

J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Liberalism

Political Theory
2021, Vol. 49(6) 934–967
© The Author(s) 2020



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/0090591720981890
journals.sagepub.com/home/ptx



Duncan Bell¹ 

Abstract

J. G. Ballard was one of the most original writers of the postwar era. Although he has drawn considerable attention from scholars across various fields, the character of his political thinking remains a puzzle. He has been claimed as both a radical and a conservative, while others suggest that his work expresses no distinct political stance. Drawing on a wide range of source materials, I argue that from the 1960s to the early years of the twenty-first century Ballard developed a bold and intriguing account of liberalism grounded in insights drawn from surrealism and Freudian psychoanalysis. This was an idiosyncratic version of the liberalism of fear. The essay analyzes Ballard's sociopolitical vision, focusing in particular on his account of human nature, social reality, totalitarianism, and the power of the imagination.

Keywords

J. G. Ballard, liberalism, surrealism, Freud, psychoanalysis, war

Introduction

I think my political views were forged by my childhood in Shanghai and my years in a detention camp. I detest barbed wire, whether of the real or figurative variety.¹

J. G. Ballard (1930–2009) was one of the most important Anglophone writers of the postwar era. Across six decades he produced a unique counter-history of the twentieth century written in terms of its pathological obsessions. Exploring

¹Christ's College, Cambridge, UK

Corresponding Author:

Duncan Bell, Christ's College, Cambridge, CB2 3BU, UK.
Email: dsab2@cam.ac.uk

the fraught intersection of consumerism, the information revolution, and human psychology, his work—including notorious texts such as *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), *Crash* (1973), and *High-Rise* (1975)—influenced numerous other writers, musicians, visual artists, filmmakers, and cultural commentators.² It has also drawn considerable scholarly attention. Avant-garde experimentalist, pioneering new wave science fiction writer, trenchant critic of capitalism, ingenious urbanist, visionary of environmental apocalypse, dystopian dreamweaver, phenomenologist of the contemporary technoscape: Ballard has been read as all of these and more. He was, cultural theorist Mark Dery observes, a trailblazing cartographer of cyberculture.³ Novelist Angela Carter wrote that “there is always that sense, present in everything J. G. Ballard writes, of a unique and profoundly original mind discussing with itself pressing questions about the nature of our species’ experience on this planet.”⁴ Ballard’s account of late twentieth-century life, political theorist John Gray proclaims, “is unsurpassed in its clairvoyant exactitude.”⁵ Recently he has been anointed as a guide to the psychosocial dynamics of the 2020 global pandemic. “The visionary English novelist’s dystopian imagination, defined by cataclysmic events, quarantines and technological isolation, has never felt so prescient.” We are living, Mark O’Connell concludes, “in Ballard’s world.”⁶

Read as a critic of capitalist society, Ballard is routinely juxtaposed with or compared to thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault.⁷ Others discern a troubling streak of nihilism in his work. Labelling him the “greatest of modern apocalyptic writers,” Frederic Jameson suggests that Ballard’s early novels are “exemplary illustrations” of how “the imagination of a dying class—in this case the cancelled future of a vanished colonial and imperial destiny—seeks to intoxicate itself with images of death.”⁸ A similar charge was levelled by H. Bruce Franklin, who argued that Ballard’s renderings of apocalypse were projections of “the doomed social structure in which he exists”; his was ultimately a literature of “despair, negation, and death.”⁹ In a less critical vein, novelist Jonathan Lethem characterized Ballard as a “poet of desolation,” and “perhaps the most cosmically elegiac writer in literature.”¹⁰ He has been interpreted as a latter-day Oswald Spengler, narrating the decline of Western civilization. Others see him as a fabulator of spiritual fulfillment, a utopian of sorts, “the literary herald” of an emancipated world: “His landscapes of the soul are also landscapes of justice.”¹¹ Some conservatives claim him as a one of their own.¹² Profoundly elusive, Ballard’s work continues to stimulate, provoke, and confound.

This essay offers a new reading of Ballard’s politics. Although political theorists have rarely engaged with his work, Gray is a notable exception. Ballard once claimed that he was “not a political writer.”¹³ Gray concurs. “Ballard’s achievement is not to have staked out any kind of political

position,” he cautioned in 1999. “Rather it is to have communicated a vision of what individual fulfillment might mean in a time of nihilism.”¹⁴ In the following pages I suggest that there is much more to be said about the subject. There are two significant problems involved in pinpointing Ballard’s political stance. One is methodological. Most interpretations focus on his fictional output. But divining the politics of sophisticated writers from their artistic production is a notoriously complicated enterprise, and in Ballard’s case this difficulty is amplified by the calculated ambivalence of his novels and short stories. He regarded his attempts to make sense of the world as a form of rogue scientific inquiry. His fictions were elaborate thought-experiments, designed to scrutinize emergent phenomena or latent features of contemporary society rather than prescriptive manifestos for how best to live in it. “I approach my subject matter very much in the spirit of a scientific investigator who throws out hypotheses to explain the phenomena. At all times it is impelled by a need to find a truth about a situation.”¹⁵ To provide a fuller picture of his intellectual and political commitments, I utilize Ballard’s extensive archive of interviews, essays, and reviews, as well as discussing some of his novels—chiefly *Empire of the Sun* (1984), *The Kindness of Women* (1991), and *Kingdom Come* (2006).¹⁶

The second issue is metatheoretical. Since there is little agreement on what thinking politically encompasses, delineating the political dimensions of a writer’s work is invariably a disputed exercise. Ballard rarely discussed the structure of government, the nature of political ideologies, legislation and public policy, or principles of justice. If the domain of politics is conceived in this relatively narrow sense, Gray is right to claim that Ballard did not articulate a “political position.” But a different picture emerges if we open the interpretive aperture. Ballard addressed some of the most fundamental issues of the twentieth century: “the threat of nuclear war, over-population, the computer revolution, the possibilities and abuses of medical science, the ecological dangers to our planet, the consumer society as benign tyranny.”¹⁷ Political thinking assumes many and varied forms. As Robert Gooding-Williams argues, contrasting and sometimes conflicting genres are characterized by their “thematic preoccupations,” and to illustrate the point he distinguishes social contract theory, from Hobbes to Rawls, with an “Afro-modern” alternative that emphasizes the nature of white supremacy and the meaning of black emancipation.¹⁸ These are but two among many genres. Ballard can be located in a diffuse body of twentieth-century thought concerned with the multiplex impact of technology on human subjectivity, systems of belief, and social institutions. This draws him into the orbit of thinkers such as Guy Debord, Lewis Mumford, and Marshall McLuhan, as well as a rich stream of

speculative fiction by writers including H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and Ursula K. Le Guin.¹⁹

Ballard, I argue, propounded a surrealist vision of liberalism. It was liberal insofar as it endorsed (even celebrated) the norms and institutions of liberal democratic capitalism, valorized individual liberty, and was consciously positioned against “totalitarianism,” left and right. It was surrealist insofar as it was grounded in a set of claims that Ballard drew from surrealist art and psychoanalysis. Surrealism was, he declared, “the greatest imaginative venture of the twentieth century”; it offered “a key to unlocking the truth about existence and the human personality, and also a key to myself.”²⁰ The task of the writer was to disorient the reader, defamiliarizing the world in order to furnish a perspicacious account of the human condition. The surrealists, Ballard averred, “guide us towards a discovery of the secret formulas of reality.”²¹ Ballard employed a battery of techniques informed by surrealism—uncanny juxtapositions and dreamlike imagery, nonlinear and fragmented narratives, reflexivity about perception and representation, the creation of external worlds assembled from the building blocks of the psyche—to bolster liberal democratic order rather than to supersede it.

Ballard’s liberalism was grounded in three claims. The first concerned human nature: reason was both limited and easily corrupted. Unconscious drives, manifesting as aggression, irrationality, violence, and cruelty, played a far greater role in animating self and society than was usually recognized. The second claim was that social reality—the world as apprehended and experienced by persons—was fragile and often illusory. Moreover, the world as perceived is but a partial reflection of a deeper reality, rooted in the unconscious, the “secret engines that keep us moving.”²² Section I elucidates these two points. The third claim, which I address in section II, concerns the janus-faced powers of the imagination, which Ballard saw as both necessary for human flourishing—even the realization of freedom—and capable of great cruelty. These claims underpinned his conception of liberalism as a prophylactic technology to protect against the most dangerous features of humanity. This position was, I suggest, a variant of the liberalism of fear. The final section (III) discusses Ballard’s late writing about the incipient totalitarianism of consumer society. I argue that he became increasingly worried about the threat that neoliberalism posed to the human psyche and to sociopolitical order, but that his diagnosis exposed the limits of his liberalism.

The main purpose of this essay is to reconstruct the assorted elements of Ballard’s liberalism, identifying its inspirations, tracing its development over time, and pinpointing some of its internal tensions. I do not offer either a defense of his perspective or a full-blown critique of it. As well as presenting a new reading of the ethicopolitical vision of an influential writer, I seek to

contribute to scholarship on political aesthetics, and on the diversity and complexity of twentieth-century liberal thought in the Anglophone world. Often reduced to easy caricature, liberalism is a rich and evolving tradition, encompassing multiple and often conflicting forms, its sources as varied as its expressions.²³ Ballard's work demonstrates that it could flower in unlikely terrain. Among other things, I explore how psychoanalytic and visual-cultural elements have been imaginatively configured to champion liberal democratic capitalism, and how taking seriously the midcentury influence of Sigmund Freud can enrich understanding of the "liberalism of fear."

The Self and the Stage-Set of "Civilization"

Applying Freud's principle, we can see that reason safely rationalizes reality for us.²⁴

The editors of the first serious appraisal of Ballard's writing felt it necessary to rebut the charge that he was "fundamentally right-wing."²⁵ Confusion over the political inflection of his work remains palpable. Yet in interviews Ballard was clear about various commitments. For most of his career he was an unabashed admirer of American capitalism, and he welcomed the attempt to "Americanize" Britain during the 1980s. "I was a great supporter of Margaret Thatcher," he stated in 2006. "I thought economic freedom was the one thing this country desperately needed. I think her economic policies were right almost to the end. I think her social policies got out of hand, and she paid the price. I rather supported Tony Blair in his early days."²⁶ Nor were Ballard's views on foreign policy those of an antiestablishment critic. He defended the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and backed the postwar strategy of nuclear deterrence.²⁷ "I share the view of the Americans on the matter of nuclear armament," he asserted in 1985.²⁸ Praising the 1986 American bombing of Libya, Ballard lambasted the naivete of the peace movement. "[H]alf-baked and inexperienced," such people "have no perception of the realities of the world, and what it's like to live under a tyranny east of the Iron Curtain."²⁹ During the 1980s he castigated radical environmentalists—"[t]ouchingly naive, a special kind of infantilism"—as fanatics. He levelled a similar charge at radical feminists.³⁰ More Cold War liberal than New Left paragon, Ballard's expressed political views bore little relation to those of many who embraced him.

During the 1990s Ballard moved perceptibly to the left, a stance consolidated by his opposition to the Iraq war, his disdain for the administration of George W. Bush, and his growing distrust of Blair.³¹ He came to regard neoliberal capitalism as a pressing threat to liberal democratic societies.

Moreover, Ballard warned that his beloved United States was morphing into “a theocratic state run by right-wing political fanatics and religious moralisers.”³² But this shift did not mark a fundamental political reorientation. In his 2008 memoir, *Miracles of Life*, Ballard described his politics as “middle of roadism,” a position that generated “impatience” from his “keenly leftwing” partner, Claire Walsh.³³ Though his political views mutated, they remained squarely on the liberal ideological spectrum.

Ballard’s liberalism was informed by psychoanalysis and surrealism. Rather than Locke or Kant or Mill or Rawls serving as its urtext(s), it was Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*, even Dali’s “The Persistence of Memory,” that assumed the role. Ballard had discovered both movements in the late 1940s when studying in Cambridge.³⁴ Thereafter they were a constant reference point in his work. Ballard saw Freud and the great surrealist artists—Chirico, Dali, Delvaux, Ernst, Magritte—as illuminating the human condition through deciphering the connections between the unconscious and conscious mind.³⁵ He regarded that nexus, and its generative interaction with new media and communications technologies, as supplying a key to unlock the secret engines of social existence. “The surrealists deal in an external world that has been remade by the mind. They also start from the premise that there’s no firm basis of reality anywhere.”³⁶ Ballard accepted both propositions. This issued in what Jeannette Baxter calls his “radical Surrealist experiment in the re-writing of postwar history and culture.”³⁷ Ballard saw no tension between his aesthetic radicalism and his liberalism; rather, the latter was derived from the former.

At the core of Ballard’s liberalism was a conception of human nature. He thought that humanity was a dangerous species, capable of magnificent acts of creation but prone to aggression, violence, and cruelty. “Human beings have an extraordinary instinct for self-destruction, and this ought to be out in the open where we can see it,” he declared. “We are not moral creatures, except for reasons of mutual advantage.”³⁸ There was a clear Freudian provenance for his account of instinctual aggression. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud had identified a death-drive, *Thanatos*, that competed with the life-drive, *Eros*, an argument he extended in *Civilization and its Discontents*, a book that played a pivotal role in shaping Ballard’s worldview. As his daughter Fay recalled, Ballard frequently read it to his children at bedtime.³⁹ Mark Fisher once observed, with only slight exaggeration, that he was engaged in an “endless rewriting” of Freud’s text.⁴⁰ Because of the “primary mutual hostility of human beings,” Freud had argued, “civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration,” and human reason was locked in conflict with other forces: “the passions of instinct are stronger than reasoned interests.”⁴¹ In Ballard’s work *Eros* and *Thanatos* were intertwined,

though the latter was emphasized over the former.⁴² He also warned that people were prone to self-deception, believing mistakenly that they were fully conscious of, and capable of managing, their various purposes and desires. This was no accident but rather an expression of the power of the unconscious: reason rationalized reality.⁴³ People have “far darker imaginations than we liked to believe.”⁴⁴ It was vital to acknowledge this ineliminable element of the human condition. “I was always starry-eyed about the world becoming a better place,” Walsh recounted after Ballard’s death. “But Jimmy never shifted in his belief that it was essentially cruel.”⁴⁵

Ballard’s dark appraisal of human potentiality was rooted in his own confrontation with the twentieth century. Growing up in Shanghai during the 1930s, the privileged child of wealthy parents living in the International Settlement, he encountered terrible suffering. Starvation was rife, especially as the population of the city swelled with refugees fleeing war and famine. “Bodies lay in the streets of downtown Shanghai, wept over by Chinese peasant women, ignored in the rush of passers-by.”⁴⁶ In 1937 the Imperial Japanese Army successfully fought the Chinese National Army for control of the city, in one of the bloodiest battles of the Second Sino-Japanese War. The occupants of the Settlements, including Ballard and his family, witnessed the slaughter and its grim aftermath at close quarters. In 1943 they were interred in the Lunghua Civil Assembly Centre, a camp run by the Japanese military. During his time there, and in the chaotic days after the war, Ballard saw soldiers humiliating, torturing, and murdering Chinese civilians.⁴⁷ “A vast cruelty lay over the world, and was all we knew.” He insisted that his wartime life was more global norm than exception. “The experiences I went through in Shanghai,” he wrote several decades later, “are probably closer to the experiences of most people on this planet than my life since.”⁴⁸ Those never exposed to such horrors were fortunate. In an important sense Ballard never left Shanghai. Both a survivor and a student of twentieth-century political terror, the Second World War cast a long shadow over his thinking.

Such themes were given fictional treatment in a remarkable pair of novels, *Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women*. Regarded as one of the great British novels of the Second World War, *Empire* was published in 1984 and filmed by Steven Spielberg in 1987. Less an accurate account of Ballard’s personal history than an attempt to explore realities about human behavior derived from his experience, Ballard was adamant that he sought “psychological truth” not mimetic reconstruction.⁴⁹ Baxter suggests that the books are examples of “convulsive autobiography,” a form of life-writing practiced by surrealists, including André Breton and Ernst, that “through strategies of invention, rewriting and dissemblance,” aimed to recover “subjectivity, history and memory” from the stifling conventions of traditional autobiography.⁵⁰

Empire is pervaded by psychoanalytical tropes. Subjected to extreme social dislocation and repeated exposure to violence, Jim, the young protagonist, manifests classic symptoms of trauma.⁵¹ From 1937 onward, he is a witness—often mute and uncomprehending—to a catalogue of human suffering and depravity. Dead and dying Chinese peasants are commonplace: beheaded or strangled as public spectacle, starving in the streets, victims of the merciless war against the Japanese and the racialized indifference of the Europeans. Inhabitants of the International Settlement embark on macabre tourist expeditions to gawk at the carnage of recent battles. “In the trenches between the burial mounds hundreds of dead soldiers sat side by side with their heads against the torn earth, as if they had fallen asleep together in a deep dream of war.”⁵² In the internment camp, vulnerable and alone, Jim both suffers and observes suffering, all while trying to impose meaning on an abject world, surviving (even thriving) by rendering it intelligible. He adopts assorted Freudian responses to trauma, including dissociation and identification with the aggressor.⁵³ The former leads him to construct personal mythologies to defuse or deflect the horror; the latter prompts his disdain for fellow British captives and his valorization of the Japanese military. “Above all, Jim admired the kamikaze pilots.”⁵⁴

But the novel is not just a study of individual endurance. It is also an exercise in deflationary critique, puncturing the myths of patriotic regard and imperial supremacy that nourished the British community in Shanghai and sustained them in the camp. “Civilization”—a term simultaneously invoking the imperial order and echoing Freud—is exposed as a thin veneer, easily dissolved, its governing values, norms, and institutions annulled with disorienting speed.⁵⁵ The lifeworld of the Settlement is dismantled as if it were a stage set, a recurrent image literalized late in the novel when, after a brutal forced march, Jim, along with hundreds of other emaciated prisoners, is garrisoned in a football stadium in Shanghai, overseen from the stands by a vast collection of tables, chairs, and wardrobes—the looted detritus of their former lives.⁵⁶ Likewise, Jim watches as the apparently indestructible sense of British supremacy is swept away following the sinking of the Royal Navy battleships *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales* in December 1941 and the subsequent Japanese victory at Singapore. Rather than foregrounding or celebrating the grand abstractions of nation, empire, honor, and glory, attention is focused relentlessly—forensically—on human frailty. As Angela Carter observed once, *Empire* is “very notably, a novel about the fragility of the human body, and the dreadful spillability of that body’s essential juices, shit, piss, blood, pus.”⁵⁷ The juices are spilt through both deliberate violence and general neglect, seeping or spurting from desiccated bodies weakened by starvation, cholera, and malaria, mutilated by the anonymous technologies of

industrial warfare—artillery shells, machine gun bullets, bombs—or through the slow, deliberate infliction of pain, as when Japanese soldiers methodically beat a young Chinese peasant to death in front of the assembled British prisoners.⁵⁸

For Ballard, as with Freud, war was a crucible that unmasked hypocrisy and destroyed illusion. Throughout his career he returned to the “unwelcome truths it could expose.”⁵⁹ As well as assailing fantasies of national and imperial greatness, *Empire* is also a dissection of human nature, illustrated through the lengths people will go to survive. Jim adjusts to the war—even coming to enjoy the perverse freedoms of the camp, where he can roam alone with his hyperactive imagination—through nourishing a form of psychological realism about his predicament.⁶⁰ Ransome, an idealistic doctor, “resented Jim for revealing an obvious truth about the war, that people were only too able to adapt to it.”⁶¹ Few prisoners resisted their captivity.⁶² The novel peels back the sedimented psychological illusions that underpinned “civilized” society. Selfishness, not altruism, was the default; conventional morality was supplanted by a desperate fight for survival; lying, cheating, stealing, even violence, are swiftly normalized. The choreographed murder of the peasant “was intended to show the prisoners that the Japanese despised them, first for being prisoners, and then for not daring to move an inch to save this Chinese coolie.”⁶³

The transition from war to peace is fraught and ambiguous, exposing the ontological instability of the categories. When the atom bombs are dropped—Jim believes he sees the “pearly light” of the Nagasaki explosion—order does not follow. Instead a zone of radical indistinction emerges: the Chinese countryside is crisscrossed by bands of Japanese and Chinese soldiers, armed peasants, criminal gangs, and starving ex-prisoners. This is one of numerous episodes in Ballard’s oeuvre that illustrate the terrors of lawlessness, of a world absent basic institutions to govern and constrain behavior.⁶⁴ A study in epistemic, affective, and sociopolitical uncertainty, *Empire* explores the precariousness of social reality, the instinctual foundations of human behavior, the limits of reason, and the conjoint horrors and attractions of violence.

For Ballard, failure to confront the true nature of humanity was a defining feature of conventional forms of morality and politics. Rationalistic understandings of motivation and action were inadequate. This was exemplified by a persistent inability to grasp the psychic appeal of violence, from the countless atrocities of the Second World War to the fascination with the thanatic spectacle of Vietnam, from the popularity of violent sport and film to the obsession with the celebrity deaths of JFK, Martin Luther King Jr., and Princess Diana. “The Enlightenment view of mankind is a complete myth. It leads us into thinking we’re sane and rational creatures most of the time, and we’re not.”⁶⁵ In his memoir Ballard argued that many people relished the

infliction of cruelty. "I was sure that the countless atrocities in Eastern Europe had taken place because the Germans involved had enjoyed the act of mass murder," he mused, "just as the Japanese had enjoyed tormenting the Chinese."⁶⁶ To miss this was to ignore a vital element of human nature. "The faith in reason and rationality that dominated postwar thinking," he charged, "struck me as hopelessly idealistic."⁶⁷ Rationalistic forms of politics were fatally flawed, for they could neither accurately diagnose nor respond effectively to the sources of human action. "I think that the liberal imagination just cannot understand the substratum of psychopathic possibility that exists below the surface of the everyday rational mind."⁶⁸ But rejecting liberal rationalism and complacency did not entail the rejection of liberalism tout court. Ballard sought a different form of liberal order, one more attuned to the secret engines. "One should face up to the realities of human nature. That way one can do something about improving it, steering it into safer channels."⁶⁹ Only liberal democratic institutions allowed for this possibility.

Encountering Freud and the surrealists in the late 1940s nourished Ballard's imagination and furnished him with a conceptual framework to make sense of his wartime experience. "I was still carrying all these memories of the thousands of dead Chinese I'd seen. . . . I was carrying a huge cargo of death really and I couldn't understand why all this happened. Why did human beings behave in such a bestial way towards each other?"⁷⁰ Freud's psychoanalytical writings, and their staging and extrapolation by the surrealists, helped to answer this question. They unlocked the mysteries of what Ballard termed "inner space," the space—more alien than the stars—located within the human skull. "[W]ith its emphasis on the irrational and perverse, on the significance of apparently free or random associations, its symbolism and whole concept of the unconscious," psychoanalysis was, Ballard argued in 1966, "a complete mythology of the psyche—moreover, a functional mythology that could be used for the systematic exploration of the inner reality of our lives."⁷¹ Ballard did not read Freud literally: there was no death drive hardwired into our brains. Instead, psychoanalysis generated hypotheses, concepts, and metaphors that offered a compelling explanation of the world of experience. Demonstrating the inescapable role of the unconscious, the intertwining of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, and the saturation of dreams, objects, and practices, with hidden or repressed meanings, Freud provided a map to navigate the complexity of the mind and the social world.⁷²

The surrealists appealed to Ballard, in part, because they built on this psychoanalytic framework, attempting to expose or decode the secret engines through visualizing the tentacular powers of the unconscious. "I think the most important influence on me, as a writer, is probably Surrealism," he told an interviewer in 1992.⁷³ Defamiliarizing settled patterns of cognition and

perception, they demonstrated the impossibility of neatly separating the fantastical and the real, mythos and logos. "Dali's work demonstrates," he wrote in 1969, "that surrealism, far from being a gratuitous dislocation of one's perceptual processes, in fact represents the only reasonable technique for dealing with the subject matter of the century."⁷⁴ Dali's paintings, he declared, "constitute a body of prophecy about ourselves unequalled in accuracy since Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*."⁷⁵ They told the viewer far more about reality than purportedly "realist" literature or art. Even as Ballard adapted the insights and ethos of the surrealists, he rejected attempts to equate their work with radical politics. André Breton's effort to conscript surrealism to Marxism was, he contended, "an absolute blunder."⁷⁶ Surrealism did not translate automatically into any particular political orientation.

Like Freud, Ballard came not to bury human reason but to salvage it through revealing its weaknesses. And like Freud, he thought that laws and moral conventions, developed over time, could limit destructive impulses and allow the possibility of human flourishing. Some forms of coercion were necessary to constrain our instinctual nature. "Human beings do have huge reserves of psychopathology which are repressed—thank God—by the forces of law and order."⁷⁷ But conventions and laws functioned only when social conditions were relatively stable. They buckled easily under pressure. Reality was a "stage set" in at least two senses. First, it was capable of swift erection and even swifter removal: "no matter how magnificent anything appeared," it could "be swept aside into the debris of the past."⁷⁸ Regression always looms. Second, what looked (ideally) like a fixed and durable backdrop to life was little more than an artificial cover masking the principal drivers of change. Much of the action took place offstage or behind the scenes, in the irresolvable conflict between the id, the ego, and the superego. Ballard had experienced the fragility of apparently settled worlds. Life in the camp demonstrated the vulnerability of morality and social order. "Moral principles, along with kindness and generosity, are worth less than they might seem."⁷⁹ But even if fragile, they were still important.

Freud posited that the history of civilization was in part an attempt to find an "expedient (i.e. satisfying) solution" to the conflict between the libidinal demands of the individual and the disciplining pressures of the group.⁸⁰ He regarded liberalism as the political ideology best suited to achieving this accommodation. "I remain a liberal of the old school," he informed Arnold Zweig in November 1930.⁸¹ Psychoanalysis was essential for fortifying liberalism, equipping it with a theory of mind and an account of the psychic bases of social suffering that would help it to confront reality. He believed that liberal regimes expanded the range of human freedom, extending the scope of tolerance while limiting (without eliminating) unhappiness, violence, and

cruelty. As the psychoanalytical critique of fascism was pursued by the Frankfurt School and Wilhelm Reich, Freud initially focused his assault on the Soviet Union, arguing that anticapitalists misidentified the sources of social misery. Rather than acknowledging instinctual aggression, a human universal, they blamed private property, an historically contingent institution. The root of domination lay in the psyche not in political economy. He dismissed their proposed postcapitalist alternative as an expression of hopeless utopian desire.⁸² After the war, psychoanalytical accounts of politics proliferated on both sides of the Atlantic. Cold War culture—at the height of Anglo-American ego psychology—was infused with Freudian themes.⁸³ As Samuel Moyn observes, the “nervous self-assurance of America’s Cold War liberals, and the calls for transformation by the era’s leftists, are unthinkable outside the frame Freud bequeathed both sides.”⁸⁴ Many liberals and New Left thinkers turned inward, identifying instinctual desires as powerful drivers of sociopolitical development.⁸⁵

Like Freud, Ballard regarded liberalism as the political-economic system that promised the greatest scope for the satisfaction of individual desires, and hence human happiness, within a regulatory structure of law and norms. This orientation explains both his support for economic liberalism, expressed in his admiration of American capitalism and Thatcher’s economic agenda, and his concomitant embrace of the cultural transformation of the 1960s. In combination they promised the development of a dynamic equilibrium—however fragile—between the demands of the group and of the individual. Economic liberalism (purportedly) encouraged competition and creativity by expanding the range of choices available and channeling human aggression in a productive manner. It sublimated destructive instincts. Cultural transformation dissolved the carapace of restrictive social and moral norms that inhibited the id and catalyzed dangerous forms of repression. The domain of human freedom had been enlarged. (This also explains his rejection of Thatcher’s repressive social policies). Since it was the best option available, Ballard was willing to support American hegemony and take sides in the Cold War. Liberalism needed protection against its mortal enemies, left and right.

Ballard’s thought, I suggest, can be read as an idiosyncratic expression of the “liberalism of fear.” Liberalism, Judith Shklar avers, has only “one overriding aim: to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom.” Focusing on “damage control,” it seeks to avoid the worst outcomes rather than specifying ideal conditions for human flourishing. It does not “offer a *summum bonum* toward which all political agents should strive, but it certainly does begin with a *summum malum*, which all of us know and would avoid if only we could. That evil is cruelty and the fear it inspires, and the very fear of fear itself.”⁸⁶ Eschewing “intense moralism,” it

insists, Bernard Williams added, that people should attend first to the “only certainly universal material of politics: power, powerlessness, fear, cruelty.”⁸⁷ Shaped by an historically grounded skepticism about the capacity of humans to (peacefully) transcend their circumstances, the liberalism of fear aims to meliorate human suffering. Ballard’s work was a variation on the theme. Obsessed with the lessons of twentieth-century history, he was sensitive to the pressing weight of the past and to the manifold dangers lurking beneath the façade of social stability. In Shklar’s Emersonian formulation, he was a resolute member of the “party of memory.”⁸⁸ Mindful of the vital importance of individual liberty, he sought a form of politics that could secure the conditions necessary for it to survive in a Hobbesian world. It was an “expedient solution” to the tension between freedom and legitimate coercion. But there was at least one significant difference. Whereas Shklar located cruelty chiefly in the activities of states, Ballard—like Freud—regarded it as a fundamental feature of human psychology. The liberalism of fear required a theory of mind as well as an analysis of institutions.

Valences of the Imagination

The media is now the reality that most people inhabit. It shapes their lives and governs their truths.⁸⁹

The imagination played an essential though ambivalent role in Ballard’s sociopolitical vision. It was responsible for the construction and reproduction of (a sense of) social reality. As such, it was both the stabilizer of conventions and a potential vector of change. But even as it was capable of glorious creativity, the imagination was a persistent source of danger—unchecked or unduly repressed it contained the immanent possibility of violence. Channeling it was a primary goal of Ballard’s liberalism. Finally, as well as a source of dystopian conflict, it was a privileged site of utopian desire.

Ballard argued that during the postwar years, and especially the 1960s and 1970s, the world was enveloped by a vast “corporate sensorium” figured as part of the “larger mental space of the planetary communications landscape.”⁹⁰ This represented an epochal shift. “[W]e are at the climactic end of one huge age of technology which began with the Industrial Revolution and which lasted for about 200 years.”⁹¹ Reality, Ballard suggested, was transmuting into a kind of fiction, a labyrinthine assemblage of narratives, images, signs, and sounds, formulated by the entertainment industry, multinational corporations, and advertising agencies, and disseminated via an array of communications technologies, from television to virtual reality. Social thought changed with it. “Freud’s profound pessimism in *Civilization and its*

Discontents has been replaced by McLuhan's delight in proliferating information mosaics," Ballard declared in 1969.⁹² The sensorium created new consumer desires and recoded individual subjectivity, themes that he explored in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, *Crash*, and *High Rise*. Rather than substituting McLuhan for Freud, Ballard sought to map the terrain where they met.

Dali offered a key to understanding the illusory quality of reality. "We entertain certitudes about the subject of reality which permit us to live." While the solidity of our physical surroundings—a door, a wall, a car—"is not in doubt," Dali "splits up the elements of reality and assembles them to constitute a Freudian landscape," and his work served to "undermine these certitudes."⁹³

What they [the surrealists] demonstrate conclusively is that our commonplace notions of reality—for example, the rooms we occupy, the rural and urban landscapes around us, the musculatures of our own bodies, the postures we assume—may have very different meanings by the time they reach the central nervous system. Conversely, the significance of the images projected from within the psyche may have no direct correlation at all to their apparent counterparts in the world outside us.⁹⁴

Ballard's comments on the constitution of social reality were telegraphic and sometimes contradictory. Despite occasional rhetorical flourishes suggesting otherwise, he did not deny the existence of an external world. He scorned postmodernism for upholding such a view. He accepted, he stated in 1984, "the objective nature of the world I describe, [and] the complete separation of that world from my own mind."⁹⁵ Ballard contended that the unconscious projected a grid of meaning onto the world, establishing individual experience as a dynamic and unstable synthesis of external and internal elements. "Just as the sleeping mind extemporizes a narrative from the random memories veering through the cortical night, so our waking imaginations are stitching together a set of narratives to give meaning to the random events that swerve through our conscious lives."⁹⁶ Reality, he observed in 1991, was "largely a product of the human imagination. The artificial is the real. Layers of unreality have been laid down on us by advertising and commerce like the strata of a new Troy."⁹⁷ Everyday life was a surrealist phantasmagoria.

It is little wonder that Baudrillard welcomed *Crash* as the "first great novel of the age of simulation"—the age, he declared, "with which we will all now be concerned."⁹⁸ Fiction, Ballard stated in 1971, is "anything invented to serve someone's imaginative end," whether a politician, advertising executive, or novelist. Although his compressed discussion of social ontology left many questions unanswered, Ballard identified three strata of reality: (1) the

“world of public events”; (2) the “immediate personal environment, the rooms we occupy, the postures we assume”; and (3) the “inner world” of the mind. Where the three levels “intersect,” he mused, “you find the only valid points of reality, a new reality which we all inhabit.”⁹⁹ His basic contention was that the interfusion of technology and capitalism was reshaping reality as experienced by citizens in Western democracies, and that this had disorienting effects on how they understood themselves and the world.

Ballard suggested that the increasing “fictionalization” of the social world meant that one of the assumptions of prewar surrealism had been superseded. Drawing on Freud, the surrealists presupposed the “distinction between the inner world of the mind and the outer world of reality,” synthesizing them to reimagine “the external world of reality in terms of the internal world of fantasy and fictions.” This assault on the illusory reliability of human perception helped generate the unsettling power of Dali’s paintings. But the distinction was no longer tenable. “It’s the external world which is now the real, the paramount realm, of fantasy. And it’s the internal world of the mind which is the one node of reality that most of us have. The fiction is all out there.”¹⁰⁰ The task of the artist was to decode this new hyperreality. Freud had distinguished between the literal (manifest) content of dreams and their (latent) symbolic meaning. The emergent technoscape demanded the reversal of this distinction between the “the apparent and the real” and its application to the “external world of so-called reality.”¹⁰¹ While Ballard occasionally suggested that surrealism was outmoded, his most frequent response was to insist that it was more germane than ever. “The techniques of surrealism have a particular relevance at this moment, when the fictional elements in the world around us are multiplying to the point where it is almost impossible to distinguish between the ‘real’ and the ‘false’—the terms no longer have any meaning.”¹⁰² A quarter of a century later he reiterated the point, arguing that consumer society, centered on “a TV monoculture dissolving the last barriers between fantasy and reality,” was “a surrealist domain in its purest form.”¹⁰³ The artistic techniques, psychoanalytical insights, and transgressive ethos of the surrealists remained vital for deciphering the human condition.

Ballard proposed that the acceleration of consumer capitalism had precipitated a shift in human consciousness. Among other things, it altered the emotional register of citizens immersed in it. In an essay on Dali, he wrote that “[v]oyeurism, self-disgust, biomorphic horror, the infantile basis of our dreams and longings—these diseases of the psyche have now culminated in the most sinister casualty of the century: the death of affect.”¹⁰⁴ As he observed in 1991,

The peculiar reversal of values, where sensation ruled and sensation was all that mattered, led to . . . the death of affect, the death of feeling. Nothing mattered so long as it generated a powerful, galvanic response, sent a surge of current through the public sensorium. I felt that human values, moral values had inverted. Death became sexy, as we saw from the extremely frank and lurid newsreels every night on television from the civil wars in the Congo, Vietnam and so on, and there was certainly a kind of cult of death in life.¹⁰⁵

The “death of affect” encompassed three intersecting trends. First, the dulling of compassionate emotional response to suffering through repeated exposure to mediated violence. Second, the “prepackaging” of emotions, in the sense that the affective lives of citizen-consumers were increasingly shaped by the interests of global corporations. And third, the “normalization of psychopathology,” meaning that what had once seemed psychologically aberrant—torture, murder, enjoyment of human suffering—was now accepted as part of everyday life. The “moral basis” of capitalist society had been transfigured, the overload of violent imagery, combined with the emotional distancing facilitated by its technologically mediated form, spawned a pervasive mode of voyeurism stripped of sympathetic affect. In the 1960s, he proclaimed boldly, “human sympathy had begun to die.”¹⁰⁶ Ballard thought that it was essential to probe the dynamics of this nascent social psychology and seek ways to moderate its impact. The former was the purpose of his fiction; the latter, the ambition of his politics.

In *Kindness*, Ballard stitched together many of the themes, obsessions, and hallucinatory images that had marked his earlier fiction. Like *Empire*, it is a profoundly ambivalent book, oscillating between accurate recall and fictional elaboration, aiming once again at psychological truth. It opens with a disjointed tour of Jim’s life prior to his postwar return to England, subtly different in its chronology, cast, and focus from that traced in *Empire*. The narrative is punctuated by moments of searing violence that reverberate through the text: a bombing raid in Shanghai that kills over a thousand civilians, leaving a stunned Jim wandering across a carpet of corpses; the torture and murder of a Chinese peasant by Japanese soldiers, witnessed at close proximity by Jim, after “peace” had been declared. These episodes recur through the book. The past is constantly irrupting into the present, history figured as a living reality not a past phase of existence. “I had mislaid part of my mind somewhere between Lunghua and Shanghai,” Jim reflects.¹⁰⁷ The bulk of the story unfolds during the Cold War, in a “narrative organised around the deathly repetition and ultimate therapeutic mastering of repressed trauma.”¹⁰⁸ Jim struggles to make sense of his wartime experience before he finds domestic happiness with Miriam, an interlude shattered by her sudden death,

followed by his slow and uneven path to psychological recuperation through the quotidian labor of caring for their children. It ends with the filming of *Empire*, a Hollywood spectacle symbolizing a form of catharsis. Violent death—individual and collective—haunts the novel. Even as the narrative follows the details of Jim's life, the terror of war, as both persistent trauma and omnipresent geopolitical danger, threatens to dissolve the confected stability of postwar society.

Interpretive clues are scattered through the pages of *Kindness*, in the repeated references to the surrealists.¹⁰⁹ At one point Miriam says to Jim, the Cambridge medical student, that “Ernst, Dali, the Facteur Cheval . . . they're your real syllabus.” Later, in a scene describing an experiment with LSD, Jim quotes the French symbolist painter Odilon Redon, a favorite of the surrealists: “place the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible.”¹¹⁰ It could serve as Jim's (and Ballard's) personal creed. *Eros* and *Thantos* jostle for primacy. Even as Jim finds a form of consolation through domesticity, violent death stalks his imagination and the outside world, images of impending nuclear war fusing with an endless parade of corpses, from the killing fields of World War Two, Korea, Algeria, Vietnam, and the Congo. “Whatever mythologies I constructed for myself would have to be made from the commonplaces of my life, from the smallest affections and kindnesses, not from the nuclear bombers of the world and their dreams of planetary death.”¹¹¹ While forms of personal fulfillment are possible, Ballard suggests, the world itself remains a domain of cruelty and violence; occasional islands of stability are anchored precariously in a roiling ocean, awaiting the (inevitable?) flood.

Kindness says little about Jim's political views. Like *Empire*, it is a diagnostic piece of writing, not a programmatic manifesto. But it can be read as a defense of liberal order. The various experiments in living that Jim pursues, as well as the cultural transformations that he embraces in the 1960s, are only possible, Ballard implies, in a liberal society that enshrines personal freedom and enables the pursuit of a wide array of life choices. Contra the New Left critics, Ballard was convinced that the postwar liberal-capitalist settlement elevated and encouraged authentic individual freedom, or at least allowed the possibility of doing so. In the novel Jim remains obsessed with the American dream, its fantasy of boundless affluence, its dynamism, its unabashed confidence. Democratic society may be fragile and riven with hypocrisy, but it was no less valuable for that. Indeed its vulnerability is what makes it so important to foster—something that Jim, bewitched with the imaginative possibilities of flight, and preoccupied with the thought of impending war, contributes to by joining the Royal Air Force in the 1950s to train, albeit briefly, as a combat pilot. At the end of the 1970s, while revisiting Cambridge, he reflects on the meaning of the nearby American airbases that had long fascinated him.

“Beyond the hedges and the chain-mail fences the nuclear bombers stood at the ends of their runways, guarantors of the civilised order upon which the university so preened itself.”¹¹² This pointed comment evokes his earlier description of “the saving miracle of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” an act of barbarity that (Ballard always maintained) was necessary to halt yet greater suffering.¹¹³ Despite his anxieties about the logic of the Cold War, Ballard was adamant about the moral and political superiority of the Western capitalist system and the need to defend it against challengers. He was convinced that it offered the best hope for achieving psychic happiness.

Ballard also drew from Freud and the surrealists a deep concern about the psychic and social consequences of libidinal repression. He feared that in an overly regulated world, in which the imagination had been stifled and conformism ruled, new forms of pathology, violence, and cruelty, would emerge. Riffing on Gray’s *Straw Dogs*, even as he echoed Laing’s antipsychiatry, Ballard floated the idea that “[i]n a totally sane society, madness is the only freedom, and the more civilised we are, the more ruled by reason, the greater the unconscious need for some sort of irrational outbreak grows within us.”¹¹⁴ Although Ballard often explored the idea, he did not endorse psychopathology as a strategy of resistance. “The notions about the benefits of transgression . . . are not ones I want to see fulfilled. Rather, they are extreme possibilities that may be forced into reality by the suffocating pressure of the conformist world we inhabit.”¹¹⁵ It was far better to dissolve conformism through cultural transformation than resort to violent resistance against authoritarian domination. His texts were both provocative thought-experiments and monitory warnings.

Fear of excessive repression underpinned Ballard’s libertarian attitude to censorship. “I’m a strong libertarian—within the constraints of the law—and believe in exploring all the possibilities open to us,” he once wrote.¹¹⁶ Unless the imagination was given (relatively) free rein it would express itself through violence. “The refusal to acknowledge human nature is a mistake because it will find some other, possibly more lethal, way out.”¹¹⁷ He was critical of attempts to ban pornography, believing that they would not restrain the libido but rather feed a darker set of obsessions. “The sexual imagination needs every encouragement to remain in the daylight where we can see it, rather than plunge again into the subterranean world of repression and taboo.”¹¹⁸ Moreover, the state employed censorship to induce passivity and limit dissent. “Censorship in England has a clear political role. It represents the fear of the established order that given any sort of imaginative freedom, or too much of it, the power structure will collapse. . . . The people in control sanitise the view of the world for us.”¹¹⁹ Free speech was essential for achieving an “expedient solution” to the problem of social order.

Ballard was accorded that rare literary honor: the creation of an adjective. The *Collins English Dictionary* defines “Ballardian” as “resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in Ballard’s novels and stories, esp. dystopian modernity, bleak manmade landscapes and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments.” Yet coding Ballard as a dystopian misses the clear streak of idealism woven through his work. His stories are tales of personal fulfilment, even transcendence.¹²⁰ Ballard’s own account of utopianism was ambivalent. He distinguished implicitly between sociopolitical utopianism—dreams of a radically transformed society—and forms of personal self-realization. While expressing occasional sympathy with the former, he thought (as did many liberals) that the twentieth century had shown the dangers of utopian desire. The distance from utopia to Auschwitz and the Gulag was short. Nevertheless, he worried that stifling utopian dreams neutered the imagination.

Sadly, I think the notion of Utopia died at some point in the twentieth century—two vast utopian projects, Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, turned into the greatest nightmares the human race has ever experienced, and people now are understandably sceptical about any future utopia. We’re still living in the aftermath of an extremely dangerous century. People today are rightly sceptical about any proclaimed intentions to build heaven on earth. We now live in the present, unconsciously uneasy at the future, and this short-term viewpoint does have dangers. We know that, as human beings, we are all deeply flawed and dangerous, but this self-knowledge can act as a brake on hope and idealism.¹²¹

Utopia had been sublated into the superficial and fleeting pleasures of consumerism. Following the end of the Cold War, Ballard observed that “[i]t may be that we have already dreamed our dream of the future, and have woken with a start into a world of motorways, shopping malls and airport concourses which lie around us like the first instalment of a future that has forgotten to materialize.”¹²² A widespread belief in a better future was one of the main casualties of the century.

There was hope still. Whereas Shklar argued that the liberalism of fear was “entirely nonutopian,” Ballard invested the imagination with utopian possibility. “I think man is a mechanical creature with the soul and mind of a poet. It’s our imaginations that allow us to transcend the universe.”¹²³ Redemption was to be found not in the benign nature of humanity or in the solidarity of class or the claims of party, but in human creativity. Despite the dangers lurking there, inner space was a site of utopian desire. “One has to foster one’s own imagination to a very intense degree, far more than most people realize.”¹²⁴ But this stance came at a cost: personal fulfilment was

elevated over collective action. Political change was sacrificed on the altar of self-transformation. This individualistic orientation also underpinned Ballard's views on revolution. Asked once whether he sought a revolution, Ballard gave a revealing answer. "In a way, it came in the sixties."¹²⁵ The revolution he yearned for was a revolution in the imagination—and of culture more broadly—not a fundamental sociopolitical one. Change could only emanate "from the confines of the skull—by imaginative means, whatever the route may be."¹²⁶ This was what had happened in the 1960s. Turning inward, Ballard's liberalism valorized work on the psyche as the best response to the surrealism of everyday life in capitalist modernity.

The Dark Side of the Sun

The human race sleepwalked to oblivion, thinking only about the corporate logos on its shroud.¹²⁷

Ballard had long been alert to the janus-faced character of capitalism. "I've always been drawn to consumerism and the Americanization of everyday life but I've always been aware that there's a sort of dark side to the sun," he remarked in 2008.¹²⁸ During the last two decades of his life he worried increasingly that a potent new form of authoritarianism was lurking in the recesses of the neoliberal order. He hinted at this in *Kindness*, where Jim's friend, the psychologist Dick Sutherland, comments that "[t]he totalitarian systems of the future will be docile and subservient, and all the more threatening for that."¹²⁹ This mantra ran through Ballard's late work. He suggested that consumerism had etched itself so deeply into the social fabric, and into the psyche, that a threshold had been crossed. The pathology now outweighed the benefits. Yet as he turned his critical fire on the "dark side of the sun," Ballard did not reckon with the historical processes that had generated this conjuncture. He failed to consider that the neoliberal world that he disdained, even feared, was created by policies he had earlier welcomed.

Ballard's final sequence of novels—*Cocaine Nights* (1996), *Super-Cannes* (2000), *Millennium People* (2003), and *Kingdom Come* (2006)—were more explicitly political than his earlier work, concerned as they were with diagnosing the sociopolitical dangers of "late capitalism." They can be put into dialogue with a range of psychoanalytical and psychiatric thinkers, including Freud, Erich Fromm, R. D. Laing, Herbert Marcuse, and Wilhelm Reich.¹³⁰ They are iterative investigations of the central thesis of *Civilization and its Discontents*: there is a profound contradiction between individual freedom and "civilized" society. Freud argued that as civilization developed it constrained and repressed the instincts that make us human. "[I]t is impossible to

ignore the extent to which civilization is built up on a renunciation of instinctual gratification, the degree to which the existence of civilisation presupposes the non-gratification (suppression, repression, or something else?) of powerful instinctual urgencies."¹³¹ "Civilized man" exchanged potential happiness for "a measure of security."¹³² The instincts had been repressed or displaced, and the superego installed as a monitory agency to regulate and internalize social conventions. For much of history, religion had performed this role, though a variety of moral prohibitions had accumulated over time. The superego had never extinguished the id, a "bit of unconquerable nature" that sought to act on the pleasure principle.¹³³ This conflict was manifested as a form of social neurosis, resulting in widespread unhappiness. "If civilization requires such sacrifices, not only of sexuality but also of the aggressive tendencies in mankind, we can better understand why it should be so hard for men to feel happy in it."¹³⁴ Ballard, like Freud, had thought that liberalism promised to ameliorate the most repressive dimensions of society. But something had gone awry: "civilization" was fostering new forms of tyranny.

Ballard worried about the passivity, boredom, and anomie of life in consumer society. "We're all deeply conventional, and hardly differ from one another in any vital sense. We're desperate for excitement of some kind."¹³⁵ He feared the "suburbanization of the soul." Boredom rendered citizens politically complaisant, leaving them exposed to new forms of despotism and domination. The traditional bases of morality, including religion, had weakened or dissolved, and nothing comparable had emerged to replace them. "People believe in nothing," he complained in 1995. "All ideology is gone. The great churches are empty, political ideology is finished, there's just a scramble for power."¹³⁶ The main danger was "the decline and collapse of the public realm."¹³⁷ Captured by advertising and the ephemeral products of an expanding media-entertainment complex, the public sphere was shrinking. A mindless consumerism filled the vacuum. The reduction of politics to advertising, and the hollowing out of the public, heralded potential calamity as the outlets for articulating and resolving sociopolitical conflicts disappeared. At the same time the neoliberal state was curtailing freedom, deploying evermore intrusive surveillance systems to monitor and police the population. There was little sign of serious resistance. "This Orwellian system of surveillance has not really prompted any protest. It's as if there's a deeply masochistic strain in the population-at-large: that we *want* to be watched by closed-circuit television cameras."¹³⁸

Freud had warned that the most dangerous societies were those in which individuals lacked a strong, integrated sense of identity—they were vulnerable to the charismatic power of demagogues and dictators. Ballard sensed this danger in a Euro-American zone remolded by the unfolding convergence of

consumer and communications revolutions. As history demonstrated, the dark potentialities of the unconscious mind were easily tapped by those willing to do so. "This reservoir may appear more and more attractive to all sorts of agencies, from political parties to commercial concerns to religious groups to criminals to philosophers."¹³⁹ It was but a short step to a new form of fascism. The citizens of contemporary societies were, he cautioned, "extremely vulnerable to any master-manipulator. . . . I expect the next Adolf Hitler or Mao to emerge from the wilderness of the vast North American and European shopping malls."¹⁴⁰ Donald Trump is an archetypal Ballardian character. There will be others.

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw a burst of theorizing about emergent forms of authoritarianism.¹⁴¹ Ballard added his own twist. He read widely in the literature of political violence. In 2004 he lavished praise on Robert Paxton's *Anatomy of Fascism*, a book that he found "deeply unsettling" because of its "strong hint that the corpse might sit up at any moment and seize us by the throat."¹⁴² His debt to Paxton was significant. In Ballard's papers are notes he took on *Anatomy*, comprising a selection of long quotes interpolated with his own commentary on the subject.¹⁴³ Ballard repurposed Paxton's arguments, fusing them with his psychoanalytical diagnosis of consumerism.¹⁴⁴ Paxton defined fascism as

a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victim-hood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.¹⁴⁵

In both his notes and his published writing, Ballard accepted many of these propositions—the obsession with community, humiliation, unity, energy, and purity; the connections between elites and masses; the significance of ritual; the role of cathartic violence. He pondered how they might be manifested in "late capitalist" society, suggesting that consumerism had supplanted traditional political ideology as a source of collective identity, and that it threatened a repurposed form of fascism. These ideas found literary expression in *Kingdom Come*, Ballard's final novel.¹⁴⁶ A barbed mixture of satire, surrealism, and noir crime fiction, it is a thought-experiment in which many of the comments he made on Paxton's book were ventriloquized by the main characters as they seek to explain the unfolding crisis.

Kingdom Come is at once a critique of the "secret engines" of consumerism and a melancholic lament for a lost world of possibility. It opens in

characteristic Ballardian fashion: “The suburbs dream of violence. Asleep in their drowsy villas, sheltered by benevolent shopping malls, they wait patiently for the nightmares that will wake them into a more passionate world.”¹⁴⁷ The story unfolds in the affluent commuter towns metastasizing around London, “a terrain of inter-urban sprawl, a geography of sensory deprivation” that are enacting the “end state of consumerism.”¹⁴⁸ The action is centered on Brooklands, dominated by a huge mall, the Metro-Centre. A sinister new movement is coalescing. Maxted, a wayward psychologist, comments on its means and ends:

Racist attacks, Asian families terrorized out of their homes, immigrant hostels burnt down. Football matches every weekend that were really political rallies, though no one there ever realized it. Sport was just an excuse for street violence. And it all seemed to spring from the Metro-Centre. A new kind of fascism, a cult of violence rising from this wilderness of retail parks and cable TV stations. People were so bored they wanted drama in their lives. They wanted to strut and shout and kick the hell out of anyone with a strange face. They wanted to hero-worship a leader.¹⁴⁹

Sangster, a headteacher, explains the magnetic appeal of consumerism to Pearson, an advertising executive. “When we go shopping we take part in a collective ritual of affirmation”—“It celebrates coming together. Shared dreams and values, shared hopes and pleasures. Consumerism is optimistic and forward-looking. Naturally it asks us to accept the will of the majority. Consumerism is a new form of mass politics.”¹⁵⁰

There are two principal elements in Ballard’s model of consumer fascism, one that he posits as a general feature of human social psychology, the other specific to a particular phase of capitalism. The first is the irrationality of collectives, a theme reaching back through Freud to the pervasive anxieties about mob psychology circulating at the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁵¹ People are easily whipped up into a frenzy, their excitement trumping reason as they revel in the “freedom to deliberately lose control.”¹⁵² It was essential to remember, Maxted opined, that “[w]e’re a primate species with an unbelievable need for violence.”¹⁵³ This “willed insanity” helped explain the mesmerizing appeal of Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot.¹⁵⁴ The second part of the argument concerns the peculiar psychology of consumerism. As anomie and listlessness beset affluent populations, “a gigantic boredom prevailed.”¹⁵⁵ These psychological dispositions intersect in a combustible admixture. It only needed a suitable “retail messiah for the age of cable TV” to ignite it.¹⁵⁶

Capitalism has at once stripped away the traditional sources of restraint—churches, trade unions, political movements, class solidarity—while feeding

an insatiable appetite for consumption, aggression, and violent spectacle. Moreover, people weaned on advertising campaigns have lost the capacity to distinguish truth and falsity, or even to care about the difference—Ballard here charts the emergence of a post-truth world. “They knew they were being lied to, but if lies were consistent enough they defined themselves as credible alternatives to the truth. Emotion rules almost everything, and lies were driven by emotions that were familiar and supportive, while the truth came with hard edges that cut and bruised.”¹⁵⁷

This “soft fascism” diverges from its precursors in its lack of concrete political content. Animated by a hatred of difference—resulting in the “ethnic cleansing” of minority communities—it contains no distinctive program. “Consumer fascism provides its own ideology, no one needs to sit down and dictate *Mein Kampf*. Evil and psychopathy have been reconfigured into lifestyle statements,” Sangster explains. “It’s a fearful prospect, but consumer fascism may be the only way to hold a society together. To control all that aggression, and channel all those fears and hates.”¹⁵⁸ Geared chiefly to inducing a constant need for further consumption, the beliefs it purportedly expresses are flexible and open to rewriting, as fashions and perceived needs change. Indeed a core theme of the novel is the power of advertising to manipulate people, their beliefs, desires, and values shaped by an endless stream of messaging—the content is less important than the form. As Pearson explains: “Consumerism is the greatest device anyone has invented for controlling people. New fantasies, new dreams and dislikes, new souls to heal. For some peculiar reason, they call it shopping. But it’s really the purest kind of politics.”¹⁵⁹ This “new politics” is committed to nothing other than the perpetuation of a cycle of consumption and redemptive, exhilarating spectacle.

Consumerism, Ballard wrote in his annotations on Paxton, was a “redemptive ideology” that “reminds us of the failure of liberalism, and the failure of individual liberty and reason,” through offering its devotees a new source of authority and “a new aesthetic of instinct and gratification.”¹⁶⁰ Rationalistic forms of politics—this is what he meant by liberalism here—failed to enthuse citizens or provide tools for recognizing the perils of the emergent order. “Who needs liberty and human rights and civic responsibility? What we want is an aesthetics of violence. We believe in the triumph of feelings over reason.”¹⁶¹ All that was needed were charismatic figures to energize the masses. “The same process can be seen in all communities where there are repressed tensions. People deliberately allow themselves to be led by a hot head or fanatic, and then explode in a cathartic rush of violence against the target figures. They allowed themselves to be led into a state of willed psychopathology.”¹⁶²

Rather than an integral element of its flourishing, Ballard suggested that consumerism now threatened to derail the “civilization” it helped to create.

This echoes Marcuse's contention in *Eros and Civilization* that "Freud's metapsychology comes face-to-face with the fatal dialectic of civilization: the very progress of civilization leads to the release of increasingly destructive forces."¹⁶³ But absent Marcuse's belief that a postcapitalist world is both possible and eminently preferable, Ballard has little to offer in response. Instead, the novel concludes with an invocation of the very political rationality that it—and much of the rest of Ballard's late output—spent dismissing. The burst of fascism is not suppressed; it simply fizzles out, unable to find an effective leader to channel it. The threat remains. The novel ends with a warning: "unless the sane woke and rallied themselves, an even fiercer republic would open the doors and spin the turnstiles of its beckoning paradise."¹⁶⁴

How did this investment in late Freudian themes relate to Ballard's surrealist liberalism? As the millennium approached, it became ever clearer to him that the promise of liberal capitalism had not been realized. The "expedient solution" had failed. The neoliberal tide had created a psychically imbalanced society in which individuality was stifled, happiness was increasingly elusive, and new forms of tyranny and terror were discernible. The superego was recoded to the extent that the pathologies of capitalism were internalized and adopted as normative. But even as Ballard's late work offers an extraordinary phenomenology of capitalism and its discontents, it highlights the limits of his political vision. A sense of fatalism, even capitulation, runs through it. Capitalism is figured as an impervious force, something that happens to citizens who are largely powerless to resist it effectively. Moreover, the utopian spark is reduced to dreams of individual fulfillment; there is little role for sustained collective action in challenging domination. Resistance is posited largely as a form of strenuous personal effort, mirroring the very neoliberalism it sought to reject.

Conclusion

Deliberately ambiguous and open-ended, Ballard's extraordinary fiction can bear the weight of endless interpretation—it provides ammunition for a host of political orientations and for none. Nevertheless I have argued that throughout his long career he outlined a distinctive political stance, a form of liberalism grounded in insights drawn from his own traumatic experience and from his immersion in surrealism and the work of Freud. This was a species of the liberalism of fear that sought a balance—an "expedient solution"—between individual freedom and social coercion, while acknowledging the contingency and fragility of any such arrangement. It comprised a set of interlinked claims about human nature, social reality, and the imagination. Citing Joseph Conrad, Ballard once proposed that it was necessary to

“immerse yourself in the most destructive element” to better understand the human condition and “moderat[e] these strains that are present.”¹⁶⁵ Just as Freud thought psychoanalysis could foster habits of mind that enabled human happiness, and just as Shklar thought liberalism could only flourish in a society of “well-informed and self-directed adults,” so Ballard saw his work as exposing people to the “secret engines” so that they might better comprehend the pathologies and possibilities of the contemporary world.¹⁶⁶ He had hoped once that this exposure would sensitize them to the superiority of liberal democratic capitalism, but as consumerism corroded the public sphere, accelerated the collapse of fiction and reality, and exacerbated competitiveness, inequality, and cruelty, liberalism seemed to offer few resources to mitigate the danger. It was unclear how political “middle of the roadism” might animate resistance to the emergent forms of consumer authoritarianism that Ballard warned against.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following for their advice and comments: Jeannette Baxter, Robin Bunce, Sarah Fine, Alan Finlayson, Seamus Flaherty, Joel Isaac, Paul Kirkby, and two anonymous referees for this journal. Seminar audiences at Oxford, Princeton, and Sussex provided valuable feedback. Thanks also to Lawrie Balfour for her generous and insightful editorial support. All the usual disclaimers apply.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Duncan Bell  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8886-8888>

Notes

1. J. G. Ballard, “The Art of Fiction” (1984), in Ballard, *Extreme Metaphors: Collected Interviews*, ed. Simon Sellars and Dan O’Hara (London: 4th Estate, 2014), 196.
2. For Ballard’s influence on assorted cultural forms, see, for example, Louis Pattison, “Artists Influenced by Dystopic Novelist J. G. Ballard,” 2017, https://daily.bandcamp.com/lists/artists-influenced-by-ballard?utm_source=footer; Peter Bradshaw, Deyan Sudjic, Dave Simpson, Iain Sinclair, and Mark Lawson,

- “How J. G. Ballard Cast his Shadow Right across the Arts,” 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/apr/20/jg-ballard-film-music-architecture-tv>.
3. Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century* (London: Hodder, 1996), 192, 225. Important scholarly texts include: Jeannette Baxter, *J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009); Andreas Gasiorek, *J. G. Ballard* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); D. Harlan Wilson, *J. G. Ballard* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Roger Luckhurst, “*The Angle Between Two Walls*”: *The Fiction of J. G. Ballard* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998).
 4. Angela Carter, “Space for Surrealism,” *The Guardian*, November 8, 1990, 25.
 5. John Gray, “Review of *Millennium People*,” *New Statesman*, September 8, 2003, <https://www.newstatesman.com/node/158321>. The respect was reciprocal: from the late 1990s onward Ballard praised Gray’s work (e.g., Ballard, “Reading the Signs” [2004], in *Extreme Metaphors*, 411). For an account of their relationship, see Mike Holliday, “Fulfilment in a Time of Nihilism,” 2011, <http://www.ballardian.com/fulfillment-nihilism-gray-ballard>.
 6. Mark O’Connell, “Why we are Living in J. G. Ballard’s World,” *New Statesman*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/2020/04/why-we-are-living-jg-ballard-s-world>.
 7. For example, Florian Cord, *J. G. Ballard's Politics: Late Capitalism, Power, and the Pataphysics of Resistance* (Amsterdam: DeGruyter, 2017), reads Ballard as committed to a “subversive politics” of resistance.
 8. Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 199n32, 93, 288.
 9. H. Bruce Franklin, “What are we to make of J. G. Ballard’s Apocalypse?,” in *Voices for the Future*, ed. Thomas Claerson (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1979), 93, 105.
 10. Jonathan Lethem, Review of Ballard, *Collected Short Stories* (2009), *New York Times*, 8/10/2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/13/books/review/Lethem-t.html>.
 11. Dominika Oramus, *Grave New World: The Decline of the World in the Fiction of J. G. Ballard* (London: Terminal, 2015); W. Warren Wagar, “J. G. Ballard and the Transvaluation of Utopia,” *Science Fiction Studies* 53 (1991): 68.
 12. Theodore Dalrymple, “The Marriage of Reason and Nightmare,” *City Journal*, Winter 2008, <https://www.city-journal.org/html/marriage-reason-and-nightmare-13076.html>; Rod Liddle, “J. G. Ballard was a Man of the Right,” *The Spectator*, September 30, 2009.
 13. Ballard, “J. G. Ballard” (1974), in *The Imagination on Trial*, ed. Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet (London: Allison, 1981), 19.
 14. John Gray, “Modernity and Its Discontents,” *New Statesman*, May, 10, 1999, <https://www.newstatesman.com/node/149127>; Gasiorek, *Ballard*, 207.
 15. Ballard, “Against Entropy” (1984), in *Extreme Metaphors*, 208; Ballard, *All that Matters is Sensation*, trans. Elisabetta Rattalino (Gianico: Krisis, 2019 [1992]), 35. Rachel Stanley characterizes this as the “naturalistic gaze”: Stanley, ““The

- Scientist on Safari”: J. G. Ballard and the Naturalist Gaze,” *Textual Practice* 29, no. 6 (2015): 1165–85.
16. The relationship between Ballard’s novels and his “paratextual” materials, as Jeanette Baxter terms his interviews and essays, remains a contested one, as there is considerable thematic and linguistic continuity across them. See Baxter, “Uncanny Forms: Reading Ballard’s ‘Non-Fiction,’” in *J. G. Ballard: Visions and Revisions*, ed. Jeanette Baxter and Roland Wymer (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), 50–70. I agree that it is not plausible to completely separate them, though I contend that his paratextual materials are often marked by a more explicit articulation of, and reflection on, the various claims he is making and the sources that inspired him, than are the novels or short stories. Thanks to Jeannette Baxter for pushing me on this point.
 17. Ballard, “Back to the Heady Future” (1993), in *A User’s Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews* (London: Flamingo, 1996), 194.
 18. Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.
 19. On how science fiction can (and should) be read as political thought, see Eileen Hunt Botting, *Artificial Life after Frankenstein* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), chap. 1. On literature and political theory, see Danielle Charette’s valuable survey: “Political Theory and American Literature: A Guide Through the Archive,” *Political Theory* (Online First 2020).
 20. Ballard, “Archetypes of the Dream” (1986), in *User’s*, 99.
 21. Ballard, *Miracles of Life: Shanghai to Shepperton* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), 133.
 22. Ballard, “All We’ve Got Left is Our Psychopathology” (2003), in *Metaphors*, 397.
 23. Duncan Bell, “What is Liberalism?” *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (2014): 682–715; Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
 24. Ballard, “The Innocent as Paranoid” (1969), in *User’s*, 94.
 25. James Goddard and David Pringle (eds.), *J. G. Ballard: The First Twenty Years* (Hayes: Bran’s Head, 1976), 5.
 26. Ballard, “Dangerous Bends Ahead, Slow Down” (2006), in *Metaphors*, 419–20.
 27. Ballard, *Miracles*, 90.
 28. Ballard, “The Past Tense of J.G. Ballard” (1985), in *Metaphors*, 221.
 29. Ballard, “J. G. Ballard and Mark Pauline” (1986), in *J. G. Ballard*, ed. V. Vale (San Francisco: RE/Search, 2005), 127–28.
 30. Ballard, “Ballard’s Anatomy,” 1991, https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1991_science_fiction_eye_magazine.html. For other examples, see Ballard, “Empire of the Senses,” 1991, https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1991_oct_i-d_magazine.html; Ballard, “The River from Nowhere,” 1987, https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1987_sept10_city_limits_london.html; Ballard, “Myths of the Near Future,” 1988, https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1988_april_ZG_magazine.html; Ballard, “Don’t Crash,” 1995, https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1995_kjb.html.

31. Ballard voted for Blair in 1997 and 2001, but not in 2005. His criticisms of Blair's political evangelism and servile support for Bush parallel those in David Runciman, *The Politics of Good Intentions: History, Fear and Hypocrisy in the New World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Ballard, "Now Parliament is Just another Hypermarket," <https://www.newstatesman.com/books/2009/04/ballard-author-blair-british>.
32. Ballard, *Miracles*, 243; Ballard, "Entertaining Violence," 2004, <https://spike-magazine.com/0104jgballard/>. In Ballard's archive are enigmatic notes (c. 2006–2008) for a novel on resistance to American empire, entitled *An Immodest Proposal or How the World Declared War on America*, in which the United States is attacked by countries tired of its imperialism. Ballard papers, British Library, MS 88938/3/27/1.
33. Ballard, *Miracles*, 127, 230. Ballard's recipe for "radical" political change in Britain was "the abolition of the monarchy, the House of Lords, inherited titles and the public schools," and dismantling the class system—all left-liberal objectives.
34. Ballard, *Miracles*, 120. Ballard attended the Leys School in Cambridge between 1946–1949 before spending two years studying medicine at King's College, Cambridge.
35. Ballard also reworked ideas from Jung and Laing in his fiction, though (I contend) they had much less impact than Freud on his social thought. For Ballard's idiosyncratic use of psychological arguments, vocabulary, and themes, see Samuel Francis, *The Psychological Fictions of J. G. Ballard* (London: Continuum, 2011). For a valuable survey of psychoanalysis and political theory, see *The Routledge Handbook of Psychoanalytic Political Theory*, ed. Yannis Stavrakakis (London: Routledge, 2019).
36. Ballard, "J. G. Ballard," *Transatlantic Review* 39, no. 1 (1971), 61.
37. Baxter, *Surrealist Imagination*, 2. Baxter offers the most comprehensive account of Ballard's surrealism. See also Gavin Parkinson, "Arrows of Surrealist Desire: Re-reading J. G. Ballard's *Unlimited Dream Company*," *Word & Image* 32, no. 3 (2016): 294–310.
38. Ballard, "Reading the Signs" (2004), in *Metaphors*, 413.
39. Baxter, "Review of Francis," *Science Fiction Studies* 39, no. 3 (2012): 527.
40. Mark Fisher, *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher* (London: Repeater, 2018), 44.
41. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans J. Riviere (London: Hogarth, 1930), 86.
42. Francis, *Psychological Fictions*, 54–55.
43. Ballard, "The Innocent as Paranoid," 94; Ballard, "In the Asylum of Dreams" (1986), in *User's*, 235–36.
44. Ballard, *Miracles*, 238.
45. Claire Walsh, quoted in *The Observer*, April, 26, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/apr/26/jg-ballard-appreciation-claire-walsh>.
46. Ballard, *Miracles*, 17. For a useful summary of Ballard's life in Shanghai, his reflections on it, and the peculiar geopolitical status of the city at the time, see

- James Gray, "J. G. Ballard and the Phenomenology of the Absence of Law," *Law and Humanities* 13, no. 2 (2019): 156–64. See also, Fay Ballard, "Shanghai/Shepperton," and Graham Matthews, "J. G. Ballard and the Drowned World of Shanghai," in *J. G. Ballard: Landscapes of Tomorrow*, ed. Richard Brown, Christopher Duffy, Elisabeth Stainforth (Amsterdam: Brill, 2016), 8, 9–22.
47. Ballard, *Miracles*, 93–94, 106–7; Ballard, "Alien at Home," 1991, https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1991_sept15_independent_sunday_review.html.
 48. Ballard, *Miracles*, 108; Ballard, "J. G. Ballard and Mark Pauline."
 49. Ballard, *Miracles*, 82; Ballard, "In Conversation with J. G. Ballard," 1991, https://www.jgballard.ca/media/2000_writers_in_conversation_with_christopher_bigsby.html; Ballard, "Past Tense," 1985, *Metaphors*, 215.
 50. Baxter, *Surrealist Imagination*, 138. On the complex interweaving of the fictional and factual in his life narratives, see Umberto Rossi, "Mind is the Battlefield: Reading Ballard's 'Life Trilogy' as War Fiction," in Baxter (ed.), *Ballard*, 66–77.
 51. Francis, *Psychological Fictions*, chap. 4, offers the most comprehensive account of the psychoanalytical features of the text.
 52. Ballard, *Empire of the Sun* (London: Panther, 1985 [1984]), 32.
 53. Francis, *Psychological Fictions*, chap. 4; Gasiorek, *Ballard*, 158–61.
 54. Ballard, *Empire*, 189. He also admired the American internees and military.
 55. The most extensive discussion of Ballard's account of empire is David Paddy, *The Empires of J. G. Ballard: An Imagined Geography* (London: Gylphi, 2015).
 56. Ballard, *Empire*, 262–63.
 57. Carter, *Time Out*, 1984, <https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/a-review-of-empire-of-the-sun>.
 58. Ballard, *Empire*, 262–63.
 59. Ballard, *Miracles*, 113.
 60. Francis, *Psychological Fictions*, 131.
 61. Ballard, *Empire*, 208.
 62. Ballard, *Empire*, 169.
 63. Ballard, *Empire*, 228.
 64. Gray, "J. G. Ballard and the Phenomenology of the Absence of Law."
 65. Ballard, "Ballard of an Indignant Man," 2003, https://www.jgballard.ca/media/2003_the_age.html.
 66. Ballard, *Miracles*, 137.
 67. Ballard, *Miracles*, 137.
 68. Ballard, "J. G. Ballard and V. Vale," in *Ballard*, ed. Vale, 100.
 69. Ballard, "A Conversation with J. G. Ballard," (1988), *Metaphors*, 239. Ballard worried that violence was a generative force. "There might be something about violence that provides a necessary salt in our psychic diet": "How to Face Doomsday without Really Dying," 1973, https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1974_CBC_radio.html; see also Ballard, "J. G. Ballard" (1974/1981), 23. This worry never left him.
 70. Ballard, "Up a Kind of Sociological Amazon" (2008), in *Metaphors*, 476.
 71. Ballard, "The Coming of the Unconscious" (1966), in *User's*, 85.

72. Ballard thought that evolutionary biology verified Freud. The development of human aggression had been necessary to survive as hunter-gatherers. "And we still carry those genes": "J. G. Ballard," 1997, https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1997_frieze_magazine.html.
73. Ballard, *Sensation*, 27. He offered conflicting accounts of his debts to the surrealists. At times he acknowledged their profound influence: Ballard, "The Visitor" (1992), in *Metaphors*, 264–65; "Future Now" (1986), in *Metaphors*, 229; Ballard, "A Conversation with J. G. Ballard" (1988), 232. Occasionally, he suggested that they validated his preexisting convictions: "An Interview with J. G. Ballard" (1982), in *Metaphors*, 140. Whether read as originary source or correlative vision, surrealism was a touchstone throughout his career.
74. Ballard, "The Innocent as Paranoid," 95.
75. Ballard, "The Innocent as Paranoid," 91.
76. Ballard, "Conversations" (1995), 306–7. While many surrealists were squarely on the left, Dali flirted with fascism in the 1930s: Robert Short, "The Politics of Surrealism, 1920-36," *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, no. 2 (1966): 3–25; Raymond Spiteri, "Surrealism and the Question of Politics, 1925-1939," in *Companion to Surrealism and Dada*, ed. David Hopkins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 110–130.
77. Ballard, "Historian of the Future" (2007), in *Metaphors*, 467–68.
78. Ballard, *Miracles*, 58.
79. Ballard, *Miracles*, 94.
80. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 61.
81. Freud to Zweig, November 1930, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig*, ed. E.L. Freud (New York: NYU Press, 1970), 21.
82. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, chap. 5. On Freud's liberalism, see J. W. Boyer, "Freud, Marriage, and Late Viennese Liberalism," *Journal of Modern History* 50, no. 1 (1978): 72–102; William McGarh, *Freud's Discovery of Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 30–32, 184, 224, 271–73.
83. Dagmar Herzog, *Cold War Freud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
84. Samuel Moyn, "Preface," in Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, ed. Moyn (New York: Norton, 2021).
85. Eli Zaretsky, *Political Freud: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
86. Judith Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy Rosenblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 21, 29.
87. Bernard Williams, "The Liberalism of Fear," in Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 59.
88. Shklar, "Liberalism of Fear," 26.
89. Ballard, "Visions of Dystopia," 1988, https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1988_april_the_face_magazine.html.

90. Ballard, "J. G. Ballard's Wild Rise" (1997), in *Metaphors*, 342; see also Ballard, "The Visitor," 265.
91. Ballard, "The Space Age is Over" (1979), in *Metaphors*, 123; Ballard, "Against Entropy," 201–2; Duncan Bell, "Scripting the City: J. G. Ballard among the Architects," in *Political Theory and Architecture*, eds. Bell and Bernardo Zacka (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 143–64.
92. Ballard, "Introduction to the Danish Edition of *Atrocity Exhibition*," 1969, https://www.jgballard.ca/non_fiction/danish%20_atrocity_intro_1969.html.
93. Ballard, "Crash & Learn," (1974), in *Metaphors*, 76.
94. Ballard, "The Coming of the Unconscious," 88.
95. Ballard, "The Art of Fiction," 190.
96. Ballard, "An Interview with J. G. Ballard" (1991), in *Metaphors*, 252.
97. Ballard, "Jim's Story," 1991, https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1991_nov2_sydney_morning_herald.html.
98. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 119. See also Baudrillard, "Ballard's *Crash*" (1976), *Science Fiction Studies* 18, no. 3 (1991), 313–30. Baudrillard's reading of Ballard has been widely criticized by Ballard scholars.
99. Ballard, "J. G. Ballard" (1971), 62–63.
100. Ballard, "Speculative Illustrations" (1971), in *Metaphors*, 38.
101. Ballard, "Introduction," in Ballard, *Crash* (London: Vintage, 1995), i.
102. Ballard, "The Coming of the Unconscious," 88; Ballard, "It Would be a Mistake to Write about the Future" (1976), in *Metaphors*, 99–105.
103. Ballard, "The Touchstone City" (1991), in *User's*, 89.
104. Ballard, "The Innocent as Paranoid," 91.
105. Ballard, "In Conversation with J. G. Ballard" (1991).
106. Ballard, *Sensation*, 30, 31.
107. Ballard, *Kindness*, 65.
108. Francis, *Psychological Fictions*, 137.
109. Ballard, *Kindness*, 90, 93, 143, 149, 162, 181, 185, 208, 217; Baxter, *Surrealist Imagination*.
110. Ballard, *Kindness*, 90, 208.
111. Ballard, *Kindness*, 119.
112. Ballard, *Kindness*, 284.
113. Ballard, *Kindness*, 66.
114. Ballard, "The Meaningless Universe Demands Meaningless Acts," 2003, https://www.jgballard.ca/media/2003_oct3_BBC3_radio.html.
115. Ballard, "Reading the Signs," 412.
116. Ballard, "Empire of the Surreal" (1995), in *Metaphors*, 298. On Freud's defense of free speech, see Joel Schwartz, "Freud and Freedom of Speech," *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (1986): 1227–48.
117. Ballard, "A Conversation with J. G. Ballard" (1988).
118. Ballard, "Working Class Proust" (1991), in *User's*, 111.
119. Ballard, "Not a Literary Man," *Spike Magazine*, 1995, <https://spikemagazine.com/0901ballard/>.

120. Wagar, "J. G. Ballard"; see also Ballard, "Rattling Other People's Cages" (2006), in *Metaphors*, 437–38.
121. Ballard, "Nothing is Real, Everything is Fake" (2003), in *Metaphors*, 393. On liberal anti-utopianism, see Jan-Werner Müller, "Fear and Freedom: On 'Cold War Liberalism,'" *European Journal of Political Theory* 7, no. 1 (2008): 45–64.
122. Ballard, "Back to the Heady Future," 192.
123. Shklar, "Liberalism of Fear," 26; Ballard, "Memento" (1993), in *Metaphors*, 278.
124. Ballard, "An Interview with J. G. Ballard" (1991), 252.
125. Ballard, "Historian of the Future," 470.
126. Ballard, "Graham Revell and J. G. Ballard," in *Ballard*, ed. Vale, 52.
127. Ballard, *Kingdom Come* (London: 4th Estate, 2006), 41.
128. Ballard, "Sociological Amazon" (2008), in *Metaphors*, 479.
129. Ballard, *Kindness*, 193; Ballard, "Kafka in the Present Day" (1993), in *User's*, 146. See also Jeanette Baxter's account of Ballard's construction of "nightmare utopias": "Visions of Europe in *Cocaine Nights* and *Super-Cannes*," in *J. G. Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Baxter (London: Continuum, 2008), 94–106.
130. Francis, *Psychological Fictions*, chap. 5.
131. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 63.
132. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 92.
133. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 44.
134. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 91.
135. Ballard, "J. G. Ballard" (1997).
136. Ballard, "Don't Crash."
137. Ballard, "Pure Imagination, the Most Potent Hallucinogen of All," 2001, https://www.jgballard.ca/media/2001_literary_review.html.
138. Ballard, "J. G. Ballard and V. Vale" (2004), in *Ballard*, ed. Vale, 26.
139. Ballard, "Indignant Man."
140. Ballard, "Russia on my Mind," 1998, https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1998_reprinted2003_febmar_london_magazine.html.
141. See, for examples, William Connolly, "The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine," *Political Theory* 33, no. 6 (2005): 869–86; Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
142. Ballard, "J. G. Ballard" (2004).
143. Ballard papers, Add Ms 88938/3/26. In 2001 he praised Michael Burleigh's *The Third Reich: A New History* (London: Macmillan, 2000), which he thought demonstrated that "Hitler was the leader of a pseudo-religion and that his followers formed an almost suicidal congregation," <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2001/dec/20/guardianweekly.guardianweekly1>.
144. See also Paddy, *Empires*, 328–29.
145. Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (London: Penguin, 2004), 218.
146. On Ballard's reading of fascism, see also Jeanette Baxter, "Fascism and the Politics of Nowhere in *Kingdom Come*," in *J. G. Ballard*, ed. Brown, Duffy, and Stainforth, 141–55. For contrasting reflections on the meaning(s) of his late

- fiction, see also Joel Evans, "The Mob: J. G. Ballard's Turn to the Collective," *Novel* 53, no. 3 (2020): 436–51; Graham Matthews, "Consumerism's Endgame: Violence and Community in J. G. Ballard's Late Fiction," *Journal of Modern Literature* 36, no. 2 (2013): 122–39; Benjamin Noys, "La Libido Reactionnaire? The Recent Fiction of J. G. Ballard," *Journal of European Studies* 37, no. 4 (2007): 391–406; Eric Ostrowidzki, "Utopias of the New Right in J. G. Ballard's Fiction," *Space and Culture* 12, no. 1 (2009): 4–24.
147. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 3.
 148. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 4, 8.
 149. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 258.
 150. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 86, 85.
 151. Francis draws out the striking similarities with the concerns of Freud's "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego": *Psychological Fictions*, 176–77.
 152. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 99.
 153. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 99.
 154. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 102, 55–56.
 155. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 64.
 156. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 71.
 157. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 204.
 158. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 168.
 159. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 145.
 160. Ballard papers, Add Ms 88938/3/26.
 161. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 160.
 162. Ballard papers, Add Ms 88938/3/26.
 163. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Enquiry into Freud* (London: Routledge, 1998 [1956]), 52. Francis applies this insight to *Super-Cannes* (*Psychological Fictions*, 166), but it is equally applicable to *Kingdom Come*. J. Carter Wood reads Ballard as a historical sociologist, identifying affinities between his work and Elias's Freudian-inflected account of civilizing processes, especially how they can seed dissatisfaction. Wood, "'Going Mad Is Their Only Way of Staying Sane': Norbert Elias and the Civilized Violence of J. G. Ballard," in *Ballard*, ed. Baxter and Wymer, 198–212.
 164. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 280.
 165. Ballard, "An Interview with J. G. Ballard" (1991), 254; Ballard, "Sci-Fi Seer" (1970), in *Metaphors*, 32.
 166. Shklar, "Liberalism of Fear," 33.

Author Biography

Duncan Bell is professor of political thought and international relations at the University of Cambridge and a fellow of Christ's College. He works on the history of modern British and American political thought and on politics and aesthetics. His recent publications include *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, 2016) and *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton, 2020).