The Tumorous Concrete Island

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"The Tumorous Concrete Island: Sensing the Beginning of the End through Reading J.G. Ballard's *Concrete Island*" (1974)

Abstract: In the Ballardian imaginary, the dysfunctional parts of London possess an apocalyptic potential usually unnoticed; once discovered, however, it could induce remarkable corporeal impacts which will compromise the urban priorities of functionality and efficiency. In *Concrete Island*, the apocalyptic is the pain emanating from the injured body to join with slabs of discarded concrete: this narrative of pain is presented to the reader as an apocalyptic portent. This paper is intended as a response to discussions about the distorted temporalities in Ballard's apocalyptic fictions. World War II has thrown Europe into an existential crisis now manifest as globalization: a tunnel vision of time remarkably flat, reductive. I argue that Ballard's apocalyptic text can be considered as corporeal owing to its palpability. The consequent entwinning of the spatial and the corporeal will render the call for an urban revolution immanent and inevitable.

Key words: urban fiction; pain; apocalypse; London; science fiction

It has pleased Nature so to make us that we attain happiness only by way of pain.

–The Marquis De Sade, *Philosophy in the Boudoir: Or, The Immoral Mentors.*

The sensations inflicted by sadists are similar to jolts of shock, some painful and some pleasurable. Intense pain foretells the body's destruction alongside its radical transformation, such that the body in pain is itself an object of novelty, one to be inspected with pleasure.

Months before the publication of *Concrete Island* in 1974, J.G. Ballard had a near-death experience in the form of a car crash in Chiswick, near the re-developed area of Westway, London. He later included versions of the accident in his novels as everyday urban disasters that no amount of careful urban planning could prevent. To put matters into perspective, the project to modernize London began during the Second World War, although the first Docklands redevelopment plans were not introduced to the public until 1972. These plans sped up considerably between "the end of the old labour project in 1945 and the beginning of the Thatcher era in 1979" (Gasiorek 118). By 1981, the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) exerted considerable control over the city's river line, which extended eastward to Canary Wharf (Sanders 123). When Ballard was at his most prolific, the London

landscape had already become chameleonic in appearance, so much so that writing modern London was akin to tracing the untraceable. By virtue of its ephemeral spatiality, London was stimulating to literary "sensation-seekers" intrigued less by the city's outward prosperity, but more so by palpable signs of its impending ruin. Ballard was contemplating London's apocalyptic prospects as early as in the 1960s when he published *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Burning World* (1964), and *The Crystal World* (1966), and he persisted in the endeavor well into the 1970s. *Concrete Island* was published in 1974, *Crash* in 1973, and *High Rise* in 1975: the three volumes are collectively known as Ballard's urban disaster trilogy, wherein disasters are refreshing distractions from the concrete "texture of modernity[,]" built "not for man, but for man's absence" (Groes 124).

Modernity is represented in Ballard's writings as a vertical spatial structure. According to Groes,

> *High-Rise* takes us up into the life of a tower block for the well-off middle classes, a vertical city 'abandoned in the sky' (7); indeed, the original title proposed by Ballard for the novel was *Up!*. *Concrete Island*, meanwhile, takes us down in an equally vertiginous cognitive experience. The trilogy thus loosely but consciously re-enacts the classic Dantean structure of *The Divine Comedy*'s three canticles: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* (1314; 1315; 1321). *Crash* is a novel that discovers a new celestial city in the peripheral zones of the metropolis, where the protagonist observes how the minutiae of suburban life falter […] One way in which Ballard's trilogy can be read is as an attempt to translate postmodern spatiality into classical, human structures by inducing specific sensory reading experiences. (Groes 124)

In Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, time is at once rooted in the external reality and enmeshed in private selves, in their memories and impressions. However, the literary spatial turn has demonstrated that spatiality is no less adept than temporality at eliding the external and the internal, the public and the private, for there exists between the mind and the world a newfound rapport—in Ballard's late-twentieth-century urban fiction a sensuous state of being (or what I will call "a worldliness"), one especially attuned to the titillating aspects of our material

surroundings. *Concrete Island* specifically attests to an irrevocable surrender to the apocalyptic chronotope, such that the hitherto "indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin qtd. in Gomel 188) between time and space wanes, and spatiality becomes the more viable medium for imagining post-apocalyptic disasters. Apocalyptic time unleashes "the horror of the Tribulations[,]" (Gomel 188), endangering one's ability to reason by exposing one to a milieu of violent shock. But this impairment at the individual level will also necessitate co-opertation, the consequence of which is that, in the post-apocalyptic realm, survival will be conceivable only as a collective enterprise, collectivism in this instance a token of "the perfection and quietude of the millennium" (Gomel 188), a realizable goal rather than an intangible ideal. Although crucial for a community's formation, sensations of shock are woefully absent in the modern city, its inhabitants' experiences of their surroundings being reinforced by habits, reflexes, and routines. Those mindless of the city's everyday disasters are also less attuned to the land's unifying potential, its bent toward post-apocalyptic collectivism.

In reference to *Concrete Island*, I wish to argue that the modern city's insularity amounts to an exaggerated state of obliviousness—that is, a form of monomania to be dispelled by irregular occasions, whereupon the possibility of death manifests itself both corporeally and spatially, as though the senses were assaulted by shock, and the material surroundings around the body were its extensions. Bodily and spatial disintegrations are synchronized insofar as they are brought on by the same apocalyptic violence: a wrecked body may serve as mirror reflection of, if not a neurological reaction to, the ruination of a shared space. The titular concrete island is the most painful, stimulating, alienating, and tangible existential threat to anyone stranded there, and yet a stimulant as potent as pain will break down the boundary between entities as distinct from one another as consciousness and spatiality. As a consequence, the land is corporealized while

the body de-corporealized: these synchronized processes foretell a radical reconfiguration of the rational urbanscape, and the corporeal literary aesthetic in question stimulates the infectious sensations of pure shock. In announcing the spatial turn, *Concrete Island* articulates new sensuous relations and so stimulates an outward reach, a so-far unfulfilled desire to relate to (others in) the world. This new affinity between consciousness and spatiality—individualism and collectivism—reveals itself as pain, an affective impact brought on by everyday urban disasters like those aestheticized in this particular disaster novel.

The De-corporealized Body

Ballard's concrete island represents an apocalyptic potential usually weighed down by the urban infrastructure of London. The protagonist Robert Maitland's chance discovery of the oft-overlooked island entails a radical reconfiguration of the quotidian in the modern city, where undeveloped spaces appear at intervals more predictable than routines of consumption. So common are wastelands such as the concrete island that they seemed inconspicuous even to Maitland, who was one of the visionary architects responsible for the designs of the city's major motorways—and, within their folds, White City, a production site for the latest television programs. White City remains London's central point of reference despite the presence of nearby oddities and blind spots. This urban center obscures and normalizes all hints of impending decay, however ominous they may appear in reality.

The threat of ruination lies in Maitland's accidental recognition of the wasteland's abiding force. The dynamic definitive of Ballard's disaster novel can only be grasped *vis-à-vis* the calm indifference prevalent in many a modern city, even though this ambience is easily upset by commonplace disasters like Maitland's car accident. The impact of the crash is such that he finds his body contorted upon waking: his hip joint has "been driven into the basin of his pelvis,

and the displaced nerves and blood-vessels throbbed through the torn musculature as they tried to reassemble themselves" (24). The pain accompanying the distortion stills the body so that it, too, may recede from the feverish motions of the city and become integral to the urban residual, whose existence is usually excluded from the everyday rhythms of the city. Anything reconstituted in this manner necessarily becomes an oddity whose presence transcends the city, their physical proximity notwithstanding. The concrete island similarly derived its distinctiveness in the midst of Londonscape—an irregularity interior to urban regularity—from the accumulation of waste, the aftermath of London's reach for modernization. Hoping to be rescued by passers-by, Maitland "stood weakly by the roadside, waving with a feeble hand, [but] it seemed to him that every vehicle in London had passed and re-passed him a dozen times, the drivers and passengers deliberately ignoring him in a vast spontaneous conspiracy" (19). Following the circular routes that are in close proximity to the island, the drivers have predictably grown inured to the island's wild and regressive condition. This involuntary state of unknowing makes them complicit in what Maitland views as a "conspiracy" against himself.

The modern city is a space of maximized swiftness and predictability, both of which qualities should make the concrete island's existence impossible, causing it to be openly hidden from the city dwellers—say, the drivers emerging "from the darkness below the overpass into the fast right-hand bend lit by the afternoon sunlight" (10), the speed of their travel keeping them from noticing "the scattered wooden trestles" (10); or, the travellers "bound for Zurich, Stuttgart and Stockholm," presently sitting "stiffly in their seats [on the upper deck of an airline coach] like a party of mannequins" (12). The distinction of modernity is a numbing swiftness that keeps the body from experiencing the vast distances travelled. The regularity of all these motions is reinforced against the "dark façades of the high-rise apartment blocks hung in the night air like

rectangular planets" (23), whereby all distinctive shapes are erased and submerged into the general state of darkness having infiltrated London. What is apocalyptic is perceptually reduced to an islandic form, here an unreadable *thing* too elusive to enter into the urban ambience of calm and desensitization. The Ballardian London landscape defuses all suggestions of threats and relegates them to the peripheries of the consciousness, as if their utterly unremarkable presences deserved no more than passing recognition.

The shocking strangeness underlying this stretch of uncultivated island is all the more palpable when examined in regard to London's post-war redevelopment. *Concrete Island* is set in 1973, at which time Britain was a demilitarized nation seeking to spend more funds on public infrastructure. The M4 motorway—where Maitland's car crash took place—is part of Westway, thus a product of a renovation project that began in London in 1966. The objective of urban planning then was to help London outpace rival cities like Paris and Brussels in developing a design of maximum efficiency, a "network of orbital ringways and radical roads" (see Robertson 34). The British planner Patrick Abercrombie's 1943 publication, *The County of London Plan,* foretold Westway's significance in the remodelling of London into a modern city with a "highly mechanized and technologically innovative" design (34). The Westway project was hailed by some as "efficient, fast and exhilarating, and referred to in the press as the '3-minute motorway' (*The Times* qtd. in Robertson 35), but protests and media coverage pertaining to its social and environmental impacts put all further renovation schemes to a halt. Even so, Westway's existence was enough to preserve the dream of building a functional modern city, and this unwavering dedication has, up until the car crash, defined Maitland's daily experiences in London. Urban modernity is in this sense a tapestry of crises, its purpose always to normalize and uphold some sort of European urban prototype. That the "forgotten traffic island" (25)

represents the threatening "nightmare of this slumbering continent" (25)—"an immense unconscious Europe" (25) banished from the ideal of the modern European city—dawns on Maitland only when he finds himself secluded on the island.

The purpose of Ballardian urban aesthetics, then, is to probe into the unconscious, intangible parts of the prototypical European city: tangibility is a trait of the quotidian urban everyday, whereas abstractness a potent assault on the consciousness. Ballard views car crashes specifically as aesthetic experiences accentuating the tangible in the abstract, the mundane in the disastrous. A meeting of the abstract and the tangible numbs (though without extinguishing) the jolts of shock that accompany all apocalyptic prospects. Indeed, the unleashing of apocalyptic violence onto urban landscapes is far from uncommon in Ballard's *oeuvre*. Citing "The Terminal Beach," Alexander Beaumont has argued that any violence inflicted on the land with the aid of modern technology is apocalyptic in scale—and the apocalyptic is not necessarily undesirable. In Greek *apokálupsis* (ἀποκάλυψις) means "to reveal" or "to uncover": an apocalypse is a force of "creation, a form of bringing forth into the world; in addition to concealing an old landscape, it has revealed or uncovered a new landscape" (Beaumont 104). In *Concrete Island*, the urban state of connectivity amounts to a sublation of differences, counteracting as it does the *apocalyptic* stimulant embedded in the land. Creativity possesses destructive elements responsible for re-constituting—"enframing"—the land as a sort of dooms-day revelation, or for provoking an act of "'stripping away' that hints at [a] hermeneutics of authenticity that might allow a new and perhaps truer kind of self-understanding to appear. Once the 'superfluities' are gone, what will be revealed is a kind of essence" (Beaumont 106). Any enframing of the land will be recognized through the velocity of its violence, which, in Ballard's disaster novel, gives rise to two

synchronous processes: i.e., the de-corporealization of the body and the corporealization of space.

Maitland's very own apocalyptic revelation asserts its presence through an acute pain that reassembles his now-disjointed body parts and so redefines his corporeality. The concrete island lends its misshapen aspect to the contours of Maitland's ejected body, whose distortions are described with such surgical precision—the aforementioned intrusion of a dislodged hip joint into the pelvis; the exposed nerves; the torn muscles and blood vessels—that the reader is left in no doubt as to the extremity of his pain. In *Concrete Island*, a body in extreme pain itself becomes an apocalyptic portent; its very apocalyptic contortion harkens a state of becoming. Plainly put, Maitland's dislocated body parts stimulate a pain that re-constitutes his state of being as he feels "the bones of his thighs and pelvis emerging through his musculature – his skeleton come to greet him. […] The bones were re-assembling themselves into a small, sharp face from which a pair of tired but fierce eyes stared out" (145). This surrealistic animation of the body part erases Maitland's cognitive command of the body in particular: "[o]ne by one the points of pain that covered his chest and legs like a series of constellations began to fade, and the atlas of wounds into which his body had been transformed went out like a dead sky" (26-28). Each expressing a point of pain, these mutinous body parts acquire a freedom of movement that, in turn, erases Maitland's significance as the thinking subject, the architectural mastermind behind London's modern remaking. As his willpower diminishes, Maitland witnesses the intractable expansion of his body: a formerly functioning part of the city now mired in a perpetual wasteland. The insular city is no longer distinguishable from its surroundings, while the boundary between inside and outside is effectively blurred. Bodily pains now fill the concrete island's horizon, looming above Maitland like a dead sky finite in extent. Maitland's

unimaginable pain tramples upon his rational consciousness while ushering in the dead sky of an unthinkable mass, whose apocalyptic temperament reduces Maitland to a non-human entity, a *thing*. The alienating agent of pain is the threshold of a new dimension beyond which lies an "atlas" or "a series of constellations," made up of disobedient limbs.

The emergent dimension of pain estranges the conceptions of both the human body and the coherent, navigable urban space. A palpable apocalyptic force makes itself known by inducing a pain articulated viscerally, sadistically. The pain that is a consequence of the body's rupture heralds a becoming that even Maitland, an architect with a hand in the government's redevelopment schemes, could not foresee for himself. The body decomposed in this way also shatters the worldliness in which it has existed—"worldliness" here a microcosm of global capitalism, a blueprint of the modern city. Ballard's self-professed interest in "the fragmentation of the body, missing body parts, as well as substitutes of body parts, protheses" (Kutzbach 181) may well justify my emphasis on these synchronized processes of decomposition. Ballard once related the idea of fragmentation to the "pornographic imagination" (Lewis and Ballard 29) that had held sway in the twentieth century, amidst potent political tension and fervent commercialism. The stimulating events of the era—the World Wars, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, famine in Ethiopia, the Lockerbie plane crash—were normalized through an aggressive dissemination of images, particularly those of grotesque violence and pain. Decontextualized, these images encourage an "obsession" with "quantified functions" which "lies at the core of science; there is a shedding of all responsibility by the scientist who is just looking at a particular subject with a tendency to ignore the contingent links" (Lewis and Ballard 29). It is not coincidental that intense pain is responsible for conjoining the injured body with the city's pocket of excess. Pained bodies and derelict spaces both represent expired potentialities, for both

face the prospect of irrevocable corrosion, of becoming the city's wasteful excesses. Body and space amalgamate all the more readily as the body becomes the site of apocalyptic violence, such that the cultivation of any affective bond between mutilated bodies and ruined spaces already constitutes an apocalyptic portent.

To underscore the obscenity of quantified functions, Ballard likens it to the pornographic imagination that "detaches certain parts of the human anatomy from the human being and becomes obsessively focussed on the breast or the genitalia, or what have you" (Lewis and Ballard 29). Dehumanizing fantasies of the sort may well erode "individual humanist elements" (Lewis and Ballard 29) like human compassion, putting the consciousness "outside of time and space, and outside the social and human-effective links that normally constrain our behavior and imaginations" (Lewis and Ballard 29). Newspaper images of the period concealed an apocalyptic trend which, under different circumstances, would have inspired apprehension and solidarity, for any such apocalyptic revelation should strain the efficient indifference characteristic of the disaster novel's urban setting. This reading of the everyday apocalypse in the city is consistent with Ballard's idea that pop culture emphasizes scientifically quantified functions. Even the most disparate of visual fragments may cohere, provided that each serves a specific function in the organism of the modern city. Modernity in this sense of the word places functionality at the forefront of the urban experience.

To disrupt this phenomenon of urban monomania and re-sensitize the body, *Concrete Island* recasts the coherent structure of London in a surrealistic light. On becoming aware of the island's existence, Maitland consoles himself thus: "'Maitland, poor man, you're marooned here like Crusoe – If you don't look out you'll be beached here for ever …' He had spoken no more than the truth. This patch of abandoned ground left over at the junction of three motorway routes

was literally a deserted island. Angry with himself, Maitland lifted the crutch to strike this meaningless soil" (32). The prosthetic of the crutch cements his initial affective connection to "this meaningless soil." Maitland points out through his allusion to Crusoe the need to utilize the fragments of modern life that the island places at his disposal. By the same token, he enhances his aptitude for meaning-making by declaring himself the island's maker-architect. The precise source of Maitland's power, the crutch, is the wellspring of pain dissolving the outward differences between Maitland and the island, being and the world:

> Identifying the island with himself, he gazed at the cars in the breaker's yard, at the wire-mesh fence, and the concrete caisson behind him. These places of pain and ordeal were now confused with pieces of his body. He gestured towards them, trying to make a circuit of the island so that he could leave these sections of himself where they belonged. He would leave his right leg at the point of his crash, his bruised hands impaled upon the steel fence. He would place his chest where he had sat against the concrete wall. At each point a small ritual would signify the transfer of obligation from himself to the island. He spoke aloud, a priest officiating at the eucharist of his own body. 'I am the island.' The air shed its light. (70-72)

Abandoning the role of victim for that of savior, Maitland officiates a ritual to let the land partake of his flesh, despite the fact that he is already in great pain, his hands already impaled, "his jacket and trousers [even now] studded with windshield fragments like a suit of lights" (7). Other parts of him are coalescing around the metallic shreds of his silver Jaguar, whose glint thus illuminates the non-human in the human.

Although pain was once integral to corporeality, it now de-corporealizes the body so that its essence, the phenomenological significance of being, can be transplanted into the meaningless soil, the no-man-land, that had witnessed Maitland's accident and brought him such pain. His excruciating, body-shattering pain seeps into the island's soil and dominates—corporealizes—it; by the same stroke, corporeality becomes a spatial delineation of Maitland's—the modern urbanite's—consciousness. The island appears to yield to Maitland's influence when

> the waist-high grass, marked by the winding corridors that recorded his uncertain movements around the car, was settling itself again, almost hiding the silver Jaguar. A thin yellow light lay across the island, an unpleasant haze that seemed to rise from the grass, festering over the ground as if over a wound that had never healed. (14)

As Maitland feels the fragments of the car lodged inside his body, he lets the pain dominate his spatial awareness so that, for him, pain *ipso facto* lies at the center of the island. He then wills his own injury to manifest itself as the car, now a festering wound hidden amid patches of long grass, the grass-field reminiscent of an ingestive organ. Making his body an atlas of physiological functions, while pain the co-ordinating point between being and the worldliness of space-time, Maitland has succeeded in unifying London, albeit that the so-called island was once no more than an obscure location *off the side of M4*. The indistinct island and the heavily congested M4 highways used to be spatially contiguous to one another; both were merely the co-ordinates of a city modern in virtue of its centralized structure. Though restrictive, modern urbanism can nevertheless be liberated when subject to corporealization, since a corporeal city is as expansive as it is sensuous. Ever-sharpening pains compel the mind to become fully aware of the body, much in the same way Maitland's misfortune has brought to his attention the strip of abandoned land usually hidden by a slope down the side of the highway. Body and space are joined together by a heightened awareness—an acute pain sweeping through Maitland's body, then all through the expanse of the grass-covered island, as if these were all continuous parts of the London landscape.

The Corporeal Remapping of Space

The oddity of a wasteland located in central London is in this way made analogous to the pain induced by the body's imminent dismemberment. The apocalyptic cycle is complete when the body is reconfigured into a constellation of pain, a template transposable to the land in spite of its ostensible insentience. To neutralize the impact, Maitland must master his pain alongside

its new jurisdiction, the concrete island, while his bodily sensations map out for him the hitherto undetected pattern of an impending apocalyptic breakdown. In view of the shape-shifting grass-field on its surface, the island embodies the insularity of a tunnel as well as the associative, expansive nature of the most lurid fantasies: Maitland sees the grass "weav[ing] and turn[ing] behind him, moving in endless waves" like "corridors [that] opened and closed[,] as if admitting a large and watchful creature to its green preserve" (42). The grass corridors shielding Maitland from the urban microcosm beyond exacts its impacts organically and, much like Maitland's bodily pain, in waves.

The synchronized movements between body and space expand the urbanite's awareness, finally inflaming in him a paranoia—a counterpoint to the monomaniac impulse so pervasive in Ballardian London. To be sure, a stockpile of waste tucked away in a quiet corner of a busy commercial hub is hardly a stimulating subject, and even Maitland finds himself recalling life his beyond the island as he contemplates its ruination. The finite space where he is confined is dissociated in his mind's eye from "the south of France[,]" where he and his mistress Helen "had gone straight to La Grande Motte, [a] futuristic resort complex" whose "hard, affectless architecture" was distinct for "its stylized concrete surfaces," "the ziggurat hotels and apartment houses, and the vast, empty parking lots" (65). The non-descript locale evinces the banality of functional urban spaces, the disaster novel's monomaniac milieu, which, however, can be dispelled by spatial incongruities like the titular island. Paranoid landscapes are subterranean in relation to organized landscapes, the one being dysfunctional while the other not. Now made aware of the island's palimpsest constitution by his car crash, Maitland recognizes that London's surface is paved with slabs of concrete arranged in heed of tepid (or "futuristic") architectural tastes, underlying which, however, is a regressive current flowing "back in time to an earlier and

more violent period" (102). The highways have so far succeeded in concealing the island—the twilight zone of waste and excess where "wild and lush" "vegetation" (102) is nourished by debility, or "a labyrinth of dips and hollows" (102) as capable of withholding as it is of revealing insights.

Owing to the vertical relation between these monomaniac and paranoid landscapes, readers are obliged to re-imagine urban violence spatially, palimpsestically. The apocalyptic force inherent in Ballard's disaster novel is protrusive in shape, as is the concrete island in relation to the functionally cohesive space that is post-war London. The car crash has alerted Maitland to the island's existence, and, through the proddings of his crutch, he is now able to tap into a foreboding alien energy. Here, the grass is said to be held aloft by "a former neighbourhood high street" (40), so that, at first glance, it seems to protrude from the ground to meet Maitland's crutch. The "markedly uneven" surface of the island conceals the traces of a now-destroyed town that, like Pompeii, has suffered the violation of a temporal passage extending all the way to the apocalyptic end of time: "On either side, the grass climbed over blunted ledges and parapets, overran the empty area-ways" (40). The grass on the island is as lethal as the volcanic ash that once covered Pompeii. Now laid on top of what remains to give the island an uneven surface, the grass is a *memento mori* to monomaniacs whose spatial awareness remains restricted by the futuristic promise of the city above.

In other words, the formless grass is also a metaphor for the dialing back of time, an attempt to recall precedents for the impactful violence to which Maitland is subjected. What the grass has to reveal is that the modern urbanscape, though distinct for its ultra-functional, at times monomaniac, tendencies, is founded on ruins. Impelled to look below the grass, Maitland "could identify the outlines of building foundations, the ground-plans of Edwardian terraced houses. He

passed the entrance to a World War II air-raid shelter, half-buried by the earth and gravel brought in to fill the motorway embankments" (38). So-called futuristic architecture is in place to mask what was once the dreaded prospect of a global war, the realization of what was once a latent apocalyptic potential. A death threat manifests itself in the air-raid shelters alongside the remains of the Edwardian terraced houses, the erasure of their uniform architecture a mockery to architects even now determined to fill London with very similar-looking high-rise apartment blocks (23). The inclusion of ruins in *Concrete Island* is a conscious allusion to surrealism, which influenced art and literature around the time of the Second World War. The years 1939—45 saw the rise of the artistic trend to discover hints of the surreal in cities "transformed by bomb damage – and thus filled with juxtapositions, resurgent vegetation, horrific tableaux, and significant fragments" (Mellor 93). Especially intriguing were "knowable markers […] – street signs, names of bars, the 'mad monotone of the Lord's prayer' – [which] all vanish into the dark" (Mellor 97). All these were interpreted as unconscious reactions toward the violence of World War II, from which time onward meaning came far less readily. The extensive ruination caused during the war signified an extinguished temporality, a severed connection between being and the world as a consequence of which spatiality—or, rather, emptiness, an impotent absence of meaning—was foregrounded.

The inscrutable landscapes wrought by wartime violence are to be contrasted with the postulatory urban re-imaginings of the eighteenth century, for example Giovanni Battista Piranesi's etchings of Rome. The *Prima Parte* (1743)—including *Campidoglio antico* and *Rovine d'antichi Edifizj*—portrays the ancient stones of Rome as embedded in lived (architectural) realities, to the effect that an unalienable continuity appears to lie between past and present. The past persists in the form of an ideational monumental city, whose intrigue

immediately asserts its own cultural, social, historical, and intellectual relevance. Piranesi's inclusion of inscriptions in his post-1748 etchings is "coterminous" with "human presence" (Wendorf 174), whose "gesture of demonstration" exemplifies "a perlocutionary act in which enlightenment successors to the demonstrator of early Renaissance religious painting force us to follow the vector of their gaze and thus confront the puzzle of the fragmented inscription […]" (Wendorf 176). In the context of the eighteenth century, the idea of ruination pertained to the possible existence of a transcendent meaning, one imported from one period to the next. Sites of ruins were curious temporal expressions which were open to interpretation, for historical meaning was still to be mined from there. By contrast, the post-war conception of ruination has a surrealistic streak that alienates all attempts at interpretation and even induces utter confoundment, in *Concrete Island* a paralyzing paranoia. The triangular patch of waste ground had survived by the exercise of a unique guile and persistence, and would continue to survive, unknown and disregarded, long after the motorways had collapsed into dust" (69). The wasteland, then, is a token of the spatial turn, a post-apocalyptic worldliness "far older than the surrounding terrain" (69) of the motorway system. The island is set apart from the predominant preference for monotonous efficiency owing to its "unique guile," its inconspicuous presence an apocalyptic portent to be discovered.

Further added to Ballard's inheritance were "the symptoms of the Cold War and the accompanying nuclear anxieties" (Robertson 36): "The sense of threat that pervades *Concrete Island* is a clear indication that Ballard's writing was very much a part of the prevailing dystopian literary mode" (Robertson 37). When cast in a nostalgic light, ruined spaces seem to set the scene for a search for lost time; but when seen as an apocalyptic portent, they become "opposed to the fixed and absolute understanding that may be gathered from historicised space"

(Robertson 38). A ruined landscape is an alienating *thing*, something independent and inscrutable, thus far denser than chronology. Waste—here the ruins, the evidence of collective trauma, the *thing*-ness into which Maitland has tapped through his pain—is apocalyptic inasmuch as it has witnessed historical violence; by virtue of its current derelict appearance, however, it also signifies continuation, the apocalyptic here the presence of something beyond the monomania of the modern city, say, a dreadful distraction revealing the remains of World War II, including "a stucco Victorian house pulled down years earlier" (40), and "a Civil Defence post little more than fifteen years old" (69). Having left these imprints of its presence, the apocalyptic branches off into vastly distant histories to show that it is infinitely divisible; that periods relate to one another synchronously. Synchrony substantiates the apocalyptic by conflating what ought to be temporally distinguishable, while these differences exert tangible impacts upon each other so as to induce a new awareness, namely, a paranoid cognisance of differences as corporeal rather than intellectual, spatial rather than temporal. In accordance with Ballardian urban aesthetics, the vertiginous feelings of shock and horror are especially expressive when rendered spatially, tangibly, primordially. The consequent corporealization of space is to be contrasted with the temporal turn, which draws upon subjective experiences and, relatedly, intellectual quests too idiosyncratic to quell the condition of urban monomania.

Conclusion

Any insistence upon the structural integrity of the modern European city necessarily accompanies territorial quests for the spatial ideals of containment and unity. London as portrayed in *Concrete Island* exemplifies an urban microcosm clustering around itself all conceivable varieties and multiplicities, to the effect that all cities modeled upon this utopian blueprint uniformly present themselves as the same emporium despite their different national

origins. All such modernized cities put on display an evident broad-mindedness which, perhaps paradoxically, erases the detail of where they are located respectively, as though modern cosmopolitanism and localism were mutually exclusive, and the pursuit of inclusion willy-nilly meant the forgoing of individual nuances. This perpetual reduction of differences invariably renders the whole and the fragment indistinguishable in appearance: this process of reduction is apocalyptic in that it is triggered by an integrative impulse quite like Maitland's professional mandate as an architect.

More precisely, the integrative impulse latent in modern urbanism is stimulated by anomalous visions such as the titular concrete island. For Ballard, what modern cosmopolitanism exposes is the abiding desire for an overarching framework within which all traces of the unfamiliar may assume familiar meaning, thus a perpetually meaningful and illuminating space upon which its inhabitants may fixate, often monomaniacally. In *Concrete Island* specifically, Londoners (exemplary urbanites of the age that they are) are ineluctably monomaniac, and their conception of the fragment is confused, for the seeming whole of the city so preoccupies them that they perceive no fragments—not even the concrete island, its glaring insularity notwithstanding. Their myopia makes it difficult to decide which is fragmented, the seeming whole of the city, or the seeming insularity of the concrete island. Nevertheless, what seems to be an impediment blurs the unbridgeable gap between the island and the rest of London, so that their integrative impulse does not encounter the full impact of resistance—an impact so shocking as to be apocalyptic—while the attenuation of such impacts becomes a necessary part of the urban routine.

The titular island is not only apocalyptic but indeed portentous, for by resisting integration, it also insists upon its own integrity as unwaveringly as the modern European city in

the vicinity. That which rejects subsumption becomes related though not integral to the urban shell: the possible emergence of a new relation is portentous insomuch as it is revelatory, the revelation here being a new spatial pattern that is, by all appearances, a counterpoint to the modern emporium-cosmopolis. An apocalyptic portent is a portentous pattern poised to reveal a new spatial awareness—or a new worldliness—whereby visions of the city currently dominant could be nimbly and infinitely extended, even at the cost of their own negation.

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