornography of science', an objective detachment, Ballard identified instead with Traven who is repelled by the nightmare surrounding him that he struggles to understand. In doing so, Ballard touches also on a precept of Husserl's phenomenology, that since science is mediated via consciousness first order experience has a priority over second order science; the dialogic in the *Atrocity Exhibition* is that between experience and reality.

In the third example, Trigg, in examining the embodiment of trauma, makes use of Ballard's short story, *Memories of the Space Age* (1982). The central character, Mallory, has contracted 'space sickness' whilst working as a physician for NASA in Florida. The illness causes time to slow giving rise to an atemporal world in which all past and future events occur in the present.¹² For Trigg, Ballard's story, provides a useful analogy of the nature of trauma as a '*deferred and fragmented manifestation of the past*'.¹³

⁷ Laura Colombino, 'The House As Skin' *European Journal of English Studies*, 16:1, 21-31. Archigram was a 1960's architectural group that sought to challenge design conventions through e.g. moving structures.

⁸ Roger Luckhurst, '*The Angle between Two Walls*' *The Fiction of JG Ballard* (Liverpool University Press 1997) xvii.

⁹ *ibid* 64.

¹⁰ Andrzej Gasiorek, *J G Ballard* (Manchester University Press 2005) 58. Decalcomania is a print transfer technique favoured by surrealist artists.

¹¹ *Ibid* 63.

¹² A similar theme was pursued by Ballard in two other stories from the same period, *News from the Sun* and *Myths of the Near Future*.

¹³ Dylan Trigg, *The Memory of Place : A Phenomenology of the Uncanny* (Ohio University Press 2013) 231.

In summary, Luckhurst highlights the significance to Ballard of authenticity (overcoming the drift of everyday life) while at the same time demonstrating Ballard's capacity for overlaying theoretical frames, Gasiorek reinforces Ballard's profound engagement with the nature of experience while Trigg touches on Ballard's personal history in which the past was constantly revisited in the present. These points inform the approach here but one that has been simplified. First, because Ballard's relevance to law and literature stems from actual events and second, because analysis of Ballard's work risks itself becoming over-theorized. Thus, to claim that Ballard is offering a phenomenological account of the absence of law is not to attribute to him the doctrines of particular philosophers but to read Ballard as examining and re-examining certain experiences as he lived them, an approach that accords with Moran's definition of phenomenology, '*In a typical formulation Edmund Husserl ... presents phenomenology as approaching "whatever appears to be as such", including everything meant or thought, in the manner of its appearing, in the how of its manifestation.*'¹⁴ Phenomenology will thus be treated as a method of seeing, a way of examining the *qualities* of experience of human beings embedded in the world from a first person perspective.

An important figure within the 'New Wave' of science fiction writers (together with Brian Aldiss and Michael Moorcock), during the 1960s, Ballard's first short story *Mobile* was published in 1956 in Moorcock's magazine *New Worlds*. Ballard's first novel, *The Wind from Nowhere* was published in 1962. Although disowned by Ballard as hack work, *The Wind from Nowhere* is the precursor to a celebrated series of novels on environmental disasters: *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Drought* (1964) and *The Crystal World* (1966). Between 1966 and 1973 Ballard concentrated on writing short stories. The novels of the 1970s discussed below, *Concrete Island* and *High Rise*, were preceded by *Crash* (1973) and, accepting Ballard's description of it as a novel, by the controversial, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970). Despite his greater focus on the novel form, Ballard continued to produce short stories after 1973. Ballard's quasi-autobiographical works, *The Empire of the Sun* (1984) and its sequel, *The Kindness of Women* (1991) were followed by the "detective" novels, *Cocaine Nights* (1996), *Super-Cannes* (2000), *Millennium People* (2003) and *Kingdom Come* (2006). An autobiographical work, *Miracles of Life* was published in 2007.

In numerous interviews, Ballard made clear that his initial embrace of science fiction was not only for its vitality but also because it was the only genre that freed him to speculate about the effects of scientific, political and social change in the present, '*people don't accept the authority of the future anymore. God knows, the present is infinitely more varied and bizarre and fantastic.*'¹⁵ Eschewing science fiction of outer space of the far future, Ballard sought instead to explore the 'inner space' of the 'visionary present'.¹⁶

In Canada in the early 1950s, while training as an RAF pilot, Ballard encountered the first science fiction he considered meaningful. Dominated by the propagandist, future-gazing, technological fantasy of popular American magazines such as *Astounding Science Fiction*, Ballard was drawn instead to the science fiction of the present or near future, in particular, that which responded to the changing nature of communications and which '*recognised a world dominated by consumer advertising, of democratic government mutating into public*

¹⁴ Shaun Gallagher, *Phenomenology* (Palgrave MacMillan 2012) 7.

¹⁵ Lynn Barber, 'Sci-fi Seer' in Simon Sellars and Dan O'Hara (eds), *Extreme Metaphors, Selected Interviews with J G Ballard, 1967-2008* (Fourth Estate 2012), 25. See also in the same text, Robert Louit, *Crash and Learn* 72.

¹⁶ *ibid* 25.

relations.¹⁷ The self of traditional and modernist fiction had for Ballard and others been overtaken by the onslaught of consumer society, the complexities of which – its saturation of images and power to mediate perceptions – demanded new approaches in fiction. In pursuing these themes, Ballard was relentlessly drawn back to the perplexities of the sense of self, place and to the limitations of memory as a means to describe conscious experience and the quality of identity in the face of increasing qualitative uncertainty. In summary, the sheer technical diversity and imaginative range of Ballard's work makes it difficult to categorize, moreover the most readable works often appear constructed to resist critical penetration and for some, such as Luckhurst, the more difficult texts present as almost incomprehensible.¹⁸

The principal focus here is on Ballard's 1974 novel *Concrete Island*. *High Rise* (1975) is also considered for its thematic relation to *Concrete Island*. The titles of the novels define their settings, respectively, an island of grass beneath a large motorway intersection and a forty-storey apartment building. These highly contained man-made environments are used by Ballard as forms of social crucible in which the behaviours and fates of characters are, in part, a function of their often extremely violent interactions with each other and their surroundings. Isolated from the outside world, one that they eschew through the development of self-destructive dependencies on their immediate environments, Ballard's characters frequently experience, among other conditions, dissociation, body dysmorphia and material and temporal distortions.

The recurrence of these themes and the manner in which they appear in Ballard's work, taken together with his early life history, reveal them as phenomenological treatments of the perceptions of characters in extremis, often following violent episodes. Although his medical training developed Ballard's interest in psychopathologies, they also have a phenomenological purpose in his fiction. They are considered here as attempts by Ballard to revisit and provide accounts of particular qualities of his lived experience of Shanghai, a city where, even in peacetime, human life was vulnerable to the corruptibility of normativity and law, a foundation for Ballard's fascination with the 'permeability and impermeability of boundaries.'¹⁹ For the purposes of this paper, the most significant incident occurred during the demobilization of Japanese forces at the close of the war when Ballard moved through a Shanghai landscape eviscerated by war and devoid of law and civil order.

A Phenomenology of the Absence of Law?

Phenomenological approaches to the *practice* of law, to *judicial decision making* and to experiences of *the legal system* are not uncommon. Examples include Dworkin's *Law's Empire*, in which he offers an account of the experience of adjudication and the interpretation of legal concepts from the point of view of judges, lawyers and lay actors and Kennedy's *Critique of Adjudication*.²⁰ Such inquiries arise naturally in societies where a functioning legal system is a given. Attempts have also been made to extrapolate theories

¹⁷ Ballard (n1) 166.

¹⁸ Roger Luckhurst, *'The Angle between Two Walls' The Fiction of JG Ballard* (Liverpool University Press 1997).

¹⁹ *ibid* 161.

²⁰ Ronald Dworkin, *Law's Empire* (Hart 1998). Duncan Kennedy, *A Critique of Adjudication* (Harvard University Press 1998).

of law from particular phenomenologists, for example, in the case of Merleau-Ponty.²¹ However, to talk of the phenomenology of the *absence* of law will strike some as problematic. Indeed, to talk of experiencing *law*, as opposed to having an experience of law's variety of outward manifestations may to some appear meaningless. Experience, they might argue instinctively, is never directly of *law* itself (any more than one can experience the state) but is contingent upon the instrumentality of law or on the functioning of the legal system as well as through our encounters with lawyers or with law's institutional settings, historical artefacts or ceremonies.

Our pre-theoretical unexamined lives – the world as it is presented to us in conscious experience, what Husserl terms our 'natural attitude' to the 'lifeworld' (*Lebenswelt*) – is that with which phenomenology is concerned. Its purpose is to describe the specific qualities of experience. The question arises as to what those experiences may include.

Clearly, we experience objects in the lifeworld and some objects are the sources of theoretical speculation. Much of the resultant theory is not *actively* considered in our everyday lives: to experience a tree does not require knowledge of evolutionary processes or of the mechanisms for the transmission of genetic data, no more does a parking fine require us to register – to take one example – the invocation of a Kelsenian norm. However, none of this means that theory does not occupy an important place in our lives as a way of sense making. But can theory itself be experienced?

The astrophysicist Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington drew a celebrated distinction between a solid table constructed of wood and its scientific counterpart comprised of nothing more, on the atomic scale, than relatively vast spaces between particles and electrical forces.²² *Prima facie*, our lived experience is only of the first. Because it is not immediately apparent from the lifeworld, knowledge of the scientific table has to be applied. But analysing the table in this way is incomplete, an incompleteness that springs in part from the Eddington's choice of a table for his example.

Shaun Gallagher argues that two further claims can be made about Eddington's example. The first, from Husserl, is that the logical constructs of scientific theory can themselves come to *inhabit* the lifeworld. These constructs, suggests Husserl, are '*human formations, essentially related to human actualities and potentialities, and thus belong to this concrete unity of the life-world, whose concreteness thus extends further than that of "things"*'.²³ The second is the suggestion, arising from Eddington's talk, of a third table, one present in the lifeworld but not experienced immediately as a table. Rather, it is experience of the table as a set of capabilities; the practical possibilities it presents us, such as a place to put lecture notes.

As above, Husserl's 'human formations' are scientific theories. An example of at least the elements of a theory that has commonly entered into consciousness is global warming. It is a theory that may lead us to attribute significant changes in weather patterns to increases in

²¹ William S Hamrick, *An Existential Phenomenology of Law: Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (Martinus Nijhoff 1987).

²² Arthur Eddington, 1928 Gifford Lecture, available at https://www.history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/Extras/Eddington_Gifford.html The table was also a key item in Husserl's phenomenological furniture – one that he had drawn from Marx's *Capital*.

²³ Gallagher (n14) 164.

atmospheric carbon dioxide, whether or not we ascribe to them a human cause. However, such perceptual experiences of atypical weather patterns could be held to be merely experiences of the physical world as *described* by theory. Husserl's claim is that scientific theories themselves "*flow into*" the lifeworld. These '*logical constructs*' enter the lifeworld as '*cultural facts*' or '*spiritual (intellectual) accomplishments*' they are not '*things in the lifeworld like stones, houses or trees. They are logical wholes and logical parts made up of ultimate logical elements ... but they are human formations.*'²⁴

This returns us to Eddington's table which, for the scientist as much as for anyone else, exists first as a wooden table, a pre-given element of the world of our senses but at the same time one that the scientifically minded can appreciate in its objectively true form as described by scientific theory, both the table and the theory thus being part of the lifeworld. However, this raises the question, what exactly is the relationship between the phenomenal world – the realm of our conscious existence – and the phenomenology of the cultural world?

Our experience of law is not that of a scientific theory supported by experimental evidence; law is contingent and entirely mutable. In short, law is a different class of cultural fact, once greatly complicated by its historical evolution. Thus, to return to the point at the start of this section, if law is a cultural fact and as such a product of the phenomenal world, can it form a part of direct experience – as something given to us in the lifeworld? As David Carr explains, while the cultural world is not perceived as an object, nonetheless it cannot be separated from objects and persons,

*the cultural world is a domain of entities and structures whose givenness is mediated by and founded on the spatio-temporal world of perception. No less than the scientific world, the cultural world has its meaning fundament in the world of perceptions, the domain through which its structures are always mediated, in which its truths are always directly verified in our experience.*²⁵

Law is perhaps most obviously expressed in human agency directed to particular actions, to social structures and to spatial organization. Law, although not an object of direct perception, is, as part of the constructed social community, an ordering presence – a view that accords with the study of Merleau-Ponty mentioned above for whom law was a '*social structure, or order of meaning, which is a form of praxis, of living intersubjective relationships.*'²⁶ Indeed, an embedded social practice can present an almost tangible force, '*much like a rock that lies in our path, the constructed world cannot be ignored ... we know the rock is real by the resistance it presents; the same is true of social structures.*'²⁷

It is this paradoxical interrelationship of the phenomenal and the cultural worlds of experience which is so frequently the focus of Ballard's work. The liminality of the cultural world, the point at which, the coherence and familiarity of that world begin to break down, is often expressed by Ballard through physical objects (including human beings) and the built environment, something Ballard attributed to his early life,

²⁴ David Carr, 'Husserl's Problematic Concept of the Life-world' in Dermot Moran and Lester E. Embree (eds) *Phenomenology: Critical Concepts in Philosophy* (Routledge 2004) 366.

²⁵ *ibid* 369.

²⁶ Hamrick (n 21) 144.

²⁷ Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Sibley, *The Common Place of Law* (University of Chicago Press 1998) 42.

*the trademark images that I set out over the previous thirty years - the drained swimming pools, abandoned hotels and nightclubs, deserted runways and flooded rivers – could all be traced back to wartime Shanghai. For a long time I resisted this, but I accept it now as almost certainly true.*²⁸

Ballard's first encounter with a drained swimming pool was in Shanghai. Drawn to the pool's 'empty presence', beyond its mere mournful and evocative symbolism, its significance eluded him as a child but he later thought of it as representing the unknown.²⁹ As a non-natural geometric void, the pool is physically bounded. Phenomenologically however, the qualities of the pool are not restricted by its dimensions. In the lifeworld, a swimming pool is not usually something we merely assess as a structure, rather it extends to us an array of possibilities and envelops us in the anticipatory sensation of the act of swimming. By contrast, an empty swimming pool presents as a flaw in the pre-given, drawing our attention to itself in novel ways. It has a disturbing gravity, a *weightiness* of form greater than that of the material it displaces and a harshness of substance and angularity that exactly oppose the lightness and freedom of swimming. A dense inversion, an empty pool is both dangerous and extravagantly useless, its vacancy exudes the qualities of transience and loss, of waste, even perhaps, of the dissolution of progress and absence of the social. It is not surprising therefore that the young Ballard did not know at first what the pool represented. The empty pool, as with Ballard's other trademark images, presents a threshold, between the known and unknown, a condition suggested by the phrase 'empty presence'. The association between a drained pool and the absence of law is perhaps most explicit in *High Rise* where a pool becomes an ossuary for the cannibalized remains of the building's former tenants, the life giving qualities of water replaced by a mass of decaying flesh and bone. To understand the origins of these disturbing trademark images and their relevance to phenomenological treatments of social order in Ballard requires consideration of his formative years.

Ballard's Shanghai

Ballard was born in Shanghai in November 1930 and lived in the city until 1945 when he was sent to school in England, not returning until 1991. At the time of Ballard's birth, Shanghai ('the city on the sea') had grown from the old city of Nantao, a middling trading port at the mouth of the 'melancholy Yangtze' in the nineteenth century, to become the most important and culturally complex metropolis in China and the centre of British commercial and business interests in East Asia.³⁰ By 1941 the city had a population of four million comprised of fifty-two nationalities.³¹ The origins of the city in which Ballard grew up, and which the British helped to create, are, like the city itself, complex. A century before Ballard's birth, the foundations were laid for a corrupt and fractured society.

After China's defeat in the Opium War, Shanghai was opened to trade with Britain, France and the United States under the Treaty of Nanjing (1842) which in 1843 made Shanghai one of five Chinese 'treaty ports'. Under the treaty, Britons were permitted to reside in Shanghai, either leasing properties in the old city when possible or renting land on the banks of the Huanpu River outside of the city walls. A British settlement, later named the

²⁸ Ballard (n 1) 251.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ James G Ballard, *Empire of the Sun* (Harper Collins 2006) 12.

³¹ Robert Bickers, 'Incubator City: Shanghai and the Crises of Empire' [2012] 38(5) *Journal of Urban History* 862.

‘International Settlement’ since it was not the property of any single power, was only formally created in 1845 when land, theoretically subject to Chinese sovereignty, was allocated to the north of the city below the Suzhou Creek and to the West of the Huanpu River. The ‘Land Regulations’ of 1845 laid the ground for the later development of extraterritoriality by proscribing the terms for leases, allowing for their enforcement by the settlement and effectively preventing Chinese residence. In 1849, the French created a settlement to the south of the International Settlement and the Americans established one to the northeast. Chinese governance of Shanghai was severely weakened after the occupation of the city by the Small Sword Society in 1853, a faction that arose during the enormities of the Taiping Rebellion, the most destructive in terms of human life of any conflict on Chinese soil. The rebellion created a refugee crisis in Shanghai – the first of many later influxes of civilians escaping war and persecution from China, Russia and Europe.

The need for improved urban management led to the creation of the Shanghai Municipal Council in 1854 to oversee a common system of administration. The same year saw the formation in the International Settlement of the Shanghai Municipal Police Force and Shanghai Volunteer Corps. The Council was made up of elected members of various nationalities under a restricted franchise which acted to exclude the Chinese until 1928. The French did not long remain part of the Shanghai Municipal Council but established a separate concession, forming a French colony under a Consul-General in 1857. The British and Americans then later combined their lands into the International Settlement.³²

As an administrative assembly, the Shanghai Municipal Council answered only to its electors and to consular authority, a freedom that allowed it to expand both the Settlement and its area – sometimes by the practical expedient of constructing roads and then claiming administrative rights over them.³³ Thus, the architecture of governance of Shanghai involved, almost from the beginnings of the foreign presence at the end of the Opium Wars, a complex layering of jurisdictions and administrative controls under which multiple nationalities vied to assert their identity and authority through partisan political institutions or illicitly, outside of them. Law was in many senses a fragile construct, an order that even to begin to understand required taking account of place, time and identity. Bickers notes that, at one point, twenty jurisdictions coexisted in Shanghai together with their respective laws while the policing of the city was separated into as many as seven separate zones. Not surprisingly, this multiplicity of police jurisdictions served to facilitate criminality.

In theory, at the time of Ballard’s birth, Greater Shanghai was under the jurisdiction of Chang Kai-shek’s authoritarian government in Nanking but in reality power ebbed and flowed between Nanking, corrupt local politicians and gangsters such as Tu Yueh Shen who controlled a huge drug focussed criminal organization, the Green Gang.³⁴ The root of Shanghai’s power base was the treaty system which had permitted a segmented, multi-layered system to arise by virtue of its limited specificity. This situation yielded certain advantages, at least for those businessmen, criminals, local administrators and foreign

³² Pär Kristoffer Cassel, *Grounds of Judgement: Extraterritoriality and Imperial Power in Nineteenth Century China and Japan* (Oxford 2012) 64.

³³ Robert Bickers, ‘Shanghaighlanders: The Formation and Identity of the British Settler Community in Shanghai 1843-1937’ (1998) 159 *Past and Present* 161, 172.

³⁴ Bernard Wasserstein, *Secret War in Shanghai: Treachery, Subversion and Collaboration in the Second World War* (Houghton Mifflin 1999) 25.

powers wily enough to realize that the sum of such socio-legal complexity was vagueness and that ‘vagueness was strength’.³⁵

Thus, Ballard’s Shanghai, the ill-named ‘Paris of the Orient’, ‘a city of forty-eight storey skyscrapers built upon twenty-four layers of hell’, the ‘world’s wholesale drugs hypermarket’, a capitalist powerhouse clearing half of all China’s trade through its huge docklands and godowns, was infamous in the early part of the twentieth century for its catalogue of vice (it had the largest population of prostitutes of any city), corruption and criminality, for its extreme poverty and conspicuous consumption and for its being a hub of international political and economic intrigue. To conjure order from the daily frenzy of excess, the city was reliant on a complex interlacing of physical, cultural, social, political and legal boundaries.³⁶ These many boundaries, to employ a phrase from Ballard’s novel *Crash*, presented “borderzones of identity”, thresholds that engender ambiguities in the subjective self.

For some minorities, the need to avoid their sense of self-being overwhelmed contributed to the assertion of a shared identity. Those Britons known as ‘Shanghaianders’ were a distinctive and dominant such grouping. These were settlers, whose families had, in some cases, been in Shanghai since the mid-nineteenth century. They acquired a reputation both in Shanghai and at home for an arrogant colonialism and, not infrequently, a determined racism against the Chinese that was readily transmitted to insecure English arrivals. Although on key dates Shanghaianders paraded their imperial rituals, their allegiance was primarily to their immediate Shanghai community which, given its origins and the nature of its governance, helped fuel an illusory belief in their capacity for independence from the mother country and a concomitant imaginary identity.³⁷ Ballard was to witness at first hand the collapse of this confidence as British military might failed both in Shanghai and elsewhere in the Eastern theatre. Questions of the subjective self and its place within a rapidly crumbling social structure suddenly became highly complex.³⁸

The Ballard home was just outside the International Settlement; a large detached house built in the ‘Surrey stockbroker style’ on Amherst Avenue roughly a kilometre to the west.³⁹ The Metroland exterior and middle-class American interior, with its central heating, refrigerators, heavy furnishings and polished floors, contained the root motifs of a comfortably bourgeois world which many of Ballard’s fictional characters would watch collapse into chaos. Outside, the overcrowded conditions under which the local populous commonly lived were to the young Ballard a source of guilt, despite the fact that the abundant space his family enjoyed ensured their emotional distance and, through the luxury of separate bathrooms, his anatomical ignorance.

To the south-east of the house is the Avenue Joffre, a then elegant thoroughfare in the French concession where the Ballard’s ten Chinese servants bought groceries for the household. Nineteen-thirties’ road maps of central Shanghai reveal the interplay of Chinese and British names within and around the International Settlement. Robinson Road, Gordon Road and Connaught Road sit alongside Penang, Haiphong and Changping Roads. The names are a reminder that the British were always a minority. Save for periods during the refugee crisis of 1937 and despite Shanghai being a largely non-Chinese creation, the Settlement was not

³⁵ Bickers (n31) 866.

³⁶ Wasserstein (n 34) 4, 7.

³⁷ Bickers (n 33) 179.

³⁸ James G Ballard *Crash* (Harper Perennial 2008) 48

³⁹ Ballard (n 1) 11.

at this time closed to the Chinese nor had it ever been a colony in the mould of Hong Kong.⁴⁰ Even within the International Settlement Britons were, by 1935, not quite one per cent of the population of 1.2 million.⁴¹

As Ballard notes in his autobiography, Shanghai was ‘90 per cent Chinese and 100% Americanised’. Having embraced an unbridled and careless capitalism like few others, the city naturally exuded an American commercial brashness but Ballard’s observation has greater significance to his work. The American culture that dominated through advertising, music, radio broadcasts, Coca-Cola, films, comics and publications such as *Time Magazine* to which the Ballards subscribed, projected power, fame and luxury together with the promise of a supremely technological future. This imprinting of consumerist media and message Ballard would later surgically unpick, reaching a bleak apogee in *The Atrocity Exhibition* with its warning, inter alia, of our transformation into impotent moral tourists in the face of the threat and horrors of technological warfare.⁴² What links the comforts and amenities of the Americanized Ballard home with nuclear conflagration is Ballard’s penetration of the obfuscatory forms of twentieth century capitalist life through consideration of his own subjectivity, one deeply impressed by his formative surroundings.

Ballard’s recollections of the city demonstrate that, even as a young child, he was witness to many violent episodes and also that he spent a great deal of time on unsupervised often perilous bike excursions which brought him into contact with, among other dangers, the volatile Japanese military and, later, Chinese puppet soldiers.

From the East, across the centre of Shanghai, towards the Ballard house, runs the Bubbling Well Road on which, as he was chauffeured to school with a nanny at his side to deter kidnap attempts, Ballard witnessed the city’s street life. It was a place he affirmed as magical, part of the ‘self-generating fantasy’ that for him would always define Shanghai; hawkers selling sips of goose blood tapped fresh from live geese, fur-coated white Russian prostitutes soliciting clients, and Chinese gangsters intimidating their victims.⁴³ This daily fantasy of the city was, however, always capable of gratuitous extension, as in the case of the fifty Chinese hunchbacks Ballard saw gathered outside a cinema where they had been hired to promote the 1939 film premiere of Victor Hugo’s novel.

If the surreality of Shanghai was sometimes disturbing, the city had the potential to descend suddenly and without warning into genuine horror, the bounds of its ordering structures stretching, for the young Ballard, almost to invisibility.

Ballard’s father was the managing director of a textile factory, the China Printing and Finishing Company, situated on the Eastern bank of the Huangpou River. On a river crossing to visit his father’s workplace, Ballard watched from the deck of the company ferry as it navigated the bodies of dead Chinese whose impoverished families had mounded them with flowers before setting them to float down the open sewers that fed into the river. Ballard would return to the image of this ‘gruesome flotilla’ a number of times in his writings on Shanghai.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *ibid* 4.

⁴¹ Bickers (n 33) 176.

⁴² *Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women* were autobiographical novels.

⁴³ Ballard (n 1) 6.

⁴⁴ See for example Ballard (n30) 41 where Jim describes a “*regatta of corpses*”.

Aside from these very particular encounters, the perils of city life and the suffering that accompanied them were simply brute facts that had to be processed by a young child, something Ballard well understood after a lengthy hospital stay to recover from amoebic dysentery. Given that Shanghai's streets were home to a large and fluctuating population of a destitute and starving peasantry, death, disease and their processes were a part of the city's visible fabric including, in Ballard's case, the entrance to his home where an elderly beggar sat for days rattling a cigarette tin before expiring under a covering of snow. Ballard records with unflinching clarity his encounters with the desperately sick and dying, with unburied bodies on the roadsides, with the mouldering contents of collapsing funeral mounds raised above the waterlogged soil, with the body of a baby left on the steps of his father's office. Conditions of life that eventually led him to claim that in childhood he developed a fatalism to death akin to that of the Chinese.⁴⁵

Ballard was only 7 years' old when, in August 1937, China and Japan engaged in the battle of Shanghai – possibly the first time a city of its size suffered full-scale twentieth century warfare on its streets with no quarter given to civilians.⁴⁶ The battle lasted three months involving nearly one million ground troops, with Japan coordinating air bombardments and naval attacks from warships on the Huanpou River. When Japan finally overcame Shanghai's defences, three hundred thousand were dead.

Ballard's family and servants were obliged to remove to a rented property in the French Concession when fierce fighting broke out in the fields to the rear of their house in Amherst Avenue. The Concession and the International Settlement, both of which had declared neutrality at the start of the hostilities, were almost overcome by a huge surge in the numbers seeking shelter. At the peak, as many as 700,000 refugees sought safety, most with no possessions and little food. The influx of refugees marked the beginning of the so-called 'isolated island period' which lasted until the Pacific War in 1941.

This phrase, although its exact geographical meaning is contested, referred to the Settlements (or to parts of them) after the authorities acted to stem the flow of migrants by installing barriers and gates that created, for the first time, a clear physical demarcation between the foreign run and native parts of the city. The conditions under which the refugees were obliged to live have been well documented.⁴⁷ Although relief efforts were quickly established and some refugees were helped by relatives or were able to afford rented accommodation, the suffering of many others can only be imagined. Fear and the need for control led to numerous violent incidents. On 10 November 1937, a surge in the Japanese offensive brought refugees crowding to the gates of the barred Concession only to be attacked by French soldiers as they tried to force their way in,

*The gates suddenly opened, and the hungry people – no, the frenzied and starving masses who had lost all sense of humanity – rushed into the concession like the Yellow River bursting a dam ... The cruel wooden batons in the hands of the 'people' were brandished forcefully, heavily hitting ... The skulls were smashed and blood flowed out!*⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ballard (n 1) 16.

⁴⁶ Christian Henriot, 'Shanghai and the Experience of War. The Fate of Refugees' [2006] 5.2 EJEAS 215.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Zhang Yiwang, *Shanghai Before and After the Enemy Occupation* (Hanjiku: Qunli shudian 1938) 51.

Ballard witnessed at first hand the ill-treatment of terrified refugees at the hands of Japanese soldiers and also the British police.

*I saw many Chinese who had been bayoneted and lay on the ground among their bloodstained rice sacks. Violence was so pervasive that my parents and nannies never tried to shield me from all the brutality that was going on.*⁴⁹

Although the phrase ‘isolated island’ arose partly from the geography of Shanghai, it also conveys a sense that the raw experience of the city occupied a different register to that of the outside world.

The suffering of civilians in this period and was often exacerbated by the Chinese themselves. During the battle, two bombs were dropped in error by Chinese planes on the International Settlement destroying the Great World Amusement Park, an extraordinary structure catering for every possible entertainment and vice. In a moment, the explosions caused over a thousand casualties, mainly refugees. The Park was a place of fascination for Ballard who wrote frankly of the bombing in the semi-fictional *The Kindness of Women*, characteristically blending the signifiers of ordinary life with the horrors of violent death,

*hundreds of dead Chinese were lying in the street among the crushed rickshaws and burnt out cars ... An office clerk without any arms sat against the rear wheel of a gutted bus. Everywhere hands and feet lay among the debris of the Amusement park – fragments of joss sticks and playing cards, gramophone records and dragon masks ...*⁵⁰

The brutality of war took many forms. Of the many privations forced upon the refugees, the most serious was food. The fighting brought shortages and increased prices beyond the means of many. For the desperate, ‘secondhand food’ was on offer. Enterprising refugees created dishes from trimmings, bones and vegetable scraps discarded by others and sold them in ‘garbage restaurants’. Hunger and scavenging defined the lives of refugees, humiliations that Ballard and his family would experience during their confinement by the Japanese when the shortage of food left Ballard emaciated and with a prolapsed bowel.

Whilst the family were not sent to a concentration camp but interned at Lunghua, thereby escaping severe ill treatment, Ballard nonetheless saw acts of the most extreme violence exacted by the Japanese against local Chinese civilians. As a fourteen year old, he watched a Chinese rickshaw coolie being beaten to death by bored Japanese guards before one of the stunned adult internees thought to steer him away.

The most significant of Ballard’s experiences took place at the end of hostilities when, after foolishly leaving the camp on foot to return to the family home, he encountered a group of demobilized Japanese soldiers on the Hangchow-Shanghai railway. As Ballard drew near he realized that they were engaged in strangling a Chinese man to death with telephone cable. A plastic belt Ballard was wearing, the gift of an American airman, caught the eye of one of the soldiers who summoned him over. Ballard gave up the belt while the Chinese victim, tied to a telegraph pole, was killed only feet away. Although Ballard’s solitary explorations had put him in peril many times before, as when he visited an abandoned

⁴⁹ Ballard (n 1) 28

⁵⁰ James G Ballard, *The Kindness of Women*, (Harper Collins 1991) 22.

airfield near to the family home surprising some Japanese soldiers, the railway incident was possibly the closest he came to suffering a violent death during the transition. His comments on the actions of the soldiers he encountered on the railway is pertinent,

They were aware that their own lives would shortly end, and they were free to do as they wanted, and inflict any pain. Peace, I realised was more threatening because the rules that sustained war, however evil, were suspended. The empty paddy fields and derelict villages confirmed that nothing mattered.⁵¹

The interregnum in the conflict during which this incident took place was clearly a normative vacuum – an unstable, unpredictable condition in the absence of legal norms during the transition to a new regime.⁵² Ballard later said that the memory of this period stayed with him throughout his life,

August 1945 formed a strange interregnum when we were never wholly certain that the war had ended, a sensation that stayed with me ... To this day as I doze in an armchair I feel the same brief moment of uncertainty.⁵³

Subsequent to the nuclear attacks on Japan and the Emperor's surrender broadcast on 14 August 1945, Shanghai was left awaiting the arrival of allied forces during which a number of violent incidents occurred between rival national groupings. A new deputy mayor and a group of civil servants arrived in Shanghai on 24 August but it was not until 7 September that the Japanese formally surrendered and a new authority was clearly established.

Thus for Ballard, Shanghai was itself a form of social crucible, even pre-war it was perilous and violent, a place he often described as surreal, where consciousness of law grew from of its incongruity with the everyday life. In war, Shanghai's complex socio-legal structures were torn apart. It was a world that Ballard would later repeatedly examine in his fiction by modelling and re-modelling his memories of the properties and structures of his childhood consciousness: the distinctive disruptions of semi-stable realities and embodiments, of self-identity and ultimately the phenomenality of absence including that of law itself. By these means Ballard disturbs our sedimented readings of experience, bringing to our attention features of the phenomenal world lost to the natural attitude.

Islands apart

As a novel of the second phase of Ballard's career, coming after the surrealist influenced environmental catastrophe novels, the hypereality of *Crash* and the overtly experimental *The Atrocity Exhibition*, *Concrete Island*, although a fable, draws directly from developments in urbanism and architecture of the post-war period that became Ballardian trademarks: the advent of the motorway, inner city renewal and brutalist architecture. Ballard knew London's geography intimately. For forty years, he made his home in Shepperton (the dreary London suburb notable only for its film studios) from where the 'Seer of Shepperton' looked out on everyday British society, one that he believed might suddenly choose '*a day trip to another Auschwitz and another Hiroshima.*'⁵⁴ Although

⁵¹ Ballard (n 1) 197.

⁵² The surrender of Japan was announced by radio on 15 August but the occupation of Japan only commenced on 28 August 1945. The surrender ceremony was held on 2 September.

⁵³ Ballard (n1) 103.

⁵⁴ Ballard (n 1) 167.

latterly a financially successful writer, Ballard refused to move from his small semi-detached house. The reason, he said, was that it reminded him of the similarly cramped conditions of his internment at the Lunghua camp.

In the introduction to *Concrete Island*, Ballard discusses the ‘fantasy’ of being marooned like Robinson Crusoe. The concrete island of the title is a common physical feature of contemporary society – a familiar if unwelcome consequence of the built environment that, like other enclosed spaces (subways and lifts), Ballard claims contributes to the ‘constant subliminal fear’ that we may be trapped.⁵⁵ Were this to happen, Ballard asks whether we could face ‘*the challenge of returning to our more primitive natures, stripped of the self-respect and the mental support systems with which civilisation has equipped us. Can we overcome fear, hunger, isolation?*’⁵⁶ For Ballard, the question was a deeply personal one. Superimposing the Crusoe myth on London provides Ballard with a heuristic device to model his memories of Shanghai and explore the qualities of fear and isolation, the latter for Defoe, being ‘*a rape upon human nature*’.⁵⁷

Robert Maitland, a modernist architect, is driving home on the Westway (A40) when his Jaguar suffers a blow-out.⁵⁸⁵⁹ Maitland enters the novel an already isolated figure, a successful professional returning from a liaison with his mistress, he epitomizes *homo economicus* – ploughing a solitary path along the concrete sweep of the motorway, sealed from the lives and histories of those around him by the carapace of his car and the violence of speed.

Crashing through a barrier of wooden trestles Maitland’s car plunges down an embankment, coming to rest on a 200 yard long triangular patch of sunken waste ground beneath the intersection of three motorways. Enclosed by concrete support pillars and steel mesh fences, the injured Maitland finds that the embankments of loose soil are the only means of escape. Ballard’s careful detail of the absence of a crash barrier elides the motorway and soil embankment with the sea and sand; the traffic’s rush hours serve to symbolize the ebbing and flooding tide.

Maitland’s first thought after the crash is that in today’s world one must carry ‘*a full scale emergency kit*’.⁶⁰ In his first hours on the island, Maitland suffers many violent emotions, and is seized by the same fears of Crusoe, the paradigmatic natural man. When Defoe published *Crusoe* in 1719, the conditions of the state of nature were still a matter of debate, the majority view being that natural man, abstracted from society, would be beset by the constant fear of death. To calm himself once he realizes it is a matter of survival rather than escape, Maitland draws heavily on his culturally imprinted traits of self-reliance.

Maitland’s relationship with the island then begins to evolve and he undertakes a physical and metaphorical journey across the landscape. Later, in an important scene, Maitland’s sense of embodiment and situatedness will be torn away, his place within the ordered

⁵⁵ James G Ballard, *Concrete Island* (Fourth Estate 2008), Introduction.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Daniel Defoe, ‘Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe (1720)’ in G A Starr (ed) *The Novels of Daniel Defoe* (Routledge 2008) 60.

⁵⁸ The name “Maitland” is thought to derive from the Anglo-French “malatent” meaning ill-tempered (from the Latin “malum” bad and “talentum” disposition).

⁵⁹ Although attempts continue to be made to identify the site of *Concrete Island* under the Westway in London, Ballard’s inspiration was the peripherique in Paris.

⁶⁰ Ballard (n 55) 37.

spatiality of liberal society that is only ‘a few steps’ from the island suddenly impossibly far removed. Despite this, Maitland will eventually come to declare a hollow dominion over the island just as Crusoe does, but unlike Defoe’s mariner, Maitland will never leave.

Effectively trapped, Maitland turns from the problem of escape to confront the same imperatives as any quasi-Crusoe: the necessities of shelter, food and water. The task of regaining human society is not immediately soluble. The wreck of Maitland’s car provides temporary shelter, much like the cave and ship from which Crusoe salvages supplies – in this case not rum but bottles of white Burgundy from the boot. Again, like Crusoe, Maitland has materials (wine and clothes) and – in particular – money that separate him from the other ‘more primitive’ figures he will meet on the island.

In a scene that mirrors one of the most famous in *Crusoe*, Maitland finds that he is not alone, ‘on the inverted beach that led up from the island, was the footprint of a steel capped industrial boot.’⁶¹ Later, Maitland meets the owner of the print, Proctor, the Friday figure, a former acrobat who has suffered some form of brain damage and regards the island as home. The other figure is Jane, an emotionally fragile young woman who, after losing her baby, has come to live on the island in the basement of a ruined cinema supporting herself through prostitution.

At first, the island appears completely barren but Maitland quickly discovers traces of past habitations. The undergrowth conceals the outlines of Edwardian terraces and also a church and burial ground – emblems of sin and mortality – together with the remnants of the cinemas pay box. Ballard characteristically gives great attention to Maitland’s body, juxtaposing it with the island’s topography and the palimpsests of a specifically humanistic architecture. The human scale of the island and Maitland’s connection with it are suggested also through the local vegetation, particularly the animistic high grass that appears to respond to Maitland’s thoughts and moods, a device that serves also to weaken the sense of Maitland’s physical boundedness.

These human markers stand in contrast of scale to the nexus of motorways that form the island. The soaring concrete support pillars and metal route indicators are the brutal edifices of modernism’s defining technology: the car, the very cause of Maitland’s accident and, in Ballard, both a metaphor and a physical coupling of pleasure and self-destructiveness; a literal a death drive. The island’s archaeology recalls the words of the architect Le Corbusier, ‘our world, like a charnel-house, lies strewn with the detritus of dead epochs’, a detritus that modernism was determined to sweep away: the motorways a technology of mass destruction as effective as any machine of war.⁶²

The question arises, what in *Concrete Island* connects it with Ballard’s past? The discussion above of Ballard’s early life and of the social and political structure of Shanghai aimed to substantiate Ballard’s observation that the influences on his work could be traced back to his childhood. In *Concrete Island* Ballard includes details, both incidental and definitive, that evidence him drawing upon these experiences.

A powerful memory of place and a pervasive feature of peacetime Shanghai that Ballard often alludes to is the miasma of grease and cooking fat that hung in the air. Descriptions of

⁶¹ *ibid* 48.

⁶² Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning* (Dover Publications 1987) 244.

fat, its quality in the mouth and the energising effects of eating fat on the starving feature in *Concrete Island*. Maitland, when devouring the remains of a chicken sandwich thrown from a passing car is *'intoxicated by the taste of animal fat'*. The main food source on the island is an illicit waste dump used by local restaurants. An *'amorphous mass of gleaming mucilage'* oozes through a wire mesh fence from which it is possible to extract *'lumps of fatty meat and vegetable scraps embedded in the greasy avalanche'*, a description that recalls the garbage restaurants operated by Shanghai refugees.⁶³ In *High Rise* Ballard has one of the central characters barbecue and eat a cat, the fat *'almost intoxicating him as he sucked at the skewer.'*⁶⁴

These examples recall too the malnutrition Ballard suffered when interned at Lunghua but in the scenes that follow Maitland abandoning his car, Ballard draws more explicit connections between the fictional island and the darker elements of his past. To conduct a survey, Maitland climbs to the vantage point of a second war air raid shelter. Attached to it are the remains of a civil defence post. Drawn to the ruined cinema, Maitland is reminded of his childhood visits to vampire and horror films. His transit across the island is thus both physical and temporal, *'more and more, the island was becoming an exact model of his head. His movement across this forgotten terrain was not merely through the island's past but through his own.'*⁶⁵

Noting that the vegetation seems to be growing increasingly wild and lush *'as if the island were moving back to an earlier and more violent period'*, Maitland is unaware that he too is a part of this temporal movement.⁶⁶ Gradually disinhibited through the absence of civilizing constraints, he becomes ever more commanding and threatening to the other islanders. Proctor, abused by the authorities and rejected by wider society, is further dehumanised by Maitland riding him about the island like a donkey, a parallel to Friday's servitude under Crusoe. The humiliation is completed when Proctor, drunk and helpless, is urinated on by Maitland. Proctor's final moments carry us back directly to Ballard's encounter on the Honchow-Shanghai railway. To impress Maitland with his acrobatic prowess, Proctor climbs up to the motorway where maintenance men have left a work cradle suspended from ropes. In a freak accident, Proctor's waist and neck are caught in the ropes and he is killed. Maitland stands and watches as Proctor's *'garrotted body fell to the damp ground below.'*⁶⁷

At the close of the novel, after Jane has left, Maitland reflects on the fact that he is alone and decides that he will wait to escape by his own efforts now realizing that this could easily have been achieved earlier. However, it is now too late, what had once been frightening is now, despite the loneliness and physical privations, familiar, almost homely, *'he felt no real need to leave the island.'*⁶⁸

In the period immediately following the war's end Lunghua, like the fictional island, was sealed off from the outside world. Although Japanese forces continued to operate beyond the bounds of the camp, they abandoned its supervision. Sitting in a landscape emptied of its local population, the internees were held in limbo awaiting the arrival of the Americans.

⁶³ Ballard (n 55) 96.

⁶⁴ James G Ballard *High Rise* (Fourth Estate 2011) 159

⁶⁵ Ballard (n1) 70.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁶⁸ Gasiorek (n 10) 120.

The emaciated Jim Ballard, a fourteen-year-old excited by this turn of events, spent hours on the observation roof of one of the camp buildings waiting for the Red Cross to arrive with the daily rations. Venturing to slip through the unguarded perimeter fence one day, Ballard described the curious sensation of looking on the camp from outside. Disturbed, he then ran back through the thick grass ‘*relieved to be back in the camp and the only security I knew.*’⁶⁹

While identifying autobiographical material in the novel evidences the period Ballard is revisiting, to claim that Ballard’s fictional treatments of his memories of Shanghai are in part phenomenological requires further consideration of the *forms* that these memories are given, particularly the equivalences Ballard draws between the anomic and distortions of the body and physical environment.

In *The Memory of Place, a Phenomenology of the Uncanny*, Dylan Trigg examines the complex question of the nature of episodic memory (autobiographical memory). His aim is to uncover the role of the material environment in the constitution of the sense of self and the world – of the idea of ‘being touched by the past’, in other words, of the affirmative or disruptive effects of the *experience* of memory on personal identity. Touch brings temporality and *materiality* into relation, an approach that contests theories that depend solely on the temporal coherence of personal identity. For Trigg, memory of place (materiality and spatiality) has as important a role in the formation of personal identity as temporality.⁷⁰

Trigg’s argument has application both to Ballardian trademark imagery and to the intimate Ballardian relation between the subject and their physical surroundings. The former returns us to the empty swimming pool. The latter suggests both the givenness of consciousness, the strange fact that all of us are always *in* the world and cannot be separated from it in experience, and the attempts at an experiential account of particular memories. By virtue of Ballard’s recognition of the importance of Shanghai, it suggests that the extremes of Ballard’s treatment of the material (in addition to the spatial and temporal) in his fiction – where it can be linked to Ballard’s history – is a working through of the memories of events that partly constituted Ballard’s sense of self. Of course, Ballard’s distinctive treatment of these events mostly renders them outside of ‘normal’ experience. However, rather than diminishing their significance, this lack of intersubjective verifiability highlights Ballard’s treatment as complex.

A powerful and phenomenologically rich episode in *Concrete Island* occurs immediately following the description of Maitland’s temporal transit. Exhausted, starving, struggling with fever and on the cusp of delirium, Maitland plays out a quasi-religious scene, surrounded by nettles that resemble the ‘*towers of gothic cathedrals*’, likened to a priest ‘*officiating at the eucharist of his own body*’, he begins to ‘*shuck off*’ bodily parts gradually erasing awareness of his various injuries. Identifying areas of the island with his anatomy – his injured right leg with the crash site, his hands with the fence, his chest with a low wall where he recently rested, these physical sites become ‘*places of pain and ordeal that were now confused with pieces of his body.*’ Maitland finally declares, ‘*I am the island.*’⁷¹ Later, Maitland reflects on the oddness of this utterance, and how, as he moves about the island

⁶⁹ Ballard (n1) 102.

⁷⁰ Dylan Trigg, *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny* (Ohio University Press 2013).

⁷¹ Ballard (n55) 71.

“he seemed to be following a contour line inside his head”.⁷² At the close of the novel, his strange declaration will become almost literally true. On the verge of starvation and with only the vaguest of intentions to plan and execute his escape, Maitland will die where he rests, his untended body gradually deliquescing into the island’s soil.

Ballard here employs several devices. First, a method akin to an eidetic variation, an investigation of the essence of an experience. In simple cases, a variation can be quite easily applied. In the case of Eddington’s table, we might remove from our contemplation all factual elements inessential to it being a table (e.g. the colour brown, a leather top, ball and claw feet, a drawer) to arrive at a view of the table’s true essence – that being what cannot be changed without the table ceasing to be a table.⁷³ In the case of any complex human behaviour or physical event, this is an obviously much more difficult process: it is difficult to the point of impossibility to apply imagination in the same manner as the table to the question of the qualities of a normative vacuum – a concept that lies outside most human experience. This fact partially explains one component of the Ballardian, the distortions of the physical environment and of the human psyche are themselves variations that allow Ballard to approach the essence of his experience.

Early on in the novel, to attract the attention of passing motorists, Maitland scrawls a message onto the concrete caisson of one of the enormous gantry signs but finds that the words are later erased. Maitland twice tries again, but on each occasion the words are removed. Earlier in the novel, Maitland cannot read the signs that sit on the motorway above him, they carry only ‘meaningless destinations’ and the names of his wife, mother and son.⁷⁴

The denial of reading and writing and the absence of geographic direction suggest primitive, pre- or post-civilised conditions. The island is a non-place, removed from time and society, the profundity of the un-homing is emphasized by its having come about in the centre of the familiar city. Maitland’s experience of the island’s particular qualities of absence, a surface that is textless and placeless, that is real but at the same time not real (a stage set), suggest a threshold, a Platonic *khôra* a half-place between existence and non-existence in which normativity is only a memory.

High Rise

High Rise is set in a newly constructed forty-storey tower block with two thousand inhabitants built in the area of today’s Canary Wharf development in London.⁷⁵ The building is largely self-contained with a supermarket, banks, shops, swimming pools and even a junior school. The narrative is divided between Dr Robert Laing, a recently divorced physician who teaches at a nearby medical school, the building’s architect, Anthony Royal, and a television producer, Richard Wilder. At the start of the novel Wilder tells his wife that he intends to film life in the building for a project, his wife asks if it is to be another ‘prison documentary’. The organization of the block reflects a form of class structure. Almost

⁷² Ballard (n 55) 131.

⁷³ Gallagher (n 6) 164.

⁷⁴ Ballard (n 55) 49.

⁷⁵ Ballard was living in London at the time of the construction of the Balfron and Trelick Towers designed by Erno Goldfinger. Built as social housing, the towers were commissioned by the London County Council for construction after slum clearances in Polar and Ladbroke Grove. The failure of the Pruitt-Igoe housing projects in Missouri and their demolition starting in 1972 was a further influence.

entirely occupied by professionals, the inhabitants are stratified in accord with their economic status. Although free to leave should they wish, the inhabitants choose to stay notwithstanding the building's deterioration into a more than complete Hobbesian state of nature.

In a comment on the maintenance of civility among the internees at the Lunghua camp, Ballard dispensed the wisdom of his childhood experiences, *'I take it for granted that if the war had continued for much longer the sense of community and the social constraints would have broken down.'*⁷⁶ *High Rise* runs with the kernel of this assumption in spectacular fashion, both admiring of and exasperated by bourgeois passivity, one can sense the pressure of Ballard's contained anxiety to force the reader to comprehend the capacity of the ordinary and the familiar to dissolve, to sense the fragility of social norms.

Drawn from his own background, psychopathologies are one of Ballard's most favoured analytical tools, as Zahavi points out, *'If we look for phenomena that can shake our ingrained assumptions and force us to refine, revise or even abandon our habitual way of thinking, all we have to do is to turn to psychopathology.'*⁷⁷ The medic Laing provides the instrument by which Ballard identifies pathological behaviours: the drives to acts of extreme random violence, self-harm and cruelty and the manner in which tenants are obsessively drawn back from their everyday occupations and the opportunity of escape, to the charnel house of the tower with the likelihood that they will never leave. At the close of the novel, in the midst of the worst imaginable human degradation, Laing calmly roasts the hindquarters of another resident's pet Alsatian over a fire on his balcony. He reflects that, *'on the whole, life in the apartment had been kind to him. To an increasing extent everything was returning to normal.'*⁷⁸ This scene occurs just after Laing has helped the half-starved architect Royal to his final resting place, the *'terminal slope'* of the swimming pool on the 10th floor which, emptied of water, has been filled with the bones and putrid body parts of partially cannibalized tenants.

In the introduction to *Concrete Island* Ballard observes, *'here are other islands far nearer to home, some of them only a few steps from the pavements we tread every day.'*⁷⁹ An island is of course defined by its isolation – Defoe's 'rape of humanity' – the Shanghai phenomena that Ballard distils in these works – the very extremities of human experience – are nearly always just a few steps from the pavement of the everyday and localised in a bounded form. Examples can also be drawn from his short stories.

In *The Overloaded Man* (1961), Faulkner, the central character, abandons his work. Choosing to remain at home, he discovers an ability to mentally obliterate the architecture of the surrounding Menninger village, a modernist 'hell on earth' named after the psychiatric clinic in the US. He then develops the facility to edit his perceptions seeing in this skill, *'an escape route from the intolerable world in which he found himself at the Village.'*⁸⁰ After murdering his wife, whom he has ceased to recognise as a human being, regarding her as akin to an animate lump of clay that he remoulds with his hand as he crushes the life from her, Faulkner leaves

⁷⁶ Ballard (n 1) 94.

⁷⁷ Gallagher (n 14) 50.

⁷⁸ Ballard (n64) 7.

⁷⁹ Ballard (n 55) Introduction.

⁸⁰ James G Ballard, 'The Overloaded Man' in *J G Ballard The Complete Short Stories Volume 1* (Fourth Estate 2011) 334.

his house and submerges himself in a pond in his garden, *Slowly, he felt the puttylike mass of his body dissolving ... at last he had found the perfect background, the only possible field of ideation, an absolute continuum of existence untrammelled by material excrescences – he waited for the world to dissolve and set him free.*⁸¹

In *The Enormous Space* (1980), Geoffrey Ballantyne, a researcher at a merchant bank, suffers a series of setbacks and subsequently withdraws into his suburban home, the physical limits of which then become his sole horizon. Ballantyne later discovers that new rooms have appeared in the house and that the whole structure is slowly expanding. After murdering a number of visitors and a neighbour's dog, Ballantyne runs out of food. As he gradually starves to death, he reflects that he is like the marooned Crusoe, '*but a reductive Crusoe paring away exactly those elements of bourgeois life which the original Robinson so dutifully constituted ... [I want to] find in their place a far richer realm formed from the elements of light, time and space.*'⁸² Dying on his kitchen floor, Ballantyne looks on passively as the topology of his home extends towards an infinite geometrical plane.

Physical pain and suffering of the kind Ballard describes is claimed here as a form of phenomenological account, not of the experience of physical pain and suffering itself, but of the circumstances under which – the anomic void – that suffering was both possible and enacted. Japanese militarist culture and Japan's socio-political system at the time of the Second World War naturally invite comparisons with the National Socialist State of Nazi Germany and, considering the conditions at the end of the Japanese war, elements of the work of Sergio Agamben.⁸³ Agamben posits what he terms, law 'in force without significance' the condition of the suspension of the legal order and of constitutional protections (what he terms the 'state of exception'), characteristic of totalitarian states, the purest expression of which is found in the concentration camp. Thus, as the victim of the dying moments of another totalitarian regime, the unfortunate Chinese civilian in Ballard's account might appear, in the context of Agamben's political analysis of totalitarianism, as *homo sacer*, a concept derived from Roman law denoting a sacred (but not holy) individual who cannot be sacrificed but who may be killed. *Homo sacer* cannot be killed within the law but by being set outside the law may be killed: an inclusive-exclusion – an individual who is not under the law but who is still in relation to the law by virtue of the fact that his status and the consequence of that status have arisen from his exclusion from the law. The condition of neither being included nor excluded places the subject into a 'zone of indistinction. However, the Ballardian empty presence is not that of the zone of indistinction. It is not a deliberate normlessness brought about by sovereign command but rather a true state of nature encountered by taking the few short steps to the isolated island.

Later influences also provide insights into the development of Ballard's phenomenal imagery. 'Inner space', a phrase derived from the influence of surrealism that occurs frequently in Ballard's interviews was used by him to mark the shift in focus found in New Wave science fiction writing. Ballard defined inner space as an imaginary realm in which the surrealists re-envisioned the exterior world as a fantastical landscape through its merger

⁸¹ *ibid* 343.

⁸² James G Ballard, 'The Enormous Space' in *J G Ballard The Complete Short Stories Volume 2* (Fourth Estate 2011) 700.

⁸³ To provide but a few examples, the use of the Kempeitai (Secret Police), the suspension of international laws governing the treatment of Chinese prisoners of war in 1937, the innumerable massacres that followed Japanese occupations and the use of bacteriological weapons on civilians.

with the dreams and fictions of the mind creating canvasses of the unconscious.⁸⁴ However, even in the earliest phases of his writing, Ballard saw that societal change had overtaken surrealist thought, *'the fiction is all out there. You can't overlay your fiction on top of that. You've got to use, I think, a much more analytic technique than the synthetic technique of the surrealists.'*⁸⁵

One such analytic technique was pop art. Ballard frequently referred to the influence on him of *This is Tomorrow*, the 1957 RCA exhibition said to have inaugurated the movement. Pop art presented a challenge, one that has since proven spectacularly successful, to the differentiation of high art from mass culture. In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, the art critic Laurence Alloway described the show as *'a lesson in spectatorship which cuts across the learned responses of conventional perception'*.⁸⁶ In Richard Hamilton's *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?*, the now famous collage of American magazine images, an ostensibly domestic scene cluttered with the iconography of consumerism, was a pop art comment on media saturated imagery, a re-contextualisation and foregrounding of everyday objects that forced a re-evaluation of contemporary visual culture wherein *'an advertisement for a cake mix contained the codes that defined a mother's relationship to her children, imitated all over our planet.'*⁸⁷

Of equal importance to Ballard as the graphic design works were the installations, in particular *Patio and Pavillion*. This was a rudimentary hut fashioned from corrugated plastic sheeting and planks. Found objects were displayed inside and on top of the structure which stood within a mirrored enclosure on an artificial beach. The work was that of the Independence Group, formed in 1952 by the artist Eduardo Paolozzi (who was to become a close friend of Ballard), the architectural partnership of Alison and Peter Smithson (associated with the "ethic" of New Brutalism) and Nigel Henderson the photographer of the post-war London.

Objet trouvé (itself a surrealist conception) scavenged from bomb sites were placed in the hut and arranged carefully as exhibits on the beach. Among those that were recognizable were a broken gun and a bicycle wheel. The hut was furnished with a small table and posters. Peter Smithson argued that to understand the wartime period of the 'as found' required imagining, *'incredible cruelty propounded as normality'*. Presaging post-apocalyptic survival, the pavilion suggested a dwelling for refugees, perhaps even the survivors of a nuclear calamity, an unavoidable association during the Cold War.

Smithson's injunction touches on the question of why Ballard found the installation so affecting. The pavilion and its assemblages of wartime detritus imply provisionality, the pathetic symbols of domestication a profound emptiness, the whole an evocation of the *un-homed/unheimlich/uncanny* that suffuses Ballardian imagery. In his *Letter of Humanism* written in 1947 Heidegger commented, *'homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world'* an observation echoed by Lukacs that the modern condition is 'transcendental

⁸⁴ Gasiorek (n 10) 13 following.

⁸⁵ Frank Whitford, 'Speculative Illustrations: Eduardo Paolozzi in Conversation with J. G. Ballard' in Simon Sellars and Dan O'Hara (eds), *Extreme Metaphors, Selected Interviews with J G Ballard, 1967–2008* (Fourth Estate 2012), 38.

⁸⁶ 'This is Tomorrow' <https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/this-is-tomorrow/> accessed February 20 2019.

⁸⁷ Ballard (n 1) 189

homelessness'.⁸⁸ For Ballard, the pavilion was a catalyst for other self-consciously explicit associations, the physical space of the installation becoming both a part of thought and a tightening of phenomenal clarity, a baleful empty presence that connected directly with the manmade environment of Ballard's childhood.

'Hutment' was a term applied by officials in Shanghai to the slums that became common in the city from the early 1920s. Initially housing migrant factory workers who had moved from the surrounding countryside to the city, the war caused a huge expansion of slum dwelling, "*all over Shanghai, migrants or homeless residents built huts and shacks, sometimes in the middle of ruins*" to be followed after the war by a 'massive population influx actually turned the city into a massive hutment area.'⁸⁹ Photographs of Shanghai of the period demonstrate strong similarities between these shanty dwellings and the RCA pavilion. In *Concrete Island*, the description of Proctor's shelter provides a suggestive link between the hutments and the pavilion,

*a line of faded quilts hung from the ceiling and covered the walls and floor ... the sole pieces of furniture were a wooden chair and a table ... On the wooden table a number of metal objects were arranged in a circle like ornaments on an altar. All had been taken from motor-car bodies – a wing mirror, strips of chromium window trim, pieces of broken headlamp.*⁹⁰

The importance of Ballard's pre-occupation with psychopathologies has already been alluded to. As Vidler argues, estrangement or unhomeliness may be seen as the disordering of the apprehension of space.⁹¹ In the nineteenth century, rapid urban development and the displacement of populations through conflict gave rise to new psychopathologies some of which manifested as tensions between the exterior and interior, security and invasion. Thresholds in the built environment were psychologized as, for example, agoraphobia and claustrophobia, fears that Ballard examines in the short stories *Concentration City*, an apparently infinite urban expanse in which the unquestioning inhabitants are held as part of the fabric, and *Billionium*, a world in which massive overpopulation reduces living space to a matter of inches. If we accept the uncanny as, '*a significant psychoanalytical and aesthetic response to the real shock of the modern, a trauma ... that has not been exorcised from the contemporary imaginary. Estrangement and unhomeliness have emerged as the intellectual watchwords of our century,*' it is then necessary at least to pause over the word 'trauma'.⁹²

In *Empire of the Sun*, the identification by Jim, the central character, with the Japanese soldiers, has been seen as indicative of psychological harm, '*violence colonises his imagination so thoroughly that he is unable to see that his identification with the war is a product of the very trauma he believes he is so pragmatically evading.*'⁹³

⁸⁸ Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism' in David Krell (ed) *Basic Writings* (Routledge Kegan Paul 1978) 219. George Lukacs, *Theory of the Novel* (MIT Press 1974) 41.

⁸⁹ Christian Henriot, 'Slums, Squats or Hutments? Constructing and Deconstructing an In-Between Space in Modern Shanghai' (2012) 7 *Frontiers of History in China* <<https://doi.org/10.3868/s020-001-012-0030-5>> 514, 515 accessed 10 February 2019.

⁹⁰ Ballard (n55) 76.

⁹¹ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (MIT Press 1994) 6.

⁹² *ibid* 9.

⁹³ Gasiorek (n 10) 156.

To return to Trigg's use of Ballard's short story, *Memories of the Space Age* (1982), trauma can be thought of as 'a deferred and fragmented manifestation of the past.'⁹⁴ Deferral creates a radical division in time, either side of which different subjectivities reside. The past encroaches on the present, 'as though the persistence of the present were nothing more than a reverberation of the past catching up with its history ... memory belongs to the present precisely because it is incommensurable with the past.'⁹⁵

It is not possible here to speculate in detail on whether trauma was a motive force for Ballard, his stated intent was to evoke the past by means other than memory. As above, "the cultural world has its meaning fundament in the world of perceptions, the domain through which its structures are always mediated, in which its truths are always directly verified in our experience."⁹⁶ In Ballard, the disintegration of the cultural structures underlying social order and, ultimately, the absence of law, are reflected in perceptions of the physical world, including the body. The question arises as to the value that such an account of phenomenality has to the study of law and literature. In the introduction, three examples of phenomenological insights into Ballard's work were given; a search for authenticity, a deep interest in the nature of experience and a near obsession with the past. Nonetheless, however alien much of Ballard's fiction is to 'ordinary experience' it carries a curious quality of verisimilitude. In Ballardian imagery of empty pools, abandoned buildings and industrial hinterlands we sense that a truth is being revealed. The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset saw the power and meaning of reality as 'rooted in its presence. Culture is of memories and promises, the irreversibly past, the dreamed future ... but reality is a simple and frightful "being there".'⁹⁷ In Ballard we find a correction. Law, like Eddington's second table, is a human formation, one 'essentially related to human actualities and potentialities', it is phenomenologically distinct: it can be felt.⁹⁸ Such is law's sensible qualities that its corruption, disintegration and absence results ultimately in an *empty presence*, a frightful 'being there' that forcibly brings to our attention law's place within the structures of our consciousness.

⁹⁴ Trigg (n 70) 231.

⁹⁵ *ibid* 237.

⁹⁶ Gallager (n 14) 164.

⁹⁷ John T Graham, *The Social Thought of Ortega y Gasset. A systematic Synthesis in Postmodernism and Interdisciplinarity* (2001 University of Missouri Press) 352.

⁹⁸ Gallager (n 14) 7.