

2 Revising reality

In a deserted Europe Richard Forrester meets the enigmatic Dr Gould in the Dali museum at Figueras.³²

Beside him on the divan were three canvases he had selected from the walls, and which he later took back to decorate his hotel rooms.

'They're a little too close to the knuckle for me,' Forrester commented.⁴ A collection of newsreels from Hell.'

'A sharp guess at the future, all right,' Gould agreed. The ultimate dystopia is the inside of one's own head.'

Ballard expresses an enthusiasm for the Surrealists which is shared, unsurprisingly, by many of his characters. Beatrice Dahl, Charles Ransom, Halliday, Dr Nathan, and Dr Gould all have small collections of Surrealist painting to which they attach much significance. I have remarked how the strange tableaux set up in many of the stories recall the work of Dali and de Chirico, Delvaux and Magritte; further reading shows that Ballard is indebted to Surrealism not for images only, but also for methods. In an interview he was asked whether there was a direct connection between his stories and the paintings mentioned in them.³³

The connection is deliberate, because I feel that the surrealists have created a series of valid external landscapes, which have their direct correspondences within our own minds. I use the phrase "spinal landscape" fairly often. And here, in these spinal landscapes, which I feel that painters such as Ernst and Dali are producing, one finds a middle ground (an area which I've described as "inner space") between the outer world of reality on the one hand, and the inner world of the psyche on the other.'

Ballard perpetuates the Surrealists' assertion that their art discloses contents of the unconscious mind. The dislocations and ambiguities in their pictures radiate an extraordinary power of emotional and

imaginative conviction, as if bypassing the frontal intellect and striking chords in more remote regions of the brain. Violating our expectations of continuity, every painting, every collage is a metaphysical disaster area. The Surrealists assaulted 'the barriers between the deepest levels of the nervous system and the external world'.

Ballard remains highly sceptical as to what is actually in the external world, especially now that so much of it is our own creation, or at least shows signs of our interference. Our proliferating technology gives us unprecedented rations of power to act out inner fantasies and fulfil secret impulses. Psychology has reduced human mentality to terms of its most base drives, and so degraded all intentions and achievements. Rational accounts of what we make and do are dubious, ultimately irrelevant. The meaning of a multi-storey car park is not the parking of cars, not in Ballard's epistemology; and if the car park is a cipher in a code, what of the car, whose ambiguous emotional effects are much more evident?

Ballard's choice of the catastrophe mode for his first four novels was a wish to destroy the manifest form of the external world and release the deep desires latent in it. He suspected that the desires would be anti-social, selfish, aggressive, exploitative, ultimately self-destructive. In this respect *The Drowned World* is indeed closer to Golding than to Wyndham, and it is easy to see why critics thought Ballard had been reading Conrad, though he extends a heart of darkness to the entire human race. As Ransom admits, 'Mr Jordan, I daren't be honest with myself. Most known motives are so suspect these days that I doubt whether the hidden ones are any better.'³⁴

Ballard has always shown a keen eye for motives. His writings are dotted with minutiae of kinesics, the analysis of gesture and posture popularly known as 'body-language':

I expected to see a look of fury and outrage on her face, but instead her unmoving eyes showed the calm and implacable contempt of a grieving widow insulted at her husband's funeral.³⁵

Louise Peret. . . still wore her sun-glasses, screening off some inner sanctum of herself. . . but already he sensed from the slight movement of her hands across the table towards him that she was searching for some point of contact.³⁶

Radek placed his hands palm-downwards on the metal desk as if trying to draw some kind of resolution from its surface.³⁷

Trabert watched the young man pace at random around the pitch, replicating some meaningless labyrinth as if trying to focus his own identity.³⁸

Ballard insists on this subtlety with such conviction that it is difficult to detect where and when it becomes absurd.³⁹

'Lomax told me to follow you; tell him everything you did.'

'Interesting.' Ransom pondered this. The frankness could be discounted. No doubt these were Lomax's instructions, but the real point of Quilter's remarks would lie elsewhere.

Yet absurdity especially must be pursued, since it is an escape from the reasonable and expected. Randomness and surprise call into play the associative faculties of the brain, and undiscovered connections spark: the Surrealists' purpose, and Ballard's, precisely. He reproduces their effects, the bizarre juxtapositions which enshrine an enigmatic, irreducible authority. This device illuminates many incidents in his earlier work. In *The Drought* Quilter menaces Ransom with a cheetah he has stolen from the zoo: 'With a smile, as if decanting a pearl from his palm, Quilter let the leash slide off his hand into the road.'⁴⁰ As in the writings of Lautréamont and André Breton, the vehicle of the conjunction is a special kind of simile, a comparison which mystifies instead of elucidating. Thinking back to his capture by Saul and the fishermen, Ransom remembers 'the nets closing around him in the hot airless road, like the capes of bull-fighters called out to the streets behind their arena to play a huge fish found leaping in the dust.'⁴¹ Later, and more obscurely, 'Laing had not been particularly interested in Melville, this ex-pilot who had turned up here impulsively in his expensive car and was now prowling restlessly around the solarium as if hunting for a chromium rat.'⁴² Why a *chromium* rat? This is a pseudo-simile, one in which there is no discoverable parity between the terms. Ballard's version of it employs a literary sleight commonly used by ironists: he keeps the relation but blurs the distinction, so that the two halves of the simile, the actual and the virtual, can be swapped over. Charles Gifford, dying slowly on the drained delta, sees thousands of snakes emerge from the mud each evening.⁴³

The nearest creeks were three hundred yards from the camp, but for some reason the appearance of the snakes always

coincided with Gifford's recovery from his evening fever. . . .
He would sit up in the stretcher-chair and find the snakes
crawling across the beaches, almost as if they had materialized
from his dreams.

'Almost as if. . .'-in fact, they have. No one else can see the snakes;
they are phantoms projected from Gifford's mind. But Ballard's
play upon the simile accomplishes more than this casual narrative
finesse. The ambiguity he contrives allows the point that the hal-
lucinated snakes are real, more real than the closed minds of Lowry
and Louise can admit. The snakes on the beach introduce Gifford to
the 'world of absolute values', the apprehension of eternity encoded
deep in his unconscious. As he says, reiterating a favourite idea of
his author's, 'The only real landscapes are the internal ones, or the
external projections of them, such as this delta.'⁴⁴

Later, when Ballard was submitting his 'condensed novels' to
NW, he included juxtapositions of a bolder kind than these similes,
as if listing the elements of a collage.⁴⁵

Junction Makers

Dr Manston indicated the items: (1) Photograph of partly
constructed motorway cloverleaf, concrete embankments
exposed in transverse section, labelled 'Crater'; (2)
Reproduction of Salvador Dali's *Madonna of Port Lligat*; (3)
500 imaginary autopsy reports of the first Boeing 747 air
disaster; (4) Sequence of perspective drawings of corridors at
the Belmont asylum; (5) Facial grimaces, during press
conference, of Armstrong and Aldrin; (6) List of pH levels of
settling beds, Metropolitan Water Board Reservoir, Staines; (7)
Terminal voice-print, self-recorded, of an unidentified suicide;
(8) The market analysis of a new hemispherical building-system
module.

The Surrealist techniques that Ballard has used involve deliber-
ate dissociations and mystifications. The object is taken from its
usual context and dismantled, or put in a new context, or confused
with other objects. But the result of the process is not mere non-
sense, but a revaluation. The elements acquire new significance
from the reorganisation, so that we sense more about the object
than we knew or felt before. Surrealism can thus be said to have
both a synthetic and an analytic aspect; it consists not only of
inspiration, but also of inquiry. This duality Ballard has inherited. It
can be seen operating in his most characteristic writing. 'Mutating

kelp, their gene shifts accelerated by the radio-phosphorus, reared up into the air on either side of the road like enormous cacti, turning the dark salt banks into a white lunar garden.⁴⁶ This sentence is what we might call techno-mysticism, a style in which Ballard can present scientific accuracy and evocative rhapsody at the same time. Again it is constructed around a simile: 'mutating kelp. . . reared up . . . like enormous cacti.' On the near side it purports to be a precise explanation ('gene shifts accelerated by the radio-phosphorus'), like the technicalities in traditional sf. On the far side, however, everything is mysterious once more, unscientific, even illogical ('lunar garden'). The movement parallels the way Ballard creates his disastrous new worlds. Each is a logical development from the present, but that logic is devalued in the process of change: 'old categories of thought would be merely an encumbrance.' After explanation, new mystery.

Sf can often seem flawed by an intrinsic incompatibility between the language of science and the language of fiction. The language of science is definitive; its objective is clarity; it must be independent of both experimenter and reader; ideally it would be value-free. However, we know that the language of fiction is associative; it works in many ways simultaneously; the personalities and values of writer and reader are indispensable elements in its expression and interpretation; its most acclaimed passages are rich, subtle, and complex. Ballard is able to reconcile the denotative and connotative principles without obvious effort; many readers speak of him with awe, calling him a poet.⁴⁷ His amalgamation of sonorous, emotive words with categorical terms from the sciences is a kind of alchemy. A new reality is generated, in which discrete elements (lunar, garden) can co-exist. Reading these sentences we apprehend a process part analytic, part synthetic.

We can now relate this more specifically back to Surrealism. Ballard's image of mutant kelp recalls paintings by Max Ernst such as *The Eye of Silence* and *Europe after the Rain*. First using a technique such as decalcomania, a haphazard smearing of gouache on a glossy surface, Ernst would then pick out shapes that had been produced accidentally and retouch them, adding figures and sky, until he completed a fantastic landscape. These strange panoramas of alien worlds are highly suitable, as Brian Aldiss pointed out to Penguin Books, for sf cover designs. This is the inspirational side of Surrealism, pure invention based on chance and imagination. On

the other side is investigative Surrealism, as seen in Rene Magritte's *Personal Values* or Giorgio de Chirico's *The Song of Love*: a very different kind of painting, using plain and even crude depictions of familiar objects in surprising situations, distorted in proportion and perspective, to reveal unexpected qualities in them. This kind of painting invents no new worlds but reinterprets this world instead. When Salvador Dali painted pictures like *Burning Giraffe*, filled with wooden crutches and open drawers, he was illustrating his own dreams with specific reference to Freud. The imagery of these paintings is allegorical, predisposing us to examine it analytically. Dali offers his subjective landscapes as a comment on memory and perception, and encourages us to decipher them according to the generalised system of values first tabulated by Freud. This is applied fantasy. Surrealism used psychoanalysis to investigate the latent content of reality - an alliance of creative and analytical procedures.

Ballard took up the task forty years later. His essay 'The Coming of the Unconscious', first printed in *NW*, discusses Surrealism as an artistic school with scientific purposes.⁴⁸

The images of surrealism are the iconography of inner space. Popularly regarded as a lurid manifestation of fantastic art concerned with states of dream and hallucination, surrealism is in fact the first movement, in the words of Odilon Redon, to place 'the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible'. This calculated submission of the impulses and fantasies of our inner lives to the rigours of time and space, to the formal inquisition of the sciences, psychoanalysis pre-eminent among them, produces an alternate reality beyond and above those familiar to either our sight or our senses.

The claim has been made by other critics. In *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute* Anna Balakian shows that the Surrealists paid close attention to contemporary advances in science.⁴⁹ After the Romantic severance of 'feelings' from 'facts', the Surrealists, Balakian says, were the first artists to embrace science wholeheartedly. Lautréamont was influenced by Darwin, Apollinaire was excited by the automobile, Breton (like Ballard) turned from medicine to art when he glimpsed the opening vistas of psychoanalysis. 'Both Saint-Pol-Roux and Apollinaire refer to Einstein, and long for the day when the artist may be able to make breakthroughs in the concept of reality in step with the mathematician's theories.'⁵⁰ This reconciliation was made possible by adjustments on both sides. Balakian cites

Einstein and Heisenberg as especially responsible for a re-orientation of thought in physics, displacing the old Newtonian image of a mechanistic, explicable universe, and reaffirming the contingent and unquantifiable.⁵¹ Science, by accepting principles of relativity and uncertainty, had reinstated the imagination, whose exclusion Blake and Wordsworth had apprehended with dread. At the same time the bounty of technology could be revalued as more magical than monstrous. The scientist had become not a destroyer of fantasy but a producer of marvels.⁵²

However ingenuous their delight may have been, the Symbolists and Surrealists derived an altogether new impetus from it. Balakian agrees with Ballard that the methods they adopted reproduced, or at least imitated, the 'formal inquisition' of science.⁵³

Breton and his colleagues went so far as to establish a Central Bureau of Surrealist Research to experiment with writing and to accept communications relative to their research from outside their ranks. . . .

Surrealism has been the first to break the dichotomy and to communicate the desire to appropriate the data of the modern scientist in order to bring about the necessary revisions of our notion of reality and to produce a drastic transformation of the function of the artist in a scientifically advanced society.

'Breakthroughs in the concept of reality'; 'necessary revisions of our notion of reality', resulting in 'a drastic transformation of the function of the artist' - these are the very claims that Ballard sets forward in *NW*. That science and technology have changed reality itself is cardinal to his theory of fiction. Traditional forms of fiction are obsolete because the world no longer corresponds to the constructions they put upon it. So with the Surrealists, according to Balakian.⁵⁴