

Ballard and Painterly/Paranoiac Surrealism

Ballard is frequently seen in terms of his 'visual' style, the evocative landscapes, the attention to ground far more than (human) figure. When Kingsley Amis worried that Ballard was escaping from Amis' definitional rights over the genre, the solution was to 'encourag[e]

Ballard to abandon writing for painting' ('ARRGH!' 6). The allusions in his work to Surrealist painting begin early: *The Drought* written 'within' Yves Tanguy's 'Jours de Lenteur'; *The Drowned World* invoking the 'metaphysical' spaces of de Chirico's vertiginous town squares, and where Strangman directs action according to his recovered Paul Delvaux painting.

And yet, as Ballard notes to Will Self, painting had a precarious position in Surrealism. Maurice Nadeau's *History of the Surrealist Movement* 'centres' the movement in political debates of the 1920s. Breton asserted the dissolution of art/life through Surrealism, but simultaneously defended its artistic autonomy from the Communist's demand that Surrealism be subsumed to its project. Nadeau considers the constitution of a 'surrealist aesthetic' in the 1930s as marking the failure of Surrealism as an avant-garde. The propulsive force of this failure, Nadeau intimates, is the dominance of Dali, and the rise of painterly surrealism.

Other narratives of Surrealism, however, suggest that the 1920s were prototypical moves, ineffective attempts at elaborating avant-garde strategies before it fully flowered in the 1930s. For Laurent Jenny, Dali's arrival saves the movement. Sarane Alexandrian makes Surrealism co-extensive with Breton's life (Surrealism died with him in 1966), but Whitney Chadwick, in 'recovering' the largely erased history of women involved in Surrealism, moves the centre of concern away from the (all-male) experiments and definitions of the 1920s to the late 1930s, where women artists established an internal distance from Breton's continuing attempts to control the movement. The 'centre' of Surrealism is difficult to determine, but the arrival Dali is crucial in all these narratives. This is all the more remarkable given that Dali was only a member for a brief time. His entry in 1930 was delayed over the shit-smearred figure in 'The Lugubrious Game' (a painting Breton's rival Bataille praised, nearly 'poaching' Dali from Surrealism). Praising Hitler as a 'surrealist innovator' in 1934, he was estranged by 1936 and expelled in 1939.

It does in fact possess a satisfying symmetry that Ballard should cite Dali as his major influence. Dali meets Ballard, as it were, at the edge of the high/low divide; Dali's sensationalism, avidity (Dali was anagrammatically christened Avida Dollars by the Surrealists on his expulsion), and above all *popularity*, have marginalized him from Surrealist accounts and this is mirrored—exactly in reverse—by the account of Ballard rising above popular ghetto origins and thus betraying science fiction. Carter Ratcliff is prepared to place Dali's 'perverse' play with the

'low' as far beyond that ever achieved by Pop Art: thrown out of the high, he entered into 'the lower depths—and that is precisely where he wanted to be, for it is in the limitless mudflats of consumerism, with no heaven of high art above, that his image-ingestion and regurgitation brings him the fullest degree of worldly power' (66). Strangely, Ballard, was requested to remove all references to Surrealism from the catastrophe novels because association with this movement might compromise his work.

Surrealist activity at first centred on dream and automatic writing and emphasized writing rather than painting. Breton rejected 'the stabilizing of dream images in the kind of still-life depiction known as *trompe-l'oeil*' (cited, Krauss, 'Photography in the Service of Surrealism', 20). However, when Naville pronounced 'Everyone knows there is no surrealist painting' (cited, Nadeau, 118), Breton removed him from the editorship of *La Revolution Surrealiste*, and set about finding a place for the painterly.

Dali's arrival re-invigorated the tortuous logic of 'automatism' and the conception of painting as a secondary form. Automatic writing attempted the fantasy of absolute, non-delayed identity with the expression of the unconscious. Dali moved from this expressivist model to the notion of the paranoid construction of art. In Dali's reading this was an active and always interpretive mode of perceiving the external world according to the subject's perverse desire. Paranoia, rather than purely internal, perceived the same everyday objects as everyone else, but according to a bizarre and perverse narrative establishing unforeseen connections. The advantages were clear: if automatism, little more than a realist fantasy trying to avoid representation, Dali's paranoiac-critical method made a virtue of its 'secondary' interpretive role. It moved from passivity to the 'active, derealization' (Jenny, 110) of a shared environment.

Atrocity can be seen to deploy this Dali-esque device. Dali defined the paranoiac-critical method as 'the critical and systematic objectification of delirious associations and interpretations' (cited, Ades, 200), which operated according to double or multiple condensation in a single image. The most ambitious use of the device was 'The Endless Enigma', in which six readings of the same landscape could be discerned. This unstable oscillation condensed different meanings within the same object. There is a link here to the compression of landscapes analysed in *Atrocity*, and a certain similarity between Dali's very public performance of his obsessions and the T-cell's experimental re-enactments of atrocities.

For Dali, the paranoiac exploits the external world, imposing his obsessions and transforming reality itself. So, if paranoia already constitutes a form of interpretation itself, as Jenny suggests, the T-cell's search for a 'modulus' is disturbingly doubled in the act of reading the attempt to make *Atrocity* make sense. The disturbing thought here is Ballard's provocation that *Atrocity* is the distillation of 'reality' from a 'debauch' of fiction; what form of knowledge is this? The specificity, the peculiarity of paranoia is its masterly mimicry of reason, and Jacques Lacan (whose early work appeared alongside Dali's in *Minotaure*) confesses at the end of his essay 'On a Question Preliminary to any possible treatment of psychosis' that the psychoanalysts' knowledge cannot be separated from the paranoiac's, that the former's shares the same structure as the latter's. As Lacan notes: 'That such a psychosis may prove to be compatible with what is called good order is not in question, but neither does it authorize the psychiatrist, even if he is a psychoanalyst, to trust to his own compatibility with that order to the extent of believing that he is in possession of an adequate idea of the reality to which his patient appears to be unequal' (Lacan, 216). Remembering Nathan's inability to answer the question 'Was my husband a doctor or a patient?', this might further illuminate Perry and Wilkie's sardonic comment that Nathan constitutes the paranoid's ideal doctor: he agrees and shares the delusion.

Given the 'terminal irony' of Ballard's experimental work, his 'sanity' is often put in question. Peter Nicholls views Ballard as 'advocating a life style quite likely to involve the sudden death of yourself or those you love' (Nicholls, 31). If part of the device of *Atrocity* is indeed a taking up of Dali's methodology, paranoia-criticism's mimicry precisely rests on the confusion of sanity and madness. Breton and Eluard's *The Immaculate Conception* used parody to simulate madness: 'the authors hope to show that, given a state of poetic tension, the normal mind is capable of furnishing verbal material of the most profoundly paradoxical and eccentric nature, and it is possible for such a mind to harbour the main ideas of delirium without being permanently affected thereby' (Breton, 50-51). Parody distances, but what of paranoia?

The mimicry of mental states, the parody of paranoia's 'reasoning madness' also recalls Roger Caillois' beautifully Surrealistic analogy between animal camouflage and schizophrenia, first published in *Minotaure*. Sanity, rational order, is determined by *distinction* from the environment; the morphological mimicry of environment by insects might serve as a model for a madness driven by a '*temptation by space*' (70). The T-cell occupies 'impossible', overdetermined spaces, spaces

which do not 'work', or which confuse the real and the boundaries of the art-work. Even the unstable name of the T-cell disappears from the closing sections in a way which anticipates the erasure of Tyrone Slothrop from the manically proliferating surveillance devices in *Gravity's Rainbow*. But this disappearance enacts the schizophrenic as understood by Caillois: 'space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses . . . He feels himself becoming space, *dark space where things cannot be put*' (72). *Atrocity* is thus firmly in the tradition of Surrealism's problematic celebration of 'madness'—a surrender which, very soon, might turn around to become startlingly aggressive and sadistic.

Bürger argues that the appearance of the avant-garde, the very possibility of its strategies, was opened by the 'end' of the historical development of 'artistic means'; all previous methods, bounded then by their historical evolution, were now open to citation and combination. Setting in motion Bürger's 'end of art history', refusing this termination, it is plain that *Atrocity* begins to re-cite 'Cubism' or 'Surrealism' as themselves open to re-contextualization and re-combination. This is neither posited identity with the 'historical avant-garde' (Ballard as 'modernist') nor a hollow and savagely ironic repetition of it (Ballard as 'postmodernist'); the relation is more complex than that.

Paranoia-criticism's extreme subjectivism is disturbing in its communicability and rational mimicry. For Perry and Wilkie, *Atrocity* is to be read through the T-cell's obsessional interpretive frame, and is to be 'vindicated' as the only 'sane' response: 'Owing to the absence of fixed, determinate values, the only relevant measure of meaning is subjective conviction' (183) This is opposed to David Punter who suggests that *Atrocity* concerns the erasure of Self, subjectivity 'transcended by mechanism and the massive systems of information and data' (9-10). This again evokes the difficulty of establishing the status of Ballard's fictional worlds: are his landscapes to be seen as inner spaces, or as threatening the self with annihilation? Where the Surrealist emphasis privileges the former, it is important to signal how Surrealist desire is absolutely transformed by the media landscape of the 1960s. This is where Ballard's simultaneous deployment of neo-avant-garde Pop Art strategies becomes just as important to trace.

***The Atrocity Exhibition, Mass Culture
and the Neo-Avant-Garde***

If mass culture has already become one great exhibition, then everyone who stumbles into it feels as lonely as a stranger on an exhibition site . . . Mass culture [is] a system of signals that signals itself (Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 71).

What does *The Atrocity Exhibition* exhibit? Does this 'stylish anatomy of outrage' (Theroux, 56) anatomize or embody? Is this body of texts negating or affirming what it exhibits? With its mass cultural concerns, how can *Atrocity* be positioned in relation to that mass culture from which in part it derives?

I have suspended what is evident at the outset: *Atrocity* concerns the explosion of the 'media landscape'. Televisions, film festivals and billboards project images from Vietnam. The Zapruder film of Kennedy's assassination endlessly replays. The content of these images suddenly matches the violence that had been for so long accorded to the form of the media channels of mass culture. Reality is defined as that constituted by the media: for the T-cell, the fragmented projections of Elizabeth Taylor renders her 'a presiding deity', for 'the film actress provided a set of operating formulae for their passage through consciousness' (16). The T-cell's hope for unitary identity seems to be premised on whether Monroe's suicide can be 'solved', whether it is possible 'to kill Kennedy again, but in a way that makes sense'. The media have released irresolvable traumatic material which can only induce repetition of the trauma, in a futile attempt at mastery. This is the media as the embodiment of the death drive, the compulsion to repeat.

Punter's statement that in *Atrocity* subjectivity is 'transcended by mechanism and the massive systems of information and data' corresponds with a narrative of the effect on the subject of technologization in advanced industrial capitalism that has been endlessly told and re-told. If, for Jameson, postmodernism marks the invasion of the unconscious, the evisceration of 'the bourgeois ego or monad' and so 'the end of psychopathologies of that ego' ('Postmodernism', 64), then Jacques Ellul used virtually the same terms for the triumph of 'technique', its 'mechanical penetration of the unconscious' (404) in the 1950s. Ellul's account of a society dominated by the logic of the machine is not a simple determinism, for 'technique' can inhabit any sphere. However, 'when technique enters into every area of life, including the human, it ceases to be external to man, and becomes his very substance'(6).