

Psych-Fi: J.G. Ballard's Startling Visions of the Future

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Introduction

J.G. Ballard was a gentle, courteous man with a soft southern English accent. Yet he had a vision of startling originality. His fiction, which explored our hidden obsessions with media, technologies, landscapes, gained him a solid international readership. Perhaps more than any other, Ballard drew attention to the new - often powerfully subversive - ways that mainstream cultures appear to be undermined by the very tools and innovations that sustain them. This ambiguity is one of the driving forces of the mythologies that emerged in his work.

Ballard gained his reputation by treading new ground. While his early novels were located in or near climactic upheavals, even there the dominant landscapes are internal. He appeared more interested in dreams, myths, psychology, the personal and social constructions of reality, than in technology *per se*. In his universe such elements are all inextricably intertwined; fiction and reality are not separate.

Some of the early work remains highly regarded today. For example, *Vermillion Sands* (1971) is often placed among the finest imaginative literature of the time. Similarly, in *Crash* (1973), Ballard took our obsessions with the motor car to an all-too-logical extreme. It's fair to say that the full implications continue to elude us. His later work explores the media landscape, high-rise tower blocks and the like with an almost nightmarish intensity. Ballard's restless vision seemed to probe more deeply than many into the overlooked crevices of late 20th and early 21st century life. It's not a comforting picture, but it resonates widely with dreams, feelings and intuitions. We know that something significant is being said.

The publication of *Empire of the Sun* (1984) brought Ballard fame and was a revelation to his existing readers. For in the war-torn city of Shanghai an entropic vision of the world was forcefully impressed upon the consciousness of a young boy. The creative turmoil that resulted came close to being a cultural force in its own right. The images of ruined airfields and empty swimming pools have contributed toward the iconography of an age. They echo our secret fears about the risks involved in the over-extension of humankind upon the earth. A second semi-autobiographical novel *The Kindness of Women* (1991) followed the child from war to a kind of unsettled peace and, finally, to late middle age. What made these books important was that, in their own way, they are chronicles of our time, not merely autobiography. Ballard's success was founded upon the fact that he speaks not just for himself, but for some wider constituency founded in the collective unconscious.

I spoke with Ballard in the comfortable lounge of a hotel in Manchester. The hotel was, in its way, another constructed reality scripted and choreographed like a film set, an illusion standing in stark contrast to the chaos of large-scale road works outside. Such “nested environments” were, of course, second nature to Ballard, for whom, perhaps, the whole world resembled a fantastic stage. (This also explains why he owned original works by the Belgian surrealist painter Paul Delvaux.) He was certainly at ease in a role he knew well. Despite the self-revelation inherent in his work, he was, nevertheless, a private man, seldom seen in public. Yet his cordiality and unhurried manner, his direct gaze and ready conversation made for an easy rapport. So when the introductions were over and the drinks waitress moved on to another script, the interview began.

RS: Thanks again for agreeing to meet here. You’re quoted as saying that you’ve called science fiction “the literature of the twentieth century.” I wonder if you wouldn’t mind explaining for the thousandth time, why it is that you said that and whether you still believe it?

JB: Yes, I do believe it. When I say that, I don’t mean that Heinlein and Asimov are greater writers than James Joyce and Kafka.

What I mean is that future social historians looking back say from the middle of the next century may well regard the totality of twentieth century science fiction in all its forms - not only literary, but the iconography of films and television and comic book SF and the iconography - secondary iconography of SF imagery and advertising - not to mention its spin-off in record-sleeve design, fashion, architecture and the like. Future social historians may well regard the totality of SF as being far more expressive of the key imaginative response to the twentieth century than the so-called mainstream novel which is still largely a nineteenth century form and which has completely excluded, I think it’s fair to say, any consideration of the impact of science and technology on human beings from the main body of its work. One can see a writer like Kafka as having much in common with science fiction being a cousin of the George Orwell who wrote *1984*, and the Huxley who wrote *Brave New World*. You could say that Kafka was the writer of the technology of bureaucratic totalitarianism, and indeed there are one or two others one could cite. I think Borges has many affinities with science fiction. But, by and large, most so-called mainstream twentieth century novelists are still working with a nineteenth century form that’s concerned not with dynamic societies but with static societies where social nuance is all important.

Now I think that future social historians may well regard science fiction for all its naivety and for all its clear limitations as having a unique vitality. Vitality marks science fiction, even though it’s a popular form. It does have enormous energy and its images have had an immense...I don’t mean exactly reproductive power, but they’ve had an immense fertility. The images of science fiction have been immensely fertile. If you go into a

garage to get a new battery for your car, the advertising display urging you to buy a particular battery may well feature an image taken straight from a science fiction comic.

RS: Such as Sorayama's humanoid robots which are often seen in ads and on the covers of hardware catalogues?

JB: Yes, I mean science fiction has proliferated through the popular imagination of the twentieth century. I think there are two movements which have really dominated the imagination of the twentieth century. One is science fiction. The other is surrealism. Curiously both have been produced by a fairly small number of practitioners. Very few in the case of surrealism, but not many more in the case of science fiction. I think that what critics find rather off-putting about science fiction is a certain sort of briskness in its effects and a lack of sophistication. But it won't be considered a handicap in the future, any more than we consider let's say the crudities of pre-Raphaelite painters. By which I mean Italian primitives, not to mention the pre-Raphaelites themselves who had a certain crudity about them. We no longer consider that sort of crudity a handicap.

RS: So you chose to write in a science fiction mode because you considered it appropriate to the time. I also read somewhere that you collected some rejection slips early on. Was that the case?

JB: I did collect a few rejection slips. I started off by sending stories to the American magazines. This was in the mid-fifties, before I was ever published at all, and those stories came back. They were subsequently published in British science fiction magazines and went on to be endlessly anthologised. Stories like *The Terminal Beach*, and I think most of my very early stories (- if you look at my first ten to fifteen short stories that I wrote from '56 to '58/'59, all of which were published in *New Worlds* or its sister magazine *Science Fantasy* [both British S.F. magazines] I think all of them) had been first sent to American S.F. magazines - and were turned down. This was usually because the editors were puzzled by them, found them rather off-beat, didn't quite get the point or found them a little pessimistic.

RS: Yes, I imagine they were contradictory to the Zeitgeist of the time in the US.

JB: Oh they were, yes. But as soon as they were published they began to appear in American anthologies! Some of them, like *The Terminal Beach* and *The Voices of Time*, have been endlessly anthologised in America (I mean outside my own collections but in other people's anthologies).

RS: Looking ahead from there a little bit, possibly one collection which stands out most of all is *Vermillion Sands*. Do you think of that with any particular affection or interest, or is it just one book among many?

JB: I can't say I remember it that well. I mean, I actually wrote the *Vermillion Sands* stories across quite a wide time-span. I think the last was written in the late seventies. They were written across a twenty-year span so I do feel a certain affection for them, particularly as the landscape I describe - the desert resort, is a landscape that I've never known at first hand. I've known the sort of background landscapes of many of my books (like *The Drowned World*) at first hand in China during the annual monsoon floods. I've known the sort of urban nightmare landscapes of my novels in the seventies like *Crash* and *High Rise* but I've never known, I've never lived in a desert resort like Palm Springs.

RS: So it was very much a creature of your imagination?

JB: Yes it was - pure imagination and a sort of little dream of paradise.

RS: There's a particular story in that collection which I find very resonant called *The Thousand Dreams of Stella Vista*. It's the one about the neurotic house which has had a murder committed in it.

JB: That's right.

RS: I wonder if you can remember the gestation that particular story - is that possible?

JB: No, it's too far back.

RS: The reason I ask you is that I still use that story in teaching about futures because it seems to me that although this may not have been your intention, I suspect it wasn't - it is one of those wonderful gems of SF which actually give us a sense of the human *feel* of a technology long before it actually arrives. In the 90's we are just beginning to consider nanotechnology. But back in the 60's or 70's, perhaps, you wrote a story that reflected this aspect of a possible future with enormous human resonance.

JB: Well, I think that's what SF does so well, doesn't it? It doesn't just depict the future in the way a futurist might, or indeed, anybody with a sharply focused lens. What SF does is to put the emotion in so that we *can* get an idea of what it may feel like to live in some future context.

RS: So am I right in thinking that that was primarily an exercise in imagination to you, rather than futures research?

JB: Oh yes, I mean most of the *Vermillion Sands* stories are about futuristic works of art, if I remember. I mean they're not futuristic in the sense that I am *predicting* that cloud sculpting will happen one day or that machines that write verse will be invented, or that clothing will be psycho-sensitive. I can't remember - I mean these were just playful extrapolations from the

present on my part. In fact I think some of my technology is now quaintly out of date. My verse-composing machines actually had valves in them as opposed to transistors, so they have a kind of Jules Verne charm already, but that's something that can't be helped.

- RS: A little bit like *Thunderbirds*, with the reel-to-reel tape recorders?
- JB: Except that, you see, *Vermillion Sands* wasn't strictly speaking set in the future. It was set in the here and now, but a rather more leisurely here and now.
- RS: That provides a link with my next question because in the introduction to the 1973 French edition of *Crash* you talk about the world as fiction, as a huge novel. Then you talk about *Crash* as being an extreme metaphor for an extreme situation - "a pandemic cataclysm" - and you talk about the role of the book as cautionary, as a warning. Looking back over nearly twenty years, how do you feel about that book now - do you feel that it was a warning? How do you see it looking back to 1973?
- JB: Well I still endorse everything the book stood for. When I wrote that I saw it as a warning, I mean that in the most sort of generalised kind of way. It's not a specific warning, not putting a sign up on the road saying dangerous bends ahead. Yet in the sense that it seemed to me at the time of writing, and it still seems to me now, there are certain processes in train which I describe as "a sinister marriage between sex and technology." These processes will lead to a new kind of value system which may be the very reverse of those that we put our trust in now. I mean, one can already see strains of that new value system in the kind of excitement we feel in staged exhibitions of violence - like most motor racing and spectacle movies of the *Die Hard* type.
- RS: Like the staged spectacle of a monster truck crushing several cars?
- JB: Yes that kind of thing - the *Mad Max* movies and other films which celebrate violence as consumer spectator sport. Clearly there is a kind of culture of violence in which the normal yardsticks, not just moral yardsticks but those of ordinary personal safety - the kind of yardsticks we employ crossing the road - are suspended. I mean thrills and spills are the name of the game. So I don't know - *Crash* is cautionary in a general sense. It takes to a logical conclusion a set of scenarios which seem to me to be inscribed in the present.
- RS: So are you still concerned about what you have called "the death of affect" in this present century?
- JB: Yes, everything I described in *The Atrocity Exhibition* under that heading does seem to be confirmed. I don't see any other interpretation. The death of affect is inseparable from the sort of media landscape we inhabit and the way in which our lives are completely dominated and structured

by communication systems. They are just so dominant. So much of the input into the central nervous system now is profoundly distant from any kind of first hand experience. It's filtered through not just the mass media of various kinds but through all the selection and fictionalising processes of major TV companies, film organisations, advertising and the like. I don't mean that human beings aren't capable of responding on a sort of human and emotional level - they are - there is no question about that. But they are not given that much opportunity, certainly as groups, except when there is some sort of disaster. Take Locherbie when a plane fell out of the sky, people rallied around to rescue everyone. Likewise you get these big media events like the Band Aid/ Geldorf Famine Relief Project of some years ago which raised huge sums of money from a public only too willing to give. The trouble is the tap is turned on and off by the mass media, manipulated by the mass media. You get a kind of - it's a special form of - moral tourism isn't it? "Today we will all go to Bangladesh and feel concerned for the poor who are starving to death there and perhaps we will give." I mean, the whole thing is odd. I'm all for giving money to the poor of Bangladesh, but when it becomes a media stunt! In a way it rather diminishes the human impulse that it plays upon.

RS: Given your views about the media landscape, how did you feel being involved in the making of *Shanghai Jim*, the documentary about your life and work which was screened here in Britain last week?

JB: Well that was a fairly modest insertion into the media landscape. I mean I could have gone back to Shanghai for the first time with Stephen Spielberg when he filmed scenes from *Empire of the Sun* there but I decided not to because I didn't want a Hollywood film company to get between me and the first hand experience of my return to Shanghai. But a small crew from a highbrow BBC program never got anywhere near interposing itself between me and a first hand experience. I mean I just left them behind and went off on my own when I wanted to.

RS: Yes, so it was a fairly informal, unstructured time?

JB: Oh absolutely.

RS: Moving up to the semi-autobiographical novel *Empire of the Sun*- I imagine you must have heard many times that it was a revelation to your readers who saw, perhaps for the first time, the imaginative sources of much of your work, your iconography, the ruined buildings, the empty swimming pools etc. Now with *The Kindness of Women* there's a lot more of your life and your creative development opening up to people. My question is that since both are substantially autobiographical, does it concern you at all that some of the sources of your creative imagination have become too public, possibly over-exposed?

JB: I don't think it matters at this stage of the game. I mean I'm sixty years old, so the bulk of my work lies behind me on any reckoning. I have to

have some kind of closing of accounts in my life as a writer, and it would have been dangerous, I think as you implied, to savour it in *Empire of the Sun and The Kindness of Women* twenty years ago. But at my present age I don't think it makes any difference. In fact it might be a liberating move. It might free me from the past. I've settled my accounts with my past in those two books and I can now move on to something completely new which maybe takes its sources from some other experience in my life. It would be a big mistake to think that my entire world as a writer springs from my childhood experiences in China. That's a mistake. It's very easy to scan something like *Empire of the Sun* and say "ah, a drained swimming pool, that explains all the drained swimming pools in Ballard's fiction"; "ah, an abandoned hotel"... One can generalise from that to all the abandoned hotels as if Shanghai was a kind of gene that programmed the entire later growth of my imagination. That's not true.

RS: Too deterministic?

JB: Absolutely. I mean one goes on re-making one's self and absorbing new experiences throughout one's life. One's youth, the experience of marriage and having children, watching their birth and being intimately involved with women as an adult, with a wife and mother. None of these experiences were pre-figured in my Shanghai childhood and yet they've been enormously important to me and shaped my response to the world.

RS: In that context, can I ask you about the title *The Kindness of Women* - is that your title or was it suggested by a publisher?

JB: No, it was my title. It's a phrase in the book.

RS: Why did you choose that particular title?

JB: Well I hadn't got one by the time I'd finished the book and reading the book I was struck by the role that women played in it. I hadn't realised as I was writing it, how many women characters there were and how important they were to the narrative. There are far more women than there are male characters, particularly as David Hunter is really another side of me - and I was conscious of that - my dark side. Even the character of the TV psychologist represents part of me in a small way. But the women are all very strong characters who dominate the narrative. I realised the importance that women have played in my life and in particular the very happy relations I've enjoyed with women. I've depended on them; I've trusted them and by and large I've never been disappointed by them. I mean they've provided a civilizing and notionally strengthening role in my life. I've had very long relationships with women. I mean with my wife and later women and with my daughters. So I think anyone reading the book would agree that the word kindness pretty well sums up the chief quality of the women I've known in my life.

RS: So it's a key theme...

JB: Absolutely yes.

RS: Have there been any hints of new directions for Jim Ballard's writing since then?

JB: I wish I could say there have, but there haven't - yet. Time ... I've been writing now for thirty-five years, that's as a published writer. I've only written eleven novels in that time so I haven't written continuously by any means. I've generally had a fallow period after finishing a novel where I think about where I'm going next.

RS: So it's time for a break for a while?

JB: I think so.

RS: Perhaps I can turn now to looking ahead toward the Twenty-First Century. In 1974, again in the introduction to *Crash*, you said that the future is "ceasing to exist," it is "devoured by the all voracious present." Now I see that as a poetic or imaginative truth rather than a literal one. But is there still any resonance in that sort of statement for you - do you still see the future as being absorbed in the present?

JB: I think that's even more true now than it was when I said it. I think the past was the first casualty in the Second World War. People simply became uninterested in the past. Now they are only interested in the past in a sort of theme park-like way. They ransack the past for the latest design statement. There's no sense of a continuity to which one owes a certain sort of obligation or duty or feels one's self shaped by; one just sort of picks and chooses what elements of the past one wants to exploit for one's own purposes. The second casualty possibly - I don't know if you can date it, is the death of the future. It might be connected with the Kennedy Assassination. It's quite possible that Kennedy was in some way an avatar of the notion of radical change, of a new world, recovering from the threat of thermo-nuclear war in the fifties. Had he lived and served two full terms he might have energised this planet.

I don't mean that I approve of Kennedy. I'm talking about a media construct by and large - but he might have - the media construct which we call J F Kennedy might well have energised the planet and thrown it into a forward - motion as he did to his credit with the space race. I mean he single-handedly launched the space race and he said "let's get a man on the moon by the end of the sixties." In a way, NASA and its incredible achievement in landing there on the moon is a rather touchingly old fashioned example. It's a sort of nostalgic throwback to the great pioneers of scientific exploration. Whether the death of Kennedy was also the death-knell of the future, I don't know, but it's a point that could be argued. However, by the seventies nobody was interested in the future.

I'm old enough to remember the 1930's and 40's when people were intensely interested in the future; when popular magazines and newspapers were saturated with news of the fastest train in the world, the longest bridge, the fastest plane, land-sea records, deep sea penetration dives - people were fascinated by the future. Schools of architecture and design like Art Deco and the modernist movement were engines running forward into the future. There was immense optimism and immense confidence in the ability of science to deliver the future and a better world with it. Now that ended by the seventies. Nobody was interested in the future and to this day nobody cares tuppence halfpenny about some new scientific development. I mean people have no sense of what the world three years from now will be like, whereas people in the thirties and forties had a sense that the future had been marked out clearly. One knew that - I mean one would see actual diagrams in newspapers stating that ten years from now such and such will come in to existence and then we can expect television in all our homes and then video telephones and so on. Now all that's over. Nobody is interested in the future at all. I think the future has been annexed into the present. Occasionally a futuristic image is trotted out, ransacked like an image of the past and absorbed into the ongoing continuum that represents present day life.

RS: I agree with you wholeheartedly about the loss of optimism - one can see that coming for a long time and it remains current, but isn't it possible that, instead of only being more problematic, the future could also be more fascinating than ever as a result of this imaginative blockage? The problem may be that we actually live in a present that was the future that so many people looked forward to when they were in the past. Perhaps it requires a different leap of imagination out of this present to consider the new range of alternatives that lie ahead. I would like to ask you about the nature of the new leap of imagination that may be required to go beyond our present into our future.

JB: Well I agree with a new leap of imagination. One thing that we can be certain of is that there will be a future, at least in the chronological calendar sense. The year 2000 will come and the year 2500 will come, but I have a feeling that some time over the next ten or twenty years, there is going to be a major break of human continuity. One of the reasons why we've turned our backs against the future at present is that we unconsciously sense that the logics that will dictate our lives in the next twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years will be completely unlike those which rule our lives today and have ruled our lives in the past. We may move into a very indeterminate, a seemingly dangerous and chaotic era, where all the old certainties and the social cement that held society together will have gone. So the future could be as discontinuous as a night in Las Vegas or an evening spent hunting TV channels in New York. People may well perceive unconsciously that the future is going to be a very dangerous place. I think that there will be sudden quantum leaps in social values that would seem totally disconcerting to us if they happened now, but which

probably our descendants in the next generation or two will take completely in their stride - just as we take completely in our stride sudden quantum jumps in social values that would have appalled or shocked our grandparents. The whole series of radical changes in social organisation and moral values that are going to take place in the next twenty or thirty years are already in train.

RS: Would you include the human genome project there?

JB: Yes, but think also of the wiring diagram of the brain. The last secrets of human consciousness may emerge from that kind of work. There's no reason why not - after all the brain is a mass of circuitry - there's no mystery about the units that make up the brain - it's a mass of neural networks. There's absolutely no reason why the operation of this complex system of neural networks shouldn't be understood in its entirety. Now I think this will lead to manipulation of the brain in any way - so that everything from transcendental experiences to the creation of sort of ad hoc religions will be possible. I mean you will be able to run up a new religion for yourself and be completely convinced by it at the press of a switch. At the same time I think, as you say, the manipulation of molecular biology will uncover all that needs to be known about the genetic structures in the chromosome, allowing us to manipulate the human organism in any way we wish. Beyond that, you've got absolutely startling developments that I'm sure will come in the next twenty to thirty years in the consumer electronics field with the development of virtual reality systems. If they come on stream (as they seem likely to) we are on the threshold of devising systems in which the computer-simulated reality will contain more units of information than is currently provided by the optical systems of the brain.

In fact I was reading a book on virtual reality a few days ago in which an American engineer - he's not been challenged on this - has stated that reality equals perhaps seventy-four million receptor units of some kind that are used in computer simulation. But once you reach this number and exceed it - presently computer simulations are operating with far less than this threshold number - the reality generated by virtual reality systems will be more convincing than that which we find around us in our ordinary lives. Now once these systems come on stream, one of the logics of human consciousness will fulfil itself in that mankind will be able to substitute for that illusion of reality which the central nervous system has inherited from its past, a new reality which the imaginative sectors of the central nervous system have created instead. So that, in a sense, the central nervous system will have out-run itself; it will have excelled itself and exceeded its own limits and achieved a kind of evolutionary take-off. It will no longer be bounded by that notion of reality which millions of years of evolution have endowed it with. It will be able to take wing and fly. I can see the human race retreating entirely with some form of virtual reality. One sees a dry run in the addiction to television; our addiction to the image. If anything, this is the century of the image, whatever its

source, and we're infatuated - we're image-makers as much as we are great engineers. Electronic images are the air we breathe, and virtual reality merely represents the end-point of a logic laid down when the first electric current was put through a light filament.

RS: So the twenty-first century looks exceptionally challenging?

JB: Yes I think so. I won't be here to describe it unfortunately, and it may even be beyond description, but I would have thought we are looking at very ambiguous and uncertain times. People will lead very dislocated and exhilarating lives of a kind that we find very very difficult to visualise now - just as our grandparents found it impossible to visualise a world where you could simply go to a nearby airport and find yourself lying on a beach on the other side of the world in a matter of hours. I mean it was simply inconceivable to my own parents when it took four weeks in a P & O boat to get from England to China.

RS: On the other hand, some speculative writers have, in a sense, already visited such futures. People like Fred Pohl with his story *Day Million*, have considered futures where everything is fluid and even identities can be exchanged or stored.

JB: Well that may come even further beyond. I mean the wildest predictions of science fiction may well come true, but I'm not really thinking in science fictional terms because the virtual reality systems for example that laboratories are working on all over the world at present particularly in Japan and the United States are not science fiction. They are extrapolations of present computer technology. They are no more science fiction than television.

RS: So would you say that imagination had a greater role than cold logic in looking ahead?

JB: Well the imagination can certainly make the quantum leaps that are going to be necessary to ride the roller coaster of the future. It's very hard to read the future on the macro level. I mean, it's like trying to predict the exact throw of the dice a thousand throws ahead. It can't be done.

RS: But it's still worth looking at?

JB: Yes, oh I think so, in part because it says a great deal about our present. All these developments are inscribed in the world we live in now. They are not necessarily up and running at present. But it's very easy to forget how the world has changed say, over the last thirty years. I mean, even on the domestic level, our homes are just loaded with consumer electronics which have changed our lives to a considerable degree - TV sets, CD players, video cameras, microwave ovens, freezers and all the other gadgets which have actually changed our lives and, indeed, our sense of ourselves. If anything, these changes are accelerating.

RS: So imagining possible futures remains a continual challenge?

JB: Absolutely.

RS: Thanks very much.

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