



BOOK REVIEW:
J. G. Ballard

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Wilson, D. Harlan. *J. G. Ballard*. U of Illinois P, 2017. ISBN 978-0252082955.

There are some SF narratives that transcend the boundaries of the genre, not because they have tendencies toward another established genre (realism, the detective novel, etc.), or because they can be placed within a more generalised, speculative bracket, but because they imagine a world in which the framework of science itself no longer applies or makes any sense. The philosopher Quentin Meillassoux labels these kinds of fictions “extro-science fictions”, or “XSF”. For Meillassoux, these types of fiction suggest a world that breaks away from the notion of fixed laws that guarantee the stability of reality and of experience, the likes of which Kant had tried to set out in response to Hume’s scandalous suggestion that we couldn’t really know about such things. Kant’s notion that a world in which the appearances of things constantly shift would lead to the impossibility of perception itself, in fact, is for Meillassoux a version of XSF (8–17). The very fact that we can think of this kind of world – where, for example (and to use Kant’s phrasing), a “human being were now changed into this animal shape, now into that one” (qtd. in Meillassoux 28–29) – means that we aren’t able to refute the possibility of such worlds by means of reason alone. And this is just one, extreme type of XSF world. Meillassoux outlines two less extreme versions: worlds that contain causeless, random events occurring only very occasionally; and worlds that are in thrall to such contingency that it is impossible to establish any fixed laws, but in which perception is still possible. All of these different worlds would elude science – and the frameworks around which SF constructs itself – as there would either be no constant object to observe or represent, or no laws on which to base any study or thought-experiment, or both.

Meillassoux mentions a few existing narratives from literature (rather than from philosophy) that come close to XSF: Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), Robert Charles Wilson's *Darwinia* (1998), Philip K. Dick's *Ubik* (1969). And he also mentions a more thoroughgoing example of the genre: René Barjavel's *Ravage* (1974). These novels all conform in one way or another to the suspension of scientific laws in the spirit outlined above.

I think we can class the work of J. G. Ballard – at least in its most experimental guises – as XSF, but this involves expanding the concept a little. For what Ballard's novels do consistently is to question the notion of fixed scientific laws from the point of view of consciousness itself, whereby it is not necessarily (or just) the world at-large that is subject to sudden events without precedent but, rather, human psychology that undergoes a series of shocks and transformations throughout the *oeuvre*. Reading Ballard within a psychoanalytic framework, or even a schizoanalytic framework, thus in some way always misses the point of his work, particularly where Ballard pushes firmly beyond the boundaries of a normative model of human psychology. In the books that do this – *Crash* (1973), *High-Rise* (1975), *Super-Cannes* (2000), etc.— we witness not just a mode of literature that is interested in the parameters of human psychology and what happens when this is transformed, but one that is committed to demolishing those parameters.

What this vacillation between SF and XSF in Ballard's work exposes is a writer who has always been – to adapt a phrase – both *in* and *against* SF. We can see this on an extreme level through the terms we've just been using, but also in the way Ballard mixes surrealism, absurdism, environmentalism, utopia, and crime into the SF genre. It would seem counter-intuitive, then, to try to argue that Ballard is an SF writer in any straightforward, unproblematic, or unadulterated sense. Thus it comes as a surprise when D. Harlan Wilson tries to make precisely this argument in *J. G. Ballard*, which is part of the Modern Masters of Science Fiction series (which has an expanding list of work that is, in many cases, excellent). Wilson makes the argument here that we can class Ballard's work as SF pretty much regardless of the piece being dealt with, notwithstanding the fact that some of Ballard's work only tangentially touches on the genre. He does this partly by using Darko Suvin's definition of SF as being established through a "*novum*", which designates a "totalising phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and addressee's norm of reality" (qtd. in Wilson 8). This makes sense to an extent, but it is obviously much less convincing when we come to novels like *Empire of the Sun* (1984) and *The Kindness of Women* (1991).

Whilst Wilson makes some effort to articulate how these books fit into a SF model, this is largely fleeting. As for later novels like *Cocaine Nights* (1996), *Millennium People* (2003), and *Kingdom Come* (2006), Wilson brackets these also as SF for under-elaborated reasons, which have to do with some of the core themes of earlier novels like *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), *Crash*, and *Concrete Island* (1974) catching up with reality. In any case, Wilson's catch-all classifications don't really leave him with much to prove, and so for the most part the book performs three other discernible, albeit quietly stated, tasks. The first is to chart Ballard's output from its start to its end point, right up until his memoir and final book, *Miracles of Life* (2008). The second is to read the novels and stories from a Deleuzian point of view, the purpose of which is never particularly obvious. And the third is to read Ballard's literary output in relation

to his stated opinions and general biography (this being a common feature of the Modern Masters series).

This latter element of the book feels tired and amounts to an amalgamation of interesting quotations from interviews with Ballard that, if one is familiar with the terrain, will have been encountered before. There are some interesting tidbits here for those unfamiliar with Ballard, though, and generally these help illuminate the work as much as such readings can. For example, Ballard's signature concept of "inner space" – which refers to the site at which psychological transformation and subversion takes place in conjunction with altered external environments – gets a good run-down, particularly in relation to Ballard's extensive corpus of short stories, which Wilson surveys in detail. The Deleuzian aspect of the book – which consists of Wilson applying concepts from Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical and schizoanalytical framework – feels fresher, even if not entirely unprecedented within the secondary literature. But here, Wilson has a tendency to slip into jargon, which results in the specificity of Deleuze and Guattari's concepts being lost and any association between these and Ballard's writing feeling out of reach. One example will suffice to illustrate the general point. In Chapter 4, Wilson reads the emergence of the tribal, affectless subject of *High-Rise* as signalling an "operational deleuzoguattarian plateau. The tenants fall prey to desiring-production and devolve into raw desiring-machines" (94). For the reader unfamiliar with Deleuze and Guattari, this statement will be impossible to decipher. But even for the reader familiar with their thought, the mixture of concepts and lack of explication obscures a point that is presumably quite a simple one about the extremes of libidinal economy as rendered in Ballard's novel.

There are some productive theoretical insights here, though. The best are probably how Wilson relates the Ballardian universe to Marshall McLuhan's notion of media as an extension of man. This is a valid comparison and has the advantage of being lucid. For example, Wilson suggests in the introduction that we read Ballard's meditations on consumer culture, undergirded as this is by advertising and desire, in relation to McLuhan's ideas, which in turn invites some interesting associations between McLuhan and Ballard's own notion of inner space. This also allows for further links to be made with the manifest themes of technology throughout the early novels and stories and into the late work, and Wilson does this as the book unfolds. This leads us to the other useful aspect of this book, which is – as already mentioned – to provide a broad and expansive view of Ballard's output. The collection of resources that the monograph brings together is no doubt scholarly and will be useful to those holed up in the suburbs or elsewhere, studying Ballard. But this ought to come with the proviso that any book that seeks, as *J. G. Ballard* does, to pin down such an unwieldy body of work as one thing obscures its intrigue, its complexity, and its sheer defamiliarising qualities.

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Works Cited

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