

*Anywhere But Here: The Competing (and
Complementary) Postmodern Nostalgias of
J.G. Ballard and Douglas Coupland*

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
by

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis and the work reported herein was composed by and originated entirely from me. Information derived from the published and unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and references are given in the list of sources.

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I dedicate this work to my Mother and Father, who were always there when I came to.

Abstract

This thesis addresses postmodern nostalgia in the fictions of J.G. Ballard and Douglas Coupland. By reading them alongside the work of Svetlana Boym, Fredric Jameson, Walter Benjamin and Linda Hutcheon among others, it firstly builds upon and questions Boym's categories of restorative and reflective nostalgia.

By taking two authors whose work chronologically straddles the postmodern moment to date, the thesis also demonstrates that nostalgia is one issue over which any consideration of postmodernism as a monadic cultural paradigm can be problematised. It proceeds from the supposition that early postmodern fiction is decidedly anti-nostalgic in tone, whereas recent examples are characterised by a less militant perspective. By placing the authors' texts in dialogue with each other, the piece emphasises nostalgia's ineradicability and its hidden role in anti-nostalgic agendas. To support these claims, the thesis argues that nostalgia is not an indivisible phenomenon. Alighting on and defined by objects which can be set against each other, nostalgia is often pitted against itself in other forms, presupposing a multitude of mutually hostile nostalgias.

The nostalgic objects on which the thesis focuses are: colonialism, the North American frontier, the Suburbs, nostalgic consumer objects and Apocalypse. These have been selected over other foci because they are the most pervasive themes in the work of both authors. Colonialism and the North American frontier are exceptions as they are rarely directly pitted against each other in the authors' work. However, they both serve to ground the nostalgic perspectives of both writers, and as such are addressed separately in chapters devoted to a single author.

The concluding chapter focuses on the role postmodern irony plays in Ballard and Coupland's work. Explicitly combating nostalgia, irony is exposed as an integral component of any contemporary nostalgic narrative, potentially refining it in the service of a more circumspect contemporary nostalgic.

List of Abbreviations

Works by Douglas Coupland

<i>AFAP</i>	<i>All Families are Psychotic</i>
<i>ER</i>	<i>Eleanor Rigby</i>
<i>GA</i>	<i>Generation A</i>
<i>GX</i>	<i>Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture</i>
<i>GC</i>	<i>Girlfriend in a Coma</i>
<i>HN</i>	<i>Hey! Nostradamus</i>
<i>JP</i>	<i>JPod</i>
<i>LG</i>	<i>Life After God</i>
<i>MS</i>	<i>Microserfs</i>
<i>MW</i>	<i>Miss Wyoming</i>
<i>PO</i>	<i>Player One</i>
<i>PFD</i>	<i>Polaroids From The Dead</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Shampoo Planet</i>
<i>SOC</i>	<i>Souvenir of Canada</i>
<i>SOC2</i>	<i>Souvenir of Canada 2</i>
<i>GT</i>	<i>The Gum Thief</i>

Works by J.G. Ballard

<i>CI</i>	<i>Concrete Island</i>
<i>ES</i>	<i>Empire of the Sun</i>
<i>HA</i>	<i>Hello America</i>
<i>KC</i>	<i>Kingdom Come</i>

<i>MP</i>	<i>Millennium People</i>
<i>MoL</i>	<i>Miracles of Life: From Shanghai to Shepperton</i>
<i>RW</i>	<i>Running Wild</i>
<i>RP</i>	<i>Rushing to Paradise</i>
<i>AE</i>	<i>The Atrocity Exhibition</i>
<i>CW</i>	<i>The Crystal World</i>
<i>TDC</i>	<i>The Day of Creation</i>
<i>TD</i>	<i>The Drought</i>
<i>DW</i>	<i>The Drowned World</i>
<i>KW</i>	<i>The Kindness of Women</i>
<i>UDC</i>	<i>The Unlimited Dream Company</i>
<i>WFN</i>	<i>The Wind From Nowhere</i>

1. Introduction: The Varieties of Postmodern Nostalgia

Memory is distinguished from the merely reproductive power of imagination in that it is able to reproduce the former representations *voluntarily*, so that the mind is not a mere plaything of the imagination. Fantasy, that is, creative power of imagination, must not mix in with it, because then memory would be *unfaithful*.¹

- Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology From a Practical Point of View*

The Western tradition teems with warnings of the dangers of forgetting. In Book IX of Homer's *Odyssey*, the *Lotophagi* feed Odysseus' crew and watch them sink into ecstatic fugue states, wishing 'to browse on the lotus, and forget all thoughts of return'.² Many of our associations with forgetfulness are negative. Through Holocaust memorials, Remembrance Days and minute's silences, there is a welter of perfectly reasonable, even vital injunctions to 'never forget' in the here and now. Less frequently addressed, however, is the danger inherent in forming a strong emotional attachment to memory, whether individual or cultural; that it can obfuscate and even distort individual and collective memory in line with a present agenda or desire. Following Kant, we may conceive of nostalgia in the first instance as a tension between *memory* and *imagination*. For the authors under consideration in this thesis,

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology From a Practical Point of View*, trans. and ed. by Robert B. Louden (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 75-76.

² Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by E.V. Rieu and D.C.H. Rieu (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 112.

J.G. Ballard and Douglas Coupland, this tension is one of the cardinal concerns that drive their respective authorial endeavours.

Any interrogation of nostalgic tendencies would seem to be more naturally suited to Russian or French literature in particular. Projects on the exiled Russians Vladimir Nabokov and Mikhail Lermontov for instance, or on the French convicts Jean Genet – prisoner of stone and desire – and Marcel Proust – prisoner of the closed lung and cork-lined room, have all yielded riches, not only for the impassioned polyglot critic, but also for a number of authors, philosophers and essayists drawn to the little infinities the works of these writers contain. However, to this critic's mind, this makes the necessity of a contemporary Anglophone equivalent to these well-ploughed continental furrows all the more urgent. While Great Britain and the countries of which North America is composed have what we may problematically term 'nostalgic traditions', they have rarely produced authors who *critique* nostalgia, or as with Nabokov and Proust in particular, draw attention to nostalgia as one of the fulcra of their authorial projects. So why Ballard and Coupland? Surely these two authors' similarities are outweighed formidably by their differences. One is a British citizen-cum-immigrant, the other a Canadian citizen-cum-immigrant; one is an author whose writings arguably made their biggest impact in the 1960s and 1970s, while the other is an indisputable, if uncomfortable spokesperson for the rudderless generation who came to prominence in the 1990s; one has quasi-millenarian leanings, while the other evinces a deep, abiding concern with those trends infiltrating an arguably secular pop culture. Furthermore, where Ballard's fictions are surgically-cool, dwelling on, according to David Pringle, “[t]he death of affect,” that modern loss of sensitivity to

the other and his suffering³, Coupland's often end on a cautiously sentimental note, or rather one that privileges sentiment over cynicism. The points of divergence are legion. With these exigencies in mind, particularly the spatial, the temporal and the eschatological, this work proposes that all of these issues present unique comparative opportunities for seeing how nostalgia has denied and asserted itself across borders and generations throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Both authors have made proclamations regarding nostalgia that their fictions either support or belie. Both also use the liminal spaces of suburbia and new communities as a laboratory for their concerns surrounding the interstices between civilisation and barbarism, ontology and epistemology, and chronological time versus perceptual time, or even eternity. The works of neither author can be neatly described as either nostalgically-ironic or ironically-nostalgic. Critically for this project, both authors question the integrity or lack thereof of the sphinxes 'home' and 'I' that nostalgic thought perhaps too-neatly pairs. As is inevitable with authorial undertakings of the audacity and scale mounted by these two writers, a baffling set of contradictions presents itself that is illuminating for the purposes of constructing a thesis around the shifting moods of nostalgia. The present work cautiously proceeds from the thesis that the rejection of nostalgia by Ballard, emblematic of a wider 'year zero' cultural trend in his generation, invites subtle forms of nostalgia to take its place. It then discusses these forms in terms of the generation which succeeded Ballard's, whose only tenable response to this omnipresent nostalgia is to incorporate it into any apprehension of 'the new'.

³ Peter Brigg, *J.G. Ballard* (Mercer Island: Starmont House, 1985), p. 38.

i.

In a letter written in 1995 to the science fiction critic David Pringle, J.G. Ballard writes, ‘[w]e’re driven by this terrible disease of nostalgia, and postmodernism is a gift to nostalgia and reaffirms that we don’t have a future.’⁴ Briefly putting to one side the fascinating broadside against ‘postmodernism’ mounted above, Ballard’s impressively militant stance on nostalgia – that it is a ‘terrible disease’ – is pellucid and will form the first toehold for the present work.

Like Thomas Pynchon’s or Kurt Vonnegut’s, Ballard’s work has been included in the countercultural canon by some, but like his contemporaries cited here, he has always bridled against this reductive description. While Ballard appreciates the 1960s as perhaps the last of the grand periods of social and cultural experimentation before discourses we may loosely describe as ‘post-modern’ became *de rigueur*, he was never even a satellite member of the Haight-Ashbury scene of which the term ‘counterculture’ is immediately redolent. His oft-cited admiration for William Burroughs notwithstanding, Ballard’s experiments with ‘turning on’ and ‘tuning out’ were never entirely successful.⁵ Ballard was living in suburban Shepperton at the time, a single father quietly writing Surrealist science fiction novels which dwelt on psychopathology through psychoanalytic and existentialist frames as opposed to the pulpy subject matter of more orthodox science fiction writers. These choices of

⁴ J.G. Ballard, *Quotes*, ed. by V. Vale & Mike Ryan (San Francisco, RE/Search Publications, 2004), p. 189.

⁵ Ballard describes Burroughs as ‘[T]rue genius and first mythographer of the mid-20th century [...] the lineal successor to James Joyce, to whom he bears more than a passing resemblance’ in Ballard, *Quotes*, p. 281.

content are hardly surprising when you consider that Ballard is a war-child of sorts. A resident of Shanghai during World War II and later a prisoner of the invading Japanese in the Lunghua internment camp, Ballard perceived a morbid depthlessness in cosseted suburban bourgeois life that also, he insists, offers potential for radical, emancipatory psychopathologies.

Ballard's fictions have always intersected with issues raised by 20th century technological warfare and its disputable capacity for revealing important anthropological verities. Human products are products of human minds, so for Ballard, there is nothing counterintuitive or illogical in, for instance, psychoanalysing the hydrogen bomb. Toby Litt paints a fascinating portrait of the man, in which he asserts that Ballard's engagement with psychoanalysis is uniquely cater-cornered:

Despite Ballard's insistence on the parapsychological [...] , it seems [...] he has no interest in the Freudian subconscious *as such*. His interchangeable heroes [...] do not have rich mental lives. But as soon as one takes the external world which they inhabit as their subconscious, as soon as one sees sublimation as being replaced by efflorescence, by architecture, then one begins to see Ballard aright.⁶ [emphasis mine]

'The Freudian subconscious *as such*' is the key term above. Psychoanalysis was already undergoing a process of refinement by the time Ballard's first novels saw print, and while the 'linguistic turn' was already being championed in Left Bank

⁶ Toby Litt, 'Foreword' in *J.G. Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Jeannette Baxter (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. vii-x (p. ix).

institutions in the late 1960s, Ballard eschewed language for architecture and landscape as the true theatres of intrapsychic tensions. His narratives therefore repeat the same essential arc, which ends with the protagonist succeeding or failing to meld with a psychologized landscape and become ‘whole’. Litt’s general précis for every Ballard story is impressively spare:

There will be a building-up which is, at the same time, a breaking-down.

People collectively will become involved in some regularized mania, within the elaboration of which the actions of the main characters will prove decisive but from which they themselves will remain essentially detached.⁷

Ballard’s fictions also evince a marked fascination with the collapse of social institutions and the social contract, and how the architecture of the post-war period may be an indicator of the level of this entropic process. Ballard’s attitude to this process is profoundly ambivalent. As will later be explored, the childhood recollections Ballard has made public in both his fictional autobiography *Empire of the Sun* (1984) and his autobiography *Miracles of Life: From Shanghai to Shepperton* (2008) in no way reflect the horrific recollections of other wartime writers like Primo Levi or Paul Celan. Disturbingly, these are often *happy* memories, and the lengths Ballard goes to in order to strip them of ordinary nostalgic associations are *extraordinary*. Whilst Ballard has never proclaimed his work to be definitively nostalgia-free, it is not difficult to see how any overt nostalgic reverie might be extradiegetically suppressed, deferred or even covertly distributed among other texts under the aegis of ‘psychological truth’. This project will expose some of the

⁷ Litt, p. viii.

paradoxes and lacunae presented by Ballard's antinostalgic strategies, the most noteworthy of which is his problematic 'terminal irony'.⁸ The intention behind this exposure is not to score points off this formidable author, but rather to highlight the complexity of his work and its implications for the present. Readers will note the conspicuous absence of *High Rise* (1975) and *Crash* (1973) from the present work, and while this might fairly be considered a missed opportunity, the large body of scholarly work devoted to these two classic Ballard novels has to some extent led to a dearth of critical commentary on Ballard's other works.⁹ This thesis is intended in part to redress this critical imbalance. It will therefore focus on less frequently scrutinised Ballard texts, most notably: *Kingdom Come* (2006), *Miracles of Life* (2008), *Concrete Island* (1974), *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Drought* (1965), *The Crystal World* (1966), *The Day of Creation* (1987), *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979), *Hello America* (1981) and *Running Wild* (1988).

In a 1997 article by J.G. Ballard for *The Observer* newspaper entitled 'Going Somewhere' (1997), a hymn to airports and their internationalist ultra-modernity, he praises them for their breezy futurism and the fact that they 'seem to be almost the only form of public architecture free from the pressures of kitsch and nostalgia'.¹⁰ Contrastingly, he writes the following of post-war Britain's urban architectural efforts:

⁸ Brigg, p. 74.

⁹ For a concise and thoroughgoing analysis of Ballard's *Crash*, see Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 186-191.

¹⁰ J.G. Ballard, 'Going Somewhere: Airports' in *The Observer* (1997)

<<http://jgballard.com/airports.htm>> [accessed 30 June 2009] (paragraph 3 of 12).

Britain faltered on the way to its own future, half-heartedly erecting a shabby urban limbo of under-serviced municipal towers and wind-swept shopping precincts. Together they provided the nostalgia-worshippers with all the ammunition needed to launch their postmodernist counter-attack. The pitched roof seemed to rule the Eighties, a vernacular dialect unable to distinguish a town hall from a supermarket or fire station, too many temples to tweeness that resemble offerings on the altar of Prince Charles's uneasy conscience.¹¹

This broadside against nostalgia conceals a seam permeating Ballard's own fictions both his epigones and some of his critics have hitherto overlooked. When the cheap urban redevelopment programmes and new towns that followed the 1950s slum clearances in Great Britain were condemned and latterly demolished, Ballard appears to argue, so was the future. Instead the town planners plundered Britain's architectural heritage to create mock-Tudor shopping malls and restaurants whose facades were coated in timber-effect plastic beams. Ballard's position is that these projects constitute not just what Hal Foster has called a 'flight from the present', but a craven flight from the future too.¹² The kind of architecture to which Ballard here refers is symptomatic of what Foster has dubbed 'neoconservative Post-modernism'.¹³ This breed of post-modernism, deeply hostile to the more sceptical poststructuralist variety, is according to Foster 'marked by an eclectic historicism, in which old and new modes and styles (used goods, as it were) are retooled and recycled. In architecture this practice tends to the use of campy pop-classical in order to decorate the usual

¹¹ Ballard (paragraph 2 of 12).

¹² Hal Foster, '(Post)Modern Polemics' in *Recodings* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987), pp. 121-137 (p. 122).

¹³ Foster, p. 121.

shed...'¹⁴ Readers of Ballard's novels should not be surprised when architectural projects adhering to this aesthetic become forums for atavism and sexual violence. Ballard's contempt for nostalgia, and indeed nostalgics *qua* cultists, seems to be tidily encapsulated in this piece. However, a few paragraphs on in this article, when Ballard goes on to describe the heyday of London's Heathrow airport, a strange volta occurs:

I miss the days when celebrities were photographed as they stepped through airliner doors. The headiest ozone of glamour and optimism crossed the Atlantic in the Constellations and Stratocruisers of the Fifties as Hollywood stars, Presidents and tycoons waved from the steps, bringing their confidence and likeability to this northern European corner of the depressed world.¹⁵

Above, we can clearly make out a sense of betrayal generated by a chaste nostalgia. Here, Ballard fondly recollects a period of post-war austerity when the future seemed tantalisingly close. Within the same article, the author betrays his own vulnerability to the condition he purports to despise earlier on. The tension hinted at above, symptomatic of an effective *nostalgia for an abandoned future*, is only one of the disquieting contradictions latent in Ballard's stories and essays. This type of nostalgia wishes to be thought of as anything but.

Looking around us, we can understand this resentment; it has become a cliché that the future was supposed to be aesthetically and technologically spectacular. Even Mutually Assured Destruction vouchsafed an impressive fireworks display, as opposed

¹⁴ Foster, pp. 121-122.

¹⁵ Ballard (paragraph 8 of 12).

to the slow death by soggy glaciers, superbugs and greedy carcinomas to which we are now arguably desensitised. ‘World War III began on the instalment plan around 1945’, Ballard writes.¹⁶ He fondly recollects a period when ‘the future’s bright’ was more than just an advertising slogan, covering as it did both the sidereal glamour of Hollywood and the phosphene dawn of the mushroom cloud. Andrzej Gasiorek writes of Ballard’s fictional geographies as ‘entropic, depleted world[s] in which the future had failed to materialise and was now nothing but a derelict zone bestrewn with abandoned ruins, discarded machines, and cryptic icons’.¹⁷ These are nostalgic landscapes, even if their denizens are so deadened by the devastation that nostalgia is a forgotten impulse. Nostalgia for oceanic, preconscious being anterior to time is Ballard’s stock-in-trade, though he would have us believe otherwise. The melancholy and yearning is to be found in the detritus rather than in the characters tripping over it in some of Ballard’s overtly dystopian novels. As understandable as this yearning is, even for those of us who grew up after the ‘end’ of the Cold War, it is clear that lacunae exist in Ballard’s stance on nostalgia. His stated position on it is often inimical to that found in his work, particularly when his works struggle to evade it. In his repeated depictions of characters attempting to ‘remythologise’ their own lives, he persistently fails to acknowledge that the principal means by which this can be achieved is through nostalgia. This tension is dynamic rather than corrosive, indicating that anti-nostalgic strategies can leave a text, culture and especially the critic himself even more susceptible, in Ballard’s terms, to infection.

¹⁶ *Quotes*, p. 250.

¹⁷ Andrzej Gasiorek, *JG Ballard* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 6.

ii.

The second focus of this project is the Canadian author Douglas Coupland (born in 1961), who alongside his American peers Bret Easton Ellis, Donna Tartt and Chuck Palahniuk, became an appropriately reluctant spokesperson for a ‘Generation X’ that emerged coevally with Francis Fukuyama’s controversial (and tragically premature) pronouncement of the ‘end of history’ following what we now know to be the USA’s pyrrhic Cold War victory over the Soviet Union.¹⁸ G.P. Lainsbury summarises this pronouncement as ‘the optimistic spin on the prevailing reductive orthodoxy [...] that the world has been saved from history by the free market’.¹⁹ Coupland writes about and (grudgingly) on behalf of a disaffected middle-class generation whose former counterculturally-literate parents had long since traded in their VW Beetles for BMWs. Using the technologies of the accelerating culture around them, they explored what they felt to be a cul-de-sac present of exhausted master narratives, leading Lainsbury to conclude that Coupland’s first novel, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991) ‘is a meditation on the end of history’.²⁰

While principally an author, Coupland is also a visual artist whose work has been exhibited across the globe. A fascination with disposable pop culture informs his visual style, and pervades his fictions to an equal extent. Fast food packaging, computer games and glossy fonts are all present in Coupland’s fictions, but as with Ballard’s relationship with film and technology, there is a striking ambivalence

¹⁸ See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ G.P. Lainsbury, ‘Generation X and the End of History’ in *GenXegesis*, ed. by Andrea L. Harris & John M. Ulrich (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), pp. 184-195 (p.187).

towards them. His fictions concern themselves to some degree with the search for depth behind the glossy façade of consumer culture. The discarded burger boxes, motherboards and soft drink cans in Coupland's stories are portals to the numinous. As with Ballard's public persona, Coupland's has remained plastic throughout his career; one moment he is the sharp-suited ironic yuppie, the next a heavily-bearded Canadian mountain man. Fascinated by the disposable glamours of pop culture, 'Doug' appears to apply the same logic to his public persona. He sheds guises like snakeskin, never remaining in one long enough for readers or critics to root him in any tradition. Within his oeuvre itself, his positions often change radically from one novel to the next; what seems to be toxic in one novel can routinely be nutritious in the next. This playfulness should not be confused with either a bland, *prêt-à-porter* post-modernism or a lack of serious intention. Rather, by mimicking these trends in contemporary culture and pitting them against the perennial problems of metaphysics and ontology, he invites his readers to reconsider whether post-modern cultural playfulness, a heavy component of which is irony, masks a *cri de cœur* at the perceived loss of authenticity and History.

Generation X contains a series of ironic, pop-art inflected exergues not wholly dissimilar to those found in Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), the most fertile for the present work being, '[n]ostalgia is a weapon' (GX, 175). While this conspicuous sloganeering on Coupland's part should be taken as having been written *on behalf* of the titular generation as one of their concerns, a sustained analysis of his corpus will, I hope, reveal this quotation to be a skeleton key for any later musings on nostalgia, up to and including those written in the first decade of the 21st century. The

quotation is also maddeningly ambiguous, leaving no clue as to either the target or point of origin of this ‘weapon’.

When Brian Draper points out that ‘Memory and nostalgia permeate [his] books’ in a 1997 interview (conducted the day after Coupland had completed *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1997)), Coupland replies, ‘I think nostalgia is simply memory permeated with sentiment.’²¹ This pat formula for nostalgia is disconfirmed by the penetrating insights into nostalgia found in the author’s own work. Coupland fails to add that in his writing and art, sentiment often recalibrates memory through opaque processes. Furthermore, as in Ballard’s work, nostalgia is not always directed towards memory of events so much as memories of representations. This is how nostalgia for the future can occur; a past representation of the future is debunked and so a nostalgia for that ideal future becomes possible. There is nothing simple about nostalgia in Coupland’s work.

According to Andrew Tate, Coupland is interested in ‘[w]hat compels people in a wealthy contemporary culture to seek solace in a revived, simulated past’. A ‘commodified... sanitized history’²² evocatively christened ‘trademarked time’²³ by Tate is a source of prodigious anxiety for Coupland’s alienated ‘twentysomethings’. Too intelligent to be oblivious to history’s ‘flattening’ by consumer capitalism, yet too bound up in its omnipresent structures to see an alternative, Coupland’s protagonists inhabit a palsied present with no discernible escape hatch. In *Generation X*, their act of resistance to this suffocating predicament is to take it to its logical extreme, taking

²¹ Brian Draper, ‘Engaging in Reflection: Douglas Coupland’, *Third Way*, 4, 20 (1997), 16-19 (p. 18).

²² Andrew Tate, *Douglas Coupland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 65.

²³ Tate, p. 69.

dead-end jobs, for which they are wildly overqualified, at franchise restaurants. For Coupland's Generation X, pointedly failing to fulfil their potential and doing unskilled work is as close as they can get to the sixties counterculture's more dramatic and politicised 'dropping out'. Aware that the trade-off for material comforts is to exist in, according to Tate, 'an era... strewn with the cultural leftovers of countless previous epochs', they attempt to reassemble these nostalgic scraps into a meaningful whole, with varying degrees of success.²⁴ Mirroring the prodigious tendency of cultural recycling already underway in consumer culture, Coupland depicts a generation trying to use the same tactic for spiritually nourishing ends. John M. Ulrich lists the ambiguous effects of cultural recycling, which can be deployed earnestly or cynically:

Cultural rubbish [...] is subject to being "picked" and recycled, put to use in another form or context – as hybrid, pastiche, collage, nostalgia (with or without irony), or plain old retread – a process now identified as coterminous with the formation of the postmodern cultural landscape.²⁵

This thesis will proceed from the assumption that Ballard, in his declared position as a 'neutral observer' who 'is looking out and seeing what's going on in the street' is in fact nothing of the kind, and is rather an admirably talented proselytiser who has contributed to inhibiting discourses of spent presents and vanished pasts.²⁶ As such, the generation that is the subject of most of Coupland's fictions exists within a stifling

²⁴ Tate, p. 3.

²⁵ John M. Ulrich, 'Introduction: Generation X - A (Sub)cultural Genealogy' in *GenXegesis*, ed. by Andrea L. Harris & John M. Ulrich (Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), pp. 3-37 (p. 10).

²⁶ *Quotes*, p. 318.

frame of reference dominated by the cultural fallout from Ballard's generation, of which Ballard's work is perhaps the most harrowing index. This thesis argues that Coupland is attempting to 'write his way out' of a Ballardian world and its whitewashed nostalgia.

Coupland does not direct his readers towards what we may term 'traditional' nostalgic artefacts. Instead, his protagonists are nostalgically inclined not towards the mediated past of the posed family portrait or the Hollywood fever dreams of the 1970s, but rather towards nothing less than the allegedly vanished Real; towards that to which they have never been exposed. If the post-war 'Baby Boomers' were gleefully complicit in the Real's overthrow, it is Coupland's 1970s generation who feel that their parents' generation 'blithely hand[ed] the world to us like so much skid-marked underwear' (GX, 98). As Fredric Jameson writes, 'the way back to the modern is sealed for good'.²⁷ Presented with nothing but surface, they resent their being denied any social phenomena with an interior, beyond the edifice of late Capitalism itself. Thus, with only the severely limited lexicon of late capitalism with which to articulate the specious lost Real, the characters and the text conspire to undermine and subvert their ambivalent relationship with this degraded referent. This ambivalence deserves closer examination; late in the novel, Andy takes his brother Tyler on a swift detour to the Oregon Vietnam memorial. As one of Andy's formative memories, Vietnam, far from the Baudrillardian simulacrum of the first Gulf War, is for him 'a

²⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 156.

concert in history's arena just as the final set was finishing' (GX, 175).²⁸ Andy feels that he was only a child at the tail end of 'reality', and thus his obligatory repugnance at the war itself is mitigated by his affection for its ineluctable realism. ' [*Y*]es, I think to myself, they *were* ugly times. But they were also the only times I'll ever get – genuine capital *H* times, before *history* was turned into a press release, a marketing strategy and a cynical campaign tool' (GX, 175). For Coupland's protagonists, history itself is a lost object of nostalgia; a history Ballard and his generation believed deserved to be put out of its misery precisely because it can be considered not as something which has been disrupted by decay and catastrophe, but rather as a catastrophe itself. Following the work of Pagan Kennedy in *Platforms: A Microwaved Cultural Chronicle of the 1970s* 1994), Kirk Curnutt believes this nostalgia for history to be a discrete strain which can give rise to a form of generational resistance, of whatever intensity:

Because the 1970s were the first decade in which nostalgia became a "full-fledged industry, a market segment, an imaginary past intended to help the bummed-out masses blot out the present," we must resist... commercially motivated "manufactured memory." To do so, we must look back with "guerrilla nostalgia," a "more ironic, more self-aware" critical stance that resists the temptation to smirk at the detritus of *Charlie's Angels*, blaxploitation films, and CB radio.²⁹

²⁸ See Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

²⁹ Kirk Curnutt, 'Generating Xs: Identity Politics, Consumer Culture, and the Making of a Generation' in *GenXegesis*, ed. by Andrea L. Harris & John M. Ulrich (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), pp. 162-183 (p. 171).

iii.

We do not have the luxury of a stable definition of nostalgia. It will therefore be necessary to provide a genealogy in the first instance and then move on to some of the recent theoretical paradigms that will be used throughout the present work.

The term ‘nostalgia’ is composed of two discrete Greek words: *nostos*, which roughly translates as ‘homecoming’, and *algos*, which translates as ‘pain’. ‘Homesickness’, or ‘pain of homecoming’ would seem to be the closest English analogues.³⁰ We cannot proceed from or indeed rely on a simple linear inheritance from antiquity, however, because the term was not invented until 1688. Svetlana Boym identifies the term nostalgia as a portmanteau word coined by the Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer in his doctoral thesis. ‘*Nostalgia*’, Boym observes, ‘is only... nostalgically Greek.’³¹ Its structure may be considered ironic as well as nostalgic. With this etymological complexity in mind, it must be acknowledged that the term contains many impurities which conspire to make it radically unstable. Far from attaining greater clarity through the centuries, this inherent instability has only worsened.

Nostalgia was initially used to describe an affliction associated with time spent abroad by Swiss soldiers, which occasioned ‘nausea, loss of appetite, pathological changes in the lungs, brain inflammation, cardiac arrests, high fever, as well as marasmus and a

³⁰ While this is not contradictory, it is worth mentioning that Ballard’s take on nostalgia being a ‘disease’ is already comfortably installed in the term. He has revived its pathologisation.

³¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 3.

propensity for suicide'.³² Intriguingly, choleric and tubercular patients in the eighteenth century were first diagnosed with nostalgic symptoms before the true culprit became apparent. Nostalgia then, as a defining or limiting term, began life as term for treatable illnesses, which were subject to many forms of suitably Galenic treatments. These included: 'leeches, warm hypnotic emulsions, opium and a return to the Alps'.³³ Delivered from 1772 to 1776, Kant's lectures on anthropology addressed the newly-diagnosed phenomenon, claiming that the effect of sending the troops home was not to confirm the nostalgia at all, but rather to undermine it. The returning soldiers found themselves 'greatly disappointed in their expectations and thus also [ou]nd their homesickness cured'.³⁴ Direct exposure to the absence of the lost object, then, was considered curative at this point; a cure that already incorporated the facticity of the lost object's inability to comply with the demands placed on it by nostalgia. Significantly, Kant's thoughts on the nostalgic subject of the time reveal that it was considered a disease of displaced rustics, not of the cultured classes:

It is also noteworthy that this homesickness seizes more the peasants from a province that is poor but bound together by strong family ties than those who are busy earning money and take as their motto: *Patria ubi bene* (Home is where we are doing well).³⁵

³² Boym, p. 4.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Kant, p. 71.

³⁵ Kant, pp. 71-72.

If Kant's perspective on the disease is representative of his time, as a formal diagnosis nostalgia began life as an affliction of peasants. Fascinatingly, Ballard cleaves to this medical nomenclature.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, doctors began to suspect that nostalgia was incurable. Having discovered that even funded trips home for afflicted soldiers often yielded no appreciable recovery, Boym writes that 'one doctor claimed [...] nostalgia was a "hypochondria of the heart" that thrived on its own symptoms' – an insight which has formidable currency to this day.³⁶ It was with the first and second generation Romantics that nostalgia became not only a bourgeois condition, but also a highly fashionable one, whose defining characteristic was a poetic melancholia.³⁷ 'The epidemic of nostalgia', Boym explains, 'was no longer to be cured but to be spread as widely as possible.'³⁸ This shift in perception prompted a rapid reappraisal of nostalgia as fetish rather than distemper. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as the baton of treating or indeed indulging in nostalgia was 'passed from doctors to poets and philosophers', the imperial powers awakened to the utility of nostalgic narratives as a potential hegemonic accomplice.³⁹ What had been a disease was actively encouraged in order to propagate patriotic fervour in colonised lands and at home. 'Where native ruins were not available', Boym writes, 'artificial ruins were built, already half-destroyed with utmost precision, commemorating the real and imaginary past of the new European nations.'⁴⁰ What had once been considered

³⁶ Boym, p. 7.

³⁷ Boym, p. 11.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Boym, pp. 11-12.

morbid and superfluous became vital to nations whose economic and architectural topography became more plastic than ever before. Nostalgia became a critical armature relied upon by the state in order to construct itself in its own ideal image, mostly abroad.

Boym observes that around this period, ‘intellectuals and poets from different national traditions began to claim that [although their languages would later incorporate ‘nostalgia’] they had a special word for homesickness that was radically untranslateable’.⁴¹ Many nations still insist that there is no direct translation in any tongue for their own experience of this sentiment. From heart to land and blood to soil, other languages, they maintain, cannot capture the subtleties and nuances of their own particular term. There is, therefore, a strong nationalist timbre to nostalgia to this day, which abets the prohibition on a blanket definition. If, however, nostalgia is simply ‘longing for home’, it must be acknowledged that the terms ‘home’ and ‘longing’ are freighted with a great number of spatial and temporal associations. Just as nostalgia must perforce be unrequited by its object in order to function, so the word itself insists on being unrepeatable across geographical borders and strictly even within the same language. ‘Homesickness’ is in truth a Janus word, one whose meaning can be inverted however it is taken. It straddles both sickness *for* homecoming and sickness *of* homecoming. These *apparently* oppositional definitions interpenetrate and inform each other in complex ways. If homesickness can have an ancillary connotation, one predicated on an oppressive *presence* as well as *absence* of home, the compulsion to escape may be as problematic as the desire to return. Nostalgia exists on both sides of the door; one face repels, the other attracts.

⁴¹ Boym, p. 12.

When two people speak of nostalgia, even in the same tongue, they are speaking of very different things. Nostalgia, then, must be foreign to all dictionaries. Jarringly, it is linguistically *unheimlich* or uncanny in stark contrast to its immediate connotation, truly at home in no language even though most languages claim a variant of it as their own.

While the state's manipulation of nostalgia to legitimise itself is a matter of verifiable historical record, so too is its manipulation by revolutionary movements. From their disciplines' inception, philosophers and then later, sociologists and anthropologists have concerned themselves to some extent with the distinction between 'authentic' traditional communities and modern society, as was certainly the case with Rousseau. Traditional community was privileged and made the ideal referent, with which modern society, which appeared 'as a foreign country, public life as emigration from the family idyll, urban existence as permanent exile',⁴² would always be unfavourably compared. To use the example of Rousseau, that this noble ideology was so easily abused by the *éminences grise* of the Jacobin project raises the question of how much scope nostalgic conceptions of authenticity allow for terror. This scope is not limited to terrestrial concerns either; religion and metaphysics have depended on prelapsarian and transcendent images of ideal conditions from which we have been conditionally banished for millennia, and neither Ballard nor Coupland are immune to these chimaeras. While there is an incontrovertible deployment of these narratives in the service of extant or aspiring Power, there are those who maintain that while it is lamentable that these narratives can be smuggled so cynically into the political arena,

⁴² Boym, p. 24.

there are traces of redemptive potential in each and every one. The question of nostalgia's 'ownership' by competing groups therefore exposes the flaws in its claim to authenticity. If both sides in an argument attempt to recruit the 'true' tradition, that contested tradition must be 'read' by nostalgia in differing, often oppositional ways.

What we can take away from these historical uses and abuses of nostalgia on the macro level is the existence of a sense that the unhappy present or local condition is somehow anomalous or broken; a misstep that can be steered back on course through the implementation of certain strategies, whether they be gestures of divine propitiation or fundamental reorganisations of society along political lines. Individually, these strategies can be woefully misconceived; taken together, they are usually disastrous. As Boym forcefully asserts, '[u]nreflected nostalgia breeds monsters'.⁴³ The key adjective in this quotation is 'unreflected'. Boym is careful to avoid condemning nostalgia, since it can be salutary, albeit only if thoroughly interrogated.

In defining restorative nostalgia, Boym asserts that it 'stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home'. It also 'does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition'.⁴⁴ If we can accept Eurydice as an isotope of 'home', Ovid's cautionary writing of the Orpheus myth can be seen as an example of restorative nostalgia.⁴⁵ Orpheus, blinded by the loss of his true love, is occluded.

Unlike the Judeo-Christian deity, the great pantheons usually feature Gods

⁴³ Boym, p. xvi.

⁴⁴ Boym, p. xviii.

⁴⁵ See Ovid, 'The Tenth Book of Ovid's Metamorphoses' in *Metamorphoses*, trans. by Arthur Golding (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 295-319 (pp. 295-297).

characterised not just by pettiness, but also by the ludic qualities the orthodox monotheistic traditions associate with more diabolical forces. It is Orpheus' fate that he should succumb to his own curiosity and lose Eurydice a second time. He was doomed from the moment he descended. In all the iterations of the Greek legend, not one reunites Orpheus with his soul mate. It is the one adamantine facet of the myth. The crime we may impute to Orpheus is not looking back and losing Eurydice; it is looking back with a view to reclaiming what has been lost, as though this would be a restoration rather than an inversion of the ontological status quo; a literal 're-production' of Eurydice that assumes fresh significance in our own era of mechanical and digital reproduction. The fact that Orpheus' own nature dictates that he must look back into the depths to see Eurydice vanish is one of the crueler frailties strewn like man traps throughout classical myth. He is doomed to suffer anew as soon as Pluto and Persephone grant him an audience. That the Thracian women, furious at their rejection by the mourning, cripplingly nostalgic Orpheus, tear off his head during the Bacchanalia and toss it, still wailing Eurydice's name, into the waters of the Hebrus should come as no surprise.⁴⁶ The fates despise restorative nostalgia and have a mordant sense of humour.

For a positioning of restorative nostalgia as a weapon, then, this episode is ideal. Here inextricable from vision, nostalgia does not merely afflict the nostalgic; it also serves the double function of eliminating the object of its gaze as well. In the case of monuments and national revivals, for instance, it is unclear whether, as with Jacques Derrida's revelatory rereading of Plato's *Phaedrus*, they preserve memory or destroy

⁴⁶ See Ovid, 'The Eleventh Book of Ovid's Metamorphoses' in *Metamorphoses*, trans. by Arthur Golding (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 321-348 (pp. 321-323).

it.⁴⁷ It can be argued that this restorative form of nostalgia siphons energy off forgetfulness and misremembering as well as memory. With its enormous scope for distortion and affective (therefore selective) narration, the basilisk stare of nostalgia always threatens to shuck the past of what Sylviane Agacinski has termed ‘ontological dignity’.⁴⁸ Authenticity is, therefore, the first casualty of any attempt to revive the authentic or natural. The authentic and the natural, if they purport to be so, would require no resuscitation. A sizeable honey-trap unique to what may be loosely described as the industrialised ‘secular’ world is that, in the absence of scriptural prohibitions on resurrecting the dead, there are no gods to prevent Eurydice’s re-emergence onto the mortal plane. As science fiction narratives concerning cloning technology and perfect material reproduction of lost objects continue to explore in microscopic detail, the barriers between the present and the past have never seemed more porous. The result can be ahistorical incubi; nostalgic consumer durables whose effects are the loss of a concrete present tense and a sense of the past as nothing other than a prop room for a vacuous, superficial culture in which even decay can be reproduced in high definition. This extreme example corroborates a tendency in restorative nostalgia to collapse under its own weight into a haunting of the present by re-presented objects and images. When viewed with a more cautious reflective nostalgia, however, the re-presented object can also be taken as evidence that authenticity itself is a spurious, evanescent phenomenon like any other.

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ in *Dissemination* (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 67-186.

⁴⁸ Sylviane Agacinski, *Time Passing: Modernity and Nostalgia*, trans. by Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 15.

Far harder to define than restorative nostalgia, reflective nostalgia according to Boym, ‘cherishes shattered fragments of memory’⁴⁹ without signifying ‘a return to the original stasis, to the prelapsarian moment’.⁵⁰ Instead of stressing *nostos*, as is the case with restorative nostalgia, the reflective strain ‘thrives in *algia*, the longing itself’.⁵¹ Reflective nostalgia is almost by definition therefore the preferred mode of art. The artist or exile ‘lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history’⁵² and ‘perpetually defer[s] homecoming itself’.⁵³ If we may once again invoke Orpheus, his crime and indeed the crime of restorative nostalgics *en bloc* according to Maurice Blanchot, is to attempt to restore his lost love and betray *art* in the process. In fact, Orpheus’ restorative gaze represents a *double* betrayal since both Eurydice *and* the work (his song) are both betrayed by it:

By turning toward Eurydice, Orpheus ruins the work, which is immediately undone, and Eurydice returns among the shades. When he looks back, the essence of night is revealed as the inessential. Thus he betrays the work, and Eurydice, and the night.⁵⁴

Reflective nostalgia therefore, at least in theory, is more fertile soil for an engagement with the present through art, which is by definition innovative. It also presents an

⁴⁹ Boym, p. 49.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Boym, p. xviii.

⁵² Boym, p. 41.

⁵³ Boym, p. 49.

⁵⁴ Maurice Blanchot, ‘Orpheus’ Gaze’ in *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp. 171-188 (p. 172).

opportunity for mastery over the past, to bring it to a point of conscious resolution. For Blanchot, the work of art necessarily depends on the past never being reclaimed, but paradoxically laments its own inability to reclaim that same past. ‘[O]nly in the song’, he writes, ‘does Orpheus have power over Eurydice. But in the song, too, Eurydice is already lost...’⁵⁵ It becomes clear that in some cases what the reflective nostalgic gains in insight, he loses in contentment. Reflective nostalgia is the proper foundation for the melancholy artist stereotype. As we would expect, according to Boym ‘reflective nostalgia has elements of both mourning and melancholia’.⁵⁶ It intersects at critical points with the work of mourning, which can never be definitively completed. ‘While its loss is never completely recalled’, Boym argues, ‘it has some connection to the loss of collective frameworks of memory. Reflective nostalgia is a form of deep mourning that performs a labor of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future.’⁵⁷ Boym’s phrasing here is conscientious; by only ‘pointing’ to the future, reflective nostalgia can only present an opportunity for an engagement with it; it can never lead us there. Reflective nostalgia can just as easily lead to a saturnine failure to emerge from memory’s corrosive depths. This hyper-awareness of the past’s irretrievability can be dynamic or paralysing, although both manifestations are, unlike restorative nostalgia, largely benign in the sense that society as a whole is not drafted in to help realise a transhistorical reconstruction on a national scale. Coupland’s work is the proper exemplar of this nostalgic strain, as opposed to Ballard’s, which is more representative of restorative nostalgia.

⁵⁵ Blanchot, p. 173.

⁵⁶ Boym, p. 55.

⁵⁷ Boym, p. 55.

While it is true that reflective nostalgia ‘cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalises space’, melancholy is not its only bedfellow.⁵⁸ Coupland and Linda Hutcheon explore lighter alternatives, observing in the post cold-war period an engagement with the lost past of a more cynical nature:

Reflective nostalgia does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home; it is ‘enamoured of distance, not of the referent itself.’ This type of nostalgic narrative is ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary. Nostalgics of the second type are aware of the gap between identity and resemblance.⁵⁹

The self-awareness of the postmodern moment plays host to its own unique incubi, which Coupland addresses with characteristic ambivalence in his novels. The melancholic reflective nostalgic, therefore is considered somewhat naive in our turbo-capitalist, accelerated culture. The ironic reflective nostalgic, on the other hand, would seem to be the figure most appropriate to our unprecedented condition. For all their hyper-awareness, though, the ironic reflective nostalgic is the figure most likely to hubristically breach the blood-brain barrier between reflective and restorative nostalgia, with irony as their only means of defence. As effective as irony can be at deflating the destructive earnestness of restorative nostalgia, it sometimes fails, with ruinous consequences, as we shall see.

The power of art and the power to restore are therefore, at least notionally, countervailing forces. While Boym and Walter Benjamin complicate this binary

⁵⁸ Boym, p. 49.

⁵⁹ Boym, p. 50.

opposition of restorative and reflective by proposing a more interpenetrative and sometimes complementary relation between the two, it is necessary to proceed from this opposition. Finally, and as this thesis will explore, reflective nostalgia on nostalgia itself is in no way tautological. A properly interrogated nostalgia's innovative element can be extracted and refined in the service of the present. Ballard's 'disease' motif need not apply if future generations learn to master nostalgia rather than allowing nostalgia to master them. The Marxist chronicler-cum-critic of the evolution of 'post-modern' perspectives Fredric Jameson writes:

But if nostalgia as a political motivation is most frequently associated with fascism, there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude, cannot furnish as adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other.⁶⁰

Boym cites Bergson when, foreshadowing his spiritual successor Walter Benjamin to a degree, he writes that '[t]he past "might act and will act by inserting itself into a present sensation from which it borrows the vitality." The past is not made in the image of the present or seen as foreboding of some present disaster; rather, the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historic development.'⁶¹

⁶⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 82.

⁶¹ Boym, p. 50.

To bring us up to date, we can be confident that nostalgia has come under intense scrutiny in what we may, for convenience rather than accuracy term, ‘the post-modern moment’. A new awareness of discursively constructed histories, the modes by which their images are retrieved and even the genetic prejudices in the languages we have inherited from them, have led to a more critical interdisciplinary engagement with our collective and private mythologies. Market forces have problematised this issue even further. Fredric Jameson argues that in the *weltenschauung* of late or high capitalism, ‘the history of aesthetic styles displaces “real” history’.⁶² Jameson terms this process ‘aesthetic colonisation’. This ‘crisis in historicity’ in Jameson’s words, refers at its simplest level to a condition wherein the historical past is bowdlerised, even mutilated in the service of late capitalism, where history is retrofitted with contemporary economic assumptions and aesthetic preferences.⁶³ As with the aforementioned manipulations of history by the state, in a controversially defined epoch (a term which is itself in disrepute in contemporary academia) wherein the importance of the nation state has been undermined by globally ubiquitous corporate phalanges, history is now being manipulated in order to commodify and aestheticise its content. This surgical removal of the past’s vicissitudes in turn diminishes the present by comparison, giving rise to what Umberto Eco has termed ‘the unhappy awareness of a present without depth’.⁶⁴ This nostalgia *industry*, not absent prior to the 20th century but certainly perfected therein, conspires to create the very homesickness it aims to palliate, or at least defer with its own aggressively marketed history surrogates. Those presented with an endless recycling of past fashions, now firmly put in their place as kitsch,

⁶² Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 20.

⁶³ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 22.

⁶⁴ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. by William Weaver (New York: MBJ, 1986), p. 30.

yearn instead for, in a negation of a negation, an *authentic* past in which cultural novelty was possible and nostalgia itself was uncomplicated. This more reflective nostalgia is not without its contradictions either.

The nostalgia industry, of which cinema is undoubtedly a component, also encourages the present to be conceived of nostalgically; that is, transient and in decline. As ever sleeker buildings and commodities materialise on the global stage, so too do the images of their obsolescence or destruction. We are aesthetically primed for the deterioration of the new at all times. This in turn mobilises the nostalgic impulse before it can be properly processed. As Paul Virilio's philosophical project implies, the pace that shearing economic forces hector culture into maintaining makes it necessary for nostalgic intervals to become ever shorter. By this logic, mobile phones without picture messaging capability can become auratic relics; retro trophies. In *Generation X*, Coupland uses the term 'Ultra Short Term Nostalgia' to describe this '[h]omesickness for the extremely recent past' (GX, 109). Where there may be a paucity of native culture to reclaim, globalisation enables nostalgia to vault oceans, allowing the consumer to partake in phantasies of which they can claim only a specious ownership. It is to this period, in which the panoply of internecine historical narratives has arguably achieved critical mass and thereby threatens the legitimacy of any nostalgic claim, that this study is also directed.

iv.

In J.G. Ballard's 'Myths of the Near Future (1982), following a sleeping sickness accompanied by a collective astronaut fantasy, the architect Sheppard, looking to

exploit the coagulation of time by reviving his dead wife, confides in Anne Godwin that, approaching the demise of historical time, ‘we’re at the beginnings of the first true Space Age’. Confused, she replies ‘[n]ot the second? So the Apollo flights were...?’ ‘Misconceived,’ he replies.⁶⁵ We are now in a position, posits Ballard, to take a parenthetic and ironic attitude to history. This approach is exemplified by an exchange between Coma, Kaldren’s girlfriend, and Powers in *The Voices of Time* (1960) regarding Kaldren’s ongoing, deranged project to cauterise the stump of history:

“Sometimes I feel I’m just another of his insane terminal documents.”

“What are those?”

“Haven’t you heard? Kaldren’s collection of final statements about *homo sapiens*. The complete works of Freud, Beethoven’s blind quartets, transcripts of the Nuremberg trials, an automatic novel, and so on.”⁶⁶

While Kaldren is not the centre of the short story, nor its ultimate antagonist, his terminal documents point to a 20th Century anxiety surrounding the bookending of history. Posthistorical thought, viewed with bemusement by Coupland, is given serious consideration by Ballard, whose admittedly anti-nihilistic apocalypticism views history’s foreclosure as an opportunity to consign its sanguinary misadventures to an ironic Room 101. The function of Ballard’s terminal documents in ‘The Voices of Time’ is not just to soberly enumerate certain pivotal events in human history with

⁶⁵ J.G. Ballard, ‘Myths of the Near Future’ in *J.G. Ballard: The Complete Short Stories: Volume 2* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 602-634 (p.623).

⁶⁶ J.G. Ballard, ‘The Voices of Time’ in *The Voices of Time* (London: Orion Books Ltd, 1992), pp. 9-41 (p. 26).

a view to ‘summing up’, but also to *kill historical time itself*. The terminal irony Ballard strategically deploys is calculated to make a mockery of historical time and progress, rendering any nostalgia for anything within it redundant, since it is nothing but a ‘misconceived’ cosmic experiment that has finally depleted itself. This ironic dismissal of the entire human archive is a far more effective quencher of Enlightenment vanity than any sustained impugnment. It extends to the future too, as it is the concept of history as linear progression linked by events which is being corroded. In a telling moment in Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962), this dismissal and ironic distance are summed up when Kerans is asked, unremarkably, if he still listens to the radio. ““Never,” Kerans said. “Is there any point? We know all the news for the next three million years”” (*DW*, 15).

Of Ballard’s critical reception to date, David Pringle claims that ‘one quality which [they] often overlook is his sense of *irony*: the Ballardian wit which redeems so much.’⁶⁷ Peter Brigg also claims that ‘Ballard’s ‘new myths’ are characterised by [a] wedding of irony and myth.’⁶⁸ Both critics position him as a master ironist as well as, first and foremost, an incisive diagnostician (and prognosticator) of decline and profane resurrection. Contrastingly, of Coupland, Mark Forshaw has written that ‘[t]he importance of [his] project... is that it registers so clearly a deep level of dissatisfaction not just with ‘knee-jerk’ irony but also with the still accumulating and apparently ineluctable inheritance of ironic post-modernism.’⁶⁹ From these two

⁶⁷David Pringle, *Earth is the Alien Planet: J.G. Ballard’s Four-dimensional Nightmare* (San Bernardino: R. Reginald, The Borgo Press, 1979), pp. 39-40.

⁶⁸ Brigg, p. 89.

⁶⁹ Mark Forshaw, ‘Douglas Coupland: In and Out of ‘Ironic Hell’’, *Critical Survey* 12, 3 (2000), 39-58 (p. 39).

statements, it is tempting in the first instance to neatly differentiate Ballard and Coupland on the level of irony; that is, Ballard is an ironist of nostalgia, whereas Coupland is a critic of irony. However, while there is substance to this distinction, it is not without its subtleties. Additionally, this divergence in ironic posture on the part of both authors has a profound impact on their use of nostalgia, and vice versa. A clarification of the role occupied by nostalgia in the authors' works is therefore impossible without an accompanying clarification of the role occupied by irony.

In its capacity as both antagonist and secret accomplice to nostalgia in postmodern fiction, irony can be and often is difficult to disentangle from nostalgia in Coupland and Ballard's fiction. Linda Hutcheon claims that irony and nostalgia share a 'secret hermeneutic affinity that might well account for some of the interpretive confusion [...] the confusion that saw postmodern artefacts, in particular deemed simultaneously ironic and nostalgic.'⁷⁰ Hutcheon does not support the view that the two concepts are susceptible to fusion or superimposition. They remain discrete, perceptions to the contrary. There is therefore no such thing as 'ironic nostalgia' or 'nostalgic irony', but rather an ongoing negotiation between the two that can sometimes appear to erode the distinction between these two complementary but opposing attitudes.

Hutcheon's playful work on nostalgia proceeds from the observation that 'however self-evident (on a common sense level) it may seem that an often sentimentalized nostalgia is the very opposite of edgy irony, the postmodern debates' conflation (or

⁷⁰ Linda Hutcheon, 'Irony, Nostalgia and The Postmodern' *University of Toronto English Library [UTEL]* (19th September 1998), <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html> [accessed 2nd December 2009] (p. 1).

confusion) of the two should give us pause'.⁷¹ This legitimate claim, which does not seek to expose a lack of critical rigour in her contemporaries so much as 'the very real and very uneasy tension between postmodern nostalgia and irony', is significant because it draws a formal distinction between the two in a postmodern context for the first time.⁷² Despite Hutzcheon's deeply suspect insistence that she herself is 'unafflicted' by any nostalgia whatsoever, hers is a project of clarification, from which many fresh questions unique to contemporary nostalgia arise. Crucially, Hutzcheon restores *choice* and *agency* to the postmodern subject, who is supposedly aware of the intermittency and fragmentariness of their own subjectivity.

Drawing an initial point of contact, Hutzcheon observes that '[w]hat irony and nostalgia share... is a perhaps unexpected twin evocation of both affect and agency – or emotion and politics'.⁷³ However, where they diverge is principally on the issue of *knowingness*, in the sense that irony already has the critique of its subject matter installed as a precondition of its status *as* irony, which Hutzcheon sportively claims is 'a mark of the fall from innocence, if ever there was one'.⁷⁴ Conversely, nostalgia (which is not split into Boym's categories of restorative and reflective in Hutzcheon's work) is, according to Hutzcheon, who subscribes to Susan Stewart's formulation, '“prelapsarian” and indeed utopian'.⁷⁵ A striking feature of Hutzcheon and Stewart's belief is that nostalgia can be *utopian*, which is to say its transformative gaze is not confined to a spatialised past at all, but can in fact be projected into the future in the

⁷¹ Hutzcheon, 'Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern', p. 2.

⁷² Hutzcheon, 'Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern', p. 1.

⁷³ Hutzcheon, 'Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern', p. 4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

form of something either experiential or mythic from a past conceived of as Edenic. ‘If the present is considered irredeemable’, writes Hutcheon, ‘you can look either backward or forward. The nostalgic and utopian impulses share a common rejection of the here and now.’⁷⁶

Where Hutcheon breaks with her contemporaries, particularly Fredric Jameson, is over the aforementioned negative view of the populist postmodern present as riddled with nostalgia arising from a depthless present.⁷⁷ While Hutcheon is in agreement with Jameson that ‘[o]ur contemporary culture is indeed nostalgic’, she also qualifies this with the mitigating notion that ‘some parts of it – postmodern parts – are aware of the risks and lures of nostalgia, and seek to expose those through irony.’⁷⁸ Postmodernism then, far from being held hostage by nostalgia, aestheticises the past in order to ironize and actually loosen its claim on the present. While there is no denial of vulgar exploitation of past styles, as with Jameson, Hutcheon’s claims do not condemn the present outright, nor do they necessarily celebrate it. In fact, they share Coupland’s irresolvable ambivalence:

[P]ostmodern architecture does indeed recall the past, but always with the kind of ironic double vision that acknowledges the final impossibility of indulging in nostalgia, even as it consciously evokes nostalgia’s affective power. In the postmodern, in other words, (and here is the source of the tension) nostalgia itself gets both called up, exploited, *and* ironized. This is a complicated (and

⁷⁶ Hutcheon, ‘Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern’, p. 7.

⁷⁷ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 156.

⁷⁸ Hutcheon, ‘Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern’, p. 8.

postmodernly paradoxical) move that is both an ironizing of nostalgia itself, of the very urge to look backward for authenticity, and, at the same moment, a sometimes shameless invoking of the visceral power that attends the fulfilment of that urge.⁷⁹

Turning to Jameson himself, whose relationship with nostalgia, she reveals, is as problematic as Ballard's, Hutcheon implies that it is ambivalence and not nostalgia that is the proper affective orientation towards postmodern culture. This does not mean that this ambivalence does not *incorporate* nostalgia at all, merely that any insistence on nostalgia as a dominant mode bespeaks a level of *personal* rather than necessarily collective disenchantment with the present or local situation:

When [Jameson] finds something nostalgic – be it the theorising of the Frankfurt School or the novels of J.G. Ballard – nostalgia is meant to be taken as “regressive.” Yet his *own* rhetoric and position can themselves at times sound strangely nostalgic: in article after article in the 1980s, he repeatedly yearned for what he called “genuine historicity” in the face of a postmodernism which, in his words, was “an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way.”⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Hutcheon, ‘Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern’, p. 7.

⁸⁰ Hutcheon, ‘Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern’, pp. 6-7. See also, Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 19-21.

Perhaps Hutcheon's most striking claim is that neither nostalgia nor irony are immanent properties of objects of consciousness. Hutcheon liberates the postmodern subject from any metaphysical obligation to respond nostalgically to a given stimulus, whether internal or external:

[T]o call something ironic or nostalgic is... less a *description* of the ENTITY ITSELF than an *attribution* of a quality of RESPONSE. Irony is not something *in* an object that you either “get” or fail to “get”: irony “happens” for you (or better, you *make* it happen) when two meanings, one said and the other unsaid, come together, usually with a critical edge. Likewise, nostalgia is not something you perceive “in” an object; it is what you “feel” when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight.⁸¹

Implicit within this framing of nostalgia is a reassertion of individual responsibility for one's nostalgic yearnings. If the postmodern moment oscillates between nostalgic and ironic provocations within its cultural products, it is up to the consumer or spectator to decide whether to take them ironically or nostalgically. For all the talk of a postmodern conspiracy to fan the flames of and then profit from nostalgia, we have some say in the matter, albeit constrained to some extent by the limits of our language insofar as there are a limited number of ways in which we can articulate our responses to stimuli.

⁸¹ Hutcheon, ‘Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern’, p. 5.

It is possible to construct a linear model of inheritance between Ballard and Coupland inasmuch as the condition of general irony Ballard diagnoses is the condition under which the generation(s) who were supposed to embody its logic bridle under Coupland's stewardship. '[T]here are those who consider irony to be too knowing for its own good, as well as a figure subject to the law of diminishing returns' argues Stuart Sim.⁸² Coupland's authorship proceeds in this spirit, depicting two generations (to date) whose ambivalence towards irony stems from an acute knowledge of their plight, which is to be both the audience and the victims of a general irony which has infiltrated every stratum of social life as a response to the commodification of its every aspect, no matter how outwardly subversive or eccentric, up to and including religious faith. 'What Coupland deplores with growing conviction throughout his work to date', claims Mark Forshaw, 'is a debilitating irony and cynicism that is both the cause and symptom of the 'loss' of effective politics and the possibility of belief.'⁸³ It is clear that Forshaw's take on this strand of Coupland's broader project contrasts sharply with Ballard's perspective, which is predicated on the conviction that this loss is, or rather *will be*, a necessary prelude to acceptance. To return to Forshaw's claim that Coupland's texts are often permeated with '[a] dissatisfaction at the replacement of faith or belief with irony', we may conceive of Ballard's work as being permeated with the belief that irony is the only *reliable* avenue left.⁸⁴ Not so for Coupland, whose originality perhaps lies in his fictional mobilisation of irony against itself. D.C. Muecke anticipates this trend twenty years before Coupland's first novel,

⁸² Stuart Sim, *Irony and Crisis: A Critical History of Postmodern Culture* (Cambridge: Icon Books Ltd., 2002), p. 187.

⁸³ Forshaw, p. 53.

⁸⁴ Forshaw, p. 48.

anticipating Coupland's general attitude towards ubiquitous irony.⁸⁵ '[W]hat is 'appearance' and what is 'reality' in irony', he contends, 'are no more than what the ironist or ironic observer take them to be, from which it follows that irony itself is not invulnerable to further irony from a new vantage-ground.'⁸⁶ As is to be expected if the occult connection between irony and nostalgia is to be believed, this forced cannibalisation of irony can and does create a space in which a more sustaining nostalgia can thrive, having been driven underground by the general irony Ballard both champions and to which, it may be argued, his work falls victim. Coupland's hostility towards nostalgia only extends as far as the imposed breeds whose purpose is to commodify collective memory and, as Mary McCampbell proposes, 'enable [Generation X] to simply and consistently avoid any sort of frightening questions that might scrape the surface of a deeper truth, reverse the pervasive hollowing of a 'lack''.⁸⁷ It may therefore be possible to elucidate Coupland's position as an outraged rejection of ironic acceptance. There can be no acceptance if the situation in which the postmodern subject finds themselves is unacceptable, that is when memory is in danger of being privatised. An aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that although there are many points of accord between the two authors, Coupland does not inveigh against nostalgia *qua* nostalgia so much as those uncritical, purely aesthetic strains which allow for a contemptuously ironic commodification of its products. If the post-modern

⁸⁵ For a detailed analysis of Coupland's position on irony as defined by Muecke and others, see Terri Susan Zurbrigg, *X=What? Douglas Coupland, Generation X, and the Politics of Postmodern Irony* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008).

⁸⁶ D.C. Muecke, *Irony* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1970), p. 31.

⁸⁷ Mary McCampbell, 'Consumer in a Coma: Coupland's Rewriting of the Contemporary Apocalypse' in *Spiritual Identities: Literature and the Post-Secular Imagination*, ed. by Jo Carruthers & Andrew Tate (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 129-148 (p. 136).

solution to the Modernists' burden of history is to alleviate it by insisting on an ironic dismissal of history as so much narrative fluff, for Coupland the cost of this cauterisation of the historical stump may be too great. If history is cordoned off with irony for the purposes of disinfection, we can learn nothing from the disclosing grime whose capacity for counsel and instruction dwarfs that of the antiseptic legacies which can be revived in the present without fear of ideological contagion. A nostalgia which encompasses the rust and refuse of history can lead to revelation and rebirth. To that end, he pits ironic detachment against itself in order to create a space for *nostalgie de la boue*, '(lit. "yearning for mud")'.⁸⁸

Coupland's largely successful strategy of forcing irony to give way to nostalgia to some extent by setting it against itself perhaps reaches its apex in *JPod* (2006), his cruellest and most mordant novel to date. Considering the rest of his oeuvre encompasses HIV/AIDS, Columbine-style shootings, cancer and the Bomb, this is a big claim. However, notably absent from this, his tenth novel, is the humanity and compassion with which he is frequently associated. The tropes of traditional picaresque humour are ironically brought to bear on murder, human trafficking and drug addiction without a trace of Couplandesque redemption in sight. A group of basement-dwelling video game designers, arbitrarily thrown together on the basis of their surnames beginning with the letter J, confront dysfunctional families, murder without consequence and Chinese slave labour with an irony grown brutal and callous since the abandoned bid for authenticity of the previous generation. Katlin, one of the designers, at one point triumphantly exclaims '[w]e finally dr[o]ve a silver nail

⁸⁸ Dylan Trigg, *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia and the Absence of Reason* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc, 2009), p. 57.

through the heart of Generation X...’ (*JP*, 232). Even more attuned to the subtle hues of irony than their Generation X predecessors, *JPod*’s protagonists are more solipsistic and reflexively ironic in their attitudes than any of Coupland’s before or since. However, this does not represent a *volte face* in Coupland’s attitude to irony any more than *Lolita* (1955) or *Death in Venice* (1912) represent commendations of paedophilia on the part of Vladimir Nabokov and Thomas Mann. Rather, *JPod* is simultaneously Coupland’s most and least Ballardian novel in that it unflinchingly confronts the retreat of emotion with a very limited and subtle commentary, but presents the actions of its protagonists in such a way that Coupland’s established audience cannot help but be amused and dismayed in equal measure. However, the amok or general irony adopted by Ballard’s protagonists is instead figured in the novel as general *autism*, articulated best by Kaitlin in the novel, who writes that ‘[p]erhaps the broadest way of understanding the world of the high-functioning autistic is to treat all stimuli that impact on the human body not as sensory input but as information bombardment’ (*JP*, 290). Mary McCampbell summarises Baudrillard’s position on information bombardment in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) as defined by the belief that ‘postmodern society perpetuates the myth of meaning... by generating an excessive amount of information in the form of media messages’.⁸⁹ This information deluge is so powerful, it overwhelms the conscious mind’s capacity to sift through it and form judgments. This is no different from the claims made in Ballard’s *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) regarding the brutal disintegration of the individual by complex media strategies, and yet there is no sliver of redemptive possibility in Coupland’s novel. Instead, beyond even the vision of global catastrophe in *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1997), *JPod* is Coupland’s most apocalyptic novel. The *JPod* itself refers to the

⁸⁹ McCampbell, p. 130.

loneliness of the reified, individuated consciousness. Ballard's utopian 'inner space' is here repositioned as a prison which inhibits an authentic connection between reified subjects whose very subjectivity is in doubt. It is an ironic pose towards this desolation that presents the real problem; the ironic pose which was once brandished as a defence against a highly suspect nostalgia, but has now become every bit as harrowing.

Of *Zima*, the clear alcopop popular in America in the 1990s that is an object of scorn in the novel's present, an unnamed member of JPod says, '[i]t's beyond irony. It's not funny or anything. It's just gross' (*JP*, 191). This statement serves equally well for the novel as for the obsolete drink. This extends to Coupland's novels' position on excessive irony. When another JPod member, Bree says, "'I miss the possibility of doing something Apple, something cool or new'" (*JP*, 197), it directly ironizes *Microserfs*' protagonists' yearning to be '[o]ne-Point-Oh. The first to do something cool or new' (*MS*, 87). Generation X's unfulfilled need to unearth a kernel of authenticity and originality is ironically scorned by their successors in an unwitting gesture of self-sabotage. Ethan even goes so far as to say "'[s]top, I can't take any more of this identity crap'" (*JP*, 137). This is a sentiment totally inimical to the aspirations of the generation blooded into adulthood by the music of Pearl Jam and Nirvana and the films *Reality Bites* (1994), *Singles* (1992) and *Slacker* (1991). For Coupland, the symbol for the young, alienated 21st Century subject is Google. Google represents a prosthetic omniscience akin to Godhood, with a concomitant deadening of affect and a sense of ubiquitous irony. As Muecke observes, 'the pure or archetypal ironist is God'.⁹⁰ To an even greater extent than with the still-inchoate digital

⁹⁰ Muecke, p. 37.

communications technologies in *Microserfs*, the development of the web browser has superficially ameliorated nostalgia by presenting an infinite repository of information to the user. The work of remembering is entrusted to cache memory. This results in supersaturation or bombardment, but an illusion of divinity is absolute. God need not be nostalgic because S/He can view time in its entirety at will, albeit without the crucial sensuous grime which charges it with meaning. The corollary of this on the anthropic level, however, is an inevitable Ballardian ‘death of affect’. Nostalgia is replaced with irony as lived experience is replaced by information:

The problem is, after a week of intense googling, we’ve started to burn out on knowing the answer to everything. God must feel that way all the time. I think people in the year 2020 are going to be nostalgic for the sensation of feeling clueless. (*JP*, 248)

As the above quotation insinuates, the ‘google cure’ for nostalgia is a stopgap at best. Too much distance, too much *ironic detachment* engenders an Icarus-like burn out. Oblivious to this warning, the ‘JPidders’ sign up to Coupland’s trickster proxy Doug’s new project, the ‘Dglobe’ – a ‘spherical liquid crystal screen programmed with proprietary 3-D cartographic algorithms’ that mimic Earth and the other known planets from space in every way. This mimicry also extends into the deep past and the speculative far future. The illusion of divinity used to compensate for the obsolescence of the alienated JPidders by Google is pushed by Coupland to its logical conclusion; a God’s eye view of planet Earth in which the user can ‘see what happens if we throw a class 5 hurricane towards Florida... yeehaw!’ (*JP*, 445). This obvious nod to the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina is intentionally chilling, positing a present

wherein a specific (and unfair) apprehension of autism is a consumer lifestyle choice.

The capacity for repetition in this miraculous toy elides any capacity for nostalgia.

Everything is retrievable, nothing is immediate:

Coupland said, “That’s Earth three billion years from now. Hey – let’s look at

it again in fast motion!” He clicked the fob, and we watched the continents form across a thirty-second span.

I said, “Again.”

We watched it again. (*JP*, 444)

In his gleeful demand to see the process once more, Ethan is clearly infantilised by the Dglobe. He becomes petulant, more cavalier than ever about the terrifyingly nihilistic ending of the novel, in which all the characters ‘earn money doing sweet fuck-all’ and any outstanding values they may have had throughout the novel are cavalierly abandoned (*JP*, 447). After a lifetime of programming videogames, the JPodders now get to inhabit one; a world with no consequences, where death and obsolescence are reversible. Nostalgia is surplus to requirements in this nightmare scenario, and yet its presence is intended to be felt extradiegetically. As a depiction of a post-emotional Ballardian Gehenna in which ironic distance is an aegis for a compassionless vacuum, the acceptance of a critical nostalgia which would resurrect empathy as its object is the antonymous subtext. This could not be further from Ballard’s project, despite the familiar form.

Coupland’s fictions are perhaps closer in spirit to Hutcheon’s perspective, but for him irony is just as, if not more, problematic than nostalgia. Coupland’s mournfully self-

aware protagonists, while acknowledging the greater freedom to pick and choose between irony and nostalgia, also understand this either/or as a zero-sum game, and rather than bidding for a comfortable reconciliation or synthesis of the two, search instead for a fire escape. However, Coupland does appear to be making a bid for, if not a synthesis, then a cordial armistice. As he rehabilitates nostalgia and makes it fit for purpose in the 21st century, he never does so at the *total* expense of irony. If Ballard's generation suppressed nostalgia with irony and that was the dominant cultural trope into which Generation X was born, his stories seek to balance the scales slightly more in nostalgia's favour once more, albeit with a fund of irony ready to hand if nostalgia ever grows out of control. In a sense, Coupland's texts act as mediators between irony and nostalgia. Kirk Curnutt writes:

Despite the claim that it is an ironic strategy then, “guerrilla nostalgia” actually attempts to transcend the contempt and scorn that erodes [...] satire into vituperation. The reason is that, for [Pagan] Kennedy, the nostalgia industry itself perpetuates the alienating sarcasm that extends to us a false individualistic sense of “canny superiority.”⁹¹

The implications of this endless interplay between irony and nostalgia in the work of both writers are numerous, but while irony will be a conspicuous presence throughout this thesis, it will not be given the prominence it deserves until the conclusion, for reasons of space and clarity. Most of the material used throughout the present work can be read through either a nostalgic prism or an ironic one with equal facility. However, if Hutcheon is correct in her insistence on a ‘secret hermeneutic affinity’

⁹¹ Curnutt, p. 171.

between irony and nostalgia, Ballard and Coupland's corpora push this affinity to the limit of intelligibility. Ballard and Coupland's motifs can be taken as ironic or nostalgic (and often both), and there is rarely any criterion by which we can confidently determine which is which in any given example. One critic may see nostalgia, the other irony. For lucidity's sake, it will therefore be necessary to take many of the authors' tropes at face value. Where nostalgia seems to predominate, for the most part it will be treated as such in spite of any possible ironic subversion. Furthermore, the sustained critical focus on irony in Ballard and Coupland's oeuvres justifies a nostalgically-focused counterpoint. As such, irony should be borne in mind throughout the work as an antithetical background against which nostalgia will be recalibrated for the purposes of contrast, and will feature prominently in the conclusion. This contrast between irony and nostalgia is important because it exposes an essential fact regarding nostalgia itself, which is that if its objects can indeed be taken ironically with no scope for definitive disconfirmation, nothing can be *essentially* nostalgic. Nostalgia cannot be reified, and if it is taken therefore as an 'attribution of a quality of response', an ontology of nostalgia cannot be attempted here. Its causes and effects will be thoroughly interrogated, but it falls to philosophers rather than literary critics to define what nostalgia 'is' once and for all.⁹²

v.

Both authors are, for reasons which will be explore later in greater depth, considered hyper-contemporary in their engagement with issues such as ecological disaster, the distressed social fabric, consumerism, the suburban experience and apocalypse.

⁹² Hutcheon, 'Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern', p. 5.

However, there are contemporary philosophers, critics and theologians who argue that some of these concerns are manifestations of nothing more than a kind of acute, cyclical millennial anxiety. These figures too will later be given their due. While the question of precisely how contemporary the works of these two authors are will remain open long after the present work has accrued an impressive lamina of dust, for our purposes it is vital to treat any and all anti-nostalgic declarations on the part of either author with caution. To be anti or counter-nostalgic in a present saturated with nostalgia is to subscribe to a mutant form of nostalgia for a time when all eyes were fixed on the future. As Boym puts it, we are all '[n]ostalgic for a prenostalgic state of being'.⁹³ This puckish term exerts a powerful gravity, it would seem, but it is not wholly accurate. Coupland and Ballard are both writing at a time in which, according to Microsoft programmer Dan in *Microserfs* (1995), a 'corporate invasion of private memory' is underway, turning nostalgia into a brand whose existence depends on nostalgia for its own sake (*MS*, 177).

Ballard and Coupland share a common suspicion of nostalgia, but its reputation as a useless or actively mendacious emotional state will be challenged in this thesis, in the sense that such a perception fails to account for the many positive contributions it has made to global culture, and how it can even lead to innovation and redress for many alienated peoples and generations. Nostalgic narratives have sustained dispossessed peoples during dark and challenging times, and while it might be validly contended that these narratives have in some cases encouraged lassitude and acceptance of present *tristesse*, they have also provided the first spark of social upheaval. While nostalgia is by definition a retrospective sentiment, it never settles on one object or

⁹³ Boym, p. 26.

time. Corporate attempts to democratise nostalgia have been very successful, but a counteracting tendency exists within our changing culture to ‘reclaim’ or indeed ‘redeem’ nostalgia. If, as Coupland’s footnote in *Generation X* claims, nostalgia is a weapon, then it can be aimed at those post-modern discourses which assert the foreclosure of the future. Insisting that this is a conscious strategy on Coupland’s part, Tate writes:

Th[e] unequivocal emphasis on the value of a ‘usable past’ – a past that must not be sold off to the most persuasive bidder – renders explicit an approach to nostalgia, and its dangers, that has been at play in Coupland’s work since his debut novel. What kind of past is worth recovering? ⁹⁴

The *sine quibus non* of this project, to be borne in mind throughout, are the face-to-face engagements between competing nostalgias, and it is these which will be isolated and closely scrutinised. Nostalgia comes in many forms, and the present work will also expose the mechanisms by which nostalgia can even absorb anti-nostalgia into its broad church. Even an awareness of nostalgia’s capacity for deception can be considered a nostalgic attitude, since it presupposes an uncontaminated ‘authentic’ memory or lost home against whose revisiting nostalgia is a barrier every bit as impermeable as chronological time. Each generation devises impressive methods by which nostalgia can take other forms and be denied as such, and one aim of this work is to expose, not without a certain admiration, the mechanisms by which these methods operate.

⁹⁴ Tate, p. 66.

Modern and Postmodern theories of nostalgia will be placed in dialogue with Coupland and Ballard's texts throughout the thesis in order to better understand and expose the differences in their approaches to nostalgia. It is best to proceed thematically in order to break these oppositions down, and so each chapter of this project is concerned with the dominant tropes in the work of both authors, which are: colonialism, the American frontier and acceleration, suburbia, the nostalgic object, the correlation between nostalgia and apocalypse, and in conclusion, the polar relationship between irony and nostalgia. These have been selected because these tropes in particular are crucial to critical understanding of nostalgia in J.G Ballard and Douglas Coupland's works. The aim of this thesis is to abstract and define hitherto uncatalogued species of nostalgia, and also to show how, using authors who for various reasons have become figureheads or reluctant spokespersons for an era, nostalgia may be changing and even splintering over time, even within a postmodern condition that defines itself in terms of an opposition to narratives of progress.

2. Coulrophobia and Calenture: J.G. Ballard and Colonial Nostalgia

A long range goal of anthropology was the discovery of general laws and propositions about the nature of mankind. The circumstances of its founding, that is, Western expansion and the discovery of the non-Western world, meant that these laws and propositions were based on a close study of the newly-discovered “primitives.” However, an immediate and practical purpose of anthropology was to fill in the gaps of Western man’s knowledge about himself.¹

Diane Lewis, ‘Anthropology and Colonialism’ (1973)

Colonial experience was profoundly structured by disease, both as metaphor and as reality.²

Alan Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (1999)

In one of Ballard’s early short stories, ‘The Garden of Time’ (1962), Count Axel and his wife find themselves trapped in their opulent villa while a horde of unidentified barbarians advances inexorably towards them, preparing to sack the villa and massacre its fading inhabitants. This advance has been arrested by the titular garden’s enchanted crop, crystal flowers whose function is to temporarily arrest and even reverse chronological time. Each flower the Count picks liquefies in his fingers,

¹ Diane Lewis, ‘Anthropology and Colonialism’, *Current Anthropology*, 5, 14, (1973), 581-602 (p. 582).

² Alan Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 2.

disappearing as ‘the entire concourse [is] abruptly flung back in a reversal of time [...] [it] appeared to be stationary’.³ The implication is that the mob’s encroachment has been warded off in this way for years, possibly centuries of subjective time for the Count and his wife, neither of whom have aged a day. ‘Their lives together had been timeless,’ Ballard writes, ‘and [the Count] could remember as if yesterday when he first brought her to live at the villa.’⁴ However, time and entropy (represented by the horde) are catching up to Count Axel and his wife, who ‘[b]oth [...] knew that the time garden was dying’.⁵ According to Michael Delville, this literary presentation of entropy ‘shares [Thomas] Pynchon’s [interpretation] of human life releasing energy at an accelerating rate and ready to succumb to a form of emotional and intellectual ‘heat-death’.⁶ This entropy cannot be reversed indefinitely; in fact, only for as long as it takes for a hard-won insight into the truth of inevitability to be revealed. The horde is a violent Ballardian metaphor for time, which is depicted as cruel, implacable and predatory. As the last of the flowers dissolves, the villa violently manifests its age, as do its residents, perhaps as one last act of defiance towards the inevitable:

Most of [the mob] were too busy finding their footing among the upturned flagstones to look up into the centre of the thorn bushes, where two stone statues stood side by side, gazing out over the grounds from their protected vantage point. The larger of the figures was the effigy of a bearded man in a

³ J.G. Ballard, ‘The Garden of Time’ in *J.G. Ballard: The Complete Short Stories Volume 1* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 405-413 (p. 407).

⁴ Ballard, ‘The Garden of Time’, p. 410.

⁵ Ballard, ‘The Garden of Time’, p. 407.

⁶ Michael Delville, *J.G. Ballard* (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers Ltd, 1998), p. 18.

high-collared jacket, a cane under one arm. Beside him was a woman in an elaborate full-skirted dress, her slim, serene face unmarked by the wind and rain.⁷

The happy coincidence here is that the effect of plucking of the final flower is to leave the house and the star-crossed couple in ruins before they can be desecrated. There is something heroic here about this evocation of the Freudian death drive; of the will to destroy oneself on one's own terms before the external threat (and for Ballard, chronological time is nothing other than an external, invading other) can get there first. However, there can be no doubt that this gesture is quixotic, subject to a withering irony brandished by the author as his fictional pawns desperately kick against their own assured annihilation. The truth is that Ballard's treatment of Axel and his wife is partly-ironic, full of ambivalence towards their futile bid to cling to the only way of life they know. Peter Brigg writes of an exchange between Ballard and David Pringle, in which the former unconvincingly argues against any assumption that his work is in any way oriented towards the past:

[I]t is not surprising that ['The Garden of Time'] prompted David Pringle to ask Ballard if he regretted the vanished world of the past. Ballard's answer begins with a blunt "No, I don't." After some comments about the newness of Shanghai where he grew up, he concludes, "I was brought up in a world which was new, so the past has never meant anything to me. The use in that story of an old aristocrat, or whatever he was, was just a convention."⁸

⁷ Ballard, 'The Garden of Time', p. 413.

⁸ Peter Brigg, *J.G. Ballard* (Mercer Island: Starmont House, 1985), p. 29.

However modern the environment, the tastes and cultural codes adopted by the British inhabitants of the Shanghai International Settlement in which Ballard spent his formative years *were* old, or rather formed an unintentionally parodic interpretation of the colonial world. Their failure to adjust to the irresistible tide of modernity, to defend themselves against it with a transparent nostalgia, is the primary reason for Ballard's contempt for his peers and their fictional surrogates of his own creation. 'The Garden of Time' contains all the synoptic and formal ironies and nostalgias with which Ballard's fictions are riddled. This chapter will place the early 'catastrophe' novels alongside the 'Life Trilogy' of *Empire of the Sun* (1984), *The Kindness of Women* (1991) and *Miracles of Life* (2008) and identify, through their *possible* imperial and colonial subtexts, the lacunae revealed by Ballard's simultaneous critique and capitulation to nostalgic reconstructions of Britain's murky colonial past.⁹ The chapter considers the possibility that the construction by Ballard of a 'fictional autobiography' not only extends to his fictions as a whole, but can also be viewed in 'diseased' colonial terms in the sense that both, to quote Umberto Rossi's conclusion regarding Ballard's autobiographical decoys, 'selectively screen traumatic memories in order to protect the scarred mind of the writer'.¹⁰ This chapter will then address the notion that what the 'scarred mind' is being protected *from* through the dummy autobiographical gesture is not just the trauma associated with violent events, but also the pathologised nostalgia directed thereto. The overarching goal here is to use

⁹ Umberto Rossi, 'Mind is the Battlefield: Reading Ballard's 'Life Trilogy' as War Literature' in *J.G. Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Jeannette Baxter (London: Continuum, 2008) , pp. 66-77 .

¹⁰ Rossi, p. 77.

Ballard's problematic relationship with colonialism as a basis for further nostalgic investigations, as it is over this issue that his complex and contradictory position is most apparent. However, before this survey can begin it is vital to address the issue of what we are dealing with when we read the 'Life Trilogy'.

Ballard's childhoods, we are unreliably informed, were spent in two Englands: one a farcical England of amateur dramatics, garden parties and chauffeurs, the other a tragic parody of the same whose setting was a Japanese POW camp. Ballard's Englands – more English, one suspects, than England ever could have been, like the Chandrapore of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) – had little to do with the conditions prevailing in an England experiencing the slow attrition of its imperial holdings. One of Ballard's Englands was a site characterised by affluence and leisure, the other by privation and disease. This uncanny proliferation of an intensely nostalgic English ideal community is curiously appropriate to the author's recapitulations of essentially the same inverted colonial narratives in his early novels.

While the community in which Ballard grew up was expatriate rather than colonial, it shared with those communities a common isolationism, surveillance culture and a utopian – if banal – English nationalism. 'Colonialism' is an expansive and contested term, so I shall be using the definition offered by science fiction critic John Rieder:

[T]he entire process by which European economy and culture penetrated and transformed the non-European world over the last five centuries, including exploration, extraction of resources, expropriation and settlement of the land,

imperial administration and competition, and postcolonial renegotiation of the distribution of power and wealth among former colonisers and colonised.¹¹

This broad definition is more appropriate to Ballard's experiences in pre-communist China because the British project there was not strictly colonial. Rieder's definition allows for what Robert Bickers has identified as a 'pseudo-colonial presence' established through 'the opening up of China to British trade as a result of the Opium Wars (1839–42, 1857–60)'.¹² In 1927, only three years before Ballard's birth, Britain could boast of 'a Crown colony, two leased territories, two British-dominated international settlements, six concessions and a settled presence in cities and towns stretching from Manchuria to the borders with Burma'.¹³ The International Settlement in Shanghai where Ballard was raised until the Japanese invasion was one of the bulwarks of British influence in the Far East. The denizens of Shanghai's International Settlement referred to themselves punningly as 'Shanghailanders,' an acknowledgement of their complex identity. While integrating into the British concessions and settlements required an acceptance of imperial values, a reinvention was also required. Bickers writes that becoming part of a settlement in China usually required of the settler nothing less than an overhaul of their existing identity:

¹¹ John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. 25.

¹² Robert Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism 1900–1949* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 3.

¹³ Bickers, p. 10.

Britain in China replicated itself through the socialisation of [...] recruits, making Shanghailanders and Tientsiners out of Lancastrians, Ulstermen, Scots and others, by fashioning new identities out of existing ones (British, imperial, dominion).¹⁴

All regional idiosyncrasies, then, were absorbed into a prefabricated British imperial paradigm; one deeply threatened by the subsequent ‘Americanization’ of the Settlement once a US military presence was established there. Bickers observes that much of *Empire of the Sun* is concerned with ‘the young central character’s relationship with American mass popular culture’,¹⁵ which he embraces as an alternative to a ‘Shanghailander’ culture that according to Umberto Rossi has failed to accept that ‘the British Empire was more of an ideological fiction than a political reality’.¹⁶ For the older settler and expat generation, the destabilising effect of American influence was profound. According to Bickers, the pseudo-colonial attitude forged in the International Settlement depended on a phantasmagorical history, which was vital ‘because the imagining of community required affirmation through founding myth and the subsequent narratives of growth and development’.¹⁷ Nostalgia, it seems, made for potent political capital in the International Settlement. In flight from his peers’ colonial ‘disease’, Ballard took shelter in American culture. His work superficially attests to this, with its endless quest narratives, all of which feature a protagonist in search of ‘free space,’ the American frontier dream. However, this

¹⁴ Bickers, p. 22.

¹⁵ Bickers, p. 239.

¹⁶ Rossi, p. 73.

¹⁷ Bickers, p. 40.

chapter will establish that the serial *repetition* of this narrative is far more in keeping with colonial than pioneer praxis.

It is a common practice among western critics to deride crass ‘model’ communities such as Disney’s 1930s-inspired Celebration in Florida (named and shamed in Ballard’s *Millennium People* (2003) (MP, 15), or George Hazeldon’s fortress-like Heritage Park in South Africa, but the truth is that the spore communities left by the colonial powers in far flung places were as absurdly nostalgic in their way as either of the fustian architectural projects cited above. What they share in common with these newer nostalgic communities is a perfectly spurious historicity that, in its very spuriousness, demands a hyper-nostalgic attachment to the distant home, whether the remoteness of that home is determined by time, space or both. As has been glancingly addressed in the introduction, this hyper-nostalgic attachment’s capacity for distortion and misrepresentation is enormous. It is no surprise that these communities have inspired sheaves of commentary as they are examples of restorative nostalgia at its most flagrant. In *Empire of the Sun*, the first novel (or to use Umberto Rossi’s term ‘auto-biographia literaria’) in Ballard’s Life Trilogy, the International Settlement in which he grew up is written in terms every bit as disparaging as those directed by western critics towards bespoke model communities such as Heritage Park and Celebration.¹⁸ An invocation of the overused notion of hyperreality is justifiable in the case of the International Settlement. Dennis A. Foster cleaves the parodic International Settlement to hyperreality insofar as ‘the most important first events, the “originals” from which later events will take their meanings, already have the form of

¹⁸ Rossi, p. 70.

representations'.¹⁹ A colonial settlement has always already succumbed to the fairground logic of hyperreality, and as such it is crucial to proceed on the understanding that Ballard may be writing *from* rather than necessarily *of* nostalgia, immediately problematising any attempted loosening of that bond. The colonial settlement is a repetition of an imperial entity with no precedent.

i.

‘Pierrot and pirate, his parents sat silently as they set off for Hungjao.’ (ES, 21)

J.G. Ballard – *Empire of the Sun*

Empire of the Sun arguably inaugurates a third phase in Ballard’s writings; one in which he *ostensibly* left overt science fiction behind and declared a moratorium on the unforgiving social commentary of *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and *Crash* (1973).²⁰ *Empire of the Sun* finally yielded up to the mainstream a ‘safe’ Ballard who conformed to realist literary conventions without straying into the more experimental modes associated with William Burroughs, Bernard Wolfe, Robbe-Grillet, B.S. Johnson et al. Ballard presented readers with what appeared to be autobiography denuded of the Surrealistic aspects of his work that many readers found irksome, or worse still wilfully obscurantist in the continental mode so unfamiliar to Anglophone readers glutted with realist texts. *Empire of the Sun* was a phenomenal commercial

¹⁹ Dennis A. Foster, ‘J.G. Ballard’s Empire of the Senses: Perversion and the Failure of Authority’, *PMLA*, 3, 108 (1993), 519-532 (p. 522).

²⁰ This would re-emerge in Ballard’s ‘fourth phase’ with *Super-Cannes* (2000), *Millennium People* (2003), *Cocaine Nights* (1996) and *Kingdom Come* (2006).

success, even spawning a film adaptation by Steven Spielberg, a director associated with nostalgic science fiction family films.²¹ Despite the author's muted public declarations of the narrative liberties taken with regard to the actual sequence of events in the Shanghai of the Sino-Japanese war and even his own level of involvement in this horrific environment, most readers, including some inveterate Ballard devotees, took the novel to be pure autobiography, or at least a confessional *roman à clef* – this notwithstanding *Empire of the Sun*'s Dr Ransome's warning, following Jorge Luis Borges and Baudrillard, that neither Jim nor the reader should 'confuse the map with the territory' (ES, 129). Many readers did just that, becoming 'mired' in what Luckhurst terms 'the complex repetitions that fold the texts back into the oeuvre'.²² If *Empire* and *Kindness* can be considered *romans à clef*, the keys they provide are playfully constructed to open the novels rather than the life. In his critical essay for the British Film Institute on David Cronenberg's notorious 1996 adaptation of Ballard's most notorious novel, *Crash: David Cronenberg's Post-mortem on J.G. Ballard's Trajectory of Fate* (1999), Iain Sinclair cannot mute his admiration for what he clearly believes to be a synthetic construction:

Ballard got his retaliation in first by crafting [...] the fiction of an autobiography. The elements were exquisitely calculated: exoticism (catching the vogue for travel writing), nostalgia (lost colonies), war, the child. Unwary

²¹ To the extent that this critic's first encounter with the book itself after seeing the film was in 1985's Book Club Associates edition. The publication of this edition attests to the phenomenal recuperation of Ballard's image in a short period of time by mainstream publishers.

²² Roger, Luckhurst, 'Petition, Repetition and "Autobiography": J.G. Ballard's "Empire of the Sun" and "The Kindness of Women"', *Contemporary Literature*, 4, 35 (1994), 688-708 (p. 690).

readers persuaded themselves that *now* they understood; the traumas of the Japanese camp, the surrealism of empty swimming pools, the fat American cars cushioning a detached viewer on his journey back into a past that never happened. In the afterglow of this achievement, the humanising of a profoundly misanthropic oeuvre that has never been contained in genre reservations, Ballard was increasingly visible.²³

While it would be difficult to refute the playfulness with which Ballard approached his intermittently autobiographical Chinese Box, there is perhaps something altogether more serious underpinning it. What are the dummy autobiographies attempting to exclude, and more importantly, why? As Sinclair correctly notes, readers familiar with Ballard's oeuvre up until this dramatic narrative *volte face* saw in the novel Ballard's primordial scene; an overflowing chalice of origins that contextualised many of the author's tropes and obsessions. However, while this chimera of autobiography and fiction is undoubtedly compromised for the purposes of demystifying Ballardian motifs, it is far from a dead end. 'The trademark images that I had set out over the previous thirty years', he writes in his altogether more sere, 'conventional' autobiography *Miracles of Life: From Shanghai to Shepperton* (2008), 'the drained swimming pools, abandoned hotels and nightclubs, deserted runways and flooded rivers' (*MOL*, 251) were all, he insists, present and (in)correct when he embarked on his very real peregrinations through the blasted streets of the unreal city that was wartime Shanghai. It is fascinating to compare the wildly divergent ordering of events and cold reportage of *Miracles of Life* with the more purposefully cinematic *Empire of*

²³ Iain Sinclair, *Crash: David Cronenberg's Post-mortem on J.G. Ballard's Trajectory of Fate* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), p. 18.

the Sun. While the uncanny resemblances between *Empire of the Sun* and the author's other fictions are striking, *Miracles of Life* dispels any doubts over the fact that the book is riddled with fictions and purposefully misremembered events added to provide a young boy's experiences in wartime Shanghai a narrative cohesion lacking in the experiences whose lead it follows. Paul de Man posits a radical reading of autobiography as that which, in a sense, authors the author:

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? And since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others, does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round?²⁴

If the grammar of autobiography is limited, and the demands of that grammar force any attempt at autobiography to *produce* the author, the reader is perpetually denied access to an 'authentic' James Graham Ballard. The forgiving term 'autobiographical fiction' is revealed as a tautology by de Man, and so we must question the figure who in truth dignifies the autobiographical gesture by positing the existence of a pure form. The fact that Ballard is conscious of and even revels in this referential labyrinth means that by choosing to interweave fiction and autobiography (when fiction is already

²⁴ Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement', *Modern Language Notes*, 5, 94 (1979), 919-930 (pp. 920-921).

implicitly interwoven with autobiography anyway), Ballard reveals much *in absentia*. Through conscious misdirection as opposed to a dignified silence regarding his origins, Ballard abets the construction of an ersatz-Ballard more in keeping with the content of his own novels; a Ballard worthy of having an adjective appended to the dictionary in his honour. However, while the implications of de Man's paper for Ballard's pseudo-autobiographical projects are profound, this chapter will also demonstrate that colonialism itself demands a form of autobiography; the colony 'authors' the homeland, the dead centre, through nostalgic repetition. As we shall see in the next chapter, America differs from other colonial settlements inasmuch as it resists the autobiographical gesture in order to perpetually overwrite the whetted Braille of its own landscape and extend itself indefinitely.

What remains in both *Miracles of Life* and *Empire of the Sun* when certain details are discredited are the bizarrely repetitious nostalgic behaviours of the adult internees of the Lunghua camp, who Andrzej Gasiorek maintains were, 'the source of [Ballard's] greatest contempt; unable to adapt to prison-camp life [...] paralysed by a self-defeating nostalgia prevent[ing] them from confronting the realities of the situation and the duplicitous ethical code that enables them to conceal their hypocrisy from themselves'.²⁵ If Gasiorek is correct, and the sentiment directed at the internees from 'Shanghai Jim' is not the pity and bewilderment projected by Christian Bale in his astonishingly mature performance in Spielberg's film, but rather an ironic contempt for 'their Nöel Coward/*Cavalcade* notions of England [...] nostalgic folk memor[ies]' (*MoL*, 28–29), this may also account for his abhorrence and ironic attitude towards

²⁵ Andrzej Gasiorek, *J.G. Ballard* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 142.

colonial nostalgia, personified in his inaugural full length works as white-suited, colonial ghouls.

ii.

The white-suited martinets of Ballard's early novels: Ventress in *The Crystal World* (1966), Strangman in *The Drowned World* (1962) and Richard Lomax in *The Drought* (1965), all share similarly cutthroat nostalgic tendencies, each one striving to either maintain or resurrect an outmoded value system in a milieu in which such attempts are pointless. That these figures can be both comic relief and palpable threat would seem to lend itself to comparison with the internees of Lunghua, whose myopic preservation of their already parodic English customs is so desperate that their presence amounts to a haunting of Jamesian proportions, as this passage from *Empire of the Sun*, in which the evacuation of the camp disinters grotesque nostalgic excesses, reveals:

Recreation had clearly come high on the prisoners' list of priorities while they packed their suitcases before being interned. Having spent the years of peace on the tennis courts and cricket fields of the Far East, they confidently expected to pass the years of war in the same way. Dozens of tennis racquets hung from the suitcase handles; there were cricket bats and fishing rods, and even a set of golf clubs tied to the bundles of pierrot costumes carried by Mr and Mrs Wentworth. (ES, 241)

The 'Pierrot costumes' referenced above are an echo of a much earlier sequence in the novel, in which Jim's family are preparing to be driven to their friends' – the

Lockwoods – fancy dress party. ‘His mother stood in her pierrot suit by the window, staring at the steely December sky,’ Ballard either recollects or contrives. ‘All over the western suburbs,’ ends the chapter, ‘people were wearing fancy dress, as if Shanghai had become a city of clowns’ (*ES*, 20). The choice of Pierrot, the weeping clown from French stagings of the traditionally Italian improvisational *Commedia dell’Arte*, is perhaps too apposite for Ballard’s purposes to have been the case. Known for his credulity and abstractedness, Pierrot and his billowing white costume are perhaps too well tailored to the blinkered ‘guests’ of the Lunghua internment camp – the implication being that the inane theatricality of the am-dram productions staged by the English expats extends to every facet of their lifestyle, which is insular and every bit as repetitive as Ballard’s own narratives. However, Paul de Man underscores the futility of questioning the authenticity of suspicious autobiographical accounts, arguing that coincidences such as these are ‘an effect of what [Gérard] Genette calls a “concommitance” (right *timing*) of which it is impossible to say whether it is fact or fiction’.²⁶ In his essay ‘Specters of History: On Nostalgia, Exile and Modernity’ (2001), Peter Fritzsche solidifies this link between the nostalgic and the fool:

In their search for security, nostalgics failed to cultivate abstract relations among strangers in formal settings. Familiar intimacies compensated for lack of social adeptness, so that nostalgia appears to most observers as sweet but dumb. A diminished outlook, it is based on repetition rather than novelty, order rather than juxtaposition.²⁷

²⁶ de Man, p. 921.

²⁷ Peter Fritzsche, ‘Specters of History: On Nostalgia, Exile and Modernity’, *The American Historical Review*, 5, 106 (2001), 1587-1618 (p. 1592).

With their isolationism and rejection of the new, then, the expatriate nostalgics of Shanghai – ‘sweet but dumb’ – pass the Pierrot audition with flying colours. However, there is another dimension to this literal tomfoolery; fear. Shanghai Jim’s aversion to and ironic bearing towards the English expats is informed as much by fear as disdain. The militancy of Ballard’s revulsion for nostalgia cannot be accounted for by a straightforward hauteur towards his peers. According to Alan Bewell, William Wordsworth ‘presents [a narrative] in which colonialism is read as pathogenic’ in his pastoral elegy ‘The Brothers’.²⁸ With its distinctly nostalgic tenor, we may suppose that Ballard shares this view of the colonial project as not just at risk from, but also *coterminous with*, disease. Bewell goes on to say that nostalgia was *the* tropical disease of colonialism, pathologised by Dr. Johnson in his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1775) as ‘Calenture,’ ‘a distemper peculiar to sailors, in hot climates; wherein they imagine the sea to be green fields and will throw themselves into it, if not restrained.’²⁹ As victims of calenture then, Ballard’s Lunghua adults and white-suited colonialists are vectors for the colonial disease of nostalgia, which Ballard’s protagonists seem desperate to either evade or inoculate themselves against.

To pursue the clown motif, Ballard’s position is also, perhaps more fundamentally, couched in phobia. We see a clown aesthetic of sorts in *The Drowned World*; when the tranquillity of the lagoons is shattered by the arrival of the Kurtz-like colonial treasure hunter Strangman (‘Straw-man’/‘Strange-man’) and his crew of negative African

²⁸ Bewell, p. 58.

²⁹ Samuel Johnson, *Johnson’s Dictionary: A Modern Selection*, ed. by E.L. McAdam Jr., & George Milne (London: Gollancz, 1963), p. 111. Cited in Bewell, p. 58.

stereotypes, those who have remained behind to watch the waters' reclamation of London are disturbed in the first instance by his appearance:

Kerans realised that the skin of his face and hands was uncannily white, devoid altogether of any pigmentation. Kerans' heavy sunburn, like that of Beatrice and Dr. Bodkin, made him virtually indistinguishable from the remainder of the Negro crew [...] Strangman alone retained his original paleness, the effect emphasised by the white suit he had chosen. (*DW*, 92)

This bleached, sinewy apparition signals calamity for the three remaining members of the Camp Byrd biological mapping team. His immaculately white, pressed suit is powerfully redolent of the suits worn by colonial officials during the British Raj. Lacking only the pith helmet and walrus moustache of Kipling, Strangman is a genteel imperial marauder of the worst kind; a Quatermain straight out of the 'aggressive compendiums of patriotic derring-do' Ballard claims to have read alongside American comics as a child, albeit a Quatermain with no big game left to hunt (*MoL*, 20). His manners and clear breeding do little to disguise his avarice. To complement this anachronistic colonial garb, however, is an osseous white complexion totally at odds with the tropical climate; he is 'sick'. Not only does this detail alert the reader and the protagonists to Strangman's lack of exposure and therefore interest in the new and exciting Freudian geographical configurations, it also rounds out an image of him as an afflicted pierrot. Neither 'sweet' nor 'dumb', Strangman is a walking condensation of English expatriate pathology allowed to run its course and revert to its aggressive colonialist substrate. In his attempts to pump out the water and shore up the commercial centre of London for the purpose of retrieving its treasures, Strangman is

also the colonialist adventurer ironically turned cannibal and plague-carrier, plundering the imperial hub when there are no new worlds left to conquer.

A problem presented by a convenient mapping of Strangman onto the enervated expat pierrots of *Empire of the Sun* is that the London the expats wish to nostalgically resurrect in a prison camp is an imaginative construct, whereas the London Strangman literally resurrects exists beneath the lapping waves as an algae-festooned relic, rendering any parallel untidy to say the least. A possible solution to this resides in a subsequent chapter related in *Miracles of Life*, in which he describes his bewilderment at arriving in post-war England, doubly humiliated for having exhausted its imperial resources – which would result in the wholesale collapse of the empire after the Suez crisis – as well as needing the support of the Russians and Americans to defeat Hitler's Germany:

With its ancestor worship and standing to attention for 'God Save the King', England needed to be freed from itself and from the delusions that people from all walks of life clung to about Britain's place in the world. Most of the British adults I met genuinely thought that *we* had won the war singlehandedly, with a little help, often more of a hindrance, from the Americans and Russians. In fact *we* had suffered enormous losses, exhausted and impoverished *ourselves*, and had little to look forward to than *our* own nostalgia. [italics mine] (*MoL*, 126)

A striking element of Ballard's contemptuous attitude towards the British is that its ferocity makes it easy to overlook the fact that in the above passage, he self-identifies

as British. His insistence that he is British by passport only is undermined by this unacknowledged tribal affiliation. This is reflected in the typical early Ballardian protagonist who, though pitted against colonialist ‘supervillains’, is very much cut from the same tailored cloth, as David Pringle observes:

On the face of it, it sounds as though Ballard’s protagonists are indeed “heroes.” Apart from one or two masochistic kinks, they could come straight out of the British thriller and adventure story tradition, slightly decadent avatars of Bulldog Drummond and James Bond.³⁰

The first James Bond novel, *Casino Royale*, appeared in 1953, during the undignified death throes of the British Empire, and provided British readers with a suave, lethal gentleman-spy cast in the Quatermain mould. Where Britain’s military might had waned, Ian Fleming opted to emphasise its espionage and intelligence-gathering virtuosity, giving a humiliated, necrotic global power a Quatermain appropriate for the post-war period. However, it cannot be overlooked that Fleming’s character is a *naval* Commander, and therefore an outwardly plausible embodiment of Britain’s shift from naval dominance to a key player in the Cold War. He is a nostalgic embodiment of an Empire on the wane, and as such cannot be considered a truly contemporary figure. In his essay ‘Dial ‘M’ for Metonym: Universal Exports: M’s Office Space and Empire’ (2000), Paul Stock emphasises the nostalgic tenor of the Bond character:

Bond [...] longs for the moment of Empire. While protecting what remains,

³⁰ David Pringle, *Earth is the Alien Planet: J.G. Ballard’s Four-dimensional Nightmare* (San Bernardino: R. Reginald, The Borgo Press, 1979), p. 38.

he aligns himself with what Frederic Jameson has called ‘nostalgia for the present.’ Following Jameson, [Raphael] Samuel describes such nostalgic tendencies as a ‘desperate desire to hold on to disappearing worlds.’ This disappearing world is that of a pre-eminent Great Britain, a nation state in a position of dominance and international influence.³¹

Insisting upon ‘the characterisation of Bond as the ‘blunt instrument’ of British policy, and a figure of colonialism’, a contradiction in Ballard’s characterisation of his protagonists becomes apparent.³² Nominally there to highlight the futility and absurdity of colonialist values, they are representatives of the same, albeit without the *overt* jingoism of the colonialist-adventurer archetype. They are stricken with the colonial disease of nostalgia or calenture, but display no obvious symptoms. Instead, their dry humour and ironic detachment from the atavism around them marks them out as Kipling’s English gentlemen, keeping their heads just long enough to wish they were losing them like everybody else. They are a repetition of the colonialist adventurer, albeit in garb and complexion sufficiently different from their template to mask the join.

If Pringle is correct in his assessment of Ballard’s protagonists’ pedigree, it would appear that Ballard’s early strategy was to pit the postcolonial British hero, whose dissipated lifestyle and moral relativism reflected the squalor of Imperial implosion, against the classic colonialist-adventurer, in a surreal landscape. As daring as this

³¹ Paul Stock, ‘Dial ‘M’ for Metonym: Universal Exports: M’s Office Space and Empire,’ *National Identities* 2, 1 (2000), 35-47 (p. 36).

³² Stock, p. 40.

strategy is, it is also apparent that the boundaries of the colonial narrative are never exceeded. It is the decaying Empire yearning for and in conflict with its older, occluded self. Perhaps only a product of Empire whose origins lay outside the Imperial centre could be capable of this rich, but ultimately futile attempt to purge a senescent Empire of its nostalgia for itself. A complication arises when we consider that Ballard seems to be attempting to hobble colonial romanticism with irony, turning the Imperial hub into one of its untamed colonies, and yet the native Other, in whom Ballard has seldom expressed an interest other than as a foil for the protagonists, is left unconsulted and ignored. Ballard's dawn raids on the colonialist attitude in his early novels backfire because he is attempting to annihilate colonial nostalgia with figures who covertly embody it. Drawing the periphery to the dead centre does not question the integrity of the centre so much as validate it, in the same way that the composition of fictional autobiographies validates pure autobiography. Ballard's hybrid identity, therefore, forged in one of the world's first 'global' suburbs, makes for a ceaseless patrolling of political, geographic and metaphysical borders. Nostalgia cannot grow from these demilitarised zones of the mind without bearing misshapen, neoplastic fruit.

Ballard has acknowledged that '[t]he image of an immense half-submerged city overgrown by tropical vegetation, which forms the centrepiece of *The Drowned World*, is in some way a fusion of my childhood memories of Shanghai and those of my last ten years in London.'³³ Written in 1963, these words alert us to a deeper connection between the diluvial streets of Shanghai and post-war London. England

³³ J.G. Ballard, 'Time, Memory and Inner Space' in *The Drowned World* (London, HarperCollins, 2006), p. 10.

proper, according to Ballard, is as counterfeit as its parodic twin on the other side of the globe. With the end of the British Empire at the end of World War 2, England *itself* became a colony of its now entirely metaphysical Imperial centre, which became a far more powerful narrative once it had ceased to be a material reality. The empire only lived on through repetition of its rituals.

Just as the expat pierrots of Shanghai and Lunghua attempt to fabricate a spatial proximity to London and England in an intensely ritualised manner, Strangman also understudies the war-traumatised English themselves in their temporal nostalgia. In his unshakeable conviction that ““the treasures of the Triassic compare pretty unfavourably with those of the closing years of the second Millennium,”” Strangman aligns himself with imperial hubris (*DW*, 92). He is a colonialist without an empire, ransacking works of art and jewellery whose value is at best suspect in a world accelerating towards the deep past. The ironic dimension Ballard lacquers onto this clown is in his being a boy’s own adventure hero straight out of imperial propaganda fictions, revealed as the monstrosity he *always was* now that empire’s borrowed time has elapsed. In a temporal sense, then, the English Ballard meets on his arrival in England appear to him to be expatriates as well; disaffiliation and identification in one stroke. Unable to return to the halcyon days of empire and a secure sense of Britain’s stature on the global stage, the wretched post-war English do not relinquish the hyper-patriotism that is a necessary expedient of war. ‘The nostalgic desires,’ Svetlana Boym observes, ‘...to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.’³⁴ The England promised to Jim Ballard as his birthright: the ‘rose-pink view of England that seemed to consist of the West End of

³⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York: Basic Books, 2001) p. xv.

London, Shaftesbury Avenue and the Troc, a glittery sparkle of first nights and dancing till dawn, overlaid by a comfortable Beverley Nichols world of market towns and thatched roofs' was a mythology constructed to sustain the English abroad not only in space, but in time too (*MoL*, 126). Strangman is a creature of this nostalgic mythology allowed to go feral; our exiled boyhood hero, home at last to carry out imperial foreign policy on home turf.

Another risible yet oddly vitiated white-suited figure in Ballard's colonial mindscapes is Ventress, the architect vying for possession of his tubercular wife, Serena, with the diamond mine owner, the 'rough diamond [of] powerful build,' Thorensen in *The Crystal World* (*CW*, 72). Armed with shotgun instead of lyre, Ventress is an Orphic figure returning, like Ballard's protagonist Dr. Sanders, to retrieve his Eurydice from the underworld. That his final appearance in the novel has him wailing Serena's name as Orpheus does Eurydice's when his head is torn off and tossed into the Hebrus by the Maenads, confirms his nostalgic credentials. Like Orpheus however, Ventress is also an emasculated figure; the colonial eunuch whose shotgun, like Orpheus' lyre, is more than a convenient prop. Cuckolded by Thorensen (as stout a patronymic of Nordic virility as one is ever likely to find), Ventress' role in the love triangle was always going to be minor. He wages a minor guerrilla war against Thorensen and his indigenous private army that is successful insofar as he manages to shoot the mine owner dead, only to later discover Serena enfolded in his arms, the two of them 'like swimmers asleep in the bottom of an enchanted pool' (*CW*, 166). While he always succeeds in entering the underworld unmolested, Orpheus never retrieves his love.

The novel is set in Cameroon only a few years after independence from French rule. As such, a great many colonial vestiges persist in the novel and it proves to be a welcoming Conradian backdrop for the milquetoast ‘great white hunter’ Ventress. In his book on Ballard, Roger Luckhurst writes of ‘[H.] Rider Haggard’s fantasy of the African terrain as that space where the decline of England into effeminacy could be reversed and re-masculinised.’³⁵ This fantasy is ridiculed by Ballard in *The Crystal World* through the impotent figure of Ventress. His name alone attests to the total emasculation of the British imperial project, ‘Ventress’ becoming ‘ventUress’ with little difficulty. While he shares Strangman’s ‘skeletal face and white suit’ (*CW*, 25) and is certainly gun-drunk when the occasion calls for it, his skittish nature is flagged early on when he removes his gun from his ludicrously kitsch, almost high-camp ‘polished crocodile skin’ suitcase and places it in Sanders’ in order to smuggle it safely into Port Matarre (*CW*, 17). While remaining sensibly cautious in his presence, Sanders sees through Ventress’ cryptic statements and confident bluster to the timorous architect beneath. ‘My dear Louise,’ he reassures his new companion in Port Matarre, ‘you have a Bluebeard complex – like all women. As a matter of fact, Ventress isn’t the least bit sinister. On the contrary, he’s quite naïve and vulnerable’ (*CW*, 49). Ventress is quite simply not considered a serious threat. Though he manages to pick off Thorensen’s gang of mercenaries and armed employees one-by-one, he is never anything other than a pathetic, marginal figure – albeit one with whom Sanders experiences a disquieting sense of kinship.

³⁵ Roger Luckhurst, *The Angle Between Two Walls: The Fiction of J.G. Ballard* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), p. 42.

The third Ballard character of this type is Richard Foster Lomax, the decadent architect-cum-Prospero of *The Drought* (1965). With his white-haired, cruelly seductive sister (or is it daughter?) Miranda, and a Caliban-like lackey in the brutish and misshapen Quilter, Lomax is another despicable Ballard grotesque. This ‘plump, grinning Mephistopheles’ in his ‘white silk suit, like a pasha waiting for his court to assemble,’ serves as another pierrot in the Ventress mode (*TD*, 48). However, this time, instead of returning quixotically to the jungle, the colonialist figure is an intransigent sybarite who refuses to leave his gated ‘glass-and-concrete folly’ in the geographically vague city of Mount Royal when the wave of desertification hits (*TD*, 48). Lomax’s obdurate refusal to leave his extravagant home, opting instead to stare down the intense heat, is another example of the colonialist’s nostalgic fixation on the prelapsarian imperial moment. Even when confronted by Ballard’s protagonist, Dr. Ransom, with the absurdity of his stubbornness in the face of nature in revolt, Lomax responds with a classically colonial hubris, insisting that ‘[i]f it wasn’t for people like myself we’d all be living in mud huts’ (*TD*, 51). Like the French colonialists who refused to leave Viet Nam during the Indochinese wars (powerfully depicted as opiated, ‘diseased’ phantoms in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now: Redux* (2001)), Lomax’s doomed attempt to maintain a lighthouse of civilisation through the drought descends into gloomy farce.

When Dr. Ransom returns to Mount Royal with his companions after ten years of interminably dull subsistence living on the ‘terminal beach’ of the coast, he finds Lomax, his sister and Quilter still alive, albeit facing the imminent prospect of extinction. Quilter has fathered several deformed children with the now morbidly obese Miranda, who has to all appearances not moved from her chair by the

swimming pool. They have become obese on the flesh of travellers and abandoned canned goods, drinking water tapped from an underground reservoir discovered by Lomax. Lomax has become a burlesque of himself, described thus:

His skin had become svelte and creamy, untouched by the desert wind and sun. He wore a grey silk suit of extravagant cut, the pleated trousers like a close-fitting skirt, or the bifurcated tail of a huge fish, the embroidered jacket fitted with ruffs and rows of pearl buttons. To Ransom he resembled a grotesque pantomime dame, part amiable scoundrel and part transvestite, stranded in the middle of the desert with his pavilion of delights. (TD, 214)

As with Ventress, Ballard cannot resist feminising the colonialist figure.³⁶ Like the Lunghua Players, Lomax's performance never ends. Of course, no empire ever entertains the notion of its own transience, which is perhaps one reason why they always implode through as many internal contradictions as external threats. Like the Thousand Year Reich and the Pax Romana, empire sees itself as both the culmination of and escape from history. No matter how dire the reduction in circumstances, emissaries of the imperial and post-imperial powers refuse to accept the resumption of history, even when this resumption may be to their benefit. With *Empire of the Sun* and *Miracles of Life*, it is difficult to avoid parallels. A particularly arresting one in *Miracles of Life* refers to the Lunghua internees and indicates the extent to which they became attached to the nostalgic simulation of England they managed to construct there:

³⁶ A disturbing trait common to these revisionist colonial fictions is the forced contiguity between effeminacy and disease.

Later, in England, I heard that many of the Lunghua internees were still living in the camp six months after the war's end, defending their caches of Spam, Klim and cartons of Lucky Strike cigarettes. (*MoL*, 115)

Whether these nameless internees were institutionalised or not, the Lomax excesses are clearly on display here; the desperate, nearly psychotic intransigence and unwillingness to accept the transition into a new mode of being, however emancipatory in both the existential and material senses that may be. We are not far from the calenture that saw so many sailors leap to their deaths during the period of British naval supremacy.

In each iteration of the catastrophe in Ballard's early novels, the white-suited antagonist becomes more diseased and effete. Strangman, the deranged Quatermain figure who embodies England's colonial dreams gives way to Ventress, an architect who aspires to Haggard-like adventurism but never quite makes the grade, who in turn gives way to Lomax, another architect who, in his refusal to abandon his manicured estate while the world literally burns, is far closer to the real figures for whom postcolonial novelists and critics reserve a special scorn. The reader is led by stages from the corrupted boy's-own character Strangman, through the failed boy's-own figure Ventress to the kind of colonialist for and by whom such imperial wish fulfilments were produced. From the colonial dream (Strangman) to the sedentary dreamer (Lomax), all their nostalgic associations are brutalised in turn. The nostalgic dream is revealed as diseased, the nostalgic dreamer a clown. With each repetition of the white-suited antagonist, the effect becomes as progressively anaemic as the

characters themselves. Viewed in chronological order, we see a figure and a trope which loses its impact both diegetically and extra-diegetically each time. What emerges from this is the demonstrable fact that the colonialist figure is only baneful to the imperial centre. While the major events in *The Drought* take place in a familiar suburban landscape, the author never divulges its exact location or national setting, and so Lomax is not necessarily a returned colonialist. As such, the diseased Ventress and Lomax are no threat to the centre. It is only on return to the ideological wellspring of the colonial project that its 'children' destabilise its nostalgic founding assumptions and become infectious. Ballard's implied auto-construction as a disapproving observer of these figures – a paternalistic perspective – will now be addressed.

iii.

With these correspondences established, it is time to shift attention to the vast body of letters, interviews and articles composed by the man himself. Psychobiography is considered a jejune undertaking by some critics, but in Ballard's case it is not only possible, but essential. While it is not necessarily the critic's task to separate the facts from the fictions, the fact that Ballard has publicly consigned substantial portions of his own history to two novels (*Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women*) – which were bound to be read as autobiography – makes that supposed history fair game for critical scrutiny. While the following may seem like an exercise in, in

Sinclair's words, 'domesticating Ballard's psychosis,'³⁷ the fact is we are *invited* to do so.³⁸

Seemingly comfortable in his role as a public figure, observers have noted that Ballard's public engagements have often included an element of showmanship. While Ballard's condemnation of nostalgia has not changed in fifty years, he seems to have incorporated it, however ironically, into his authorial performance. Iain Sinclair recounts a National Film Theatre press event at which he found Ballard's choice of dress noteworthy:

Busking his way through the *Guardian* gig at the NFT he looks comfortable with fame: lightweight suit, handkerchief flopping out of breast pocket. Toff's accent, genial. An alarming resemblance to a house-trained Sir Les Patterson. 'The ex-RAF look', Chris Petit calls it. Nic Roeg and Jim Ballard, clubmen who don't belong. Years spent overseas.³⁹

Ballard the performer may well be playing games with his critics here, but this performative element is noteworthy in itself; the author whose scorn for English colonial nostalgia borders on emetic, ironically clothes *himself* in the cerements of that dead world; its nostalgia-infected blanket. Its repetition continues *in him* – he is both critic and carrier of the colonial nostalgic disease. It could be that Ballard's throwaway

³⁷ Sinclair, p. 92.

³⁸ Not least because Ballard has spent decades pathologising our domesticity.

³⁹ Sinclair, p. 74.

observation in *Miracles of Life* that ‘the camouflage always imitates the target’ is literally true in his case, but that would bespeak a level of commitment to a role no less extreme than the English in the international settlement and later Lunghua (*MoL*, 136). The observations of Ballard confreres and admirers indicate otherwise; rather, there is a possibility that this baffling affectation may have been practised without irony. If this is an unconscious affectation – which it may very well *not* be – a host of rich contradictions and possibilities present themselves.

‘Ballard was in exile in Shepperton, a returned colonial,’ Sinclair proposes; ‘a time-traveller trying to recreate, through cabalistic rhythms and repetitions, the Proustian excitement of scenes witnessed in childhood.’⁴⁰ If this is indeed the case and Ballard is a ‘returned colonial,’ then the similarities between himself and the white-suited nostalgic Pierrots for whom he reserves the cruellest sneers extend far beyond the sartorial. To support his returned colonial thesis, Sinclair interviewed the author Michael Moorcock, Ballard’s friend and former *New Worlds* magazine editor. Moorcock is in no doubt that Ballard’s books form a wound profile of deep trauma occasioned by the war years. Moorcock said that what disturbed him most about Ballard was the ineradicable notion ‘that the Shanghai camp must have been exactly like a leafy suburb...’⁴¹ Before engaging with this concept more fully in the suburbs chapter, it is also worth noting that the reverse is also possible. ‘Chris Petit,’ relates Sinclair, ‘saw Ballard’s Shepperton house as a colonial bungalow. He was dug into,

⁴⁰ Sinclair, p. 8.

⁴¹ Sinclair, pp. 83-84.

and making the best of, an alien world. Internal exile.⁴² While this may well be true, Ballard's is not an exile without an agenda. I propose that Ballard, a refugee from war torn Shanghai, considers himself to be an anthropologist abroad, immersed in one of the longest case studies in history. Gasiorek has written the following of Ballard:

[T]his is how Ballard has always positioned himself rhetorically, insisting in interview after interview that because England was to him a completely foreign country (as with the past, they do things differently there) he viewed its landscape, its people, its social forms and its cultural forms from an alien perspective.⁴³

If for Ballard 'Earth is the alien planet,'⁴⁴ it has always been unclear whether he considers himself to be an Earthling or not. Extraterrestrials do not feature prominently in his stories, and if they do they are absent presences, scrawling indecipherable calendars on obelisks for obsessive xenogeologists (read: literary critics) to trip over. Ballard invites his readers to consider themselves as aliens; to mount an odyssey inwards to uncover the strange neural structures governing our daily existence, of which we are by necessity oblivious. Cemented into this discourse is a deviant strain of the hubris of objectivity common to colonial-era anthropologists, for whom, according to Diane Lewis, 'alienation must occur before it is possible to

⁴² Sinclair, p. 84.

⁴³ Gasiorek, p. 2.

⁴⁴ David Pringle, *Earth is the Alien Planet: J.G. Ballard's Four-dimensional Nightmare* (San Bernardino: R. Reginald, The Borgo Press, 1979).

acquire knowledge without involvement'.⁴⁵ Knowledge acquisition of this type depends on the anthropologist placing themselves in the position of 'alien to the aliens'. Lewis continues:

While the anthropologist may have played the part of colonizer unwittingly, he has occupied the role of outsider consciously. It is, in fact, the perspective of outsider which is thought to assure "objectivity," an important methodological goal. A basic part of the training of anthropologists, along with the creation of high cultural tolerance through exposure to cultural relativity, is preparation for detachment in the field.⁴⁶

Ballard studies and has studied *us*, the English, by operating, in a sense, in deep cover. '[P]erhaps my coming to Shepperton,' he writes, 'was a deep-level assignment that my central nervous system gave me.'⁴⁷ He appears as just another suburban bourgeois, camouflaged in our laughable fabrics, customs and the war paints of the weeping pierrot. This is not, however, the whole truth. Ballard's formative experiences took place in Lunghua, and by his own admission everything he writes on suburbia and beyond is refracted through this grisly prism, as Moorcock and Petit independently confirm. He has been composing reports and updates on the English for fifty years. In his essay 'Homesickness and Dada,' the anthropologist Michael Taussig writes the following of his own discipline:

⁴⁵ Lewis, p. 585.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ J.G. Ballard, *Quotes*, ed. by V. Vale and Mike Ryan (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 2004), p. 368.

Anthropology was always a homesickening enterprise. To the (not necessarily unhappy) travail of sojourns abroad with their vivid flashes of (generally unrecorded) homely memories, one has to add the very logic of its project to connect the far away with home in ways that the folk back home could understand.⁴⁸

According to Taussig, orthodox anthropological field work is not targeted towards discovery so much as invention, although these ‘inventions’ are generally deliberate reconstructions of a history of behaviour to confirm the anthropologist’s native society’s own. Anthropology is unflatteringly recast as narcissistic and, more importantly, nostalgic. Science fiction writers have been attempting to turn this anthropological/colonial gaze back in on itself since the genre’s inception, with varying degrees of success. H.G. Wells, perhaps alongside Jules Verne, is credited with formalising the genre’s conventions,⁴⁹ and it is sobering to note that even in 1898, with the publication of the inestimably influential *The War of the Worlds*, the problem of colonialism was being exposed under cover of escapist fantasy – the very mode by which colonialist propaganda was promulgated:

Wells asks his English readers to compare the Martian invasion of Earth with the Europeans’ genocidal invasion of the Tasmanians, thus demanding

⁴⁸ Michael Taussig, ‘Homesickness and Dada’ in *The Nervous System* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 149-182 (p. 149).

⁴⁹ Although Wells famously favoured the term ‘scientific romances’.

that the colonisers imagine themselves as the colonised, or the about-to-be-colonised. But in Wells this reversal of perspective entails something more, because the analogy rests on the logic prevalent in contemporary anthropology that the indigenous, primitive other's present is the coloniser's own past.⁵⁰

An insurmountable problem is raised by this device. In order to critique his own culture, the critic must in the first instance elevate himself above it. The idea that the writer, and particularly the satirist, is somehow pursuing a 'purer' anthropology because they are 'alienating' themselves in order to scrutinise their own culture is essentially recapitulating the unequal relationship between coloniser and colonised once again, albeit internally. Ballard rarely writes of alien encounters because he is the only alien in his fictions, as opposed to the English he observes. As a 'Martian invader' of sorts, it is therefore essential that his texts do not display symptoms of the colonial disease of nostalgia. However, if we take Bewell's reading of Wells' novella as read, it is possible to undermine Ballard's textual strategy from first principles. Bewell argues that Wells' book 'crystallises a range of epidemiological anxieties and uncertainties that came to dominate the British cultural understanding of colonialism'.⁵¹ In *The War of the Worlds*, the Martians do not fall to a barrage of artillery fire, but rather to microscopic organisms harmless to us 'natives'. The nostalgic disease then is just as apt to infect the coloniser as the colonised, and it is this 'hypochondria' which makes for such a fascinating range of colonialist depictions in Ballard's work. Of *War of the Worlds*, Bewell contends that '[t]he narrative anxiously addresses the prospect that the very things that separate the "healthy"

⁵⁰ Rieder, p. 5.

⁵¹ Bewell, p. xiv.

coloniser from the “sick” colonised might ultimately produce a tragic vulnerability.⁵²

We might conceive of the protagonists in Ballard’s early novels as perpetually oscillating between coloniser and colonised, if only to escape nostalgic contagion. If nostalgia is indeed a ‘disease’ as Ballard claims, there are few measures that can be taken by the author/anthropologist to avoid falling ill.

It logically follows that the ‘discovery’ of mores, sacrifices and rituals that mirror our own could be deployed to fuel oppressive ideologies at the wellspring of their production. Chiming with this opinion, Roy Wagner writes that ‘[a]n anthropologist is something of a “culture missionary,” believing (like all good missionaries) in the thing he invents, and is apt to acquire a substantial local following in his efforts to invent the local culture.⁵³ According to Wagner therefore, the ancillary task of the anthropologist is to nostalgically anneal the other to Occidental accounts of origin; to infect *them* before they infect *him*. The Other or the scrutinised community does not exist on its own terms, but rather to nostalgically confirm our own recently constructed shibboleths of origin; it is forbidden to be truly ‘outside,’ since that would undermine any totalising discourse, so it must be absorbed into an articulable ‘outside’ we have *constructed* for it. For Taussig and Wagner, orthodox anthropology is therefore an unconscious exercise in restorative nostalgia. Wagner writes:

An anthropologist *experiences*, in one way or another, the subject of his study; he does so through the world of his own meanings, and then uses this

⁵² Bewell, p. xiv.

⁵³ Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 7.

meaningful experience to communicate an understanding to those of his own culture. He can only communicate this understanding if his account makes sense in terms of his own culture.⁵⁴

The anthropologist, fettered by his own cultural values, narrates the alien culture nostalgically, that is to say in his own civilisation's terms. Two things are curious about this arrangement in Ballard's fictions: the first is that the reports are intended for the objects of scrutiny, composed in our indigenous language and using our own narratives of deep structure and history; the second is that Ballard's own culture is incontestably colonialist. As I asserted at the beginning of the chapter, Ballard is writing *from* rather than *of* colonial nostalgia. The former could be construed as unwitting cultural narcissism, but Graham Huggan's argument that, 'as the Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha has famously pronounced, anthropology is "a conversation of 'us' with 'us' about them"'⁵⁵ appears to be ameliorated somewhat in this case. The latter is particularly troubling as the only conceivable place Ballard can be writing from is the one place which arouses nausea; the caricatured, repetitious colonial England of *Empire of the Sun*.

To return to Roy Wagner's critique of anthropology, Ballard as anthropologist-cum-missionary 'acquire[s] a substantial local following in his efforts to invent the local

⁵⁴ Wagner, p. 3.

⁵⁵ Graham Huggan, '(Post)Colonialism, Anthropology, and the Magic of Mimesis', *Cultural Critique*, 38 (1997-1998), 91-106 (p. 92).

culture'.⁵⁶ His reading of the English suburban experience as masking an atavistic, primal structure is lashed nostalgically to a long-vanished Japanese internment camp in which he 'had been happiest and most at home, despite being a prisoner under threat of an early death'.⁵⁷ English readers of Ballard seem all too happy to indulge his nostalgia and allow him to reconstruct this camp in our shopping centres and our suburbs because he grants our *own* wish for a definitive 'natural' mythology in suburbs considered inauthentic and synthetic by most. His is a mythology his readers are all too ready to accept, not least because they are cogent and beautifully articulated. For all their qualities, however, the fictional autobiographies he has written are still mythologies:

Both "autobiographies" *mythologize*, which is to say that they take elements of the same compulsively repetitive landscapes, scenarios and images and recombine them in fictions which yet teasingly and forever undecidably play within the frame of the "autobiographical." There is no *authenticity* here, no revelatory disclosure of (in Gusdorf's insistent phrase) "deeper being,"⁵⁸

We are beginning to see that the cult-of-the-author Ballard has done little to dispel depends on a foundation myth he was compelled to nourish with a set of dummy ciphers that further obfuscated the matter rather than clarifying it. They are, like the

⁵⁶ Wagner, p. 7.

⁵⁷ J.G. Ballard, 'The End of My War' in *A User's Guide to the Millennium* (New York: Picador, 1996), pp. 283-294 (p. 294).

⁵⁸ Luckhurst, 'Petition, Repetition and "Autobiography"', p. 701.

colonial settlements whose logic they miniaturise, repetitions with no original. In his lecture *Nostalgia for the Absolute* (1974), George Steiner's description of the mythologizing process is applicable in this dimension:

A true mythology will develop its own language, its own characteristic idiom, its own set of emblematic images, flags, metaphors, dramatic scenarios. It will breed its own body of myths. It pictures the world in terms of certain cardinal gestures, rituals and symbols.⁵⁹

The above could have been written solely of Ballard, but Steiner applies it to any and all totalising nostalgic discourses. Even the adjective 'Ballardian' presupposes a set of symbolic criteria by which this mythology can be distinguished from others. The devotion Ballard inspires borders on the cultic. This 'cult' does not exist in a vacuum, however; its grammar and mythic scaffold, like colonialism with anthropology, depend on other discourses for legitimacy. Of his beloved Surrealism, Ballard writes:

Psychoanalysis was its main critical engine, and I was drawn to Surrealism in my late teens because it seemed clear to me that post-war England, with all its repressions and taboos, needed to be laid out on the couch and analyzed.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ George Steiner, *Nostalgia for the Absolute* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Ltd, 1997), p. 4.

⁶⁰ *Quotes*, p. 291.

A sense of mission is implicit in the above quotation. When Ballard asserts that England ‘needed to be laid out on the couch and analysed,’ he is clearly putting himself in the frame as a potential analyst-cum-anthropologist. In *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979), the crash-landed Blake character, freshly attired in ‘black worsted trousers and jacket, the dry-cleaned suit of a priest or funeral mute’ makes an admission which betrays the covert messianism innate to Ballard’s texts *in toto* (*UDC*, 31–32):

For five minutes one rainy afternoon I was gripped by a Pied Piper complex, and genuinely believed that I could lead the twenty children and their startled mothers, the few passing dogs and even the dripping flowers away to a paradise which was literally, if I could only find it, no more than a few hundred yards from us. (*UDP*, 13)

We are repressed, and Ballard is here to ‘rescue us’ would seem to be the conceit on which this quotation rests. However, only on first inspection does the accusation of repression in middle England appear to be a slight. Steiner puts forward a compelling argument that ‘psychoanalysis almost invents its necessary patients’.⁶¹ If nothing else, this telling quotation raises the possibility of alleviating an anxiety over the fact that the British *petit bourgeoisie* may be as hopelessly banal as it fears it is.⁶² The ignoble savage is here ennobled *for* their ignobility. It is possible that origin narratives of

⁶¹ Steiner, p. 15.

⁶² The class anxiety inherent in anthropology is a dynamic factor too expansive to linger over here, suffice it to say an attempt to ‘uncover’ an atavistic structure to the western middle class may be an obfuscating tactic to retrofit it with a stereotyped, ‘authentic’ working class cachet.

repression and sublimated aggression occasion nostalgia (albeit nostalgia for something never experienced) rather than revulsion in the anaesthetised and insulated post-war English suburbanite. Ballard, or at least the Ballard on public display, has positioned himself as a kind of Strangman-figure. He too will drain the externalised manifestation of ‘the drowned seas submerged between the lowest layers of [the] unconscious’ (*DW*, 74). Ballard’s stated ‘deep assignment,’ is to peel back the social and unearth our true selves. Just because the beam is kindly does not mean this imposition is not invasive or impervious to being read as a disease. More importantly, just because this imposition is *welcomed* does not mean it is not invasive. I am not proposing that this process is uncomplicated, since the discourses Ballard is imposing on our culture are our own, but it is convenient to think of them as an inevitable corollary of our colonial projects; a nostalgic regurgitation or repetition. Ballard’s intention is clearly didactic, and it is possible he is embraced for (among other, more flattering reasons) telling us what, if we are honest, we have already been primed to accept uncritically by a century of justified colonial guilt and recrimination. There is even a slight liberal frisson at having this confirmed, and better still by one who is, to all appearances, ‘one of us’.

For Ballard, these ambivalences can and should constitute an insurmountable hermeneutic circle no less problematic than the ‘crisis or even disablement of depth hermeneutics’⁶³ presented by the postmodernism he aggressively rejects. Ballard’s colonial perspective is shaped by his own colonial origins and indeed language. ‘Here we encounter,’ writes Taussig, ‘in one of its more potent manifestations, not only the

⁶³ Luckhurst, *The Angle Between Two Walls*, p. 7.

mystifying of Otherness as a transcendent force, but the reciprocating dependence on narrative which that mysterious stress on the mysterious entails.⁶⁴ According to Steiner, psychoanalysis and particularly Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) are stained with ineradicable nostalgic traces because, with their heavy emphasis on Thanatos as the perpetual victor over Eros, Dionysus over Apollo, Cain over Abel, the final victory of the death drive is the consummation of an innate imperative to 'return' to an Edenic state of pre-selfhood:

What the species strives for, finally, is not survival and perpetuation, but repose, perfect inertness. In Freud's visionary programme, the explosion of organic life, which has led to human evolution, was a kind of tragic anomaly, almost a fatal exuberance. It has brought with it untold pain and ecological waste. But this detour of life and consciousness will sooner or later end. An internal entropy is at work. A great quietness will return to creation as life reverts to the natural condition of the inorganic. The consummation of the libido lies in death.⁶⁵

The white (de-facing) makeup of the pierrot then also figures here as a death mask, one to be welcomed as well as derided. Perhaps Ballard's mystifying adoption of nostalgic colonial codes is an exercise in pursuing colonial logic to the point of collapse; romancing it into the grave. With its alleged teleological insistence on homogenous civilising projects, Ballard's reading of empire may be that it is in fact

⁶⁴ Taussig, p. 159.

⁶⁵ Steiner, pp. 20-21.

suicidal, in the sense that *any* totalising ideology gleefully sets the conditions of its own demise. As Bewell writes, ‘a mistaken superimposition of a “native” landscape onto a foreign one’ invites ‘a confusion of the two,’ whose consequence is ‘death’.⁶⁶ Ballard would like to hasten that speculative suicide, even if (or perhaps *because of which*) he is pulled into terrible gravity of its disappearance. That wished-for suicide, so the Ballardian logic goes, will in turn open the door to an uncovering of its engine of ideological propulsion, and the one thing it aggressively denies; that its true telos is the de-civilising of the natives at the *omphalos*, or imperial centre. Ballard even goes so far as to acknowledge that ‘I think I was just trying to recreate the landscape of Shanghai in Western Europe and the U.S.’⁶⁷ While it is infinitely more reassuring to believe this is only true of his fictions, Ballard’s project is, as unwittingly as Freud’s, transformative rather than diagnostic. Steiner confirms this in Freud’s case, at least on the individual level:

Many of Freud’s conjectures have been self-fulfilling in that private and social mores have altered so as to meet psychoanalytic expectations. It is not just a nasty joke to say that so many neuroses arose after Freud had taught us to expect them.⁶⁸

At its most cynical, the task of the anthropologist is to traverse space in order to identify cultures that can absorb their own culture’s discourses of deep memory and

⁶⁶ Bewell, p. 61.

⁶⁷ *Quotes*, p. 354.

⁶⁸ Steiner, p. 15.

ossified structure. In this way, our present is granted intelligibility and anterior context, allowing for an ‘empirical’ verification of nostalgic narratives which can then be enthroned as fact rather than nostalgia. The anthropologist creates a space for nostalgia. The anthropologist, in this case Ballard, uses extant depth models created in the colonial centres to *manufacture* an authentic, retrievable past that just so happens to resemble ‘the Proustian excitement of scenes witnessed in childhood’ to which Sinclair refers. Ballard is an inverted colonialist in the sense that he is attempting to author the centre *from* the colony, which is what his parents’ generation had been doing, albeit in a far less brutal fashion. Wagner writes:

[T]he whole range of conventional controls, our “knowledge,” our literatures of scientific and artistic achievement, our arsenal of productive technique, is a set of devices for the *invention* of a natural and phenomenal world. By assuming that we merely measure, predict, or harness this world of situations, individuals, and forces, we mask the fact that we create it.⁶⁹

It is perhaps to conquer once and for all perspectives such as Wagner’s and Taussig’s that Ballard so aggressively insists on totalising models of human behaviour. Seemingly resistant to both refutations and refinements of core Freudian and Jungian beliefs, Ballard, like Lomax, has dug in his heels and stranded himself on an epistemological terminal beach. His antipathy towards any discourse he suspects to be ‘postmodern’ may well be occasioned by a sense that they might revoke some of his anthropologist’s/missionary privileges. They may even expose the nostalgic traces in

⁶⁹ Wagner, p. 71.

his own work. A savage critic of colonial nostalgia who does not engage with discourses arising from the death of, among others, colonial grand narratives, must also depend on discourses produced coevally with, and therefore not ulterior to, colonial practices. Ballard is nostalgic for the modern. Jameson writes:

Indeed, it seems just possible that the pathos of entropy in Ballard may be just that: the *affect* released by the minute, and not unenthusiastic, exploration of this whole new world of spatiality, and the sharp pang of the death of the modern that accompanies it. At any rate, from this nostalgic and regressive perspective – that of the older modern and its temporalities – what is mourned is the memory of deep memory; what is enacted is nostalgia for nostalgia, for the grand older extinct questions of origin and telos, of deep time and the Freudian Unconscious...⁷⁰

The compulsion to ‘uncover’ or perhaps implant pathogenic deep memory structures by Ballard is itself evidence of a nostalgia for a stable, indivisible prenostalgic whole immune to further fragmentation. Like Strangman, Ballard is a colonial without an empire. His ‘orphaning’ in *Empire of the Sun* not only quite advantageously elides the question of sanction and prohibition, but also allows for an illusion of *an*nostalgia. This is not psychological realism so much as wish fulfilment. The repetition of the never-perpetrated murder of the detested colonial set in the early novels fails each time to remove what Roger Luckhurst has termed the ‘recalcitrant traces’ occasioned by the

⁷⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 156.

‘very attempt at active forgetting’, which also hold the purity of his other fictions hostage.⁷¹ *Empire of the Sun*, then, is not an attempt to provide an ‘autobiographical decoding machine’ for the preceding novels in a specious bid for acceptance into a literary elite for whom Ballard has nothing but contempt; it is an attempt to provide an autobiographical *encryption* machine for himself.⁷² That the author is, forty years hence, as ‘guilty’ of nostalgia as any of his Shanghai peers is obfuscated by a Byzantine operation of ideological deflection and diversion in *Empire of the Sun*. In *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), Paul Ricoeur writes:

The ideological process is opaque in two ways. First, it remains hidden; unlike utopia, it is unacknowledged; it masks itself by inverting itself, denouncing its adversaries in the field of competition between ideologies, for it is always the other who stoops to ideology.⁷³

By ‘othering’ his English peers in the camp and Shanghai at large, Ballard manages to arrogate nostalgia to them and gainsay his own. This also accounts for the author’s problematic identification with the Japanese in the novel. Jim’s war is with his own and with himself. Ballard is nostalgic for the mutant England found in Lunghua; that much is true because, in the Surrealist frame to which he has pinned his colours, it is the only place from which he felt exiled at the end of the war. Boym writes:

⁷¹ Roger Luckhurst, *The Angle Between Two Walls*, p. 131.

⁷² Luckhurst, ‘Petition, Repetition and “Autobiography”’, p. 690.

⁷³ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey & David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 82.

Benedict Anderson compares national recreation of the past with individual autobiography. Both are seen as narratives of identity and personhood that sprang from oblivion, estrangement and loss of the memory of home. Homecoming – return to the imagined community – is a way of patching up the gap of alienation, turning intimate longing into belonging... [i]nternal and external exiles from the imagined communities also long for home, but with fewer illusions...⁷⁴

Here we can see that a possible colonial expedient is to incarnate the ‘national recreation of the past’ abroad; a form of autobiography and of restorative nostalgia. A key strategy of the colonial project is to provide an autobiography for the colonial hub; to comment on it without the problematic delegation of that responsibility to the *true*, reified Other, to whom the responsibility for recognising their subjectivity is also shirked. However, this longed for ‘homecoming’ is in truth to be avoided at all costs, since it would ‘complete’ the autobiography and thereby ‘kill’ the imperial narrative by exposing it to its own purulent nostalgic waste. Exposing the fiction at the heart of autobiography through repetition, nostalgic disconfirmation can be avoided.

Ballard’s autobiographical novels are not ciphers for the fiction; rather, the fictions are the ciphers through which the autobiographies are undone. Ballard’s enmity towards colonialism *qua* nostalgia is undermined at every turn by his fictions, which serve not to elucidate the life, since we will never gain access to this. The fictions have the potential to demythologise the autobiographical myths; to pick away at their tapestry

⁷⁴ Boym, p. 253.

until the nostalgic traces reveal themselves. The question of where they lead is perennially open, but it is possible that the medium through which Ballard attempts to savage colonial attitudes is so intertwined with those assumptions, his fictions will always betray more about him than any dummy autobiography, no matter how finely crafted.

The choice of the novel (and indeed fictional autobiography) form itself is fraught with ineradicable nostalgic traces of colonialism. Indeed, the novels' critiques of colonialism perpetuate the colonial mythology, however negatively. If the autobiography, according to de Man, can author the author, then the 'returned colonial' can author the empire, *but the very act of authorship will always 'infect' the centre*. John Rieder condenses Edward Said's argument regarding the novel, which the autobiography must follow, into the following formula:

[T]he social space of the novel, which defines the possibilities allowed to its characters and the limits suffered by them, is involved inextricably with Western Europe's project of global expansion and control over non-European territories and cultures from the eighteenth century to the present. One could no more separate the psychological and domestic spaces represented in the novel from this emerging sense of a world knit together by Western political and economic control than one could isolate a private realm of emotions and interpersonal relationships from the history of class and property relations during the same period.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Rieder, p. 3.

Ballard's anthropological project, undertaken in a colonial format in a colonial tongue is, like the man himself, too fraught with contradictions particular to nostalgia to yield any stable meaning. He is anti-nostalgic, yet is compelled to repeat the same narratives *ad infinitum* in case we, or *he*, missed the point the first time. The disease must be spread before it consumes the host. The author's anti-nostalgic stance, we may consider, is the causeway over which a host of nostalgic apparitions trudge from the colonial era, each more ailing and effete than the last. In this dimension, we may begin to conceive of Ballard's project as not just nostalgic but suicidally so. Perhaps, according to Sinclair, this is the point:

[I]n repetition the meaning changes. The same motifs must be tested, time and again, until they lose their potency and achieve an independent identity. Perhaps that is the true project: to kill the messenger, the fool who feels obliged, there's no choice, to keep on writing.⁷⁶

Here, Sinclair introduces the idea that in the colonial idiom, the new is achieved through repetition. This is a lame and sickly new to be sure, but it is new nonetheless. The self-effacement occasioned by autobiography and, by extension, colonialism (since colonialism requires an autobiography of empire unwelcome in the homeland to be stencilled onto foreign shores), means that due to the distortions naturally installed in the autobiographical project, the only measure to be taken in order to remain ignorant of (or to survive) these distortions is to compose yet *another* autobiography,

⁷⁶ Sinclair, pp. 9-10.

or seize yet *another* territory. When the repetition stops, the suicidal contract into which the author or empire has entered becomes all-too-clear; that the unacknowledged goal of both empire and autobiography are one and the same:

Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament, and the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause.⁷⁷

It is perhaps to prolong or rather defer this inevitable death that a *fictional* autobiography is composed; to keep building, whatever the weather, to avoid the composition of that final, terminal autobiography that would be so much infectious human vellum. Ballard has many inspirations to draw from in this regard, but perhaps none so subtle or indeed profound than the Shanghai entrepreneur Hardoon:

I suspect that my father, with his passion for H.G. Wells and his belief in modern science as mankind's saviour, enjoyed Shanghai far more. He was always telling the chauffeur to slow down when we passed significant local landmarks – the Radium Institute, where cancer would be cured; the vast Hardoon estate in the centre of the International Settlement, created by an Iraqi property tycoon who was told by a fortune teller that if he ever stopped building he would die, and who then went on constructing elaborate pavilions all over Shanghai, many of them structures with no doors or interiors. (*MoL*, 9)

⁷⁷ de Man, p. 930.

In the real figure of Silas Aaron Hardoon, we see colonialism in its rawest form; expansion and repetition or death, even though these structures, like *Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women*, are (autobiographically at least) ‘sealed’, that is, buttressed against the real by the very process of repetition. We are also led, by an oblique and decades-long route, back to Ballard’s very first novel, *The Wind From Nowhere* (1961). The antagonist in this novel, in which a global storm of awesome power razes every manmade structure on the planet, builds an impermeable pyramid as a ‘moral stand against the hurricane’ (*WFN*, 170). Battered by a wind whose complex significance encompasses both the future and elemental forces *in toto*, the pyramid finally succumbs to water erosion from beneath. This fortress is undermined not by any flaws in its surface, but by the fragility of its foundations. The pyramid becomes a tomb. The British architect of the pyramid and the pierrot of the novel is named, of course, Hardoon.

In defining the colonial project, then, we might say that it is an expansionist project whose operation depends on a restorative nostalgia which, true to form, perpetually denies itself, that is, it denies that its practices and rituals are nostalgic, since that would presuppose a loss. The communities it establishes subscribe by necessity to a view of the imperial hub as essentially immutable, and it is this concept which leads to numerous repetitions of vanished rituals and behaviours abroad. These repeated traditions serve to mask nostalgia’s status as nostalgia since it would acknowledge an unacceptable vanished referent. The repetition of certain rituals serves to recast the nostalgic object as a *present* concern, and therefore emphatically not the founding myth it is.

Each repetition of the ritual in question brings with it an incremental change, distancing it further and further from its notional template and giving rise to a deviant, necrotic form of innovation. There is a necessity, therefore, for the colonialist settler never to return to the imperial centre, since such a 'homecoming' would disconfirm the permanence of the centre and expose the sophistic nostalgia at the periphery; a suicide and a murder in one. Such returns reveal the depthlessness of tradition. If restorative nostalgia is rarely considered nostalgic, return forces a confrontation with the (in)authenticity of the restorative narrative, which has hitherto been kept on life support by ritual and tradition. The only survival strategy for the returned colonialist in this instance is to imagine surrogate myths to keep the disconfirmation in abeyance. In this, Ballard's strategy is ironic since his exposure of the repetitive behaviours of the Lunghua adults takes the form of a repetition of the same essential tropes in his own fiction and fictional autobiographies. He continues the strategy of his parents' generation by other means. Since any return to the centre is toxic for the colonialist, the centre exists for them only in the act of repetition itself, which asserts its topicality at the same time as its nostalgia is denied. *Empire of the Sun* suggests that even a child can see the porosity of this approach, but Ballard's entire oeuvre, and particularly his early novels, can be seen as a novel adoption of the same through a series of ingenious feints. Every Ballard text closely hugs the shoreline of autobiography, but until *Miracles of Life*, his final 'demythologising' book, they never fully come ashore and return home.

A simple reversal of nostalgic focus, which in this case is the charge of nostalgia pressed against everyone but the author himself, allows Ballard to plausibly deny his

own whilst still spreading the contagion. Autobiography follows the same complicated imaginative path, since it seeks to mount a ‘homecoming’, that is, to ‘complete’ the life under scrutiny whilst its very composition attests to the fact that the life is not yet complete. A truly comprehensive autobiography must end with the author’s writing of the autobiography, at which point the gesture implodes and the mythopoesis at its core is exposed. The only solution to this is to fictionalise the autobiography, to locate its centre at the boundary where memory passes over into fiction. More than one fictional autobiography is a fillip in this instance since it enhances the sense of ‘fictionality’ [sic] through repetition, thereby safely incrementally ‘venting’ the infectious nostalgia without ever having to recognise it as such, weakening it in each instance until finally it is ineffectual and toothless, bearing only a scanty resemblance to its supposed template. Colonial powers depend on an imaginatively authored autobiography to sustain their satellite colonies, but these autobiographies cannot return with the colonist lest they be exposed as fictions by the inevitable processes of mutability and decay which occurred in the colonist’s absence. Although autobiography animates and vitalises the colony (with diminishing returns), it also has the power to undermine it by presenting a counter-historical image of it as static and complete rather than inchoate and ongoing. If the centre refuses to bear the weight of autobiography then the periphery must. Fiction rather than an invalidating memory must take the strain in order for charges of nostalgia to be dismissed. In Ballard’s case, to stop building these ‘blind’ edifices would allow nostalgia to gain ground on his fictions. Each one of his novels is therefore a colony designed to bear the load of an unacknowledged, perhaps nostalgic autobiography; a ruse which functions to throw nostalgia off the scent of the boy who never came home. What becomes clear in this process is the fact that any rejection of nostalgia is only a rejection of an *isolated nostalgic object*, not the

sentiment itself. This rejection of the nostalgic object is supported by an accompanying rejection of the figure or group who experience nostalgia for the object in contention, which is to say the rejection is twofold. Furthermore, that same rejection must be ideologically buttressed by a plausibly deniable nostalgia since the only viable alternative to the former nostalgia must be a ‘state of grace’ logically prior to it. We may therefore complement Boym’s definition of ‘restorative nostalgia’ with a further observation, which is that the restorative nostalgic not only denies their own nostalgia, but also shores up this position by accusing others of nostalgia. ‘Nostalgic scapegoating’ would be an apposite term, supporting Bewell’s hypothesis that ‘Western representations of disease are dialectical structures: fearing our own collapse, we project this fear and thus gain control of it by locating disease in others, especially in those we believe are particularly prone to sickness.’⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Bewell, p. 5.

3. Wagons West: North American Frontier Nostalgia

*Hey Nostradamus! Did you predict that once we found the Promised Land
we'd all start offing each other? And did you predict that once we found the
Promised Land, it would be the final Promised Land, and there'd never be
another one again? (HN, 90)*

Douglas Coupland, *Hey! Nostradamus*

Unlike Ballard's fictions, which carry deep, ambivalently-worn colonial scars, Douglas Coupland's expose the frightening instability of North American nostalgic narratives. The term 'North American' rather than simply 'American' is apposite because, as a German-born Canadian, and more specifically a *Vancouverite* Canadian, Coupland writes of both Canadian and U.S. culture with debatably equal authority. Just as Ballard's status as a vague 'a-pat' could be construed as a privileged position from which to observe and report on the British suburban middle-class, Coupland's German/Canadian origins may also allow him to view the United States with a similar, though by no means identical, outsider's clarity. It is worth noting that Coupland's early novels are set predominantly in the United States, but from *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998) onwards, the balance has shifted in favour of Canada as his narrative setting of choice. His characters routinely flit back and forth across borders and frontiers throughout his oeuvre, and this is not unintentional. In the section entitled 'Border' in Coupland's experimental photographic record of, and modest hymn to his home country, *Souvenir of Canada 2* (2004), Coupland demonstrates that the act of crossing political, ideological and often ontological borders can reveal startling truths. He recounts an episode from October 2001 in which, on an 'empty... post-9/11 afternoon', his aunt attempted to cross the Canada/U.S. border to 'visit friends in

Maine' (SOC2, 11). Pulled over by a U.S. Customs and Immigration Official, she was informed that he was “looking at your car on the radioactivity scanner... and you’re lit up like a Christmas tree” (SOC2, 11). Coupland’s aunt then informed the guard that she had been subjected to a bone scan at McGill University, allaying the Official’s worst fears. ‘Scanners searching for enriched uranium and weapons triggers also detected my aunt’s arthritis’, Coupland marvels, adding that ‘we live in an age of miracles and wonders’ (SOC2, 11). This episode not only demonstrates that a post-9/11 world is not without hope, but also that the act of crossing borders can serve a diagnostic function, allowing us to see ourselves from hitherto inconceivable angles. Borders and frontiers are therefore key tropes in Coupland’s fiction.

In his philippic article ‘Canada in a Coma’ (2001), Jefferson Faye claims that Coupland ‘is deeply aware and vehemently opposed to the damage done to Canada by exported “American” culture’.¹ Faye’s assessment of Coupland’s work attempts to position him as anti-American, but this is not the case. Coupland’s work is instead characterised by an oscillation between sympathy and suspicion towards the United States and its nostalgic manifestations. As far as Canada is concerned, it would be churlish to suggest that it is under some form of cultural siege, since its own output flourishes within its own borders, and yet Coupland does freely own that Canada is ‘inundated with American media from every conceivable outlet’ (SOC, 114). While the same case may be made for any Anglophone country in the world, Canada’s proximity and openness to the United States makes any isolation of its more subtle cultural artefacts supremely difficult. Which forms or even motifs in aesthetics, music

¹ Jefferson Faye, ‘Review Essay: Canada in a Coma’, *The American Review of Canadian Studies* 31, 3 (Autumn 2001), 501-510 (p. 501).

and literature may we posit as uniquely Canadian? Margaret Atwood has attempted to answer this question in her wide-ranging and scholarly book *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), arguing that Canadian literature can be differentiated from American literature by first defining the latter. For Atwood, American literature is dominated by musings on the meaning of its own Frontier:

Possibly the symbol for America is The Frontier, a flexible idea that contains many elements dear to the American heart: it suggests a place that is *new*, where the old order can be discarded [...] a line that is always expanding, taking in or “conquering” ever-fresh virgin territory (be it The West, the rest of the world, outer space, Poverty or The Regions of The Mind); it holds out a hope, never fulfilled but always promised, of Utopia, the perfect human society.²

For Atwood, the ongoing American cultural conversation is dominated by its problematic relationship with its own geography. Even the inner landscapes and interzones of the counterculture are frontiers to be conquered. Atwood’s suspicion of this insatiable thirst for novelty is understandable given that this thirst, however ennobling, has often led it into turbid ethical waters. North America’s thorny relationship with the western frontier is thoroughly documented, the subject of a vast number of studies produced both within and without the continent, yet for Atwood, the lack of commentary on the Canadian psyche abets an inferiority complex manifested in Canadian cultural output. ‘Let us suppose, for the sake of argument’, Atwood

² Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: McLlland & Stewart, 2004), p. 40.

writes, ‘that Canada as a whole is a victim, or an “oppressed minority,” or “exploited.”’³ The author puts forward this supposition as something of a straw dog, acknowledging that much Canadian literature repudiates this victimhood, but she successfully argues that even when this is the case, victimhood is still the primary narrative to be discredited, and thus dominates the cultural conversation. The second pillar of Canadian literature, or the ‘central symbol’ for Atwood is survival:

Like the Frontier and the Island, it is a multifaceted and adaptable idea. For early explorers and settlers, it meant bare survival in the face of “hostile” elements and/or natives: carving out a place and a way of keeping alive. But the word can also suggest survival of a crisis or disaster, like a hurricane or a wreck, and many Canadian poems have this kind of survival as a theme.⁴

With the welter of references to information technology, commodified emotions and ubiquitous irony, Coupland’s fictions may appear to deviate from this model. However, Atwood goes on to propose that survival as the preeminent theme in Canadian literature has become more intimate and oblique in the post-industrial age:

A preoccupation with one’s survival is necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival. In earlier writers these obstacles are external – the land, the climate, and so forth. In later writers the obstacles become both harder to identify and more internal; they are no longer obstacles to physical

³ Atwood, p. 45.

⁴ Atwood, p. 41.

survival but obstacles to what we may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being.⁵

The above observation by Atwood is absolutely central to Coupland's ongoing project; the question of the soul's survival in a cynical, media-saturated, accelerated-capitalist culture. Coupland himself continues this reading many years after Atwood first proposes this reformulation of Canadian survival narratives:

Survival has always dominated Canada's history, from the time of the last ice age up to the day you read these words. And it will continue to do so, but survival no longer means portaging through unmapped birch forests that stretch past the horizon, or wintering inside a hut while the wind blows at minus 60°Celsius (-75°F) outside. Survival now means not being absorbed into something else and not being seduced by visions of short-term financial gain. (SOC, 139)

Coupland's novels are understandably considered by many to be commentaries on largely American cultural crises, and yet these crises were in some cases inarticulable in a primarily American idiom. Their articulation depended, in the first efflorescence of a 'Gen-X' culture the American mainstream did not initially understand, on a heavily ironic Canadian idiom. 'There is a long history of argument', posits Linda Hutcheon, 'that the key to Canadian identity is irony, that a people used to dealing

⁵ Atwood, p. 42.

with national, regional, ethnic and linguistic multiplicities, tensions, and divisions have no alternative.⁶

American culture had been primed for an acknowledgment of failure by, amongst others, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Arthur Miller and David Mamet, but it can be argued that it was caught short in its attempts to process the concomitant negative effects of its total *success* following the Cold War. For a short time, an entire generation of disaffected young American ‘slackers’ became subtly Canadian in their outlook, in thrall to an ironic victim complex brought about by the baby-boomers’ seemingly total economic conquest of the inner and outer worlds; dispirited by the implications of that success for the survival of authentic emotion and a sense of the future as a frontier of possibility. A catch-as-catch-can, indiscriminate nostalgia for any and all frontiers, however artificial, was inevitable in Coupland’s terms. Survival as a motif, as we shall see, also inheres in Canadian/American nostalgia of the postmodern era. Atwood writes, ‘there is another use of the word as well: a survival can be a vestige of a vanished order which has managed to survive after its time has passed, like a primitive reptile.’⁷ This chapter will address Coupland’s treatment of North American frontier nostalgia as refracted through his ironic Canadian prism, focusing in particular on these works by Coupland: *Microserfs* (1995), *Generation X* (1991), *Life After God* (1994), *Souvenir of Canada* (2002) and *The Gum Thief* (2007).

Nostalgia for the pioneer experience has been dealt with expansively in Robert McGill’s ‘Sublime Simulacrum: Vancouver in Douglas Coupland’s Geography of

⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 7.

⁷ Atwood, p. 41.

Apocalypse' (2000). McGill claims that Coupland's 'interest is in the anxieties of the descendants of the pioneers, people who had no part in the project of westward expansion but who nevertheless find themselves members of the society that the expansion shaped and whose surrounding geography can both confirm and deny their anxieties.'⁸ The goal of this chapter is to build on these groundbreaking claims and explore the various nostalgic prostheses devised or deployed by North Americans to artificially extend their frontier in Coupland's texts. This has been achieved, I propose, in three ways: the first is in the voracious consumption and repositioning of the Old World as a new frontier through tourism; the second is in the retreat from the western frontier *back* into the American desert; the third and most effective is in the epistemologically murky creation/conquest of so-called cyberspace. These three strategies have met with varying degrees of success, and all have left the American flank exposed to a cutting irony. A secondary goal of the chapter, and the reason why it focuses only on Coupland, is to provide a foundation for further explorations of 'Couplandesque' nostalgia in the thesis as a whole.

i.

The Americanisation of Europe, culminating in the profoundly significant construction of Eurodisney/Disneyland Paris in 1992, levelled off during the catastrophic breakdown in Euro-American diplomacy that was the George W. Bush presidency. The NASA space program, prohibitively expensive and politically superfluous after the end of the Cold War, hobbled into the 21st century with a slashed budget and little

⁸ Robert McGill, "Sublime Simulacrum: Vancouver in Douglas Coupland's Geography of Apocalypse" *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 70 (Spring 2000), 252-277 (p. 258).

public interest. The internet, on the other hand, is defensibly the most important communication tool since the railroad. In his paradigmatic but controversial thesis *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1920), Frederick Jackson Turner describes ‘the settlers beyond the Rocky Mountains’ in the early pioneer days as ‘need[ing] means of communication with the east’,⁹ a need which was satisfied with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. That this engine of real physical conveyance also acted as a vital mode of communication is a concept that has never disappeared in North America. The space of communication is also ‘haunted’ by the space of physical transit and vice versa. Extensions of virtual space are a tolerable nostalgic surrogate for extensions of physical space too. This rapid apprehension of cyberspace as a form of virtual space in its own right is a bizarre development indeed since the technology itself (as with the British mail trains of the 1930s and by extension all communications technology) is not only about extending physical space into the virtual, but also, according to John Tomlinson, ‘about the *closing of the gap* between a point of arrival and a point of departure’.¹⁰ The virtual interval created by the abridgement, or more accurately the *annihilation*, of the physical interval, is now *itself* considered a space of expansion, opportunity and, of course, exploitation. According to this logic, technologies which enable users to ‘demolish[...] distance’¹¹ also give rise to spatial surrogates charged with metaphysical convolutions which stand little chance of being untangled here. It is enough to state that the ‘inter’ – i.e. the collapsed space between loci – has itself become a frontier ripe for exploration and

⁹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 7.

¹⁰ John Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2007), p. 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

exploitation. This is not only to do with the exhaustion of habitable space, but also economics, as Abe in Coupland's *Microserfs* (1995) observes:

[Abe] said that because everyone's so poor these days, the 90s will be a decade with no architectural legacy or style – everyone's too poor to put up new buildings. He said that code is the architecture of the '90s. (MS, 23)

The days of the United States' monopoly of virtual space are long gone, but the operating systems, search engines and web browsers relied upon by users across the globe are still almost all produced by companies on the west coast of North America. As outwardly democratic as these technological developments are, their content is still very much directed by American trends, particularly libertarian notions of freedom and autonomy. They are also restoratively nostalgic. 'A system of administration was not what the West demanded; it wanted land'¹² Turner proposes. Intriguingly, the nostalgia in this instance does not require a locus that constitutes 'home' for its operation but *movement*, and it is this distinction among others that differentiates the frontier mentality from the colonial. The focus of the colonial project is always the centre, meaning it legitimises itself through the conviction that making the periphery resemble the centre as closely as possible amounts to a civilising mission. The frontier project, on the other hand, is focused on the periphery, hence the suspicion of centralised power across the Atlantic. 'Movement has been its dominant fact', Turner continues, 'and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continue to demand a wider field for its exercise.'¹³ Where the colonialist is

¹² Turner, p. 25.

¹³ Turner, p. 38.

nostalgic for the (possibly never encountered) imperial navel, the pioneers presented with a delimited frontier (the pioneers' descendants) are nostalgic for an equally specious pioneer *praxis*. The colonialist is under no illusions that he is embarking on a mission in which the often brutal subjugation of an indigenous people is a necessary-but-regrettable step towards their 'edification' under the imperial banner. The settlers of the North American continent, however, abandoned this policy in favour of smallpox-infested blankets and crackling gunfire. To legitimise the illusion of 'free land', the land had to be cleared of obstructions. The pioneer descendant in Coupland's fictions yearns, knowingly or not, for free land that will itself yield to yet more free land and so on. This curious conception of extant land as *tabula rasa* persists in America, albeit in mutant form. In *America* (1986) Baudrillard uses the jet engine as a condensation of this hypothesis:

A theoretical question here materialised in the objective conditions of a journey which is no longer a journey and therefore carries with it a fundamental rule: aim for the point of no return. This is the key. And the crucial moment is that brutal instant which reveals that the journey has no end, that there is no longer any reason for it to come to an end. Beyond a certain point, it is movement itself that changes. Movement which moves through space of its own volition changes into an absorption by space itself – end of resistance, end of the scene of the journey as such (exactly as the jet engine is no longer an energy of space-penetration, but propels itself by creating a vacuum in front of it that sucks it forward [...])¹⁴

¹⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 10-11.

The pioneer descendant yearns for a geographical frontier to explore and a future in which to explore it, but, as Turner laments, ‘never again will such gifts of free land present themselves’.¹⁵ He therefore constructs an endless frontier from the minerals at hand, creating a silicon vacuum ahead of him through which he no longer moves, but instead *is* moved. That *something* has been brutally sucked in to this fearsome engine is immaterial. His nostalgia is implacable because it is nostalgia for *movement*, and thus the movement must change in order for movement itself to keep moving. It is the finitude of the world that finally thwarts the pioneer, and his offspring have been formulating increasingly complex ways of satiating this inherited nostalgic impulse for over a century. In his *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (posthumously published in translation in 2006), Walter Benjamin understands this motile nostalgia on the most intimate level:

Indeed, what I seek in it [a writing box] is just that: my entire childhood, concentrated in the movement [*Griff*] by which my hand slid the letters into the groove, where they would be arranged to form words. My hand can still dream of this movement, but it can no longer awaken so as actually to perform it. By the same token, I can dream of the way I once learned to walk. But that doesn’t help. I now know how to walk; there is no more learning to walk.¹⁶

Having achieved the appropriate gait for its utopian dream, the American pioneer spirit ran out of land, but not the nostalgic desire to traverse it. Then a curious thing

¹⁵ Turner, p. 38.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, trans. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 141-142.

happened; improving the means of traversing its own surface became a subaltern, but equally demanding, frontier. Added to this, one apprehension of Manifest Destiny came to depend on movement having always been the goal. While America was the New Canaan, the City upon a Hill was always over the *next* hill. The tribes of the New Israel split over the issue of whether being an American meant movement or settlement. A *further* split then took place over the issue of whether movement was to be an end in itself or the means by which the sublime immensity of America could be rendered comprehensible once and for all. A million Kerouacs took to the road for the former, while Pan Am and the Ford Motor Company grappled with the latter. Suffice it to say the latter won out, recruiting even the children of the counterculture to a vacuous 21st century infatuation with long-haul flights to Europe; the hippie trail without the trailing.¹⁷

Europe (and indeed travel in general) is a subaltern but significant nostalgic trope in Coupland's fictions. One new horizon bolted on to the westward expansion in Coupland's fictions is therefore the Old World. The depletion of new horizons is so complete in Coupland's fictions that for the young at least, one mode of satiating the need for movement is to commit the un-American sin of looking nostalgically backwards, to Europe; the old as a new frontier, however epistemologically hazy.

In Coupland's *The Gum Thief* (2007), Bethany, a young 'goth' and dissatisfied Staples employee who, in her own words is 'the dead girl whose locker you spat on

¹⁷ The often-stereotyped Beatnik tradition, loosely established by Kerouac, John Clellan Holmes and Allen Ginsberg was as dependent on a nostalgic infatuation with Native American nomadism as it was on Whitman, Thoreau and Transcendentalism.

somewhere between recess and lunch' begins a correspondence with divorced, failed novelist and co-worker Roger (*GT*, 6). Frequently cataloguing his personal and professional failures, setting down on paper his belief that he has 'flubbed the few chances [he] had in life', Roger is given to doleful nostalgic musings, the pain of which is compounded by his awareness that they are self-indulgent (*GT*, 2). At the novel's opening, the two protagonists begin as unlikely confidantes, sharing with each other their disappointments, their feelings of loneliness and their apocalyptic anxieties. The book is a playful, postmodern epistolary novel, interspersed with sections from Roger's unpublished novel *Glove Pond*. Its intimate canvas and format notwithstanding, Bethany and Roger's exchanged letters address the defining alienating influences of our age. As Bethany and Roger's families are slowly integrated through the softly-luddite gesture of letter-writing, the intimacy of the written word presents new opportunities for reconciliation and fellowship.

In one memorable episode in the novel, Bethany expresses her desire to escape her life in America and renew herself in Europe, which she eventually attempts with disappointing results. Of Europe's mystique, she writes:

I dream of going to Europe one day. What exactly is it about Europe? People go there and suddenly all of their problems are solved, and as a bonus they're suddenly sophisticated and glam when they come back. *Hello, I'm Count Chocula. Welcome to my chateau. We'll dine on peacock livers atop little pieces of toast cut into triangles with the crusts removed.* (*GT*, 72)

Aping her peers, Bethany articulates the American perspective on Europe as an epicene, monocultural bloc. She is already awake to the dubious representations of the continent, and yet cannot resist its cartoon-like, genteel allure. Bethany's Fed-Ex'd missives become more and more cynical as Europe fails to live up to her expectations. Initially elated because the tiny sliver of England she has seen – north west London – is dominated by 'art and beauty and music and stuff everywhere' (GT, 175), she soon realises that the most banal excesses of American culture, exemplified by the Staples stationary superstore, have infiltrated Europe too. Bethany tells Roger, '[t]oday I walked past a Staples on Oxford High Street and broke out laughing: they're identical to the ones back home' (GT, 180). For Bethany, the reality of globalisation is at once profoundly disappointing and hilarious.

Other cultural assumptions are dispelled by cosmopolitan London, leading Bethany to remark that 'we've gone to a few pubs, and they're actually not as pubby as I'd hoped' (GT, 176). The nostalgic, tourist-brochure London is nowhere to be found, and it ceases to be a frontier so much as a generic, simonised global city. 'Sometimes I wonder if I'm actually here in London', Bethany writes (GT, 192). Her romantic flight from home to a great new frontier leads her to a frontier whose only secrets to impart are banal.

Finding no revelation in England, Bethany crosses the channel into mainland Europe, hoping to find her elusive new frontier there, but her efforts are frustrated by a disappointment of a very different kind. Instead of finding a culture which fails to live up to its exported nostalgic standard, it is the total success of France's efforts which prove to be dispiriting:

It's so fucking *old* here, Roger, so fucking *old*. The concierge told me they don't allow anything to be built that might prevent them from making Paris look like the seventeenth century if a movie were to be filmed. (*GT*, 209)

In its way, Paris seems to Bethany to be, if anything, more inauthentic than London. It is *so* close to its exported image that it smacks of unreality; a scrupulously-maintained film set, wherein all inaccuracies are brutally removed. It is a Las Vegas of sorts, only with the dubious imprimatur of the Real to sustain it.

In all cases, Europe proves to be a dead end as far as the sought-after new frontier is concerned. The disparity between Bethany's Europe-of-the-mind and modern Europe only heightens her sense of exile. Initially believing herself to be more at home among the bohemians of Europe, Bethany's nostalgia for new frontiers is violently disconfirmed by an actual encounter. A newly-anxious frontier nostalgia finds no repose in the old world for Coupland's characters because the old world has taken on too many of the assumptions of the new, and those vestiges which remain are aestheticised.

An implied consequence of this return to an ancestral Europe is that, unlike some other national nostalgias, America's power means that its nostalgia cannot leave its object unchanged. If Europe has, through its exposure to North American tourists and companies, changed itself into an environment more recognisable and therefore hospitable to American expectations, the paradox of the American nostalgic gaze has given rise to *the new*. An ambivalently rejuvenated Europe (and indeed world) has had

to become simultaneously more American and therefore *more itself* inasmuch as it has had to more closely follow transatlantic expectations of its own culture, in order to retain a degree of economic vitality. In emphasising its ‘oldness’, Europe has had to renew itself. The benignity of these attempts, allied to the often enthusiastically-received Americanisation of European culture by its inhabitants, has at once fulfilled and disappointed the American nostalgic gaze. At no point in history has a continent had to pursue new innovations and technologies in order to enhance its cachet of tradition and permanence. One wonders how many European traditions and architectural styles would have been resurrected or ring-fenced without the promise of a tide of American dollars to make such projects worthwhile.

ii.

We have established that, having been conquered, the North American frontier receded as a geographical frontier, to be eventually replaced with the frontier of movement. Fundamental to this is the idea of speed. For Tomlinson, ‘speed’ holds a number of connotations, so rather than ‘calculable, *relative* rate of movement or incident’, the focus must be on ‘*rapid* speed, speed thought of as remarkable in its increase’.¹⁸ To further clarify, the speed with which the horizon could be obtained itself became the horizon. ‘Rapid speed’ is a value which itself accrues speed from one generation to the next. As Tomlinson puts it, ‘the concept of speed points towards its increase’.¹⁹ In the American century and beyond, rapid speed had to accelerate. And so we come to Coupland’s first novel, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991). The

¹⁸ Tomlinson, p. 2.

¹⁹ Ibid.

title can be misread as the proclamation of a culture hurtling forwards at tremendous speed, but this is not the dynamic speed of American optimism; if it were, the subtitle would be ‘Tales for an Accelerating Culture.’ As it is, Coupland’s title refers to a terminal velocity; to what Paul Virilio terms a ‘the wall that stands at the limit of acceleration’.²⁰ In this novel, Coupland’s is a *fin-de-millennium/commencement-du-siècle* characterised by the impossibility of further acceleration, of any increase in rapid speed. Beyond instantaneity, there is only the vacuum of Baudrillard’s jet engine. He writes:

Speed is simply the rite that initiates us into emptiness: a nostalgic desire for forms to revert to immobility, concealed beneath the very intensification of their mobility. Akin to the nostalgia for living forms that haunts geometry.²¹

Acceleration, according to Baudrillard, is therefore a means by which total immobility can be achieved; a relativistic peak in which time stops as the light threshold is approached. This is, according to Andrew Tate, merely another way of looking at ‘the speeded-up, permanent present tense of today’²² found in Coupland’s novels. On the social plane, we may ground this lofty metaphor in what Tomlinson terms ‘sedentary speed’, that is ‘experienc[ing] time pressure, haste, hurry and rush – all of these essentially cultural-phenomenological rather than physical descriptions – without ever stirring from our office desk.’²³ The realisation of this nostalgic enterprise is *so*

²⁰ Paul Virilio, *Virilio Live: Selected Interviews*, ed. by John Armitage (London: Sage Publications, 2001), p. 98.

²¹ Baudrillard, *America*, p. 7.

²² Andrew Tate, *Douglas Coupland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 74.

²³ Tomlinson, p. 3.

complete, at least in the 1990s of Coupland's first novel, that it carries with it its own unique anxieties and pressures. In this condition of breakneck immobility, all agency is exhausted as the subject becomes little more than a passenger. There is no choice but to exercise infinite consumer choice; temporal immediacy snuffs out tactile immediacy. Screens mediate everything, down to the windscreen of the automobile. "Close your eyes and look closely at what you've spilled" laments Claire in *Generation X* as she points to a pool of petroleum; "Smell the future" (GX, 141). Even the future has a tactile quality; it is also, disturbingly enough in this instance, fuel for the present. Virilio comprehends the implications of this:

Each departure is a distancing [*écartement*] that deprives us of contact, of direct experience; each instance of vehicular mediation is nothing other than a drawing and quartering [*écartèlement*], a torture of the locomotive body, a sensory privation of the passenger.²⁴

What is nostalgically sought in Coupland's novels, then, is a reclaimed sense of self-initiated movement; not the stasis sought by the literary modernists, but achievable, *anthropic* speed. 'Opting out' is one mechanism by which this can theoretically be achieved, although practically this is more difficult than it appears. In this sense, Coupland's 1991 debut has not dated as much as perhaps its author would have liked. Its profound sense of belatedness remains in our post-millennial *weltenschauung*, as does its obsession with the transient and the disposable. The anxieties it isolates have, if anything become even more acute in the 19 years at this time of writing since its publication. For a book deemed absolutely of its moment by critics at the time, it is

²⁴ Paul Virilio, *Negative Horizon*, trans. by Michael Degener (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 42.

curious that one of its motifs is the toxicity of nostalgia. Its protagonists, Andy, Dag and Claire retreat in horror from the 1990s to their budget desert oasis in Palm Springs, California, and there they become eremite hipster raconteurs, spinning micronarratives around campfires to fill the void left by grand narratives grown remote as Norse mythology. ‘[T]he world has gotten too big’ Dag muses, ‘way beyond our capacity to tell stories about it, and so all we’re stuck with are these blips and chunks and snippets on bumpers’ (*GX*, 6). By ‘world’, Dag (and by extension Coupland) does not mean a lattice of geo-political borders; if anything, at Coupland’s time of writing, *that* world had contracted substantially due to the end of, or rather decade-long armistice in, the cold war. Instead, he means a sublime complex of internecine epistemes, inscrutable in their entirety. The ‘bigger’ the world in terms of recorded data, the more information is required to describe that world. ‘Too big’ and ‘too fast’ are conjoined twins. When suspended in the discourse of speed, the mention of car bumpers also raises the issue of the *transience* of those ‘blips and chunks and snippets’. They pass at speed, legible for seconds at best, examples of what Benjamin sees as a hallmark of Baudelaire’s poetry, which is ‘love at last sight... a farewell forever’.²⁵

‘We live small lives on the periphery’, Andy rhapsodises in *Generation X*. ‘We are marginalized and there’s a great deal in which we choose not to participate. We wanted silence and we have that silence now’ (*GX*, 14). However, silence is not really what the Gen X-ers of the novel need or crave; it is movement, but at a pace at which change can be comprehended as well as fleetingly apprehended. What is particularly

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 152-196 (p. 166).

striking about this early presentation of the novel's conceit is that, contrary to what has become mass culture's 'post-modern' orthodoxy, there is no euphoria or amphetamine exhilaration associated with speed here. As playful and as cuttingly ironic as the novel is, at its heart is an almost animistic air of lamentation for elemental and temporal certainties, for what Mark Forshaw defines as 'a non-negotiable and thereby sovereign truth, and a radical narrowing of the possibilities of signification in the world'.²⁶ In *Microserfs*, Ethan condenses this nostalgic attitude into a plaintive moan:

You know how when somebody says, 'Remember that party at the beach last year?' and you say, 'Oh God, was that last *year*? It feels like last *month*'? If I'm going to live a year, I want my whole year's worth of year. I don't want it feeling like only last month. Everything I do is an attempt to make time 'feel' like time again – to make it *feel* longer. I get my time in bulk. (MS, 165)

iii.

As narrator, Andy sadly observes that West Palm Springs, like the modern world is 'a land so empty that all objects placed on its breathing, hot skin become objects of irony' (GX, 19). Nothing changes. There is no real difference between being a passenger – that is, *being moved* so rapidly the pace renders everything static and untouchable, and remaining so still that stasis itself amounts to a shirked

²⁶ Mark Forshaw, 'Douglas Coupland: In and Out of 'Ironic Hell'' *Critical Survey* 12, 3 (2000), 39-58 (p. 50).

responsibility. The ‘slacker’ in Coupland’s oeuvre is merely an individual suffering acute motion sickness.

Far from the ludic free-for-all some cultural commentators believed the spiral into cultural and epistemological entropy of the post-modern moment would be, its younger inhabitants instead look nostalgically for solid ground beneath their feet on which to walk at a humanly achievable pace, towards a horizon that does not rush towards them, but rather towards which they can walk. In one extreme case in Coupland’s *Eleanor Rigby* (2004), lonely spinster Liz Dunn’s reconciliation with Jeremy, the teenage son she gave up for adoption, takes a surreal turn when she ‘sees Jeremy, crawling westward... along the highway’s edge’ (*ER*, 51). When asked for an explanation for this eccentric behaviour, he responds ‘I need to follow a light... It’s humble’ (*ER*, 51). The religious substratum of the concept of pilgrimage is restored by Coupland in this exchange. The colossal abridgment of distance effected by communications technology and vehicular engineering is apprehended by Coupland as a kind of sloth towards pilgrimage. The early pioneers’ peregrinations across the North American continent were both arduous and motivated by a yearning to attain a new Eden. Jeremy’s gesture of humility, redolent of the thousands of pilgrims who annually crawl to the Portuguese Marian shrine of Fatima, stems from an awareness that the horizon, the source of light in the west, should be approached neither cheaply nor frivolously.

The tension is really between two types of motion; one in which the subject remains static while the horizon or frontier rushes towards them in an incomprehensible assault, and one in which the subject approaches the horizon on the bloodied but

sensate feet of the pilgrim. This movement cannot be dissociated from *vision*. Before eating up space ‘with a voracity unique in the history of human migrations’, Baudrillard writes, ‘the pioneer eats it up with his eyes – in America *everything begins and ends with covetousness of the eyes*.’²⁷ However, the speed with which all objects and pieces of information are presented (and then disappear) prohibits the perception of anything other than a blur; the heraldic roar of an oncoming train that no longer stops at any station.

According to Coupland, Americans are all temporal itinerants; to couch it in nostalgic terms, Americans are *homeless* in time precisely because they have conquered the physical frontier. ‘Theirs [America’s] is the crisis of an achieved utopia’, proposes Baudrillard, ‘confronted with the problem of its duration and permanence.’²⁸ This statement is ambivalent; not only does it cover the difficulty of *ensuring* the permanence of its utopia, but also the difficulty of *undoing* that permanence; of having a limitless horizon that is both temporal *and* geographical before it once again. The utopian promise of America depends on its always *not yet having been realised*. Paradise must always be in the *process* of being regained, since any solid comprehension of its content would render it secular and profane. The frontier must always be achievable, but never achieved. According to Virilio, it is not land but sky that offers the true ever-receding horizon:

It is again because of the roundness of the planet that the ‘ever-changing skyline’ of the pioneers can never be reached, that it slips away and endlessly

²⁷ Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2005), p. 20.

²⁸ Baudrillard, *America*, p. 77.

recedes as they approach it. It is merely a delusion, an evanescent optical illusion – not so much an appearance *as a trans-appearance*.²⁹

iv.

In the United States, the sense is never lost that the city is always in the desert. The desert in Coupland's stories is a synecdoche for North American culture en bloc. The continent and the countries it comprises generate by necessity an image of illimitable expanse in order to cope with the fact that they have rendered themselves traversable in a matter of hours rather than years. In *Souvenir of Canada*, Coupland writes:

...I sit in awe of the early pioneers, of their treks across the land, moving so far and so deeply into an unknown world, excruciatingly slowly while pursuing the promised land – and perhaps topping the crest of the hill and then seeing that promised land off in the distance, only to find a mighty un-European river in need of traversing or a lake so big it looked like a sea. What went through their minds? Water must have seemed cruel and inevitable and ever present. (SOC, 122)

North America has miniaturised its immensity through the mass production and use of automobiles. The vast salt flats of Utah, for instance, generate a sense of infinity which the automobile annihilates; the horizon can be reached as well as seen.

²⁹ Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, p. 21.

Walter Benjamin's reformulation of the *flâneur*, positioned as a nostalgic revenant even at Benjamin's time of writing, can be introduced into the wilderness. In Benjamin's terms, the *flâneur* is ineluctably European and metropolitan, haunting the arcades of the *fin-de-siecle* metropolis, 'stroll[ing] to pass the time that his wealth affords him, treating the people who pass and the objects he sees as texts for his own pleasure. An anonymous face in the multitude, the *flâneur* is free to probe his surroundings for clues and hints that may go unnoticed by the others.'³⁰ American cities, however, are not constructed in the same way as the archetypal European metropolis. In Paris, London or Rome, the cities vertiginously digest themselves around every corner, doubling back and intersecting other streets in the chaotic medieval style favoured on this continent. American cities rely on the crystalline Euclidian geometry of grids and blocks. It is harder to lose oneself, as the *flâneur* is wont to do, in these serried environments. Benjamin says of the *flâneur*, 'the man of leisure can indulge in the perambulations of the *flâneur* only if as such he is already out of place.'³¹ Purposeful displacement of the self is not possible in an American city of this type; one need only orientate oneself by consulting the two-dimensional spatial grid reference of a name and a number to discover how many blocks one is from one's point of origin. Remembering, as the calling of the *flâneur*, whose perambulations give rise to intimations of the true face of transience, depends solely on his ability to be an aimless pedestrian. American cities rarely present an opportunity for this kind of goalless pilgrimage. This is a puzzling strategy for a nation whose very promise is one of amnesia. Even though a true, traceless forgetting of the travails presented by the

³⁰ Helen Marcel Crickenberger, 'The Flaneur'. *The Arcades Project Project or The Rhetoric of Hypertext*. 2005. <http://www.thelemming.com/lemming/dissertation-web/home/flaneur.html> (27 January 2007).

³¹ Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', p. 169.

Old World is impossible, the structure of cities in which one's point of origin can be found with relative ease appears inimical to this desire. It could be that 'losing oneself' is one element of the Old World metropolis Americans were all too willing to forget, yet the grid layout of these new cities acts as a giant mnemonic. An essential component of the nostalgic's apprehension of the American frontier is the happy accident of getting lost. The American desert, as numinous and antediluvian as any in the world, is the only landscape in which orientation in conventional space/time becomes problematic. One can still, barring unfortunate obstructions such as Las Vegas, get lost, but only if one abandons the car by the roadside and *walks*.

In his short story 'In The Desert' in *Life After God*, Coupland's unnamed drug trafficker says of driving that the activity 'itself occupies a good chunk of brain cells that otherwise would be giving you trouble overloading your thinking. New scenery continually erases what came before; memory is lost, shuffled, relabelled and forgotten' (LG, 142). This attitude chimes with Baudrillard's, who says of the American driving experience that it 'is a spectacular form of amnesia. Everything is to be discovered, everything to be obliterated.'³² Driving is therefore closer in spirit to the amnesiac movement westward of the pioneers, and yet for Coupland, the speed necessary to achieve this amnesia comes at too high a price. Virilio's meditations on speed also provide an essential skeleton for Coupland and Baudrillard's contiguous assertions:

The generative axis of an apparent movement materialises suddenly through the speed of the machine, but this concretisation is totally relative to the

³² Baudrillard, *America*, p. 9.

moment, for the object that hurls itself upon the layer of the windscreen will also be as quickly forgotten as perceived, stored away in the prop room, it will soon disappear in the rear window.³³

Flânerie, then, as the calling of those ‘unwilling to forgo the life of a gentleman of leisure’³⁴ is deeply inimical to this amnesiac condition brought about by speed. Stillness, strolling and reflection are his preserve, yet we have established that this mode of being is problematic at best in the American city, no more so than in Los Angeles, the focus of *Miss Wyoming*. LA is a post-urban city, like the desert ‘in love with its limitless horizontality’,³⁵ but unlike any European city built around the horse and trap or the pedestrian, this is a city built around and an extension of the automobile. Los Angeles contains 6,500 miles of non-freeway roads and over 160 miles of freeway. It is a city to be viewed at speed. The class system in LA is in part informed by automotive transit and the lack thereof. Those too poor to own cars are stranded, like Maitland in Ballard’s *Concrete Island* (1974), in the city’s most uninhabitable zones. Reflection and meditations undertaken in motion, then, are impossible in this city that resembles nothing so much as a grid of intersecting landing strips from the air; a net to capture all the birds trying to make it out to sea. What, then, of our European *flâneur*? Can he survive unchanged in this city that militates against the very activity that defines him? He escapes to the frontier of desert; he retreats *inland*, back to the unforgiving terrain his ancestors traversed in pursuit of the paradisiacal coast he has just left. John Johnson’s intention in wandering off into the

³³ Virilio, *Negative Horizon*, p. 105.

³⁴ Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, p. 169.

³⁵ Baudrillard, *America*, p. 52.

desert is to be liberated from his accelerated present. 'I don't want to be a citizen of anywhere', he protests (*MW*, 51). This is a nostalgic retreat into a view of America as a place *yet to be discovered*. However, to return to Benjamin's lament, 'there is no more learning to walk'.³⁶

This flight into the desert *on foot* is what distinguishes this American desert *flâneur* from the desert driver. The driver reflects on the impossibility of reflection, the walker on the terrain. Shucked of the dimension of speed, the journey through the desert becomes every bit as mystical as the pilgrimages of the Coptic desert fathers. For Los Angeles in particular, the city is every bit as superficially evacuated as the desert, there being no pedestrians at street level to define it as a city *as such* according to Michel De Certeau, who writes, '...pedestrian movements form one of these "real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city." They are not localised. It is rather they that spatialize.'³⁷ If a city is spatially delineated by the footfalls of pedestrians, indeed is *brought into being* by pedestrians, then Los Angeles is not a city. It is rather, as Baudrillard claims Los Angeles to be, 'with its extensive structure... merely an inhabited fragment of the desert'.³⁸ The Californian desert *flâneur*, then, must sooner or later acknowledge that in striking out into the desert, they are in fact penetrating deep into the displaced heart of the city itself. The haecceity of Los Angeles is to be found not in itself, but in the desert it refuses to acknowledge. Therefore, John Johnson, in nostalgically seeking the wilderness and erasure actually finds Los Angeles and reflection, a moment of revelation that leads him inexorably back into the

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, p. 142.

³⁷ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 97.

³⁸ Baudrillard, *America*, p. 53.

city. Johnson comes to realise the desert in the city as well as the city in the desert.

Baudrillard writes:

American culture is heir to the deserts, but the deserts here are not part of a Nature defined by contrast with the town. Rather they denote the emptiness, the radical nudity that is the background to every human institution. At the same time, they designate human institutions as a metaphor of that emptiness and the work of man as the continuity of the desert, culture as mirage and as the perpetuity of the simulacrum.³⁹

Upon his return to Los Angeles and ‘civilisation’, though he obstinately refuses to admit it, Johnson is a changed man; he has become a *flâneur*, lacking insight into this new perspective because it is not commensurate with the bombastic plotlines of the films he has produced, and the culture he has absorbed by osmosis. Instead of driving, he now walks, drawing comments from his vacuous former associates from his life as a movie producer such as ““Good *lord* – it’s John Johnson – walking – yes, that’s right, with his *feet* – on sunset!”” (*MW*, 55). No longer a *willing* participant in the terminally accelerated culture of LA, Johnson instead allows himself the possibility of intimacy with failed actress Susan Colgate and indeed the time for reflections of a personal nature. Like Baudrillard, he recognises after this desert sojourn that ‘[i]nsignificance exists on a grand scale and the desert remains the primal scene, even in the big cities’.⁴⁰ City and desert come to be signifiers of the same inscrutable

³⁹ Baudrillard, *America*, p. 63.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

signified. As the narrator in 'In The Desert' rhetorically asks, '[h]ow much a part of us is the landscape, and how much are we a part of it?' (*LG*, 170).

Driving, an act that cocoons the driver in chrome and fibreglass, reduces travel to spectacle. The *flâneur*, however, while emphatically not being the same figure as Poe's 'man of the crowd',⁴¹ is still sensible to human connection and escape from solipsism. Having been in the desert, the *flâneur* knows all too well 'just how far *nothing* can extend to' and so peels off the armature of fibreglass and chrome to walk the streets and make connections with history, memory and yes, even people (*LG*, 135). The urgency of the city is the urgency of Forsterian connection for Coupland, for without the knowledge that the desert is in the city and the city in the desert, the border between the two blurred to the point of extinction, the city *truly* becomes a desert, which Coupland names '– the equivalent of blank space at the end of a chapter', and every one of its dwellers an eremite (*GX*, 19).

The irony of returning to walking in order to 'forget the car', the primary mechanical innovation for a uniquely American form of forgetting, is heavy. However, it is also possible to conceive of the car in positive terms. As the birthplace of the mass-produced motor car, America perfected it in line with its own ethos of forgetting. While a return to walking was always going to be the logical corollary of the car's perfection (since perfection is, in reality, profoundly un-American), we see again how the satiation of a nostalgic desire gives rise to the new in America; in this case, the

⁴¹ Edgar Allan Poe, 'Man of the Crowd' (1840). Cited in Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' in *Illuminations*, p. 168.

rapid, almost desperate improvement of an existing technology in order to facilitate an impossible amnesia.

v.

On the eve of this ‘American century’ of which Bill Clinton spoke in his inaugural address, the United States was, then, still hungry – not so much for territories as for trajectories; hungry to deploy its compulsive desire for movement, hungry to carry on moving so as to carry on being American.⁴²

Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*

When Daniel, the narrator of *Microserfs* (1995) satirises commercial corporate sponsorship, writing ‘[t]his nostalgia flashback was brought to you by the proud makers of Kraft’s family of fine foods’, he is harking back to an incident in the first chapter of the novel when his housemate Michael is upbraided by Bill Gates and petulantly refuses to leave his office (*MS*, 131). A Kraft cheese slice is slid under the door, along with a preservative-filled shopping list of ‘flat foods’ (*MS*, 2). This textual contiguity between flat foods, flashbacks and nostalgia is not throwaway. Firstly, the ‘flashback’ is a cinematic device that has been smuggled into everyday language; even nostalgia must occur ‘in a flash’, subject to the same acceleration as the present from which it purports to provide refuge. Secondly, it being ‘brought to you’ assumes once again that the nostalgic is passive; that they are a passenger to whom nostalgia is delivered by a tip-hungry delivery boy. Even the autonomy nostalgia presupposes can be bought in this case. Just as Jameson’s late capitalist nostalgia mode proposes a

⁴² Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, p. 23.

flattening of history into a mural for aesthetic retrieval, these flat, processed foods satirise the lack of nourishment this form of commodified nostalgia can convey. ‘Beware of the corporate invasion of private memory’ writes Dan (MS, 177). Umberto Eco goes further still in constructing an ontology of this flattening of nostalgia, claiming that the ‘frantic desire for Almost Real arises only as a neurotic reaction to the vacuum of memories. The Absolute Fake is offspring of the unhappy awareness of present without depth.’⁴³ History is ‘fast food’, existing only to be consumed in a flash rather than explored at length. Indigestion, or ‘Historical Overdosing’ is inevitable (GX, 9).

The Microserfs look to the garage-business beginnings of the home computer revolution for their nostalgic utopia. They long for an era when virtual space was free of obstructions and tenure. This is a logical progression from the aforementioned late industrial discontents of the American Century in that, having conquered itself utterly, the only option left to America was to direct its domestic policy of seeking ever more westerly frontiers outwards to other, bespoke worlds. The phantom limb of virtual space is therefore a neutralisation or, more appropriately, a channelling of the pioneer spirit; no culture need be overwritten, after all, if the new western vanishing point can be inscribed without overwriting other, inhabited frontiers. It is a perfect, victimless crime. ‘Since there was no longer a horizon towards which to rush’, writes Paul Virilio, ‘they [America] would invent fake ones – *substitute horizons*.’⁴⁴

⁴³ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. by William Weaver (New York: MBJ, 1986), p. 30.

⁴⁴ Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, p. 23.

Returning to Baudrillard's notion of '*covetousness of the eyes*' as an American condition, communication technology adds an even greater emphasis on the true frontier as being one of *appearance*. Virilio engages with this on the level of virtual space, hopefully bolstering the argument that it and the American pioneer disposition are consonant. 'Here the computer is no longer simply a device for consulting information sources', he writes, 'but an automatic *vision machine*, operating within the space of an entirely virtualized geographical reality.'⁴⁵ Just as internet pornography is haunted by its infinite remoteness from the flesh, the virtual is haunted by its infinite remoteness from the corporeal. One may *see* the frontier one wishes to conquer through Virilio's *vision machine* or communications technology, but the recalcitrant body refuses to follow suit. Again, this is expedient for a frontier temperament which depends on an unattainable frontier, but a nostalgia for achievable, self-initiated human movement is the inevitable price for the satiation of this unacknowledgeable temperament. Virilio continues:

It is our *bodies* that mark the key difference between telemediated and other modalities of immediacy. If we want to encapsulate the prime cultural impact of new communications technologies, then, it might be fair to say that they have produced a kind of false dawn of expectations of the liberation of human beings from the constraints of both embodiment and place.⁴⁶

Microserfs is, among other things, a virtual road novel. Bill Gates is, for a time, the Microserfs' information-age Jack Kerouac, Seattle their Haight-Ashbury. However, as

⁴⁵ Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, p. 16.

⁴⁶ Tomlinson, p. 107.

this virtual space, which is also a synthetic extension of the pioneers' spatially and ontologically depleted move westward, has no origin beyond human artifice, Bill Gates and his entrepreneurial ilk constructed the information superhighway as they mapped it. These new pioneers shored up the code like real estate, then patented the virtual and the lines of code that constitute it. The counterculture's incremental transformation into commodity culture was recapitulated in the freewheelin' home computer revolution of the late 1970s' transformation into the engine room of turbocapitalism. It is clear to see why it is so revered in the US. 'The Internet...' muses Svetlana Boym, 'took over elements of pastoral imagery and 'Western' genres (e.g., the global village, homepages and the frontier mentality).'⁴⁷ As flat (i.e. ahistorical) and commodified as a Kraft cheese slice, it would appear that this is a highway strewn with tollbooths. Baudrillard's space shuttle may have broken orbit with history, but late capitalism ensures that someone has a development contract on any brave new worlds. Despite this inevitable commodification of cyberspace, however, what would appear to be incontrovertible *prima facie* is its directedness towards the future and to new frontiers constructed out of its own cloth. This is not the case. Cyberspace, at least in the country of its birth, is nostalgic. If this virtual space is an expression of a civilisation's breathless need to conquer new frontiers in order to maintain an ontological coherence for itself, new technologies deployed to this end are only facilitating a form of nostalgia that has to bury its nostalgic symptoms beneath a nest of wires and the squawk of modems; a nostalgia that denies nostalgia absolutely with its pathological insistence on innovation. '[The point is] Being One-Point-Oh' Dan protests when Abe expresses incredulity at his desire, or more accurately his *need*

⁴⁷ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 348.

to leave Microsoft – ‘The first to do something cool or new’ (MS, 87). This tessellates with Virilio’s précis of the American condition:

America bears no real relation to the old Diaspora or migration of the nomad of former times, who, while advancing rapidly across the treeless plain, frequently turned around to familiarise himself with the lie of the land by which he might return. It is the country of no going back, the land of the one-way-ticket – the fateful amalgam of endless racing and the ideas of freedom, progress and modernity.⁴⁸

With the exhaustion of geographical frontiers, then, America must succumb to a form of nostalgia for a time when advancement appeared infinite; when nostalgia was unnecessary and even discouraged. The completion of the Enlightenment liberal experiment that is America, therefore, also occasions its collapse. The colony mourns the period when it did not feel constrained by itself; when it had no compulsion to gaze backwards and risk losing the Eurydice of its ambition. This is an insoluble paradox. I am writing here of nostalgia for a time when nostalgia was surplus to requirements because the sun always set over a new horizon, if the westerly momentum could only be maintained. For a time, America could conceive of itself as a modern counterpart to Ismarus, offering Europe’s disenfranchised and persecuted the lotus of movement for an escape from a memory of persecution and disenfranchisement. With the final land claim fulfilled, however, America began to unavoidably accumulate history at a vastly accelerated rate thanks to the very technological innovations it would later use to mitigate that accumulation. America is

⁴⁸ Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, p. 22.

now heir, Virilio argues, to 'a history fallen victim to the syndrome of total accomplishment'.⁴⁹ The construction of cyberspace is therefore, the genius of its construction notwithstanding, little more than the shallow appeasement of nostalgia for a 'prenostalgic state'.⁵⁰ Infinitely plastic, virtual space is a Platonic America in which the frontier can always be seen but never reached, distinguished by a baffling insistence on *formlessness* rather than form; a Platonic antiform. The narrator of 'In The Desert' corroborates this sense of rootedness in electronic limbo, declaring that 'fragments of cultural memory and information that compose the invisible information structure... [those] I consider my real home – my virtual community' (LG, 136).

The avoidance of nostalgia leads to its pursuit. Further to this, cyberspace finds an antecedent, according to this formulation of it at any rate, in the Picturesque movement of the late 18th century. If we accept that cyberspace is a supplement, that is, that which, to mutilate Derrida's intended meaning in *Of Grammatology* (1967), 'adds to itself, [...] is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure of presence*... cumulat[ing] and accumulat[ing] presence'⁵¹ to the American frontier, which problematises itself by its very completion, it is clear that this supplement was created to be anti-teleological. Cyberspace is a constructed inconclusive project, like the Enlightenment itself. Unlike the Enlightenment or America, on the other hand, cyberspace has no spatial limitations placed upon it by an inconveniently finite world. Cyberspace is a plane designed to always hold back a remainder of itself; to disclose its form only as far as the beholder is prepared to

⁴⁹ Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, p. 18.

⁵⁰ Boym, p. 26.

⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997), p. 144.

behold it *in the present*. This virtual world is therefore an ontologically impure ‘complete ruin’. This is not the ruin of a formerly intact structure that has fallen into disrepair through neglect or violence; it is a ruin conceived of to extend America, which was ruined in its resolve to *not* be a ruin, to pattern itself after Europe in its recalcitrant desire to complete itself in spite of its ahistorical creed. History assumes a telos from which to parenthesise the history that has preceded it, whereas cyberspace makes no such claim to finitude. This ruin designed to be such can be destroyed only if it is completed. Svetlana Boym observes that during the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries, ‘[t]he new scenario of nostalgia was neither battlefield nor hospital ward but misty vistas with reflective ponds, passing clouds and ruins of the Middle Ages or antiquity. Where native ruins were not available artificial ruins were built, already half-destroyed with utmost precision, commemorating the real and imaginary past of the new European nations.’⁵² America may therefore be read as, to some extent, a picturesque folly; a broken monument to Europe. These artificial ruins are analogous to cyberspace in that they both commemorate a phantom past to incubate a phantom present; broken tumblers that leak ideology from every painstakingly wrought fissure. For America at least, cyberspace is a haunted terrain of revisionist nostalgia. Coupland renders this explicit in a memorable quote from *Microserfs*:

...the kingdom had found a way to trick God. It did this by converting its world into code – into bits of light and electricity that would keep pace with time as it raced away from them. And thus the kingdom would live forever, after time had come to an end. (MS, 24)

⁵² Boym, pp. 11-12.

Naïve nostalgia cannot find expression in a virtual environment because, Baudrillard asserts, ‘through the impulse for total dissemination and circulation, every event is granted its own liberation; every fact becomes atomic, nuclear, and pursues its trajectory into the void.’⁵³ The acceleration of modernity Baudrillard describes ensures that no event can survive the immeasurably increased speed of its transmission. ‘The nature of knowledge’, writes Jean-Francois Lyotard, ‘cannot survive unchanged within this context of general transformation. It can fit into the new channels, and become operational, only if learning is translated into quantities of information.’⁵⁴ To stretch the highway metaphor, any ‘easy rider’ traversing it has no time to record their surroundings; all they have time to reflect upon later are the billboards. Svetlana Boym neatly encapsulates this phenomenon:

Time in cyberspace is conceived in terms of speed: speed of access and speed of technological innovation. There is simply no time for temporal experiments of remembering loss and reflecting on memory.⁵⁵

Authentic and even personal history is lost in the perfection of its own promulgation, even though the very technology that allows no time for mourning and reflection is itself a *product* of mourning and reflection. Daniel and his fellow programmers enter ‘Microsoft time/space’, wherein the temporal in its new spatial arrangement can be

⁵³ Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. by Chris Turner (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 2.

⁵⁴ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Post-modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 4.

⁵⁵ Boym, p. 347.

retrieved through hyperlinks (*MS*, 48). However knowledge, as Lyotard warns, cannot but undergo a radical transformation in its very encoding. The information superhighway has no lane for ‘lived experience or collective historical memory’.⁵⁶ ‘[deletia]’, writes Daniel in his diary. ‘It stands for everything that’s been lost’ (*MS*, 191). Instead, as information becomes a commodity fetish in itself, the late 20th century subject, denied the time for personal reflection, must purchase a market-sanctioned, vastly expurgated version of history where ‘transience itself is commodified in passing’.⁵⁷

The obsolete term ‘information superhighway’, we may infer, is apposite precisely because the electronic frontier was never meant to be approached on foot or by horse. It is an extension of the urgent velocity of the automobile, through whose windscreen all memory disappears before it can be processed. This is advantageous for a purposefully amnesiac culture, but Coupland is writing from (and beyond) a century in which America became the global superpower. As a Canadian, he is in the position of both spectator and participant, trying to survive (in Atwood’s terms) America’s all-consuming frontier nostalgia.

With *Generation X*’s publication immediately following the proclamation of the end of the Cold War, America found itself left with the horrifying cultural notion that it had been ‘achieved’. Its nostalgia for incompleteness, manifested in the return to Europe as a site of authenticity, its own deserts as an amnesiac space traversed by their forefathers at great cost, and most significantly, the construction of an ingenious

⁵⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 78.

⁵⁷ Boym, p. 38.

virtual prosthesis whose frontier is only limited by the technology of the time, is a living, moving, unreflective one. Theoretically infinite, according to Coupland, the 'kingdom' need never fear achievement ever again. This is not enough for the west coast Coupland protagonist however, who sometimes returns to the most immediate form of transport there is; walking, if only to reflect on the changes wrought by the paradox of a nostalgia for amnesia. That being said, Coupland himself never denounces the technologies of nostalgia cited above. Rather, it might be possible to say that the fulfilment of a nostalgia for incompleteness, uniquely American in tenor, is the driver underpinning a prodigious crusade for innovation. In other words, those technologies conceived of as ultra-modern are in fact the product of a vigorous, resourceful nostalgia whose unpredictable effects have nonetheless, for better or worse, changed the world. This proves that a single nostalgic impulse can give rise to successive waves of heterogeneous technological and cultural innovation. Land can become time and time can become light. American nostalgia is not autobiographical in that it does not ceaselessly refer back to a dead centre. Where the colonial narrative was bound to implode because it always sought to confirm the *omphalos*, the necrotic heart of empire and thereby depend on a memorialisation of the centre in far flung places, America's (no less destructive) project remains to shift the centre to the westward periphery. While it was shaken by the settling of its westernmost frontier, it constructed surrogates that satisfied it for a time. Any autobiography of America is thereby defined by a sense that the autobiography is, like America, still *in progress*. Coupland's work set in and concerned with the United States is not panegyrical by any means, and yet his protagonists are always in search of new ways to reanimate the centre by pushing it over the horizon. Where his Canadian perspective proves invaluable is in the critique of the means by which this frontier nostalgia can be

survived. As rapacious and as unreflective as it is, its costs must be weighed against its benefits. Accepting that frontier nostalgia can be a force for good, Coupland seeks to construct new modes of being appropriate to survive the paradoxical, relentless pace of change it sets.

Coupland's Canadian-American fiction is concerned with two issues, both of which are potent syntheses of American and Canadian motifs. The first is the survival of the frontier, that is the ceaseless addition of new frontiers to channel the American frontier spirit into benign, constructive activities. The second issue is the question of precisely *how to* survive the frontier, that is, how to make sense of and assimilate the frontier's disappearance, which has already occurred and is on the order of an epistemological cataclysm. As a *fait accompli* in the physical sense, the end of the physical frontier gives rise to a necessary and constructive nostalgia experienced by that generation for whom the frontier's achievement was a perception into which they were born. An acceptance of rather than capitulation to that nostalgia has led to innovations, great and small. As an unwitting apologist for the old world meanwhile, Ballard innovates through repetition, which arises from an avoidance of nostalgia since its acceptance as such amounts to an acceptance that the traces of empire are being effaced.

4. ‘Everyone Pretend To Be Normal’ – The Resilience of Suburban Nostalgia

Suburbs – Do suburbs represent the city’s convalescent zone or a genuine step forward into a new psychological realm, at once more passive but of far greater imaginative potential, like that of a sleeper before the onset of REM sleep? Unlike its unruly city counterpart, the suburban body has been wholly domesticated, and one can say that the suburbs constitute a huge petting zoo, with the residents’ bodies providing stock of furry mammals.¹

J.G. Ballard, ‘Project For a Glossary of the Twentieth Century’

The aspects of Canada’s suburbs that make so many historians cringe are the same things that make them such a powerful global dream: it’s impossible to imagine a battle taking place outside a donut shop. You can’t colonise a mall or betray a dry cleaner or trap animals for fur in an industrial park. The suburbs are a bell jar whose interior is impervious to the goriness and exalted passions of historical outbursts. And that is not a bad thing.

But then, history is going to go on long after you and I are dead. Some day in some way, dams *will* burst. Battles *will* occur. There *will* be blood shed on these cold breezy subdivision cul de sacs. (*SOC*, 110)

Douglas Coupland, *Souvenir of Canada*

¹ J.G. Ballard, ‘Project for a Glossary of the Twentieth Century’ in *A User’s Guide to the Millennium* (New York: Picador, 1996), pp. 276-280 (p. 277).

One need only read the first chapter of George and Weedon Grossmith's *Diary of a Nobody* (1892) to gauge public attitudes to the suburban middle class in the late 19th century. The riotously funny Mr Pooter, a suburbanite so bland he paints his Shakespeare collection with red enamel paint to match his coal scuttle, is a masterful parody of the then-emergent suburban middle-class's fumbling affectations. Everyone around Pooter treats him with unambiguous disdain, down to the local distributor of dairy produce, Borset 'the buttermen'. In his diary, Pooter claims Borset has sold him 'simply shocking' eggs and politely returns them. Borset retorts that he 'would be hanged if he would serve city clerks anymore'. Shocked, Pooter 'quietly remark[s] that [he] thought it was possible for a city clerk to be a *gentleman*'.² This dissonance between the suburban bourgeois' desperate need for status recognition and the jeers of both the rank and file and *haut monde* has been an increasingly easy comedic seam to mine. Homely sitcoms such as *Keeping Up Appearances* (1990–1995) and *Ever Decreasing Circles* (1984–1989), as well as the classic Class System sketch featuring John Cleese, Ronnie Corbett and Ronnie Barker from *The Frost Report* (1966) are concerned with suburbanites' quixotic struggles for authenticity and dignity in an apparently eventless milieu. This struggle has taken many cultural forms down the decades, and there has been fierce competition for the composition of an authoritative nostalgic narrative that would 'unite the suburbs' and settle the question of legitimacy once and for all. No such document has yet been produced – a document which would answer to anyone's satisfaction the question of what suburbia *is*. This chapter will not only demonstrate that Ballard and Coupland's texts highlight suburbia as a site of competing ironies and nostalgias, but also that attempts by both authors to peel back

² George and Weedon Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 13.

the nostalgic curtain to expose a more compelling suburban narrative have also succeeded in domesticating other, darker nostalgias.

According to Roger Silverstone, the term suburbia refers not just to ‘an emergent architectural space’, but also to ‘a set of values and a way of life’.³ Globally, these values are by no means homogenous, but Silverstone defines suburbia as the manifestation of an ‘attempt to marry town and country, and to create for the middle classes middle cultures in middle spaces in middle America or Britain or Australia’.⁴ It is natural to associate the ‘middle’ – a noncommittal space of untested convictions – with banality, and while Coupland and Ballard accept this association, they also explore the possibility that this is a provocative banality from which the shoots of a new subjectivity appropriate for our times may sprout; that the suburbs are an effective site of resistance and innovation because ‘middle spaces’ border not only civilisation, but the wilderness too. Ballard and Coupland’s texts both engage with what Andrew Tate has called ‘the mythology of suburban contentment’, in which nostalgia is a stalwart accomplice. Coupland simultaneously undermines and bolsters middle-class suburban values through his ‘desire to re-enchant the suburbs of North America’, although it must be noted that this re-enchantment is usually less violent than in Ballard’s sanguinary attempts to do the same for England.⁵ ‘The alleged sterility and blandness of suburban life,’ Tate writes, ‘holds a paradoxical sense of

³ Roger Silverstone, ‘Introduction’ in *Visions of Suburbia*, ed. by Roger Silverstone (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1-25 (p. 3).

⁴ Silverstone, p. 4.

⁵ Andrew Tate, *Douglas Coupland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 116.

creativity and mystery for Coupland.⁶ This is no less true for Ballard, and in both cases it is the nostalgic associations of suburbia that must be either interrogated or flensed in order to reveal their dynamic truth content. One aim of this chapter, however, is to prove that removing the nostalgic content of suburban representations is deeply problematic. One of Ballard's aims has been to break the nostalgic spell in the post-war suburbs under laboratory conditions.

In Silverstone's words, the suburbs are often depicted as 'a consequence, an excrescence, a cancerous fungus, leaching the energy of the city, dependent and inert and ultimately self-destructive'.⁷ For many cultural commentators, and indeed for those economically marooned in inner city housing developments, suburbia is an orphaned supplement to the city. Viewed with resentment and often hostility, it has come to be understood as an orchard for everything that is inauthentic and repressed in western culture. 'Suburbia,' Silverstone writes, 'has remained curiously invisible in the accounts of modernity'.⁸ The responses to this lack of visibility have been varied, but Lorraine Delia Kenny asserts that in truth, the suburban middle-class condition 'thrives on not being recognised as a cultural phenomenon'.⁹ Coupland's protagonists' response to this lack of visibility is anxiety. 'For millions of Canadians, the suburbs are life's main experience, yet their lives are more or less stripped from the history books,' Coupland observes. 'The few times suburbanites are ever referred to is with

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Silverstone, p. 4.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Lorraine Delia Kenny, *Daughters of Suburbia: Growing Up White, Middle Class and Female* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 1.

disdain, and usually in conjunction with environmental degradation, the overbuilding of freeways or extinction' (SOC, 107). To combat their minor historical roles, Coupland's suburbanites remythologise their vapid neighbourhoods by making this banality almost baroque, as this quotation from *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1997) illustrates:

People across the city believed our hillside neighbourhood to be the cradle of never-ending martini-clogged soirees and bawdy wife-swaps. The truth would have bored them silly, as it was middle-class to the point of scientific measurability. My mother, while barbecuing one fine summer evening in 1976, said prophetically that this neighbourhood was "like the land that God forgot." (GC, 39)

Installed in this admission of suburbia's insipidity is a hyperbolic declaration by the mother of Coupland's Richard Doorland character that the suburbs are Godforsaken. It stands to reason that something cannot be both tedious *and* Godforsaken. On the surface, this early observation in the novel would seem to dock with China Miéville's contention that 'nothing is more constipatedly quotidian than the assumption that the suburbs are hotbeds of perversity, sex, violence and other lurid divertissements'.¹⁰ However, the events following on from this honest appraisal of the suburbs' true fabric is undermined later on in the novel, with nothing less than an apocalyptic event. Thanks to Ballard, contemporary depictions of suburbia position it as the possessor of a unique, if recondite, ontology that has led many to question the image of bosky

¹⁰ China Miéville, 'In Disobedient Rooms: On J.G. Ballard' in *The Nation*, (15 March 2010)

<<http://www.thenation.com/article/disobedient-rooms>> [accessed 10 July 2010], p. 4.

tranquillity a *minority* of suburbanites would prefer to project. This is not a new insight. 'From Ibsen to Osborne, from Flaubert to Updike,' Silverstone notes, 'the intensity of bourgeois suburban life has been subject to deep analysis, a clawing away of the superficial harmony of domestic order, a revelation of the stresses and strains of status, a constant ringing challenge to the patina of barely achieved authenticity.'¹¹

In the late 20th century, the exposure of the cracks striating suburban driveways and values assumed a new intensity in Ballard's work. His suburbs are not only sites of chronic ennui and simmering sexual tension, but also of lethal violence. On the very first page of Ballard's final novel *Kingdom Come* (2006), he alleges that '[t]he 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' (*KC*, 3). It would be logical to infer from this that Ballard shares with the arbiters of high culture a contempt for all things suburban, but this is not the case:

I consider suburbia to be undervalued. I consider it to be really the center [sic] of life in England – in the western world – the most creative zone and the only urban area with its eye fixed firmly on the future. All the most important innovative trends that have emerged since the Second World War, such as car ownership, television, the leisure society, wife-swapping and alienation, first flourished in suburbia.¹²

¹¹ Silverstone, p. 6.

¹² J.G. Ballard, *Quotes*, ed. by V. Vale & Mike Ryan (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 2004), p. 200.

The examples Ballard gives of what he considers to be the salutary trends initiated in suburbia are usually held against it as symptoms of its most banal excesses. What is fascinating about this quotation is that the orthodox nostalgic view of suburbia is here interwoven with its debatable pathological tendencies; in the case of wife-swapping, one Coupland finds almost quaintly wishful. As contemptuous as Ballard is towards nostalgia, its capacity for incubating a suburban pathology would seem to be a source of great interest, if not tacit approval. Like Coupland, he is a product of suburban values tested to destruction in a society which has demonstrated time and again over the course of the last century that suburban values are the exception rather than the norm. In Ballard's fictions the suburbs are timeless zones, terminal beaches in which, as Ballard states, 'you find uncentered lives. The normal civic structures are not there. People have more freedom to explore their own imaginations, their own obsessions – and the discretionary spending power to do so'.¹³ Ballard's contention that '[o]nce you move to the suburbs, time stops' immediately donates the suburbs to utopian discourses.¹⁴ As an idealised nowhere, suburbia is an intensely nostalgic, albeit suspect utopian project. As with other projects of this kind, what is excluded is as crucial to its operation as that which is included. Gated communities and other, more radical enclaves are all offshoots of the primary suburban phenomenon. Fredric Jameson's critique of utopian enclaves forms around the notion that while they never cease to present themselves as possible, they depend for their realisation on the very inequalities they are intended to elide:

¹³ *Quotes*, p. 199.

¹⁴ *Quotes*, p. 201.

I believe we can begin from the proposition that Utopian space is an imaginary enclave within real social space, in other words, that the very possibility of Utopian space is itself a result of spatial and social differentiation. But it is an aberrant by-product, and its possibility is dependent on the momentary formation of a kind of eddy or self-contained backwater within the general differentiation process and its seemingly irreversible forward momentum.¹⁵

While he is writing of a broader phenomenon than suburbia here, Jameson confirms the critical orthodoxy surrounding it; that its immediate associations are parasitism, standardisation and an inherent transience. ‘Such enclaves are something like a foreign body within the social’, he writes. ‘[I]n them the differentiation process has momentarily been arrested, so that they remain as it were momentarily beyond the reach of the social and testify to its political powerlessness, at the same time that they offer a space in which new images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on.’¹⁶ As negative as this assessment is, it is telling that Jameson owns that new social formations, however eccentric or even perverse, can briefly effloresce in enclaves such as suburbia.

i.

If such a thing as a Ballardian ‘cosmogony of the suburbs’ exists, it is to be found in his short story ‘Chronopolis’ (1960). In this early short story, Ballard turns the post-

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 15.

¹⁶ Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 16.

war flight of the British middle-class (a flight that also took place coevally in North American cities) to the suburbs into a powerfully bleak allegory, which suggests that this spatial flight was also temporal. The middle-class, Ballard proposes, were escaping the tyranny of measured, divisible time. The suggestively-named Conrad is a young boy obsessed with the engineering of timepieces in a suburb-like post-cataclysmic space where clocks are strictly proscribed. This is a timeless ‘edge city’ which, according to his teacher is ‘an enormous ring, five miles in width, encircling a vast dead centre forty or fifty miles in diameter’.¹⁷ As a description of a cratered, post-war London barely five years on from the end of rationing, this is pretty apt. Conrad’s teacher Stacey, an undercover policeman whose remit is to arrest anyone caught in possession of any instruments for measuring time, takes the boy on a tour of the deserted city. Here, every clock, controlled by a colossal master clock, has been stopped. Stacey’s description of the workings of the city centre before the clocks stopped is steeped in totalitarian imagery:

Only by synchronising every activity, every footstep forward or backward, every meal, bus-halt and telephone call, could the organism support itself. Like the cells in your body, which proliferate into mortal cancers if allowed to grow in freedom, every individual here had to subserve the overriding needs of the city or fatal bottlenecks threw it into total chaos.¹⁸

Out of experimental intrigue, Ballard allows the cancer to metastasise in his fictions, pursuing it to its terminal end. Clocks play the role of sleeping giants in this short

¹⁷ J.G. Ballard, ‘Chronopolis’ in *The Complete Short Stories: Volume 1* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 202-227 (p. 211).

¹⁸ Ballard, ‘Chronopolis’, p. 215.

story, with wristwatches and minor timepieces playing malevolent djinn. According to Stacey, the burgeoning population of inner-city residents, bedevilled by ever-watchful clock faces, began to plot and conspire against the system that regulated their lives to the second. The abandonment of the city, then, followed a period of political upheaval and anarchy:

It's interesting that in any industrial society there is usually one social revolution each century, and that successive revolutions receive their impetus from progressively higher social levels. In the eighteenth century it was the urban proletariat, in the nineteenth the artisan classes, in this revolt the white collar office worker, living in his tiny so-called modern flat, supporting through credit pyramids an economic system that denied him all freedom of will or personality, chained him to a thousand clocks...¹⁹

Ballard is here equating the flight of the white collar worker to suburbia in the post-war period with nothing less than a revolution; as genteel civil disobedience. For suburbia's detractors, even entertaining the idea that a mass exodus from the centre to the periphery of the metropolitan area could constitute a revolutionary act is sociological heresy, and yet the logic holds. 'You and I can turn on the tap any hour of the day or night,' Stacey tells Conrad, 'because we have our own private water cisterns, but what would happen here if everybody washed the breakfast dishes within the same fifteen minutes?'²⁰ Suburbia is here rendered as the fulfilment of a libertarian dream, a much lighter depiction of which is presented in the highly successful 1970s

¹⁹ Ballard, 'Chronopolis', p. 219.

²⁰ Ballard, 'Chronopolis', p. 215.

suburban self-sufficiency sitcom *The Good Life* (1975–1977).²¹ If, as Svetlana Boym avers in her introduction, ‘nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time,’²² and that, according to Ballard, the post-war suburban migration is too, then there must be a radical and subversive tendency within nostalgia itself.

It is clear from the mordant coda to ‘Chronopolis’ that Ballard’s assessment of suburbanites at the time of writing (1960) was not flattering. Having flatteringly proposed that those who settled on the suburban frontier in the post-war period were petit bourgeois recusants, Ballard goes on to deride the same settlers for having betrayed the purity of their cause. When Conrad breaks away from his captor and repairs the large clock in the city centre, the older inhabitants of the eccentric suburb hear it and recognise the chimes from their radical youth:

And all through the day they would pause as the quarter and half hours reached across the miles to them, a voice from their childhoods reminding them of the ordered world of the past. They began to reset their timers by the chimes, at night before they slept they would listen to the long count of midnight, wake to hear them again in the thin clear air of the morning.²³

The faraway chimes, whose terrible significance is now mitigated by their poignant history, elicits an unlikely nostalgia from those who once responded to those chimes with rage and recalcitrance. Ballard tells us that ‘[s]ome went down to the police

²¹ Whose final episode, performed live at the 1978 Royal Variety Performance tellingly featured Tom Good, the family’s patriarch, buckling under pension fears to re-enter the system of rational economic exchange.

²² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xv.

²³ Ballard, ‘Chronopolis’, p. 225.

station and asked if they could have their watches and clocks back again'.²⁴ Even in this early Ballard short story, a certain scorn for suburban nostalgia is evident. For Ballard, this nostalgia for clock time is symptomatic of a wider retrograde sentiment in the suburbs that hinders its unlimited potential. This is not to suggest that Ballard is not playfully inconsistent in his views on the suburbs, but it is safe to suggest that the author's infatuation with them stems from his belief that timelessness and tedium are a necessary prelude to unprecedented forms of experience and affect.

ii.

In 1992, President George H.W. Bush assured Republican voters fearful of the decline of traditional family values that his administration would 'keep trying to strengthen the American family; to make them more like *The Waltons* and less like *The Simpsons*'.²⁵ While the former have faded into a well-deserved obscurity, the latter continue to exert a formidable cultural influence. However, this notion of an idealised North American nuclear family, as propounded by *The Waltons* (1972–1981), *Little House on the Prairie* (1974–1983) and *Happy Days* (1974–1984) among others, has continued to influence American (and thus global) demotic opinion regarding the ideal family structure well into the 21st century. The nuclear family is strictly defined by David Popenhoe as 'based on "a sharp division of labor [sic]... with the female as

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Euan Ferguson, '300 Reasons Why We Love The Simpsons', *Guardian Unlimited* (April 20, 2003), <<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,939751,00.html>> [accessed 25 October 2007] (paragraph 1 of 300).

full-time housewife and the male as primary provider and ultimate authority”²⁶. In Ballard and Coupland’s fictions, the cant of the suburban nuclear family is tested to destruction through murder and examples of curiously deferred incest. This chapter explores the possibility that these atrocities serve to reinforce and reconfigure the nostalgic nuclear family rather than undermine it in the writings of both authors.

For an idea of what an ‘ideal’ Ballardian suburban family might be like, we may look to Ballard’s novel *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979). Like *Concrete Island* (1973) before it, it is a surreal desert island tale set in the London suburb of Shepperton. The protagonist, Blake, steals a light aircraft, crashes, lands in the Thames and, after surviving his own watery ‘death’ becomes a Dionysian messiah to the formerly-listless suburbanites. As the quiet residents of suburbia become his sexually pliant acolytes and inexplicably turn into birds, Blake tries to leave Shepperton only to be repelled with every attempt by ever-retreating barriers psychological and physical.

Blake is initially appalled to be convalescing in the suburbs, noting the ‘...sterile lives in this suffocating town’ (*UDC*, 35). As the town’s vegetation begins to grow at a vastly accelerated rate and the inhabitants of the town begin to look to him as a fertility god in service to a higher morality, a family dynamic of sorts asserts itself, which serves to radically destabilise the traditional suburban family unit. Initially, his benefactor’s family cautiously take to him as one of their own, a surrogate son or brother. ‘What made me uneasy,’ he remarks, ‘was that they had both been expecting

²⁶ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 7.

me, as if I had lived in this house for years as one of the family and had just returned from a boating accident' (*UDC*, 61). Blake's incorporation into the family unit, while total and unconditional, is nonetheless not bound to a particular role. 'Mrs St Cloud' notes Blake, 'embraced me with warm arms, holding my head with a firm hand against her shoulder as if comforting her small son' (*UDC*, 55).

The initial relationship between the elderly Mrs. St Cloud and Blake is one of mother and son, but this rapidly metamorphoses into something far more ambiguous. Blake sleeps with Mrs St Cloud during his recovery, and while the act is violent, she appears to offer little resistance, slipping into her newly assigned role without protest or deviation from the carnal script. Later, Blake describes Mrs St Cloud as 'this mother who had given birth to a violent and barbarous infant, wrestling me from her body' (*UDC*, 65). In this act of coupling, therefore, Blake is simultaneously Mrs St Cloud's son, her lover and his own child. Nor does it end there. After calmly turning over his responsibility as the suburb's spiritual guide to Blake, local cleric Father Wingate enlists his help in dismantling his church so as not to impede the town's conversion to paganism. During his meetings with Blake, Father Wingate's honorific becomes literal: '[h]e looked up at me with the sudden affection of a man who has wrestled with a stranger he discovers to be his own son' (*UDC*, 77). In this instant, Blake finds a father figure at the very moment Wingate cedes any claim on the town to him. Blake once again finds himself simultaneously parent and child, and later casually enters into a sexual relationship with his 'father' as he has already with his 'mother,' Mrs St Cloud: 'I felt his [Father Wingate's] mouth against my bruised lips, tasted his teeth and the stale tobacco of his spit' (*UDC*, 112). Blake's changing roles in the suburb belie the ossified positions of the traditional suburban family, using incest in particular

to demonstrate the protean nature of all familial relations when uncoupled from categories maintained by tradition. Michael Delville recognises this as a recurring tendency in Ballard's fictions, suggesting that 'the complex Freudian family romance that underlies Ballard's narrative' is another modulation of the Ballardian survival strategy:

As is often the case in Ballard's fiction, it is only through the redistribution and permutation of traditional family roles within the same individual that the modern self can hope to achieve freedom from the life-denying pressures of society.²⁷

These extreme examples serve to open up a reading of suburbia as a launchpad for new ways of life. However, the narrative offers an essentialist reading of human identity. Through Blake, Ballard writes 'I had opened the doors of my face, swung back the transoms of my heart to admit these suburban people to the real world beyond' (*UDC*, 177). Ballard's suburban focus, however reframed and reinterpreted, is the traditional suburban family, which has survived any number of Ballardian selective-breeding experiments intact. This may appear counterintuitive given the grotesque couplings with which the novel teems, and yet Ballard chooses to describe every one of the sexual acts in the novel in familial terms. As much as these violations of the incest taboo may shock and repulse, they grant a deviant legitimacy to the traditional family structure, of which suburbia is widely held to be the standard-bearer. Whatever and with whomever the congress, there is always a parent/child or brother/sister roleplay being enacted. As such, those roles are accepted

²⁷ Michael Delville, *J.G. Ballard* (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers Ltd, 1998), p.57.

unquestioningly. The traditional suburban family's existence is corroborated by even symbolic incest narratives, which serve to illustrate that there is a norm from which to deviate.²⁸

iii.

The dissolution of the nuclear family model as a source of irony would have been inconceivable to Americans in the 1950s, and yet this is precisely what Coupland attempts in *All Families Are Psychotic* (2001), a novel in which a floridly dysfunctional family courier a purloined letter written by Prince William to Diana, Princess of Wales to a collector-tycoon named Florian in the Bahamas. Stephanie Coontz has investigated the doctrinaire position on familial relations, claiming that '[w]hen respondents to a 1955 marriage study "were asked what they thought they had sacrificed by marrying and raising a family, an overwhelming majority of them replied, 'Nothing.'" Less than 10 per cent of Americans believed that an unmarried person could be happy.'²⁹ For better or worse, this position has now changed in light of thwarted 'attempts to "recapture" family traditions that either never existed or existed in a totally different context.'³⁰ For Ballard and Coupland, the nuclear family is a contingent effect of capitalism; a gated community of sorts that implodes due to the impossibility of its realisation. 'Like most visions of a "golden age," writes Coontz, 'the "traditional family" [...] evaporates on closer examination. It is an

²⁸ It is curious that the nuclear family as a model unit was only recognised *after* Freud had questioned its stability and interrogated its latent, deviant content.

²⁹ Coontz, p. 25.

³⁰ Coontz, p. 5.

ahistorical amalgam of structures, values, and behaviours that never existed in the same time and place.³¹ What the suburban nuclear family apes is its own representation; it is a simulation. It has consistently failed to keep pace with its idealisation in popular culture, not least because the principles it attempts to smuggle into the realm of tradition are internecine, particularly for women. ‘The hybrid idea’, writes Coontz, ‘that a woman can be fully absorbed with her youngsters while simultaneously maintaining passionate sexual excitement with her husband was a 1950s invention that drove thousands of women to therapists, tranquilisers, or alcohol when they actually tried to live up to it.’³² In Coupland’s novel, Janet, the matriarch of the fractured Drummond family now living with HIV due to a bizarre shooting accident involving her ex-husband Ted and her prodigal son Wade, spends much of the novel reflecting on the demise of the values she grew up with in post-war Canada. To her children, Janet’s breezy ‘gee-whiz’ English seems entirely fictional, even otherworldly:

If I squint I can still see the cool immaculate housewife I once dreamed of becoming. I’m Elizabeth Montgomery starring in Bewitched. I’m Dina Merrill lunching at the Museum of Modern Art with Christina Ford. (AFP, 9)

Wade even refers to her mockingly as ‘TV mom’, sounding as she does like a character from *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–1963) or *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957). In spite of the oppressive influence of television and nuclear family representations, however, Coupland refuses to allow Janet to be a total anachronism:

³¹ Coontz, p. 9.

³² Coontz, p. 9.

‘Mom,’ Wade said, ‘the thing I can’t figure out about you is how you can be so moral and TV mom about life, but not believe in anything at the same time. I don’t understand.’

‘What made you think that those TV moms believed in anything, Wade?’

‘Uhhh—’

‘They didn’t. Not really. We weren’t robots but we weren’t complete people, either.’ (*AFP*, 164)

Along with Janet, it is Wade who falls into a nostalgia trap here insofar as he clearly believes human nature fundamentally alters with each successive generation; a conviction shared by Ballard, as we shall see. As a consumer of a hyper-mediated past, Wade appreciates the 1950s as an animatronic display in a theme park. It is also a source of intentional hilarity as the broken and fading inhabitants of the novel cling to the familiar tropes of the familial in the most bizarre situations. However, Janet’s confession that she was ‘... a dumb bunny’ and that she ‘... believed the script [she] was handed’ leaves ample room for pathos and indeed sympathy to ameliorate the viciousness of the critique (*AFP*, 235). Also, while Janet is clearly the most sympathetic 1950s refugee, she is not alone. Her ex-husband Ted is also an unwitting victim of a suburban nuclear family ideal for which he was encouraged to be nostalgic even as it was presented to his generation at the time:

Dad – oh, man. Still the hypocritical prick acting out some corny 1960s idea of manhood. Wade knew that his father had dropped his mother quite cruelly

and was now living the life of Mr. Salt-and-Pepper Chest Hair, with his shirts wide open... (*AFP*, 28)

With the tragic foreshortening of life HIV/AIDS occasions, the present becomes an ever more pressing concern for the Drummonds. To deny it, they shore up their past with nostalgia, even as the present accelerates away from them. As Wade says of his own worsening condition, 'I figure this virus is merely resetting the clocks to where they ought to be reset. Senior citizens are unnatural' (*AFP*, 70). Attempting to keep pace with a nostalgic chimera of domestic harmony is presented as a disease in itself. The melancholia so essential to nostalgia pools in the inevitable gutter between the true, flawed nuclear family and its finessed representation. Nicole Sully complements this thesis, adding, 'Foucault state[s] that "people are not shown what they were, but what they must remember having been."'³³

For the protagonists of *All Families are Psychotic*, cognizance of the past can be noxious or redemptive. The emphasis placed on the characters' HIV cannot pass without comment in this bipolar context. The family's HIV brings them closer together, papering over the cracks in their relationships. Janet, Wade, Nickie and Ted's HIV undermines and encrypts their respective nostalgias. Following Ballard's *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979), it also raises the disquieting issue of incest. Following the chain of infection from Wade to Nickie (who sleep together initially) to Janet (who is struck with the same HIV-tainted bullet as Wade) to Ted, who marries

³³ Nicole Sully, 'An Everyday Nostalgia: Memory and the Fictions of Belonging'

<http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/cfel/docs/Sully_FV.pdf> [accessed 26 October 2007] (paragraph 2 of 30).

Nickie while oblivious to the fact he has indirectly contracted HIV from his own son, the shared blood of the nuclear family turns as toxic as the constructed nuclear family unit itself. However, this deferred incest, perhaps an attempt at uncovering a more sinister dynamic underpinning the suburban nuclear family, is still not enough to snuff out this nostalgic construction. Instead it emerges, like the Drummonds themselves, stronger. While it was never Coupland's intention to dispense with the nuclear family altogether (merely one of a series of ideological formations) it still emerges triumphant, augmented and above all stable in its recognised instability. As Andy Medhurst elegantly puts it, 'suburbia is still a given'.³⁴ Coupland's novel is part of a wider liberal tendency, arguably prompted by the success of *The Simpsons* (1989–), to reconfigure the suburban nuclear family in a manner that incorporates dysfunction into the nostalgic paradigm. The nostalgic fiction is not thrown out so much as buttressed against further erosion through an acceptance of the porosity of the nostalgic images. Dickinson writes:

[A] constellation of recent suburban movies offer audiences spatial visions of nostalgically tinged suburbs that place individuals into the bosom of imperfect but loving and white families and remake home and away, self and Other, on foundations of security and comfort.³⁵

³⁴ Andy Medhurst, 'Negotiating the Gnome Zone' in *Visions of Suburbia*, ed. by Roger Silverstone (Routledge: London, 1997), pp. 240-268 (p. 258).

³⁵ Greg Dickinson, 'The *Pleasantville* Effect: Nostalgia and Visual Framing of (White) Suburbia', *Western Journal of Communication*, 70 (2006), 212-233 (p. 213).

If Dickinson is correct, then many reconfigurations of the nuclear family *maintain* nostalgia by accentuating the imperfections that were only minor in the presentation of the suburban family in previous decades. The Cunninghams in the 1970s nostalgic evocation of the 1950s' *Happy Days* (1974–1984) had their imperfections, but none were profound enough to truly threaten the sanctity of the family unit. It may be surmised that among other factors, soaring divorce rates have meant that the nostalgic narrative has had to incorporate (and thereby neutralise) an increasing number of contemporary issues that were formerly considered chiefly urban (and therefore 'authentic' according to the reductionist discourses against which Coupland inveighs) in order to survive. 'Tied together in [...] suburbia [...] then, are profoundly difficult contradictions', Dickinson contends. '[T]he most fundamental of which is that between the risks of deeply felt "true" emotions and human attachments on one hand, and the safety and security of living a normally and socially accepted life on the other...'.³⁶ The Ballard story that comes closest to confirming Dickinson's claims is 'The Intensive Care Unit' (1977), which appeared while less complex depictions of the nuclear family such as *Happy Days* were still on air. Ballard posits a future in which all individuals are legally bound to remain isolated from each other. The nuclear family survives, but no member of a given family is allowed to interact with any other member other than through the television. 'All... activities', the paediatrician narrator tell us, 'like our family life itself, were made possible by television. At that time neither I nor anyone else had ever dreamed that we might actually meet in person.'³⁷

³⁶ Dickinson, p. 227.

³⁷ J.G. Ballard, 'The Intensive Care Unit' in *J.G. Ballard: The Complete Short Stories: Volume 2* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 442-451 (p. 443).

Despite his conviction that this forced separation creates conditions under which citizens are ‘spared all the psychological dangers of a physically intimate family life’, the narrator begins to yield to the temptation of meeting his wife and two children in the flesh for the first time.³⁸ In a perspicacious, if ambivalent take on the television’s ideological role in the nuclear family configuration, Ballard has his narrator arrange a clandestine meeting between all four family members. ‘[We] would all wear make-up, modelling our behaviour as closely as possible on our screen life together,’ his narrator proposes. ‘Accordingly, three months later, Margaret and myself, David and Karen, that unit of intensive care, came together for the first time in my sitting room.’³⁹ The nuclear family is here revealed as the intensive care unit of the title; that which requires constant monitoring and external support, and could expire at any moment. Far from the distancing effect one would expect, television proves to be the binding agent keeping the nuclear family on ideological life-support, a now ubiquitous-trope to be found in satirical cartoons, from *Family Guy* (1998–2001) (2003–) to *South Park* (1997–). ‘Affection and compassion demanded distance’, claims the narrator regarding the family’s telemediated relationship, and possibly to irony itself. ‘Only at a distance could one find that true closeness to another human being which, with grace, might transform itself into love.’⁴⁰ The physical encounter with which the story climaxes proves to be both a confirmation and a subversion of this claim.

³⁸ Ballard, ‘The Intensive Care Unit’, p. 444.

³⁹ Ballard, ‘The Intensive Care Unit’, p. 450.

⁴⁰ Ballard, ‘The Intensive Care Unit’, p. 450.

I can see the bloody scissors in my son's hand, and remember the pain as he stabbed me. I brace myself against the settee, ready to kick his face. With my right arm I am probably strong enough to take on whomever survives that last confrontation between my wife and daughter. Smiling at them affectionately, rage thickening the blood in my throat, I am only aware of my feelings of unbounded love.⁴¹

As with Homer Simpson's repeated strangulations of his son Bart, the role of television in Ballard's suburban nuclear family is to inhibit an outpouring of Oedipal violence. That this trope should now, in admittedly sanitised form, be broadcast to millions of families all around the globe and in many languages proves that the trope has now been woven into the family discourse without destabilising it. Domestic violence, oedipal rage and other motifs previously held to be urban phenomena, have in recent years arrived in representations of suburbia with little in the way of either fanfare or any mobilising repugnance. In fact, they are accepted as authenticating hallmarks. The suburbs have truly arrived when urban problems arrive on their doorstep with the morning paper.

The very idiosyncrasies that mark contemporary depictions of suburban families are themselves products of a nostalgia for a legitimacy only urban problems can provide. These issues associated with the urban are then processed by the suburban imagination and installed as part of its authenticating cachet. The suburbs, too, can participate in the credibility of urban narratives, but only as a detour or digression before order is restored; not so much an end of history as a weekend off. '[T]his passionate desire',

⁴¹ Ballard, 'The Intensive Care Unit', p. 451.

Dickinson continues, ‘is filtered through nostalgic longing, a longing that returns the narratives back to center. These nearly unbridgeable differences, as disturbing as they can be, are, in the end, rejected in favour of the nostalgically limned suburb. In most cases, the return to normalcy is celebrated because of the lessons learned in the trip to the wild side.’⁴² The Drummonds’ struggle with HIV/AIDS is a powerful example of this tendency. Through her friendship with Florian, Janet is introduced to Cissy, a Ugandan prostitute with a genetic immunity to the HIV virus who Florian has lured away from the United States’ Center for Disease Control. With a simple commingling of Janet and Cissy’s blood, Janet’s HIV/AIDS is cured in a mere 62 seconds; a treatment she passes on to the infected members of her extended family. Janet’s encounter with the non-white other, who is kept in a gilded cage by Florian, is used solely (and one suspects consciously)⁴³ as a pat device to cure Janet. Inescapably, this sequence and its implausible corollary raise troubling questions about the suburbs’ encounter with an horrific illness that until recently was considered to be a signally urban issue in the West. The troubling questions do not cluster around Janet’s disease – this is a bold engagement by Coupland – but rather around her having been cured. As is so often seen in contemporary suburban fictions that attempt to subvert the sepia-tinged nostalgic view of suburbia, the suburbanite’s engagement with urgent contemporary questions is fleeting. Serious urban and third-world concerns exist in these narratives as instructive experiences which then burn themselves out so the

⁴² Dickinson, p. 227.

⁴³ See the ‘Texlahoma’ stories in *Generation X*, which invert Janet’s return to the suburban fold by positing this return as a form of immurement through the figure of Buck, the Astronaut marooned on a planet of suburbs with no centre.

primary nostalgic scene, however dramatically reconfigured, can be restored. Where others suffer in perpetuity or unto death, the suburbanite ‘learns their lesson’:

[Janet’s] time with the disease had, to her surprise, made her feel less lost. That was one thing she knew was true. Sickness had forced her to look for knowledge and solace in places she might otherwise not have dreamed of.

(*AFP*, 269)

Coupland is fully aware of debates surrounding Fukuyama’s End of/Baudrillard’s Holiday From history, but it would seem that the suburbanite is the exemplary post-historical subject in his fictions. However penetrating Coupland’s observations may be regarding consumer society and the suburban petit-bourgeois’ place in it, there can be no doubt that it is only the suburbanite who is, in the words of Jared the Friendly Ghost in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, ““allowed to see what [their] lives would be like in the absence of the world”” and then returned, albeit wiser and more circumspect about the world they inhabit”” (*GC*, 253).⁴⁴

Images of suburbia are readily consumed in the wider culture, but gone are the unproblematised representations of yesteryear. Instead, ironic depictions such as Joe Dante’s *Gremlins* (1984), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) and *The ‘Burbs* (1989) through to the television shows *Eerie Indiana* (1991) and *Desperate Housewives* (2004–) have

⁴⁴ This Coupland trope, inherited no doubt from Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) and almost contemporaneous with Brett Ratner’s *The Family Man* (2000), has always been a suburban dream of escape and redemption, positing the suburbs as an enchanted site of numinous eruptions into the everyday.

proliferated over the last thirty years. Through this proliferation, we can see that aberrant behaviours and a tendency towards misrule have been comfortably incorporated into suburban mythology, not detracting one iota from the suburbs' nostalgic projection of itself. That these behaviours have been so comfortably domesticated is an uncomfortable development. Indeed, there is now an *expectation* in the suburbs itself that it will be ironically subverted at every turn in its cultural representations. Suburban revolt is fine and dandy; they have insurance. Through the character of middle-aged suburban dropout Lester Burnham in Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999), Dickinson claims that revolt is usually viewed through a nostalgic grille in the suburbs: 'Lester describes high school summers flipping burgers, smoking marijuana, and having sex. It was, he says, the best time of his life. Thus begins his (nostalgic) awakening.'⁴⁵

The nuclear family is one of the touchstones of Coupland and Ballard's fictions, but they part company on the issue of *generations*. Coupland is outwardly the author with the strongest attachment to generational taxonomies, unofficially sworn in as the hip guru of 'Generation X', and yet, swipes at Baby Boomer affluence aside, in the fictions that follow *Generation X*, Coupland goes to great lengths to forge affective bonds between generations, whether it be through the sense of impending or actual obsolescence shared by *Microserfs*' Dan and his father, recently fired by IBM (*MS*, 21), the sense of a stolen childhood shared by Jason and his father Reg in *Hey, Nostradamus* (2003) (*HN*, 225–226), or through the common disease shared by Janet Drummond's family in *All Families Are Psychotic*. For Coupland, nostalgia and mourning cement bonds between family members, eliding the shrinking generation

⁴⁵ Dickinson, p. 221.

gaps through a common perception that they are either lost in time or *have* ‘lost’ time. For Ballard, these generation gaps are very real, and present a decisive ontological and epistemological dislocation. In Coupland’s *The Gum Thief* (2007), a novel about nothing *but* an intergenerational *entente*, an exchange in Roger’s anodyne novel *Glove Pond* between the young author Kyle Falconcrest and the aging, alcoholic novelist Steve, reveals that Coupland is both aware of and perhaps tacitly disapproving of Ballard’s perspective on generational (dis)continuity:

[E]verything J.G. Ballard has written can’t but make us rethink the path our world is taking – particularly *Running Wild*, a book that makes me wonder if the only hope for our world is to spawn children who have mutated so far beyond our present selves that anything we have to offer them as a survival tool is pointless and quaint.⁴⁶ (GT, 93)

⁴⁶ This is one of the only explicit references to Ballard in Coupland’s work, and as such the context of such a statement is highly significant. The subject of Ballard’s work is raised in a novel-within-a-novel (hence extradiegetically ‘buried’). Ballard’s *Running Wild* is discussed in an exchange between an aging author and a young, affectedly academic one. Falconcrest’s function within the narrative is to underscore Steve’s obsolescence and his bemusement at postmodern authorial trickery. The passive-aggressive one-upmanship that ensues makes for a classic ‘dinner party from hell’ setup, and Coupland’s use of Ballard as an intellectual brickbat with which to beat Steve indicates firstly that Coupland may consider Ballard to be a representative of the very postmodern cynicism his own work attempts to undermine, and secondly that Coupland may consider Ballard’s work to be a solid example of the kind of mannered, coffee-table nihilism with which the contemporary Western intellectual tradition is often associated.

In Ballard's novel *Running Wild* (1988), a group of children whose ages place them firmly within the loose 'Generation X' demographic brutally massacre their loving, liberal parents in the gated and surveilled community of Pangbourne, from which they are rarely permitted to leave. This is cautiously depicted by Ballard as a form of evolutionary leap. 'Far from hating their parents when they killed them', he writes, 'the Pangbourne children probably saw them as nothing more than the last bars to be removed before they could reach out to the light' (*RW*, 82). In this, as in other Ballard texts, the generation for whom clock time and history are a concern are marked for obsolescence. This is not presented in terms of an *emotive* ageism, but rather as a logical evolutionary tipping-point beyond which the parents of the next generation must adapt or die. This is the explicit theme of Ballard's short story 'Low Flying Aircraft' (1975), a science fiction analogue of *Running Wild* in which the global population has plummeted because parents are terminating their physically deformed, unresponsive children. A culture of infanticide has become the norm, justified on humane grounds because their deformities are so severe. Speaking from his own family's experiences, the narrator and central protagonist, Forrester, describes the pitiful condition of these children:

Forrester remembered the first of Judith's children, with their defective eyes, in which the optic nerves were exposed, and even more disturbing, their deformed sexual organs – these grim parodies of human genitalia tapped all kinds of nervousness and loathing.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ J.G. Ballard, 'Low Flying Aircraft' in *J.G. Ballard: The Complete Short Stories: Volume 2* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 353-370 (pp. 359-360).

Forrester's encounter with Dr. Gould, friend and guardian to the mutant children (and their animal equivalents), awakens Forrester to the possibility that 'a massacre of the innocents has taken place that literally out-Herods Herod'.⁴⁸ The scenario here is the reverse of *Running Wild*, where the children are the predators and adults the quarry. There is a consistency to this vision however, in that in both stories, the adults' refusal to recognise their psychological and genetic decrepitude provokes intergenerational conflict:

Isn't it obvious that we were intended to embark on a huge replacement programme, though sadly the people we're replacing turn out to be ourselves. Our job is simply to repopulate the world with our successors. As for our need to be alone, this intense enjoyment of our own company, and the absence of any sense of despair, I suppose they're all nature's way of saying goodbye.⁴⁹

Ballard's sympathies, then, lie not with his peers (as is the case in *Empire of the Sun*), but rather with the next generation, the advance guard of a new, fit-for-purpose *weltenschauung* made manifest in 'Low Flying Aircraft' by the revelation that the children's 'defective eyes' are in fact pre-emptively adapted for an unidentified upheaval in Earth's ecological conditions, allowing them to perceive 'a different section of the electromagnetic spectrum'.⁵⁰ This ironizes the cultural landscape of the time the short story was written, between the epicene glam of David Bowie and the frantic sawing of Billy Idol and the punk band Generation X's guitars. For Ballard,

⁴⁸ Ballard, 'Low Flying Aircraft', p. 365.

⁴⁹ Ballard, 'Low Flying Aircraft', p. 369.

⁵⁰ Ballard, 'Low Flying Aircraft', p. 368.

punks are the most logical analogue of the mutant generation who are destined to inherit the Earth. ‘Punk was so interesting’, he writes in punk’s Bible, the *New Musical Express*. ‘I still haven’t recovered from it.’⁵¹ As has already been alleged, the genesis of punk was suburban disaffection; the logical consequence of suburbia’s anodyne lifestyle:

Not knowing anything about [Punk] music, I saw it as a purely political movement – the powerful political and social resentment of an under-caste who reacted to the values of bourgeois society with pure destructiveness and hate. Bourgeois society offered them the mortgage, they offered back psychosis. (*New Musical Express*, 1985)⁵²

Crucially, Ballard’s use of the term ‘under-caste’ does not refer to the class-system as we know it. Instead, and as always, he is referring to a *suburban* under-caste, a great unwashed for whom the choice of whether ‘to bathe or not to bathe’ is existential and aesthetic rather than economic. As with the postcolonial, Bond-like protagonists’ rejection and identification of the more traditional colonialist antagonists in his disaster novels, both the rebellion and the orthodoxy are generated from within the crucible of suburbia. This is mirrored in *Running Wild*. When the ‘mutant’ Pangbourne children conduct a number of Baader-Meinhof style high-profile political assassinations, Ballard’s policeman protagonist ends his report with the following:

⁵¹ *Quotes*, p. 158.

⁵² *Quotes*, p. 158.

Will the children strike again? I take it that all authority and parental figures are now their target. So the regime of kindness and care which was launched with the best of intentions at Pangbourne Village, and which has prompted countless imitations in the exclusive estates of southern England, not to mention Western Europe and the United States, has given birth to its children of revenge, sending them out to challenge the world that loved them. (RW, 104)

That this rebellion *failed* to appear, not just in the literal sense of a violent oedipal overthrow of the bourgeois system, but also in the 1980s' acceptance and refinement of bourgeois life by the children of the counterculture, gives rise to a form of unspoken nostalgia for the punk sensibility by Ballard. That he 'still [hadn't] got over it' in 1985 attests not only to its demise, but also his disappointment in its collapse. This despite the fact that the 1980s yuppie generation were as anarchic in their dealings with the free market as the punks were in the culture. It is ironic, therefore, that Ballard's disappointment in the ascendant generation, following punk's failure to raze the existing social order, should reach its disdainful zenith in 1991, the year of publication for Coupland's *Generation X*. In a New York Times review article for Robert Capa's *Children of War, Children of Peace* (1991), Ballard opines that the typical child of the age is 'a kind of dandified super-infant', a far cry from the mutinous, insanitary preceding generation.⁵³ It is Ballard's contention that mollycoddling and liberal parenting incubates insurgency, and yet while this failed to materialise, Ballard's fictions become extravagantly and increasingly fixated on this possibility, albeit with the new addition of a return to a kind of unsettled normality at

⁵³ *Quotes*, p. 366.

the novels' conclusions; for example, *Millennium People* (2003) and *Cocaine Nights* (1996). In this period, Ballard begins to tarry with the possibility of *failed* bourgeois revolutions (notably by the failed, in Ballard's view, generation to whom punk would have been of cultural relevance in their youth) of internal contradictions causing their half-hearted, decadent putsch to cancel itself out and explode on the launchpad. This is because the will to revolt in Ballard's texts is overwhelmed by torpor, snuffed out by dwindling attention spans:

Parents are worried about the way their kids are no longer literate, no longer reading, and just living for a diet of the transient. They're interested in pop music and fashion, not interested in vocational training. They're living in an endless present of clothes, fashions and pleasant sensations [...] waiting for a rude awakening. [*Mississippi Review*, 1991]⁵⁴

Seemingly torn between affection and loathing for younger generations, Ballard's depictions of them as either apathetic drones or outwardly-disabled mutants adapted for a coming evolutionary niche, are rarely sentimental. Whilst accepting Ballard's thesis that subsequent generations are adapted to different environmental and cultural pressures, Coupland does not appear to see this as an impediment to connection. On the contrary, he seems to view difference as the salient factor in the establishment of emotional bonds, both within and between generations.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *Quotes*, p. 367.

⁵⁵ See Terri Susan Zurbrigg, *X = What? Douglas Coupland, Generation X and the Politics of Postmodern Irony* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008), pp. 33-35.

As Coupland's engagement with grunge and cyber-culture proves, there is a unique identity and set of subtle rebellious tropes inherent to Generation X, only nowhere near as visible as those of the punk generation, whose vulgar anti-establishment rhetoric, more brutal than the counterculture's, was at the time truly shocking. Instead, Coupland dwells on the dejection of a generation for whom the grammar and praxis of rebellion has already been set, formalised and re-absorbed by the centre. Far from the bleating, open-mouthed and expectant infants Ballard believes Generation X to be, Coupland views them as passive not because they do not wish to be refractory, but rather because they cannot see how. As Jameson bluntly declares, in the late capitalist moment, '[n]o Oedipal revolts are possible any longer', at least on a grand scale.⁵⁶ This is because, again according to Jameson, there is a depressing awareness on the part of Generation X that 'the power with which the system is theorised outsmarts the local act of judging or resisting it from within, revealing that to have been yet another feature of the system itself...'.⁵⁷ Instead, they content themselves with petty acts of revenge against their financially solvent baby-boomer parents.

One possible avenue of acceptance for Coupland lies in the remote hope of inter and intragenerational understanding. Extreme situations force a confrontation between generations, in which the nostalgias of both are mutually understood and accepted, at least in the novels of the 1990s. In a sense, the nostalgia of Generation X is predicated on the loss of the possibility of rebellion, whereas the previous generation's nostalgia is predicated on the failure of that rebellion to achieve its aim. '[W]hat follows upon a

⁵⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 292.

⁵⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 204.

strongly generational self-consciousness, such as what the “people of the sixties felt” is, according to Jameson, ‘often a peculiar aimlessness.’⁵⁸ However, it must be added that Coupland has become more cautious – perhaps more ‘Ballardian’ – in the 2000s, and less sentimental as a consequence.

In *Generation A* (2009), Coupland recapitulates the oral storytelling trope of *Generation X* (1991), except unlike the earlier novel, the oral storytelling is arranged and enforced by a multinational pharmaceutical company rather than emerging spontaneously from a sense of collective loss. Five youths who have been stung by bees in a future in which these insects are believed to be extinct are brought together by governments and special interest groups to compose and share stories. Where *Generation X* is loosely realist, *Generation A* is unapologetically a science fiction novel, whose central metaphor is the adult world’s harvesting of the neurological tissue of the next generation for use in the manufacture of the drug ‘Solon’. This is an instantly addictive drug which ‘had a calming effect on the people who took it. Prisoners stopped feeling imprisoned; isolation stopped bothering them’ (*GA*, 280). This mirrors the death of affect in Ballard’s fiction, notably in ‘Low Flying Aircraft’ in which the decrepitude of the human race in its current form gives rise to the ‘intense enjoyment of our own company, and the absence of any sense of despair’.⁵⁹ At the end of the novel, the sinister Serge, who has brought the youths together on a remote island to share stories, reveals the drug’s purpose, which is to ‘mimic[] the solitude one feels when reading a good book’ (*GA*, 284). The unbearable isolation of the modern world is ameliorated by this apocalyptic drug, for which the five youths’

⁵⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 296.

⁵⁹ Ballard, ‘Low Flying Aircraft’, p. 369.

neural tissue is a cheap biological precursor. The youths discover that they have been literally fed each other's cloned brain tissue in order to synchronise their brains into what Serge punningly but accurately describes as a 'hive mind' (*GA*, 286). In a nostalgic privileging of *viva voce* over the written word, through Serge, Coupland proposes that '[w]hen you tell stories out loud, your bodies make a corrective molecule, one that brings people together' (*GA*, 284). As with Ballard's generational fictions, we find Coupland now entertaining the notion (as evidenced by the title, a reference to departures and new-beginnings) that emergent generations represent a radical break with the past. To penetrate the anaemic metaphor, flagged up when Serge tells them '[t]he five of you might be genetic accidents or you may be Darwinian progressions' (*GA*, 283), new generations are cultural mutations, victimised by the older generation who view them both as threat and a resource to which they have an entitlement. This is a motif one would expect to find in Ballard's work rather than Coupland's, and yet it would seem Coupland is not immune to the ubiquitous pessimism of our time. There seems to be little space for an intergenerational rapprochement in *Generation A*, unlike *The Gum Thief*, its immediate predecessor.

iv.

In Ballard's case, the impossibility of cleanly performing the procedure of separating the nostalgic assumptions of suburbia from its 'truth' is enacted in the short story 'The Enormous Space' (1989). In this tale, Ballard once again laconically raises problematic

issues regarding ‘home’.⁶⁰ His protagonist, Geoffrey Ballantyne is classically Ballardian; he is established as a typical suburbanite for whom the orthodox suburban promise has palled. ‘Some unknown source of strength sustained me through the unhappy period of my car accident, convalescence and divorce, and the unending problems that faced me at the merchant bank on my return’ says Ballantyne, and proves this by quarantining himself in his own house in order to ‘rely on time and space to sustain’ him.⁶¹ ‘I had the simplest of weapons’, he says. ‘[M]y own front door. I needed only to close it, and decide never to leave my house again.’⁶² This decision to become a suburban eremite quickly plunges Ballantyne into destructive reveries brought about by starvation that culminate in the conviction that his unassuming house is composed of ‘more rooms than there appear to be at first sight’.⁶³ As with all Ballardian spaces, domestic space is far from inert; instead it becomes a theatre of human psychopathology. Ballantyne attempts to do away with the domestic, embodied in the institution of marriage, when his wife leaves him. ‘I have put away the past, a zone that I regret ever entering’⁶⁴ he proudly declares. However, he stages this act of domestic forgetting within the domestic space itself in a peculiar take on transcendence by the author. As Ballantyne burns all the appurtenances of his former life, the house begins to appear colossal in its sucking emptiness; home becomes

⁶⁰ When Richard Curson Smith adapted Ballard’s short story for BBC television in 2003, he changed the title to ‘Home’.

⁶¹ J.G. Ballard, ‘The Enormous Space’ in *War Fever* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990), pp. 117-129 (p. 118).

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Ballard, ‘The Enormous Space’, p. 122.

⁶⁴ Ballard, ‘The Enormous Space’, p. 121.

world and world is unfurnished, leading him to conclude that ‘[t]his conventional suburban villa is in fact the junction between our small illusory world and another larger and more real one’.⁶⁵ The ‘small illusory world’ refers not just to our consensus reality, but also to suburbia itself, along with its nostalgic, ideal-community aspirations. Ballantyne’s impossible project is to negotiate the nostalgic barriers preventing him from seeing the truth of his suburban home; to penetrate the nostalgic veil smothering suburban potential to find something that would render it meaningful. Traumatised by recent events, Ballantyne seeks a ‘return’ to the sense of suburban safety he once knew. ‘Those suburbanites who cannot afford [...] armed guards and castellations’, writes Kim Ian Michasiw, ‘dream that they could and make whatever gestures at enclaving they can.’⁶⁶ Ballantyne’s ‘enclaving’ gesture may be extreme, but it is consistent with the seemingly inescapable suburban paradigm:

In every way I am marooned, but a reductive Crusoe paring away exactly those elements of bourgeois life which the original Robinson so dutifully reconstituted. Crusoe wished to bring the Croydons of his own day to life again on his island. I want to expel them, and find in their place a far richer realm formed from the elements of light, time and space.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ballard, ‘The Enormous Space’, p. 126.

⁶⁶ Kim Ian Michasiw, ‘Some Stations of Suburban Gothic’ in *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, ed. by Robert K. Martin & Eric Savoy (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), pp. 237-256 (p. 248).

⁶⁷ Ballard, ‘The Enormous Space’, p. 120.

Calling to mind once again the Shanghailanders of Lunghua, Ballard's objectivity regarding Ballantyne's enterprise is highly suspect. The purging of nostalgic and even functional appurtenances in Ballantyne's house does indeed occasion euphoria and a sense of renewal, but the managed forgetting he is attempting is futile. As with Ballard's attempts to break with colonial tradition, even in negative the trace of what has been rejected persists. As Anthony Vidler rightly notes, '[f]orgetting [...] is a more complex activity than simply not remembering'.⁶⁸ Forgetting is not simply a matter of reversing memory, as Ballantyne fails to realise. 'Margaret has taken many pieces of furniture with her', he says, 'leaving unexpected gaps and intervals, as if this is a reversed spatial universe, the template of the one we occupied together'.⁶⁹ Even here, in an empty house, the absence of the domestic points towards the same. Ballantyne's elation at seeing what he considers to be the naked house as a Kantian 'thing-in-itself' is undermined by his own remembrance of what used to occupy it. All he can achieve is a sense of the house as being a thing hewn out of negative space. Again, even in this extreme example, 'suburbia is still a given':⁷⁰

I have pulled down the heavy curtains that hung beside the windows. Light has flooded into the rooms, turning every wall and ceiling into a vivid *tabula rasa*. Margaret had taken with her most of the ornaments and knick-knacks, and the rest I have heaved into a cupboard. Suffused with light, the house can breathe.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1992), p. 180.

⁶⁹ Ballard, 'The Enormous Space', p. 124.

⁷⁰ Medhurst, p. 258.

⁷¹ Ballard, 'The Enormous Space', p. 121.

We can see the architectural Modernist project writ small in Ballantyne's project. He attempts to do away with the nightmare of history by gutting the house, creating a functional, minimalist interior. He creates a haunted house in the process. 'Inevitably', Vidler asserts, 'this [Modernist] housecleaning operation produced its own ghosts, the nostalgic shadows of all the "houses" now condemned to history or the demolition site.'⁷² Roger Luckhurst confirms this in his own writings, insisting that 'Ballard is satirizing the Modernist belief that haunting history could be banished from returning'.⁷³

'The Enormous Space' is a short story in which there is a pilgrimage *away* from the suburban home *within* the suburban home, a neutered revolution which never breaks containment and that ultimately means nothing in revolutionary terms because it takes place, as Gary Cross puts it, 'on the only ground about which the ruling orders d[o] not care'.⁷⁴ Gaston Bachelard describes this gesture as heralding 'the purest sort of phenomenology – a phenomenology without phenomena'.⁷⁵ This attempt to abduct the transcendental is stymied from first principles, and so the fact that Ballantyne's project results in solipsism and death, a consequence of his confusion between seeing the house denuded of nostalgic associations and his own mind evacuated of the same, means that in Ballard's looking glass universe, the bid for transcendence is a Faustian

⁷² Vidler, p. 64.

⁷³ Roger Luckhurst, *The Angle Between Two Walls: The Fiction of J.G. Ballard* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), p. 133.

⁷⁴ Michasiw, p. 237 .

⁷⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 184.

pact; the destination is actually the boundless tundra of the skull. However, while Ballantyne's quest is quixotic, it does reveal the uncanniness of suburbia, or rather the potential for an uncanny *sensation* to be felt therein. Nicholas Royle maintains that the uncanny 'consist[s] in a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home'.⁷⁶ This places it in close proximity with nostalgia:

[T]he typical context for the telling of ghost stories, the apparently homely interior that gradually turns into a vehicle of horror, was described in numerous versions: a cheerful household, generally following dinner, the men smoking pipes before the blazing fire, the women sewing, the children allowed to stay up late. This was the nostalgic evocation of the *veilée*, a "cottage" vision of house and home especially relished in the age of rural displacement and urban emigration.⁷⁷

The uncanny, then, would seem to be a master trope in Ballard's defamiliarisation of suburbia. This does not result in a simple obliteration of nostalgia, however. If nostalgia can have an ancillary connotation, one predicated on an oppressive *presence* rather than *absence* of home, the compulsion to escape may be as problematic as the desire to return. There is a clear ambivalence at play here; one I believe inheres to suburbia as a whole, not merely in Ballard's febrile imagination. Ballard's atavistic suburbs are more on the order of a surrealist prediction or an unearthing of latent

⁷⁶ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 1.

⁷⁷ Vidler, p. 36.

content than an actual observation. Still, his insistence on suburbia being a site of progress is not that far removed from observations made in the more sober sphere of cultural studies. In her essay ‘The Worst of all Possible Worlds?’ (1997), Vicky Lebeau charts the rise of 1970s punk rock from the suburban to the urban, a controversial position which undermines punk’s working class cachet. Her argument is compelling, however, and demonstrates that while Ballard’s voice is the most strident, it is certainly not a lone one:

Canvey Island, Woking, Harrow, Ealing, Bromley: here, outside London but not that far, punk was generated and sustained by the emptiness, the blankness of the suburbs. [A]n investment in the monotony of the suburbs as a resource for dreaming, for a fantasmatic reprocessing of what [Jon] Savage calls the ‘information overload’ of the city, presents suburbia as something like an anarchic dreamscape, as a site of resistance in its very conformity: Savage finds a reason to be different in a place where, again quite simply, there is nothing else to do. To dream the suburbs is to distort, to defamiliarize and to make strange what has become too ruthlessly familiar.⁷⁸

Lebeau’s contention is that the suburbs are, in truth, an uncanny crucible of dreams; ‘sickhome’ dreams of destruction or of flight from the quotidian. The need to escape the suburbs, to reject its somnambulism, has produced popular art of the very highest calibre. If the ‘true’ home always resides without the present or local circumstances of the (to use Lukács’ term) ‘transcendentally homesick’ subject, then the concept must

⁷⁸ Vicky Lebeau, ‘The Worst of all Possible Worlds?’ in *Visions of Suburbia*, ed. by Roger Silverstone (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 280-297 (p. 284).

be reassessed in light of this.⁷⁹ In order for homesickness to operate, it depends on the uncanny. The nostalgic post-war image of the suburb was never severed from the uncanny; if anything, the bond was strengthened by the ferocious heat of the Blitzkrieg:

In a moment when history seemed to have been brutally arrested, the uncanny reinforced its traditional links with nostalgia, joining what for many writers after the war seemed to be the “transcendental homelessness” that Georg Lukács saw as the modern condition. “Homesickness,” nostalgia for the true, natal home, thus emerges in the face of the massive uprooting of war and ensuing Depression as the mental and psychological corollary to homelessness.⁸⁰

Put another way, the tension between nostalgia and the uncanny must be maintained for both to acquire what Sylviane Agacinski has termed ‘ontological dignity’.⁸¹ Ballantyne believes himself to be ‘at home’ in infinite space, but in truth his romantic quest to comprehend the true nature of his suburban home is mounted through a spiralling attrition of objects, the last of which is logically enough himself. Before Ballantyne disappears entirely into the recesses of his house, he compares his experience to a more mundane sensation:

⁷⁹ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. by Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), p. 41.

⁸⁰ Vidler, p. 7.

⁸¹ Sylviane Agacinski, *Time Passing: Modernity and Nostalgia*, trans. by Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 15.

My eyes now see everything as it is, uncluttered by the paraphernalia of conventional life, as on those few precious moments when one returns from holiday and sees one's home in its true light.⁸²

Ballantyne's suburban *genius loci* does have more grounded analogues, and his extreme experience is a concentrated form of those found in Coupland's novels, which also feature a notable number of empty houses. These are the petri dishes of both authors' suburban fictions. The empty house, already demonstrably impossible to isolate from its domestic associations in 'The Enormous Room', still invites attempts from Coupland and Ballard's protagonists. We find an echo of Ballantyne's aside regarding the moment after a return from holiday in Coupland's *Eleanor Rigby* (2004), in which the now middle-aged Liz Dunn recalls a childhood incident in the 1970s. She recalls how she snuck into the 'Adamses' house, about ten up from ours' while they were out, and found an evacuated wonderland:

Oh, the sensation of being all alone in a place I wasn't supposed to be! It was fragrant: somebody *else*'s house. It reminded me of coming home from vacation and walking in the door of my own house, and smelling it as if I was a stranger entering for the first time. I felt like a police officer, investigating clues. I felt like a ghost who had come back, not to haunt, but merely to remember the world as it was. (*ER*, 45)

⁸² Ballard, 'The Enormous Space', p. 124.

In both Coupland's novel and Ballard's short story, it is as though the suburban home is caught in the act of being itself, divorced even from its own function. There is a privileged place for apocalyptic survivors, loners and the lonely in both authors' works, because it is only they who find themselves in situations where the domestic tips into the unhomely, nostalgia into the uncanny. 'For Freud', Vidler writes, "unhomeliness" was more than a simple case of not belonging; it was the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream.⁸³ Wandering through an empty house, however, is far from an anti-nostalgic gesture. Liz Dunn's memory of her childhood is delivered in the form of a nostalgic reverie. Ballantyne's gesture is in fact one with which most suburban children are familiar. His act of transgression, which he feels will 'reveal [...] the true dimensions of the world we inhabit...',⁸⁴ is no more than a staged recapitulation of any childhood invasion of an abandoned house or building site. The only novelty here is that the house is Ballantyne's own. This motif of stumbling across houses impossibly infused with absence runs through many of Coupland's novels. In *Miss Wyoming* (2000), failed actress Susan Colgate finds herself holing up in a vacationing family's home near the site of a devastating air crash she has just survived:

She saw a warren of three bedrooms and two bathrooms, whose normalcy was so extreme she felt she had magically leapt five hundred years into the future and was inside a diorama recreating middle-class North American life in the late twentieth century. (*MW*, 19)

⁸³ Vidler, p. 7.

⁸⁴ Ballard, 'The Enormous Space', p. 127.

There is an echo here of Ballard's persistent apprehension of reality as a stage-set, albeit in an intensely localised sense. Without the family there to inhabit it, the conventional suburban house becomes absurd. Everything is on display, nothing is to be consumed. Coupland is asking us to consider the possibility of the suburban home. Has it, in the final analysis, become the setting for a real-time soap opera or sitcom in the looking-glass logic of the era of high capitalism? Susan herself comments on this particular home's resemblance to a set:

The neighbourhood seemed to have been air-freighted in from the Fox lot, specifically designed for people who didn't want community, and she suspected she could probably crank up a heavy metal album to full volume and nobody would bat an eye. (*MW*, 23)

This is not consistent with many of Coupland's more forgiving evocations of suburbia, but Susan's activities in the house are more evocative of his sympathetic mode. Susan lives in the house for a number of days, wearing the absent family's clothes, and even going as far as staging a break-in to cover her tracks. This is a nostalgic Goldilocks narrative of freedom and total license, the irony residing in the fact that even if inhabited, nobody would 'bat an eye' if a heavy metal album were cranked up to full volume. Rebellion is now as nostalgic a suburban artefact as the Sunday roast.

The unlikely blind spot in Ballantyne's spring-cleaning of history turns out to be his own front door. His weaponised front door backfires spectacularly insofar as the doorframe itself, according to Jameson, is an intensely nostalgic artefact. 'The

doorframe', he avers, 'the metonym of human habitation and the social – now turns out to have been not merely cultural, and a representation, but a nostalgic representation of a more natural form of dwelling.'⁸⁵ To close the door on nostalgia, then, is to deny the reality of our present condition, which is that the inside/outside distinction has collapsed. The doorway itself is a nostalgic revenant; a harkening back to a time when interior and exterior were absolute categories; of a say in the matter of whether or not one chooses to be nostalgic. It is Michisaw's contention that the doorway-as-nostalgic-metaphor opens 'onto an utterly disrupted temporality in the subject'.⁸⁶ We are beyond a critical point; a point before which it was possible to choose whether to be nostalgic or not. We simply are, and the suburbs are the site in which this truth becomes apparent.

v.

Ballard's stories generate an ironic suburban mythopoeia to bolster (but outwardly undermine) the thinning desirability of these non-places. Ballard intimates, in full tourist brochure mode, that the tedium of the suburbs is only superficial; linger long enough on your lawn and the chthonic Disneyworld parade will begin soon enough. In his review of Ballard's collected short stories, China Miéville opines that Ballard 'surely had an indispensable role in the morphing of suburbia into disturbia in the cultural imagination'.⁸⁷ The unforeseeable offspring of this profane re-enchantment

⁸⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 170.

⁸⁶ Michasiw, p. 253.

⁸⁷ Miéville, p. 4.

was a fusion of banal conservative nostalgia and the aforementioned *nostalgie de la boue*, which Dylan Trigg claims arises when ‘the object of nostalgia is of ruin, dissolution or suffering’.⁸⁸ He goes on to propose that in *nostalgie de la boue*, ‘a sense of attraction emerges, whereby a sufficient distance is acquired from the object, rendering it an aesthetic object’.⁸⁹ While it is certainly true that Ballard’s transatlantic cultural influence has been nowhere near as marked as his influence in Europe, his master tropes have infiltrated suburban representation to the extent that they have become, on the one hand an accepted and even banal suburban association, and on the other an object of *nostalgie de la boue* themselves since, as Trigg writes, ‘such contact with the object is impossible’.⁹⁰ This is to say that perhaps the more terrifying likelihood is that, according to Miéville, ‘behind those sneered-at white picket fences, nothing is going on’.⁹¹ Even Coupland cannot accept that this is truly the case, as he cannot sustain a narrative which allows for an unremittingly abject (if hilarious) suburban banality. With the exception of the oddly Ballardian *JPod* (2006), which is characterised by amorality and chaos, there is always some moment of transcendence; some numinous irruption. What Coupland’s texts demonstrate with impressive clarity is that the pathologisation of suburbia, far from exorcising trodden-in nostalgic traces, has become part of the narrative landscape; indeed, it has been utterly assimilated into the nostalgic grammar of suburbia. Coupland’s texts, therefore, pinpoint a cultural moment in which the Ballardian antinostalgic strategy became clichéd. Although

⁸⁸ Dylan Trigg, *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia and the Absence of Reason* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc, 2009), p. 57.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Miéville, p. 4.

Ballard may be correct when in 1984 he avers that ‘suburbs are very sinister places, contrary to what most people imagine’, he is writing from a specific cultural context in which it was still possible to subscribe to a view of suburbia that was *not* dystopian.⁹² The suburbs are always the prime suspect for civil disobedience and social deviance in the 21st century, and there can be no doubt that Ballard contributed to this implicitly seductive suburban phantasmagoria. That dystopian imagery and intergenerational factionalism can be snugly incorporated into the nostalgic suburban frame testifies not just to resilience of suburban narratives, but also of nostalgia itself, which can sugar almost any pill. Nostalgia allows even the most aberrant discourses to be safely digested and neutralised. It can make the *unheimlich* homely with little difficulty, allowing the former to be reconfigured as a nothing more than a necessary, refreshing detour.

⁹² J.G. Ballard, *RE/Search 8/9* (San Francisco: RE/Search Publishing, 1984), p. 15.

5. The Plastic Madeleine: Nostalgic Objects and Consumer Culture

In the most famous sequence of Marcel Proust's *Du Côté de Chez Swann* (1913), the narrator is overwhelmed by a sensation occasioned by the flavour of tea sweetened by the crumbs of a 'petit madeleine' cake. After questing through a bank of stored sensation, the narrator has a nostalgic epiphany:

The taste was that of the little crumb of *madeleine* which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before church-time), when I went to say good day to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of real or of lime-flower tea.¹

This episode, the quintessential example of Proustian 'involuntary memory' depicts, according to Stephen Brown, 'a mode of involuntary transportation to the sights, sounds, and smells of times past'.² As the thematic fulcrum of Proust's entire epic *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1913–27), the madeleine episode is a fine starting point for an exploration of the 'nostalgic object'. In *Proust and Signs* (1972), Gilles Deleuze summarises the phenomenon of object-mediated-nostalgia as a sensuous one that bypasses the usual conscious mechanisms of remembrance:

¹ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 1: Swann's Way*, trans. by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 51.

² Stephen Brown, 'Of Time, Space, and the Market' in *Time, Space and the Market: Retrospectives Rising*, ed. by Stephen Brown and John F. Sherry (Armonk NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 2003), pp. 3-18 (p. 11).

At what level, then, does the famous *involuntary* Memory intervene? It will be noticed that it intervenes only in terms of a very special type of sign: the sensuous signs. We apprehend a sensuous quality as a sign; we feel an imperative which forces us to seek its meaning. Then it happens that involuntary Memory, directly solicited by the sign, yields us this meaning (thus Combray for the Madeleine [...]).³

Involuntary memory is a special case in that most nostalgic objects are kept on hand, and any experience of these must be very different from, for instance, stumbling across a forgotten toy in an attic box. There is undoubtedly something numinous about involuntary memory, and the nostalgia experienced is of a far greater intensity. Crucially for this chapter, the significant point here is that the objects we consider to be intrinsically nostalgic never find themselves consigned to the attic space. Given pride of place on the mantelpiece, they become furniture, their impact blunted through repetition. Those objects considered picayune by conventional standards can and often do become the most nostalgic of all, precisely because they are discarded or removed from view. However, this intense form of nostalgia is a singular experience which can never be repeated with the same object. If we return to Proust, his narrator's second mouthful carries none of the novelty of the first:

I drink a second mouthful, in which I find nothing more than in the first, a third, which gives me rather less than the second [...] It is plain that the object of my quest, the truth, lies not in the cup but in myself. The tea has called up in

³Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Allen Lane, 1973), p. 52.

me, but does not itself understand, and can only repeat indefinitely with a gradual loss of strength, the same testimony [...]⁴

This arcane contract between nostalgia and the object cannot be repeated with the same intensity as the first ‘second encounter’. The object cannot surprise us a second time. The first re-encounter creates the illusion of propinquity between past and present, whereas subsequent, elective re-encounters underscore distance. Ballard and Coupland write from within a post-industrial, high-capitalist culture wherein such subsequent re-encounters are ubiquitous and commodified. A fresh re-encounter is therefore a rare phenomenon indeed.

An aim of this chapter is to identify typical ‘nostalgic objects’ in the authors’ texts, and to establish whether or not authenticity is a factor in determining their nostalgic potential. Wedded to this is a secondary aim, which is to determine whether or not the authenticity of a nostalgic object has anything to do with its status as ‘original’ or ‘copy’ in the consumer capitalist system.

i.

An entire generation’s value-system and aesthetic *appears* to crystallize in certain objects, insulated from the passing of time. This is a fallacy: the objects in question allow for the omission of more than they could ever embody. In fact, to speak of ‘embodiment’ in relation to nostalgic objects presupposes a symbolic function on the part of these objects that does not exist, as though these objects held the values unique

⁴ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past, Volume 1: Swann’s Way*, trans. by C.K. Scott Moncrieff (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971), pp. 58-59.

to the epoch from which they have been reclaimed as an interior property. The critical assertion on which this chapter rests is that, *divorced from their original context, they are meaningless*. The positioning of certain objects as somehow *intrinsically* nostalgic encourages the passive nostalgic to subscribe to a mystical, totemic view wherein nostalgia is an innate property. This is not a new phenomenon, and indeed is but one manifestation of the fetishistic character of the commodity, to which Marx devoted much of his formidable critical energy. Marx argues that it is an anthropic tendency to view ‘the productions of the human brain [...] as independent beings endowed with life’.⁵ The commodity takes this logic to dangerous extremes. Marx’s conception of the commodity is essentially that it is a secularized religious artifact, ‘a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties’.⁶ In Ballard’s *Concrete Island* (1974), the arriviste Crusoe/Prospero of a (conceptually rather than literally) post-cataclysmic traffic island near London finds an altar to the detritus of the modern world on one of his frequent, limping peregrinations:

Maitland leaned against the curving wall, deciding that he would pass the night in this deserted lair. On the wooden table, a number of metal objects were arranged in a circle like ornaments on an altar. All had been taken from motor-car bodies – a wing mirror, strips of chromium window trim, pieces of a broken headlamp.

‘Jaguar...?’ Maitland recognized the manufacturer’s medallion, of the same type as that on his own car. (*CI*, 76)

⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital: A New Abridgement*, ed. By David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 43.

⁶ Marx, p. 42.

It would be absurd to consider any of these objects intrinsically sacramental or even valuable, and yet this judgment is made by the inhabitants of the traffic island, for whom these cracked trinkets have become relics due to the impassable barrier created by the vehicles roaring past the island's boundaries in both directions; automotive time rapids. The assorted items are random, having no connection with each other beyond their status as waste. '[T]he effect of the ruin works,' proposes Luckhurst, '[t]o reveal the erasures of the phantasmagoric, simulacral world.⁷ There is therefore no system at work beyond the exposure of the waste of the system, indeed that the system *is* waste. Here, car-wrecked on one of Ballard's many terminal beaches, we discover that nostalgic and sacramental value can be draped over anything under certain conditions. Beyond the barrier of speed surrounding the island is, in the lead protagonist's mind at least, consonant with transcendence. The abandonment of escape attempts by Maitland is occasioned by the realization that the island is an extreme metaphor for the inane, eventless world on which he has already, from birth, been existentially 'shipwrecked'. The relics on the junk altar therefore point to the island's ontological 'exterior', to the beyond and the future. They are initially ridiculed by the protagonist, who eventually comes to appreciate that, if the island is a microcosm of the industrialised world *in toto*, even the most grandiose relics are nothing more than fetishised rubbish. By lingering over the detritus of everyday life, Ballard elevates it to the realm of the sacred without ever losing sight of the fact that it only possesses this sacredness *in context*. The disturbing corollary of this conviction is that, relic or rubbish, the fetishised object is 'dead.' He writes:

⁷ Roger Luckhurst, *The Angle Between Two Walls: The Fiction of J.G. Ballard* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), p. 140.

We live in a world of manufactured goods that have no individual identity until something forlorn or tragic happens, because every one is like every other one [...] Nothing is more poignant than a field full of wrecked cars, because they've taken on a unique identity that they never had in life.⁸

In its purest form, a nostalgic object need only be absent for it to be sought for in the ash heap. We rarely encounter such purity of absence in our own time, in which near-perfect reproductions of lost objects can be manufactured with ease, and thus the credulity towards inherent nostalgic value is revealed as profoundly ideological in character. It is only in death that the object can become unique and illuminating.

Mechanical and latterly digital reproduction, allied to automated production, have the consumer age enabled nostalgia to be one more seemingly preinstalled ‘metaphysical subtlet[y]’ to add to the panoply of others. The commodity produced with a nostalgic cachet in mind promises access to an absent elsewhere or elsewhere, despite its own lack of historicity. The only difference is that the sophisticated ‘postmodern’ consumer is in on the joke: they are fully, if unhappily, aware of the ersatz nostalgic object’s lack of authenticity. However, when we scrutinize the *authentic* nostalgic object, the fact of its reappearance undermines the very discourses of authenticity on which its perceived value depends. Discourses of nostalgia proceed from the assumption that something has been lost. Nostalgic objects have all, to a greater or lesser extent, failed to persist in their original form into the present. The nostalgic object’s ‘value’ cannot have been recognised in every era or locale. Instead, nostalgia is cyclical. The desire for novelty consigns certain objects to history’s sidings, only to reclaim or reproduce them once

⁸ J.G. Ballard, *Quotes*, ed. by V. Vale & Mike Ryan (San Francisco: RE/Search, 2004), p. 178.

the context to which they belonged (which is perceived as more ‘authentic’ than the present or the local cultural paradigm) risks total erasure. While access to *a* phenomenon is granted, this phenomenon is not the absent past, but rather something opaque and plastic, to which Ballard and Coupland both allude in their fictions.

ii.

Before the authors’ complex attitudes to ‘nostalgic’ objects can be juxtaposed, their attitudes to physical objects as a whole must be considered. As fixated on the contemporary as the two authors are, a major confrontation with the physical object in a materially-fixated society is inevitable and necessary. An oscillation between fascination with and abhorrence for material culture is in some ways a hallmark of both authors’ styles and content, with Ballard declaring that the genre in which he predominantly couches his stories ‘is a response to science and technology as perceived by the inhabitants of the consumer goods society...’.⁹ Both authors refuse to condone or condemn the commodity fetish in particular, seeking in it a means by which it can be either redeemed or redeployed in the service of a humanity desperately in need of novelty. While Ballard raises the possibility in *Kingdom Come* (2006) that ‘[c]onsumerism is the greatest device anyone has invented for controlling people’, neither he nor Coupland let the matter rest there, searching instead for a means of escape or redemption by which the commodity itself, often in degraded or corrupted form, can be a means through which the world of commodity fetishism may be either transcended or rehabilitated (*KC*, 145). While the means may be different, the goal –

⁹ J.G. Ballard, ‘Fictions of Every Kind’ in *A User’s Guide to the Millennium* (Picador: New York, 1996), pp. 205-207 (p. 205).

the deliverance of mankind from, according to Luke in *Player One* (2010), ‘the world of *things*’ – is the same for Ballard and Coupland (*PO*, 155). That this gives rise to contradictory and in some cases troubling exceptions exposes the shifting sands on which the authors’ relationships with the world of objects are founded.

Andrzej Gasiorek makes a solid case for a point of convergence between Ballard and the Pop Art movement through a shared interest in the scree of objects hurtling towards obsolescence that make up the contemporary landscape. ‘The iconography of Pop’, Gasiorek maintains, ‘its interest in the charm but also the expendability of technological products – as ephemeral media images, as gleaming and erotically-charged fantasy objects, as frivolous gadgets doomed to obsolescence – encapsulated the day-glo allure of a fast-moving contemporaneity that was at the same time destined to end up as so much junk.’¹⁰ Transient and therefore incapable of accruing meaning, objects of capitalist desire do not require an artist to burden them with significance, since this significance is as transient and as context-dependent as the object’s modishness itself. What these consumer objects ‘transmit’ to the consumer is nothing more than the cultural assumptions of the time, not in which they were manufactured but *consumed*. By placing these objects in deviant contexts, the artist can expose the meaninglessness of the object and expose the animating consciousness which ascribes meaning. ‘In a materialistically-oriented world’, ventures Peter Brigg, ‘Ballard grasps the essential point that things – objects, events, landscapes, backgrounds, details, data, and frozen human icons – are already so laden with meaning that the lightest touch in arranging them in sequence or array is the artist’s

¹⁰ Andrzej Gasiorek, *J.G. Ballard* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 14.

task.¹¹ Ballard's task is therefore one of liberation rather than interrogation of the consumer object; contextual redeployment as opposed to ontological refurbishment. Ballard's startling, unexpected juxtapositions of consumer goods and military ordnance, plastic ephemera and genitalia are driven not by the intention of recharging these isolated objects with fresh meaning, but rather by the novelties thrown up when they are placed on a continuum of total semantic equivalence; that is, as products of the human mind. Of equal value and significance, they cluster around the media-stung subject and short-circuit the unconscious mechanisms by which we assign import and value. The alienation neo-Marxists such as Fredric Jameson have accused this phenomenon of engendering is unconditionally supported by neither Ballard nor Coupland. In the 21st century glossary appended to Coupland's *Player One*, we find a number of conspicuously Ballardian definitions for the neologisms he lists. Entirely appropriate for an introduction to Ballardian objects is the concept of 'pseudoalienation':

Pseudoalienation: The inability of humans to create genuinely alienating situations. Anything made by humans is a *de facto* expression of humanity. Technology cannot be alienating because humans created it... Technically, a situation one might describe as alienating is, in fact, "humanating." (*PO*, 238)

Ballard takes this concept further, however, in his declaration that '[o]nly the artificial can be completely real.'¹² By this the author suggests that the artificial is merely an

¹¹ Peter Brigg, *J.G. Ballard* (Mercer Island: Starmont House, 1985), p. 12 (underlining in source material).

¹² *Quotes*, p. 371.

expression of the human psyche, which for Ballard is the only arbiter of reality since reality itself is a fluid datum. If we are alienated by the world of objects around us, that is only because we are alienated from our innermost selves. Any discomfort we experience in a schizoid consumer culture is also expressive of a discomfort with the truths that consumer culture may have in store for us about our real motivations. For Ballard, the world is now completely artificial and surreal, and therefore completely real. ‘The Surrealists deal in an external world that has been remade by the mind’, he writes, asserting that consumer culture and industrialization have performed this feat as an unintended consequence of their all-pervasiveness.¹³ ‘In the terms of the Surrealist Manifesto, this is the exact state of the sur-real’, Luckhurst writes. It is ‘[a] point beyond the oppositions of subject and object, reality and imagination, life and death.’¹⁴

As a utopian fantasy, it is clear that surrealism can provide a tempting prism through which to view the world of commonplace objects and events. ‘It’s the external world’, Ballard proposes, ‘which is now the realm, the paramount realm of fantasy.’¹⁵ We have remade the world in our image. However, for Ballard, as nightmarish as consumer culture may be, we cannot undo it and nor should we wish to, because behind its destructive character lies a desperate imperative on the part of humanity to liberate the imagination in order to overcome a time-bound world. Every object we encounter can be encountered anew in a different context and the imagination can reconstitute it according to the logic of Surrealism. Ballard writes:

¹³ *Quotes*, p. 289.

¹⁴ Luckhurst, p.138.

¹⁵ *Quotes*, p. 294.

In fantastic art, Breughel, and Bosch, you have the nightmare represented extremely well [...] chariots of demons and screaming archangels and all the materials of horror. What you don't have is what Surrealism has: the representation for the first time of the inner world of the mind in terms of *ordinary* objects – tables, chairs, telephones.¹⁶

To overcome the ‘nightmare’ then, requires an artistic disposition on the part of the percipient. Without forcing objects to conform to a new system (since systematization and hard categories created our lamentably vacuous situation), objects must be wrenched from their usual context and situated in unusual, generally catastrophic, landscapes. This is no stretch for Ballard since he has been here before in wartime Shanghai, in which Surrealistic landscapes were the norm:

The confusions and sudden transformations of war, which of course were well known to the French during WWII, taught me that reality is little more than a stage set, whose cast and scenery can be swept aside and replaced overnight, and that our belief in the permanence of appearances is an illusion.¹⁷

If the world of objects is indeed a stage set, then all the objects studding its surface must be props; tools through which action and identity are mediated. Moving a prop from one section of the stage alters its significance within the action. It is no stretch to assert that the placement of a given prop can change the focus of a play, but not the

¹⁶ *Quotes*, p. 292.

¹⁷ *Quotes*, p. 318.

play itself, which hurtles towards its end regardless. In a particulate and accelerated postmodern world, we have, according to both Ballard and Coupland, literally ‘lost the plot’, and so for the former the only option available to us is to rearrange the props in lieu of a narrative. Coupland takes the opposite view, which is that, finding all our plots to be spent, dead things, the only option is to reject the contemporary nihilism towards narrative and create new ones.

Gasiorek aligns Ballard’s narrative technique with Chomsky’s ‘transformational grammars.¹⁸ These are ‘linguistic systems that recode the ciphers once their hidden meaning has been exposed’. Gasiorek argues that this recoding ‘does not take the form of creating a new system out of the old one but rather of breaking the latter up into numinous fragments and then juxtaposing these in speculative collage-like assemblages that are provisional and open’.¹⁹ In other words, Ballard takes consumer objects (and images), the smallest and most manageable units of ‘meaning’ in our culture, and tears them out of the context or tradition in which they are embedded in order to expose them to the reconstitutive, *individual* imagination. However, rather than reinstalling objects into a new, totalizing system or intelligible context in which they can be ‘read’ anew with a view to assembling a new, perhaps redemptive system, Ballard leaves objects floating in narrative space, occasionally colliding with others in a destructive Brownian waltz. These collisions then expose the often unpalatable truth underpinning these objects’ creation, which is that they are nothing more than a mirror for the creative agent. An individual encounter with the object outside of its usual context recharges the world and removes the fetters on the imagination. Peter Brigg

¹⁸ See Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1957).

¹⁹ Gasiorek, p. 15.

asserts that '[Ballard] seeks to identify things (and people made into things by the media) as external representations of the inner map of the contemporary psyche.'²⁰ To expose the essential truth that made objects are reified ideas, Ballard works backwards, taking the object itself as the starting point. If the external world is now so synthetic that the rhythms and forms of nature have been effaced or sculpted in line with human desire, to analyse the modern subject one must first analyse the object-world in which he inheres. Any possible accusations of object-mysticism on Ballard's part collapse on this very point. Ballard's view is that the significance of synthetic objects is only fixed inasmuch as, like ourselves, any change in their context changes their 'nature' too, if only in the realm of perception. Made by *us* for *us*, they satiate or displace primitive desires of which we are only dimly aware. Of course this presupposes 'essence' on *our* part. Extreme juxtaposition, which lays bare the conceptual origins of the banal consumer objects by which we are besieged, casts them in a new and baleful light, serving also to expose the interdependence of inanimate object and thinking subject that often goes unnoticed or unacknowledged. Pushing this logic to its limit is Ballard's aim. Gasiorek writes:

Lawrence Alloway's view that the media provided 'an inventory of pop technology' in which 'the missile and the toaster, the push-button and the repeating revolver, military and kitchen technologies,' collided calls to mind Ballard's claim that 'the subject matter of science fiction is the subject matter of everyday life.'²¹

²⁰ Brigg, p. 12.

²¹ Gasiorek, pp. 14-15.

For Ballard, our relationship with objects leaves us, in a sense, inverted. We have been turned inside-out by the objects we have created. This is a grim diagnosis indeed, albeit not without its narrative of salvation. For the moment, it is vital to note that, while Gasiorek insists that Ballard's 'collage-like assemblages... are provisional and open', it is also possible to conceive of them as stifling and univalent. Luckhurst posits that '... violence is depicted in [Ballard's] work as the *sine qua non* of social existence'.²² As such, if there is no latent 'truth' in objects beyond their status as gleaming surfaces in which a perceiving culture sees itself, to assert that a violent culture will always invest its most banal products with violence is far from 'provisional and open'. Rather, their significance is always frozen within the same *topos* of equivalent erotic death as every other Ballardian object. Rather than being liberated from their everyday significance, the Ballardian consumer object is instead interred in another prison of signification. 'Uncannily surmounted', Luckhurst writes, 'our technologies are hauntingly doubled, divorced from their self-identity, given, suddenly, as useless, futile junk'.²³ Nostalgia for objects, therefore, represents an attempt on the part of the nostalgic to insist upon the consistent self-identity of objects, which Ballard takes to be ridiculous given his own experiences. An illustrative example of this Ballardian tendency is to be found in an episode in *The Kindness of Women* (1991) in which, newly liberated from the Lunghua internment camp in Shanghai, the narrator retraces his steps to his family home. Encountering a group of bored and half-starved Japanese soldiers, he attempts to ingratiate himself whilst desperately trying to screen out the young Chinese boy being hanged with telephone cables next to him. 'As another coil of telephone wire encircled his chest',

²² Gasiorek, p. 202.

²³ Luckhurst, p. 139.

the narrator recollects, '[the Chinese boy] tried not to breathe, and then began to pant rapidly, his head striking the wooden pole' (*KW*, 57). As the Chinese boy's breathing ceases, the Japanese private who has taken an interest in the narrator notices 'the transparent celluloid belt looped through the waistband of [his] cotton shorts' (*KW*, 60). Described by the narrator as his 'proudest possession' in a context of dire want, its durability is then 'tested' between the Japanese private's 'strong hands' (*KW*, 60–61). The possibility then presents itself that the narrator will be garroted with his own, repurposed possession in a restaging of the Chinese youth's death. This does not come to pass, yet the violent redeployment and 're-presentation' of these otherwise everyday objects – a belt and a length of telephone wire – leaves an indelible impression on the narrator. Under the wrong circumstances and in the wrong hands, anything can be a murder weapon. In a world of fixed (albeit exposed) signifiers, the only tonic is escape, presented in unavoidably nostalgic terms. As gruesome an episode as this is, Ballard's cool detachment cannot allow this trauma to be taken negatively. If a belt and a length of telephone wire can become murder weapons, any object can become anything else. For an object to arouse nostalgia, there must be an attendant concrete significance prepared for it. To experience nostalgia is to attempt to reinstall a given object within a tradition or totalizing system. For Ballard, this can only emphasise and make unbearable the loss of the object's prior ontological configuration. In its redeployment as a potential murder weapon, the belt loses its 'innocence'. Forced to see the belt anew, its former significance is gone forever for the narrator.

iii.

With a parallel career as a visual artist, Coupland's relationship with tactile objects extends into his fictions as well. While he is primarily known for his engagement with bleeding edge contemporary technologies and their implications for a spiritually-endangered humanity, the objects for which he reserves especial attention are in fact the obsolete, mass-produced items salvaged from the scrapheap. While it is certainly true that he ascribes a quasi-mystical dimension to these objects, frequently utilizing them in metaphors of rebirth and metamorphosis, Coupland shares with Ballard a fundamental conviction that this mystical dimension is not intrinsic.

Middle-aged divorcee Karen in Coupland's *Player One* (2010) sets Coupland's stall when she dejectedly lists 'soulless' objects, some or any of which could be considered nostalgic under the right circumstances: '[u]nsharpened pencils. Notepads from realtors. Dental retainers. The drawer is a time capsule. Karen thinks, *Everything we leave behind us as we move from room to room is a husk*' (PO, 2). The meaning of objects is therefore considered to be contingent and highly subjective. However, the very mass-production of consumer goods for Coupland can also be read as a binding, democratic process in the sense that it codifies and organizes a generational or even national experience. The danger with mass-production, however, lies in the phenomenal quantity of waste it produces, giving rise to crises both ecological and historical. The latter crisis – amounting to a crisis in *narrative* – prohibits the formation of a coherent, linear human story. Objects are discarded and junked before their broader significance can be assessed.

Andrew Tate reports that ‘Jenny Turner has observed that Coupland’s fiction – ‘full of lists of unloved objects, clothes and gadgets’ – uses violent moments of upheaval to ‘bring objects together in striking ways.’²⁴ While this strategy appears to resemble Ballard’s, its aim is markedly different. Where Ballard places seemingly unrelated objects on a collision course in order to expose their erotic and sadistic potential, revealing with Coupland what Tate calls the ‘hidden stories about our relationship to the material and the transcendent, to space and time’, the younger author takes great care to pick up the pieces afterwards.²⁵ Nostalgia must be a motivating factor for seeking out these discarded and degraded objects in the first place. Following Gasiorek’s insistence that Ballard is not attempting to place objects in new configurations with a view to creating a new object-order, Tate argues that ‘abandoned, broken and exhausted objects are transfigured into something new and powerful’ in Coupland’s work.²⁶ This suggests that Coupland is attempting to refurbish objects by placing them in unfamiliar contexts and configurations in order to create a new world from the etiolated remains of the old, placing him in direct opposition to Ballard’s exuberant object-nihilism. There is no broader social function to the imaginative reinscription of objects that take place in Ballard’s fictions, and this is due to his stated view that ‘social relationships are no longer as important as the individual’s relationship with the technological landscape of the late twentieth century’.²⁷ For Coupland, it is these social relationships that must adapt and reorganize in light of the technological landscape of the imminent and immanent apocalyptic twenty-first century. His primary interest is in the endangered social

²⁴ Andrew Tate, *Douglas Coupland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 90.

²⁵ Tate, p. 74.

²⁶ Tate, p. 76.

²⁷ Ballard, ‘Fictions of Every Kind’, p. 205.

relationships Ballard disregards from the outset in favour of an individual transcendence.

His violent pedigree notwithstanding, the sniper Bertis in *Player One* gives voice to Coupland's philosophy, enjoining his unwilling audience to “[I]magine no longer being trapped in a dying and corrupt world, but instead making a new one from this one's shattered fragments” (PO, 129). The fact that the novel itself enacts this logic by taking many observations and asides from previous Coupland novels and re-presenting them would seem to function as an ironic imprimatur for this ‘alchemical’ attitude, which Tate argues ‘is in some sense, metafictional: Coupland uses the ‘plastic’ materials of contemporary culture to produce something finer.’²⁸ Tate’s use of the term ‘plastic’ in this sense refers not just to the imperishable materials of which consumer objects are composed, but also to their malleable nature, which of course extends to redeployments in a panoply of contexts. An overly-simplistic formula for this opposition would run that where Ballard seeks to *expose* the eventual junk status of all fetishised objects, Coupland seeks to *impose* a redemptive value on junk.

‘Coupland’s writing’, Tate observes, ‘frequently blurs the border between trash and treasure in its fascination with the potential of junk to be made new.’²⁹ A creative intervention in the cycle of consumption and disposal rescues objects from history’s scrapheap at the last moment, taking the ‘husks’ alluded to by Karen in *Player One* and infusing them with meaning. Coupland therefore brings at least as much artistic and authorial vigour to bear on what Tate calls ‘the afterlife of objects’ as he does to

²⁸ Tate, p. 101.

²⁹ Tate, p. 102.

the simonized technological innovations of the present and near-future.³⁰ As Tate concludes, for Coupland, the dazzle of streamlined consumer objects must not be allowed to lull consumers into a fugue state in which they forget the long-term environmental and historical consequences of refuse:

Coupland's approach to junk [...] seems to stem from an attempt to reconnect contemporary fragmentation with history; waste matter is part of a shared story, a set of narratives that become erroneous if we fail to represent the material consequences of production and consumption.³¹

This 'reconnection' recognizes the dispersed and fragmentary marrow of recent history. Of his 'Canada House' project in *Souvenir of Canada 2* (2004), in which he took a '1950s flat-roofed clunker of a house in Vancouver' and 'buil[t] a uniquely Canadian environment' (SC2, 42), Coupland writes, 'I took an idea, and then turned it into a concrete object' (SC2, 45). These objects, composed of 'driftwood, castoffs and leftovers' (SC2, 42) were intended to express 'notions of Canadian society' (SC2, 45), but they also exemplify Coupland's broader perspective on the nature of recent history. 'Contemporary fragmentation' (Tate's term) resists incorporation into a totalizing historical narrative, and so waste and refuse are 'documents' that must be included and re-presented in order for our own time to attain a measure of lucidity. 'Canada House' is a vastly scaled-down model of the historical approach undertaken in Coupland's fiction. In attempting to draw together the scattered detritus of recent history, Coupland's project goes one step further than Ballard's. He does not stop at

³⁰ Tate, pp. 87-88.

³¹ Tate, p. 103.

arranging it with a view to establishing the strange correspondences in order to excavate their latent content; he strives to arrange it in such a way that new significations are possible in service to a redemption of culture rather than a liberation of the shackled imagination. This is an ontological recycling to complement the material, represented by the junk artist and failed weatherman and beauty pageant judge Eugene in Coupland's *Miss Wyoming*:

On the way back to his room, [Eugene] beamed with a creator's joy at his three pillars made of Brawny paper towel shipping boxes, a trio that filled the front hallway from floor to ceiling. (*MW*, 136)

Following an episode years earlier in which Marilyn, the mother of the titular Miss Wyoming, Susan Colgate, ruffles through his trash for incriminating evidence in order to assure her daughter's victory in a beauty pageant for which he is the appointed judge, Eugene finds himself unable to discard everything but organic waste. 'Since the episode with the crazy pageant mother back in Saint Louis, giving *anything* away to the trashman was cause for personal alarm' (*MW*, 136) Coupland writes, depicting Eugene as intensely neurotic but also penetringly aware of the fact that what we discard is as significant a set of documents on which to base a character study as what we choose to keep. In essence, trash forms a model of our cultural unconscious; the obscene, fragmented self we choose to hide in opaque sacks. What we choose to throw away speaks volumes about the sense of value placed on objects. The prodigious waste we produce in our own time suggests that we have far more to hide than previous generations. Nostalgia is one mechanism by which this trash can be brought to light and malodorous conclusions about ourselves drawn therefrom. These

conclusions and the objects themselves can be rehabilitated, however, and perhaps this is the point for Coupland; if objects can be redeemed and transmuted into redemptive materials, then so can we. There is hope in and for nostalgia after all.

iv.

The issue of the primacy of the authentic nostalgic object over its reproduction(s) is never laid to rest in Ballard and Coupland's texts. The unyielding desire for novelty they and their characters evince has always been counterbalanced by an anxiety over what, if anything, should be preserved and what should be allowed or even encouraged to disintegrate. This disintegration is far from clean, both materially and epistemologically. The total eradication of certain objects is a more difficult task than it appears. In some cases, physical absences can reinforce the lost object's presence in consciousness for the few or the many, often creating political flashpoints in the latter case. What is undeniable is that we refuse to allow certain objects to lie down and die. Perceived authenticity is the cardinal determinant of whether our culture discards or fetishises a given object. When an object is discarded, it is considered essentially worthless and a-historical, that is witness to no history and mute on the subject of its own time. The irony is that these discarded objects routinely become the objects most closely associated with a given period in living memory. 'Authenticity' is therefore not simply a matter of facticity; rather, it is implicated in the broader question of *value*, which is ideological. Walter Benjamin claims that "[t]he presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity", and so we may conclude that authenticity *depends* on the original, but the original will not always enter into the ideological

sphere of authenticity.³² ‘The authenticity of a thing’, he continues, ‘is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history it has experienced.’³³ Whether that history is deemed worthy of commemoration is the criterion by which an object is either preserved or destroyed. It must be reiterated that no object is *definitively* destroyed, however. Mechanical reproduction gives rise to a potential profane reawakening at any moment. Unlike the Gothic fictions of the Romantic period, this potential is only realized in Ballard and Coupland’s texts when there is an attempt to restore the lost object. One chapter in John Ruskin’s inestimably influential *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), ‘The Lamp of Memory’ forms an early critique of the restorative attitude towards nostalgic objects:

Do not let us talk then of restoration. The thing is a Lie from beginning to end. You may make a model of a building as you may of a corpse, and your model may have the shell of the old walls within it as your cast might have the skeleton, with what advantage I neither see nor care: but the old building is destroyed [...]. [M]ore has been gleaned out of a desolated Nineveh than ever will be out of a rebuilt Milan. But, it is said, there may come a necessity for restoration! Granted. Look the necessity full in the face, and understand it on its own terms.) It is a necessity for destruction.³⁴

³² Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 211-244 (p. 214).

³³ Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art...’, p. 215.

³⁴ John Ruskin, *The Lamp of Memory* (London: Penguin, 2008), p.15.

For Ruskin then, restoration is a form of destruction; an insult more egregious than time could ever wreak upon the object in contention. The restoration, or more properly 're-presentation' of objects to consciousness to fulfill a nostalgic desire is freighted with a destructive character which undermines the nostalgic impulse itself. Dylan Trigg writes, 'the ruin is in a constant process of morphing into multiple configurations. Because of this incessant flux, regulating the ruin becomes thwarted as the temporal velocity of decay intensifies. The decay quickens the more the ruin becomes exposed.'³⁵ Restoration therefore has a vitiating effect on the object because '[i]n their incompletion', claims Trigg, '[ruins] are already complete'.³⁶

In Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962), the draining of the long-submerged London is cast in horrific terms. Mechanically 're-produced' from beneath the tropical swamp, the city appears to the protagonists as a kelp-encrusted revenant, an abomination rising from the excremental amnion. The city has previously held a nostalgic fascination for the protagonists – a uterine sewer of limitless wonder in which the violence of the city's creation finally becomes manifest in its destruction, its inherent junk status sealed for good, or so it would seem until the Mephistophelian Strangman's boats hove into view. Previously a site of ethereal beauty, the city is profanely reborn under the auspices of Strangman, the returned colonial. Pumps and dams – sophisticated technologies of the new – are transformed by desire into voracious exhumation machines.

³⁵ Dylan Trigg, *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia, and the Absence of Reason* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2006), p. 130.

³⁶ Trigg, p. xxix.

Strangman's plundering mission, absurd at the twilight of civilization and therefore value, yields riches approaching the limit of meaning. 'Kerans managed to take his eyes off Strangman's face and glanced at the looted relics', writes Ballard. "'They're like bones,' he said flatly' (DW, 95). Drained, the city has become a sprawling, secular reliquary. Without the consolatory anchor of religion (to be replaced eventually with postmodern irony), the relic is a dead thing, only capable of a univalent significance. For all the transgression in Ballard's fictions, it would appear that, with the exception of flying machines as we shall see, he draws the line at grave robbing because exhumation *democratizes* the corpse, thereby 'fixing' its significance. To cast this in Benjaminian terms, the exhumation of the city from its watery grave shatters the sanctity of the tomb (in which the corpse assumes new shapes and dimensions for the mourner) and reawakens a meaningless tradition in its slick masonry (DW, 113–124). As positive as this action may appear, the restoration of aura is as brutal as its removal.

For Ballard, consumer capitalism has a pernicious aspect because it pluralises the value of objects, obscuring their protean potential. In other words, capitalist exchange does not allow the post-emotional modern subject to 'own' the items in his possession *enough*. For Ballard, even when one owns and has in one's possession a consumer object *à la mode*, it is never truly 'owned' because its value in the commodity circuit is already decided, its meaning already determined. It is shared with the other as an object of desire. Under the transformative gaze of the Ballardian hero whose task is to assign value, the object is refolded into multiple configurations, each with an intensely individual, non-pluralistic significance. The object is therefore only free if it is looked upon through the eyes of a despot. Strangman is not seeking to restore the city itself so much as the meaningless form of exchange value its high streets both contained and

embodied. If burial or submersion closes the question of capitalist ownership and instead opens the possibility for an imaginative ownership, that is the object's univalent significance for one person, the restoration of the object opens it once again, making it a source of conflict arising from the violence already implicit in the city itself. In raising the city from the dead, Strangman is also reanimating the question of value for objects whose value has been assigned democratically according to normative commercial and aesthetic standards. Strangman is therefore not nostalgic in the sense that he wishes to restore London to its former glory, but rather in the sense that, still blinded by the aura of the original, he wishes to restore the value of value.

Where the physical object is concerned, for Ballard nostalgia enters into a suicide pact with itself. It dives recklessly into the past with a view to resurrecting the original object, only to surface with a monstrosity. For the lost or destroyed object to remain nostalgic and evade the mutilation occasioned by the disparity between the ideal object and the re-presented object, it must remain lost or in ruins. For Ruskin, ethics and aesthetics converge on this very point. If nostalgia implodes the moment its object is attained, and if the nostalgic state is in *itself* a pleasurable experience, it must devise a series of unconscious feints to prevent it from *completely* closing the distance between itself and the authentic object. Mechanical and digital reproduction superficially depend on an inversion of these strategies. Benjamin writes:

The concept of aura which was proposed [...] with reference to historical objects may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones.

We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be. [I]t [is] easy to comprehend the social bases of the

contemporary decay of the aura. It rests on [...] the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer...',³⁷

The above passage underscores the symbiotic or perhaps parasitical relationship between nostalgia and distance (or more properly proximity). Nostalgia is concerned with the (im)possibility of the abbreviation of distance between a spatio-temporal 'here' and 'there'. Any number of powerful narratives beguile the nostalgic subject into believing that certain totems either from 'there' can magically effect this abridgment, but they can only compound the absence of the 'there' if they become commonplace; plastic madeleines for a plastic society. We import absences, and this is discernible to Coupland and Ballard's Last Men and Women. To restore or re-produce a given object, and to attempt to reintroduce a demised past into a postlapsarian present, is never ideologically neutral. Like history, archaeology is often selective, used to legitimize or undermine extant power structures. What we *choose* to 'bring closer' (and indeed repel) reveals a great deal about prevailing value systems and political/economic capital in the time in which this 'drawing-to' takes place, and very little about the context in which the objects originally had meaning. A linear tradition can be welded together from found materials to hegemonic effect.³⁸ An object (often of spectacular or ornate aspect) with unquestionable historicity can be ideological currency. Benjamin writes:

³⁷ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art...', pp. 216-217.

³⁸ New Historicists such as Louis Montrose and Stephen Greenblatt argue that the very construction of a linear history from found materials is *itself* a hegemonic act.

The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. An ancient statue of Venus, for example, stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous idol. Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura.³⁹

Benjamin's dim view of tradition does not discount its formidable resilience. Traditions may change, but tradition itself is a constant. Quietly ductile, tradition can claim certain objects and weave them into a contemporary historical narrative. In the above quotation, we see how the statue of Venus is an object of both Pagan reverence and Christian loathing. Even in the latter case, the statue is 'claimed' by the hegemon, if only to publicly reject it. Coupland and Ballard's anxieties over the tradition of tradition find their footing around secularized versions of these objects. In *Hello America* (1981), for instance, immediately upon their arrival in a ruined future America, the protagonists are confronted with the shopworn cliché of the ruined Statue of Liberty, submerged as in *The Drowned World*:

'A local marine deity,' [Paul Ricci] suavely informed them. 'The Americans of the eastern seaboard worshipped a pantheon of underwater creatures – you'll remember Moby Dick, Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*, even the great white shark affectionately christened "Jaws"'. (*HA*, 20)

³⁹ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art...', p. 217.

With sufficient distance, even the most seemingly inviolable *fixed* aura decays.

Beneath the waves, the statue – the nostalgic object – is ‘free’ in the sense that its significance is potentially infinite; it is mythic. Any individual narrative can be draped over its expansive shoulders. Ballard’s stated concern has never been with the history of oppression or of an emancipated future in the materialist sense. Rather, Ballard’s concern is with freedom from the tyranny of fixed signification; of any obstacles to the alchemical wedding between inner and outer landscape. The emancipation of the authentic object is thus one of Ballard’s aims, and nostalgia is one means by which the object’s significance is fossilized. Unlike Coupland, Ballard does not liberate objects for humanity, but rather for the individual ego. According to Baudrillard, such a complex anxiety surrounding the exhumed or re-produced object is by no means unique:

[M]ythological objects constitute a discourse no longer addressed to others but solely to oneself. Islands of legend, such objects carry humans back beyond time to their childhood – or perhaps even farther still, back to a pre-birth reality where pure subjectivity was free to conflate itself metaphorically with its surroundings.⁴⁰

As with all anti-nostalgic strategies employed by Ballard, the procedure is neither clean nor complete. The closing down of interpretation occasioned by a homogenous and crucially *democratic* nostalgic narrative is set against a solipsistic nostalgia for which the search for the authentic becomes, according to Baudrillard, ‘the quest for an

⁴⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. by James Benedict (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 84-85

alibi (being-elsewhere)'.⁴¹ Of concern to Ballard is not being-elsewhere as much as the elsewhere to which being is drawn.

v.

Coupland's open and ongoing exploration of authenticity surrounding objects is at its most topical and transparent in *All Families Are Psychotic* (2001), which not only questions the stability of representations of the suburbs, but also of auratic objects. As has been summarized elsewhere, the novel's action is rooted in a screwball road trip across Florida to courier a letter from Prince William to his mother on the occasion of her funeral to an anglophilic pharmaceuticals tycoon named Florian. Stolen from her coffin, it finds its way into the hands of black marketeers. The bickering men of the Drummond family are charged with the task of delivering it to Florian. The reader is alerted to Coupland's position on aura and authenticity early on, with the ineffectual Drummond son Bryan's initial response to the letter. “It's just a Hallmark envelope with a card in it or something,” he scoffs. “Just a –” He froze. “It's from the funeral. It's from the coffin – *her* coffin” (*AFP*, 97). As soon as Bryan makes the connection between the letter and arguably *the* media circus of the 1990s, the letter assumes an immediate and cyclopean aura *mid-sentence*. The significance of the rapidity of this accrual of aura is that, once again, this aura is not internally generated. There is nothing mystical or talismanic about the *object-in-itself*, not least because the opening and perusal of the letter is strictly proscribed under the conditions of delivery. Nor can the letter be x-rayed with a view to reading its contents because, according to the fixer who gives them the letter, ‘[w]e do not X-ray it because the envelope is part of the

⁴¹ Baudrillard, p. 81.

royal family's custom stationery, made of bleached birch cellulose bonded on the inside with a titanium layer that keeps out both X rays and ESP. The letter inside might as well be encased in lead' (*AFP*, 97). This is later revealed to be apocryphal, but the point remains that the letter's contents is both literally and metaphorically 'unreadable'. Unmoored from its context and in the hands of neither its sender nor its demised recipient, it is a letter that can never reach its destination. Without the bonds of intimacy and the depth of mutual experience the letter signifies, it is an insensate, dead thing; an object, in other words. Were it to be opened, its significance would evaporate on contact with the air. With all the visceral imagery of exposed, HIV-infected blood throughout the novel, the reader is led to the conclusion that, to force a comparison between the letter and the body, any opening of the envelope would not be a *reading* but an *evisceration*; a toxic *turning inside out*. The object only has meaning for its intended recipient. For the unintended reader, the object's interior would be nothing other than an extension of its exterior; of historical or intellectual curiosity only.

When the Drummond matriarch, Janet, considers the letter in one of her frequent reveries, she conceives of it as 'such a perfect crystal of all words left unspoken between mother and child', rendering superfluous or even profane its commodity status (*AFP*, 160). The death of Diana, Princess of Wales was an event over which millions of people felt a sense of ownership, as though the national tragedy were somehow theirs too. Coupland is obviously critiquing the commodification of such auratic objects in the novel. '[L]ook at me and tell me that you would hand over a letter as precious as that to some monster who'd actually pay for it', Janet tells her firstborn son Wade. Acknowledging that it is both 'precious' and therefore beyond

commodity-status, Janet short-circuits the arbitrary connection between ‘true’ (use value is not applicable here) value and exchange value (*AFP*, 160). The letter is both priceless and ‘price-less’, that is, its personal value is inestimable. For Coupland then, the act of exhumation itself is to be neither feared nor reviled so much as the intentions of the person or group performing the disinterment.

Much of the humour and pathos of the novel centres around Janet’s plans to avoid handing the real letter over to Florian. This caper begins with Janet’s resonant injunction to Wade to ‘[p]ull into that mall’, indicating that it is, in fact, consumer culture that will come to the rescue (*AFP*, 161). ““We need to buy envelopes and make duplicate letters”, Janet tells her children, recruiting them into a temporary *family business* of the modest American ‘mom and pop’ variety, which is outwardly the antithesis of mass production (*AFP*, 160). In a delicate, artisanal fashion, the Drummond children (and their partners and associates) set about copying the envelope, ‘writing the word ‘Mummy’, over and over, trying to perfectly mimic the original’ (*AFP*, 162). A veritable cottage industry of forgery emerges as letter after letter, their content almost immaterial, is made according to the exact dimensions and paper texture of the original hallmark card. With an approximation of signature alone, ‘aura’ can be forged and the content of the pages within plucked from thin air. What matters is that this activity of forging letters serves to bind the family in a shared project, making the original letter mean something *for them* without the need to actually read it. They take mass-produced, ‘blank’ objects and apply added value, displaying an ambivalence towards a culture which performs this operation on a daily basis. In mass-producing the letter, they make it theirs and democratize it. This is just as well because, when Janet finally meets the charismatic and endearingly sadistic

Florian face-to-face, he confides in the easygoing Janet, telling her his true agenda.

“‘Janet, what I really want is the *envelope*’”, he says, explaining that “[e]mbedded in the envelope’s glue [...] are a good number of stable and intact somatic cells [...] Give these cells the correct goo on which to grow, and then deliver the correct stimulus, and *whaam!* Instant prince” (AFP, 241–242). Whether Florian intends to make good on his intention to clone Prince William is neither here nor there; what matters is that Florian is not remotely interested in the envelope’s contents at all. His interests are purely commercial, serving to satirise a surface-obsessed material culture in which uniqueness is fetishised by the wealthy for its own sake, irrespective of content. As a businessman, Florian is unconcerned with the emotional cargo contained within the envelope’s mass-produced folds. He only wants to ‘read’ its surface, which itself constitutes a text, albeit one composed of nucleotides and genetic junk.

However, as with the letter, any clone of Prince William would still be a unique entity, charged with new meaning precisely *because* of its cloned status. The Drummond family’s forged letters are *authentic* forgeries in exactly the same way.

For Coupland, each instance of a mass-produced object is still unique and auratic because the context and complicated affective networks in which it is embedded (even as garbage) makes it so. In other words, uniqueness or authenticity are a matter of perception at the consumer-level rather than at the level of production. Nostalgia is imposed. Mass-produced objects can still be ‘read’, whereas the context of the ‘original’, once it leaves the hands of the person for whom it has meaning, becomes emotionally ‘illegible’. It can evoke emotion of course, but *only our own*. We generate the nostalgia and the object reflects it back. Its ‘interior’ remains a mystery. It is for this reason above all that Janet does not give Florian the letter; because she respects

the irretrievability and irreducible uniqueness of the original. ‘I had the real letter with me in the restaurant but I told him it was a fake’, she tells Wade. ‘The genuine letter is actually here in my pocket still’ (*AFP*, 267–268). The Drummonds do not keep the letter for themselves, however. Realising the irreverence and futility of opening a letter whose content would be meaningless, Wade charges his astronaut sister with the task of releasing the sealed envelope into orbit around the planet:

‘Take this for me.’ He gave her the letter. ‘But don’t bring it back, OK? Leave it out there, out in orbit.’

Sarah looked at the letter and made no historical connection. (*AFP*, 278)

As lyrical an image of transcendence as this is, it is also vital to consider its counterpole, namely that the letter is being consigned to a nimbus of space junk that has been orbiting our planet since the dawn of the space age. When Liz Dunn in *Eleanor Rigby* finds a ‘meteorite’ on the street and takes it home, ‘sleeping with it beneath [her] pillow’, its aura of otherworldliness is replaced by a very real, internally-generated aura of toxic radiation as it is revealed to be ‘a chunk of the fuel core from an RTG, a Radioisotopic Thermoelectric Generator’ from ‘a Soviet-era Cosmos satellite’ (*ER*, 192–193). With the reversion of the ‘meteorite’ to ‘space junk in [her] suitcase’ as Liz inadvertently shuts down Frankfurt airport due to the nuclear threat presented by both the fragment and her own irradiated body, Coupland satirises mawkish attitudes to space and celestial objects whilst retaining a vestigial sense of their numinosity (*ER*, 232). Andrew Tate’s term ‘Miraculous realism’ would therefore be an appropriate generic umbrella for most of Coupland’s fictions.⁴² There is a hard

⁴² See Andrew Tate, *Contemporary Fiction and Christianity* (London: Continuum, 2008).

edge to his miracles, which are never uncomplicated, univalent and consequence-free. If planet earth is engirdled by garbage, Prince William's letter is both a new celestial body *and* orbiting landfill.

vi.

Of all the objects which make up a Ballardian landscape, it is the aeroplane which is always foregrounded. 'Flying had been interesting and given me another set of myths to live by', the author recalls. 'The fighter attacks by Mustangs that flew so low over Lunghua camp – I remember looking down at them from the second and third floor of the buildings during the air raids.'⁴³ If the author is to be believed, his first exposures to aeroplanes were as weapons of war, bringers of death and liberation in equal measure. Indeed, *Empire of the Sun* is largely composed of paeans to magical flying machines, for which he acknowledges nostalgia:

A potent atmosphere hovered over the cockpit, the only nostalgia Jim had ever known, the intact memory of the pilot who had sat at its controls. Where was the pilot now? Jim pretended to work the controls, as if this sympathetic action could summon the spirit of the long-dead aviator. (ES, 31)

If technology is 'so much junk' according to Luckhurst, the aeroplane and its functional analogues and precursors somehow manage to escape this representation, even when they *are* 'junked'. Indeed, if anything these junked planes are represented as auratic future-fossils of a bygone era. 'I suppose World War II was the last fling',

⁴³ *Quotes*, p. 194.

he writes, insisting upon an image of pre-mass transit in which ‘aviation was still built around the dimensions of the man’ and ‘touched people’s imaginations in consequence’.⁴⁴ Aviators are heroes for Ballard’s protagonists, and many of his stories betray a powerful nostalgia for the golden age of aviation, up to and including civil aviation and its ‘promise of the opportunity to invent oneself afresh’.⁴⁵ Despite their undeniable status as mass-produced objects, flying machines are auratic objects. In *Kingdom Come* for example, an abandoned airfield in London’s suburbs is seen as the only truly authentic, tranquil burial site in a conflict in which both sides and sites (the suburb of Brooklands and the Brooklands Shopping Centre) are equally *inauthentic*:

I looked out at the Brooklands racing track half a mile away. A section of the embankment had been preserved as a monument to the 1930s, the heroic age of speed, the era of the Schneider Trophy seaplane race and record-breaking flights, when glamorous women pilots in white overalls lit their Craven A cigarettes as they leaned against their aircraft. The public had been seized by a dream of speed no advertising agency could rival. (KC, 19)

Ballard has written that ‘an empty runway moves me enormously (which obviously says something about my need to escape)’.⁴⁶ If this is the case, it is possible to read *through* this image to an identifiable, limpid nostalgia on Ballard’s part, which is appropriately manifested in his fictions in turn. Taking the quotation from *Kingdom Come* above, a notable element is the coda, which acts as a magic bullet for the

⁴⁴ *Quotes*, p. 192.

⁴⁵ *Quotes*, p. 194.

⁴⁶ *Quotes*, p. 194.

decipherment of Ballard's attitude towards aviation. For Ballard, 'no advertising agency [can] rival' the sense of escape and liberation offered by the greatly-missed 'golden age' of civil and military aviation. Somehow literally and metaphorically 'above' the profane world of marketing and exchange, these mass-produced objects somehow maintain an aura more formidable and durable than anything manufactured before or since. Ballard's characters share an apprehension of airfields as sites of 'beginnings... not ends'⁴⁷ as Melville, 'the first astronaut to suffer a mental breakdown in space'⁴⁸ says as he attempts to exhume a buried fighter in 'My Dream of Flying to Wake Island' (1974).

With the end of the golden age of flight, it becomes clear that 'beginnings' and therefore a certain optimistic vision of the future, are the lost nostalgic objects themselves. This is a 'retro-futuristic' nostalgia, mediated by the flying machine. In the same short story, we see that despite its junk status, it is still a powerfully auratic object. 'After all his efforts', Ballard writes, 'the interior of the fuselage seemed to Melville like a magical arbour, the grotto-like cavern within some archaic machine.'⁴⁹ Despite being exhumed 'like a winged saurian', the fighter is not portrayed as an undead abomination like London's city centre in *The Drowned World*.⁵⁰ It escapes this negative rendering because, unlike the city centres which are so grindingly passé for Ballard, flight represents a metaphorical transcendence of the material and the profane. 'I accept the idea that flight is a sort of symbol of escape', he claims, 'but I

⁴⁷ J.G. Ballard, 'My Dream of Flying to Wake Island,' *The Complete Short Stories: Volume 2* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 330-341 (p. 337).

⁴⁸ Ballard, 'My Dream of Flying to Wake Island,' p. 339.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Ballard, 'My Dream of Flying to Wake Island,' p. 331.

think more than escape, of *transcendence*, and it played a very large role in my fiction.⁵¹ Flight is therefore a very pure dream of the future for the author, only superficially driven by economic and martial factors. Rather, the construction of flying machines satiates a far more intrinsic need to escape the mundane altogether. 'I was thinking of an area of totally free space', Franz in 'The Concentration City' (1967) tells his psychiatrist. 'In three dimensions, as it were.'⁵² Franz's dream of escaping his theoretically infinite and terminally-overpopulated city leads him to invent a flying machine where, we may infer, none have existed prior to the events in the story. This is conceptual science-fiction, in which we are invited to consider a *near-contemporary* world in which aviation is the schizoid fantasy of a shamanic madman. Release and transcendence, all embodied in the flying machine, are the given as the natural conclusion of any yearning for escape.

That we have grown accustomed to flight, that its status as the true zenith of human achievement is now overlooked, is for Ballard the motor driving his nostalgia. While he accepts that '[f]or too many people in the twentieth century the sky was a place from which death came', for Ballard the sky is anything but; it is our natural home, the place where metaphor meets reality on a groundless ground.⁵³ It is the future we have abandoned. '[Flight] provided some of the most potent metaphors that human beings have ever responded to', Ballard proposes, and it is impossible to disagree with him on this point.⁵⁴ If transcendence and total freedom are the metaphors which guide the

⁵¹ *Quotes*, p. 195.

⁵² J.G. Ballard, 'The Concentration City,' in *The Complete Short Stories: Volume 1* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 30-50 (p. 33).

⁵³ *Quotes*, p. 195.

⁵⁴ *Quotes*, p. 192.

author above all others, single-man aircraft (for they must be ‘single-seaters’ in order for the communion between inner and outer ‘skyscapes’ to be complete) are the means by which this apotheosis can be realized. The innumerable scrapped and hobbled aircraft in Ballard’s fictions are therefore nostalgic signifiers of *failed* transcendence, of the future’s wholesale abandonment. In the downed aircraft, the future comes to a poignant end. In many ways, even where there are none mentioned or in evidence, all of Ballard’s texts *begin* with a downed aircraft. Some motif illustrating how, as a species we took an evolutionary wrong turn on the way to the future is usually the starting point.

If nostalgic re-presentation of the object reveals the hitherto unexpressed fascistic agenda which can unconsciously impel its production and consumption, flying machines seem to escape this process, rendering them ‘safe’ for nostalgia. This is because flying machines symbolize overcoming, escape and transcendence. If the world is intrinsically empty of meaning, the only possible form of transcendence is escape rather than a transfiguration of the world. As such, and paradoxically, an intrinsically empty object, even when incapable of flight, is deployed to transcend that very intrinsically empty material world. Ballard infuses junkyards and downed aircraft with a melancholic nostalgia because, while he is all-too prepared to see the past go down in flames, he laments the loss of the shining future. Crucially, this is a *child’s* dream of the future, as we shall see.

vii.

In *Shampoo Planet* (1992), Coupland's young narrator Tyler is a budding business magnate, keen to get in on the Reaganite yuppie excesses of the already-vanished 1980s. As he sees it, his first step on the ladder of business world domination is a job with Bechtel: a quietly malign and opaquely-defined corporate entity based in Seattle. His overture to this company's CEO is chillingly appropriate for our times. He begins by telling his prospective employer that 'our country is having a shortage of historical objects – there are not enough historical objects for people to own. As well, we have too many landfills' (*SP*, 186). Here, Coupland posits a dystopian present in which the entire past will be or already has come to be viewed as a natural resource; mineral ore with which to fuel a benighted, commodified present. In direct contradistinction to *Microserfs*' Dan's concern that 'allowing the corporate realm to invade the private...' 'seem[s] like a dangerous way to be messing with the structure of time', Tyler embraces the concept of corporate incursions into memory itself, here unflatteringly analogous to a landfill (*MS*, 131). Tyler continues:

I suggest, Mr. Miller, that Bechtol develop a nationwide chain of theme parks called *History World*TM in which visitors (wearing respirators and outfits furnished by Bechtol's military division) dig through landfill sites abandoned decades ago (and purchased by Bechtol for next to nothing) in search of historical objects like pop bottles, old telephones and furniture. The deeper visitors dig, the further visitors travel back in time, and hence the more they would pay. (*SP*, 187)

What Tyler is proposing is nothing less than the final commodification of the past and of memory, mediated through the object, whose nostalgic status and therefore value is vouchsafed by nothing more than its historicity; an anticipatory riposte to *Microserfs'* Dan's fear that '[t]he past is a finite resource' (MS, 81). This is an indiscriminate, desperate envisioning of the state of (near) contemporary nostalgia. In a context in which the cultural assumptions underpinning value are suspect, relics and refuse can be one and the same thing. The uncanny exhumation of objects feared by Ballard is shared by Coupland, but there is an ethical dimension for the younger author. *The Drowned World*'s Kerans' description of the looted relics from postdiluvian London as 'like bones' is apposite for an explication of Coupland's perspective on the relationship between the object and the commodification of history. 'Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past', writes Benjamin, 'who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.'⁵⁵ For Coupland, the discarded object is as endangered as the dead by the influence of capital. Unlike the dead in Benjamin's formulation, however, trash does not risk erasure; rather, it risks symbolic assimilation. In the case of the object deemed picayune at its genesis within the system which birthed and would later attempt to *reassimilate* it, Coupland and Benjamin would see the object *redeemed*, which is to say plucked from the profane world of banal exchange and charged with new, *pluralistic* significance. We may say therefore that a point of divergence between Ballard and Coupland is that Ballard's emancipation of the object from nostalgic dredging is conducted for the sake of permitting it to signify infinitely and aimlessly, whereas for Coupland the

⁵⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 245-255 (p. 247).

emancipation of the object redeems it from the system of capitalist exchange, enabling it to signify in the service of a culturally liberated mankind. As Coupland sees it, Tyler's squalid but innovative proposal is only an overt declaration of what is already being attempted; the reprivatization of discarded objects with a view to privatizing history in its entirety:

At night visitors would then stay in Bechtol's *History World*TM museum franchises showcasing the history of history ("Oh honey, look – a stratum of phone books – another year has gone by." Kiss kiss.) (SP, 187)

This privatization abets an existing tendency to measure time *through* objects, terminating in a complete dependence on the commodity to situate the consumer in time. If we accept that the object is one yardstick by which we naturally measure the passage of time (in either its obsolescence or its state of decay), then it should be of little concern to us that this is so. Objects always have an implicit chronometric function. However, if we allow the logic of product cycles into the mix, Coupland suggests we run the risk of losing any internal sense of time whatsoever:

Todd said, "Wouldn't it be scary if our internal clocks weren't set to the rhythm of waves and sunrise – or even the industrial whistle toot – but to *product cycles* instead?"

We got nostalgic about the old days, back when September meant the unveiling of new car models and TV shows. Now, carmakers and TV people put them out whenever. (MS, 55)

As a throwaway observation, this is profound for any understanding of contemporary culture. Here, the shift from production to consumption is articulated and discarded in the same sentence. Following on from this, the Microserfs enact the same logic Todd has just hypothesized as scary. Coupland then exhorts us to 'look to the trashcans' for truth and a more stable orientation in time.

viii.

An almost literal approach to the radical historical materialism proposed by Benjamin is mounted by Coupland's characters, who, to borrow Luckhurst's reading of Benjamin *contra* Ballard, 'focus... on the unmodishness of objects of the recent past to prise open the eyes from a collective commodity dream-state'.⁵⁶ What Benjamin is proposing is the possibility of using the redeemed materials presented to the passive consumer in the capitalist dreamscape to fashion an exit from that dreamscape. This profane salvage, described by Coupland as '*beautiful, treasure-like things just lying here, free!*' is redeemed with a view to mapping the coercive consumer society through its refuse. Reassembled and repurposed, junk can be reborn, not in the staid manner of an exhumation, but recharged with meaning (SC2, 45). This is not so for the object revived at the whim of the market according to Coupland in *Polaroids From The Dead* (1996):

Don't you ever wonder about the way the world is going? This weird global McNugget culture we live in? All our ideas and objects and activities being

⁵⁶ Luckhurst, p. 139.

made of fake materials ground up and reshaped into precisely measurable units entered into some rich guy's software spreadsheet program?" (PFD, 23)

'Quit recycling the past' proclaims one chapter title in *Generation X*', Tate declares: 'the severe, quasi-Modernist instruction reflexively admonishes the writer, his reader and an entire culture for its predilection for repetition'.⁵⁷ However, if the waste of the Baby Boomers is consumed by their offspring, it is obviously not in the form of the unclean waste that would make the repetition obvious. A logocentric quest for authenticity and origin cannot be undertaken through an archeological quest through geological strata of landfill. The past must, at least on the demotic level, be clean. At no point must the past's (in truth defining) frequently unpleasant odour be apparent. The unacceptable 'Smell of Shit' as one chapter is entitled in *Polaroids from the Dead* is nothing more than the heterogeneity and above all *complexity* of the past (PFD, 13). A subtle aspersion is cast at this culture of trash-laundering in *Miss Wyoming* when John Johnson's friend Ivan discusses the special effects for a movie they intend to work on:

"I was meeting with these nerds at ILM and SGI up in San Francisco before I went to Scotland. Their computers can do perfect flying debris and litter now. They're looking for a showcase for their new techniques and this sounds like just the thing. Story needs some work, though." (MW, 122)

That special effects houses can now produce clean, virtual trash surrogates is a monstrous prospect for Coupland, since this represents the culmination of capital's co-

⁵⁷ Tate, p. 94.

optive logic, simulating the historical dirt on detritus so no truth can be gleaned from it other than that which the market allows. The payoff comes in the final sentence when, in a moment of unintentional perspicacity, Ivan says ‘story needs some work, though’. *Simulated* junk tells no tales and redeems nothing. In full ragpicker mode, Coupland is telling us that history is unclean and that it is not the junk object which recites its testimony so much as the putrid coating it has earned. Nostalgia must therefore literally be ‘for the mud’ and not just for the bauble at its heart. The nostalgia in Coupland’s 1990s culture is characterised not by reclamation, therefore, but by recycling; by *work*. The waste or excess of the previous generation is desired by bland consumer culture, but only if any trace of waste or excess is expunged. Tate reports that ‘In *Generation X*, Dag offers a memorably repugnant personification of contemporary culture as a consumer insouciantly gorging on its own faeces. “Marketing”, Dag states, is ‘about feeding the poop back to diners fast enough to make them think they’re still getting real food” (*GX*, p. 33).⁵⁸ As long as this poop has none of the sensuous signs thereof, it will be willingly consumed. For some, it is even considered to be a subversive act.

Year on year, another decade is plundered of its distinctive plumage to create catwalk chimeras whose lead consumers eagerly follow. Coupland’s work amounts to a sustained critique of this tendency in culture, albeit one defined and energized by ambivalence. Ballard’s corpus, on the other hand, *enacts* this logic; it is the logic of the nostalgia industry in miniature, a self-contained machine dedicated to its own proliferation by repetition. In her essay ‘Corsets, Silk Stockings, and Evening Suits: Retro Shops and Retro Junkies’ (2003), Christina Goulding proposes that ‘it is

⁵⁸ Tate, p. 76.

possible to conceptualize retro as a form of consumer resistance.⁵⁹ This hypothesis refers to consumers who scour retro stores in search of ‘authentic’ clothes from yesteryear, as opposed to ‘reproduction pants, corsets, bustiers, miniskirts, stilettos, and so on...’, but the distinction is principally confined to the ways in which targeted consumers of ‘authentic and inauthentic retrowear’ organise themselves socially.⁶⁰ Goulding insists on the two markets’ dissimilarity by asserting that ‘the nostalgia boom [...] is less concerned with authenticity and more focused on recycling styles in a form of bricolage that will appeal to a wider market than the purists who scour rag alleys and retro shops for the real thing.⁶¹ When we begin to seriously consider the purity of ‘pure’ and the reality of ‘the real thing’, this distinction evaporates. If we accept that both types of consumer are homogenous inasmuch as they are both *consumers*, the filament-thin distinction between inauthentic and authentic collapses. While the ‘authentic’ nostalgic object retains what may be considered a postmodern variant of the Benjaminian aura (in the sense that in most cases the ‘retro’ commodity is an authentic example of an already mass-produced item), it is still a reproduction in the sense that it has been taken out of the system of capitalist exchange for a period of time and then literally *re-produced* from beneath, as it were, the counter, much like London in *The Drowned World*. In other words, it has been recycled. Coupland entitles one of the chapters in *Generation X* ‘Shopping is not creating’ (GX, 43), implying scorn for any occluded notions of subversive consumerism. Of the many contemporary (at the time of writing) strains of culture recycling diagnosed by

⁵⁹ Christina Goulding, ‘Corsets, Silk Stockings, and Evening Suits: Retro Shops and Retro Junkies’ in *Time, Space and the Market: Retrospectives Rising*, ed. by Stephen Brown and John F. Sherry (Armonk NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 2003), pp. 54-74 (p. 57).

⁶⁰ Brown, p. 8.

⁶¹ Goulding, p. 63.

Coupland, ‘Decade Blending’ is one of the more disquieting. The author defines it as ‘[i]n clothing: the indiscriminate combination of two or more items from various decades to create a personal mood’ (*GX*, 17) Andy, the central protagonist of *Generation X*, finds this indiscriminate ‘convey[ing] [of] “pastness” by the glossy qualities of the image, and [...] by the attributes of fashion’⁶² conspicuously morbid:

Me? I’m just me. I never seem to be able to get into the swing of using “time as a colour” in my wardrobe, the way Claire does, or “time cannibalising” as Dag calls the process. I have enough trouble just being *now*. I dress to be obscure, to be hidden – to be *generic*. Camouflaged. (*GX*, 18)

Once the speciously authentic item returns to the market whence it came, its authenticity becomes a matter for the pricing gun alone. ‘The door has thus been opened’, Baudrillard observes, ‘to a mass of ‘authoritative’ signs and idols (whose authenticity, in the end, is neither here nor there).’⁶³ The nostalgia generated by items of this nature, both authentic and inauthentic, is for the temporal context (or origin) into which they are positioned as a portal. Nostalgic consumer objects promise access to an origin to which they are as excluded as the consumer themselves; they are forged passports. Irony is only a cover for this impossible mourning, this nostalgia.

The distinction between inauthentic and authentic nostalgic objects for Coupland is ultimately sensuous. The repackaged, reformed and mechanically reclaimed nostalgic

⁶² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 19.

⁶³ Baudrillard, p. 89.

commodity fetish does not, in the final analysis, enter into a dialogue with any temporality save that bastardised strain with which it is impregnated at point of manufacture. It is waste with any trace of waste removed. As Tate writes, '[r]ubbish [...] is a set of codes that demands interpretation.'⁶⁴ Coupland's texts evince a fascination with waste and discarded objects, with their potential to be landfill Rosetta Stones. 'Coupland', Tate explains, 'uses the motif of garbage – or 'objects that people no longer want' to signify regeneration.'⁶⁵ If left to itself or reused creatively, rubbish has a redemptive character. When placed back in the capitalist system of exchange, however, it becomes an extension of a neverending cycle that mirrors one already underway in the wider culture.

We have established that for Ballard and Coupland both, the mass produced object is not qualitatively subordinate to what is generally regarded to be an 'auratic' object. A more threatening object altogether is the nostalgic surrogate. If Jameson is correct, according to the logic of high capitalism 'the history of aesthetic styles displaces "real" history'.⁶⁶ Historiography becomes an exercise in aesthetic piracy in this rapacious non-paradigm. A nostalgic *consumer* object can only constellate aesthetic styles, and therefore the historical context which the object supposedly manifests in the present always possesses a vaporous historicity. The entire nostalgia industry depends on a bogus, simonised history, allowing us to, according to Hutcheon,

⁶⁴ Tate, p. 88.

⁶⁵ Tate, p. 92.

⁶⁶ Jameson, p. 20.

‘experience the nostalgic style of an era without bearing its historical costs’.⁶⁷ The nostalgic consumer object effects a *voluntary* parody of an involuntary memory of events whose complexities are exorcised. It is a hinge connecting an authentic present (the moment of its recognition in the marketplace) to a fudged past. The question of authenticity in nostalgic objects is therefore a question of intention and ubiquity. Nostalgic consumer objects are as authentic as the survived objects of a given period. However, unlike the latter they are manufactured with an implicit remit, perhaps unknown even to the manufacturer, to constellate the present with a fiction. They are presented as a cure for a disease of which the site of their production is the cause; as a prepackaged alternative to the ‘ongoing struggle to maintain a sense of place and time in an increasingly changing and volatile world’.⁶⁸ The trauma of loss and change is triumphantly outwitted in the perpetuation of signifiers of an aestheticised history. Moreover, their omnipresence in the market has the fortuitous effect of legitimising the past that has been created for them; truth, rather than strength, is in numbers. As out of joint as the time is, the lapidary past, its anxieties cropped, can always be folded into the present through consumer objects. We no longer need, so the principle would have us believe, to trust chance to strew nostalgic objects in our path to incite a Proustian involuntary memory. Instead they are placed before us by popular demand. The only surprise is the decade to be plundered, not that one will. Where this agenda is conspicuous, irony is recruited to the object’s defence, as though that were the end of the matter. It masks the traumatic awareness of the irretrievability of lost time. Nobody is truly convinced by the prefabricated nostalgic consumer object, and yet it is

⁶⁷ Linda Hutcheon, ‘Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern’, *University of Toronto English Library [UTEL]* (19th September 1998), <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html> [accessed 2nd December 2009], p. 196.

⁶⁸ Goulding, p. 65.

a totem of a culture that aspires to a consoling Proustian constellation of past and present, even though that same culture knows it can *induce* nothing of the kind.

Coupland's texts presuppose an implicit relationship between nostalgia and irony in culture, and Ballard and Coupland's differing responses to this are fundamental. We may say that where Coupland's texts inveigh against general irony *with* irony, Ballard's texts ironize nostalgia in an attempt to neutralise it.

ix.

A look at the world of toys shows that children, humanity's little scrap dealers, will play with whatever junk comes their way, and that play thereby preserves profane objects and behaviour that have ceased to exist. Everything which is old, *independent of its sacred origins*, is liable to become a toy.⁶⁹ [emphasis mine]

Any commodity can have nostalgic associations, just as (as Ballard's peculiar case illustrates) any event can have nostalgic associations, but when that association is made with an object, the object undergoes an phenomenological transformation and becomes a toy. '[W]hat, then, is the essence of the toy ?'⁷⁰ asks Giorgio Agamben, drawing essence into the debate once again. 'The essential character of the toy – the only one, on reflection, that can distinguish it from other objects – is something quite singular, which can be grasped only in the temporal dimension of a 'once upon a time'

⁶⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. by Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007), p. 79.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

and a ‘no more’.⁷¹ The toy brings the ‘once upon a time’ tantalisingly close at the same time as it is in itself evidence of its being ‘no more’. If Agamben is correct in his insistence that ‘what children play with is history’,⁷² Ballard’s narrator in *The Kindness of Women* certainly treats history and the present as his plaything:

I remember pacing up and down with all the Napoleonic impatience of a 7-year-old, my toy soldiers drawn up on the carpet like the Japanese and Chinese armies around Shanghai. At times it seemed to me that I was keeping the war alive singlehandedly. (*KW*, 9)

Jim, convinced of a mystical connection between the deployment of toy soldiers and the very real threat of violent Japanese occupation, miniaturizes the impending conflict with an unspoken conviction that he can control the narrative. The godlike manipulation of reality for the individual consciousness is all-licensed in the case of the child. For Ballard, toys allow for the reorganization of reality in an intelligible way. They allow for the illusion of control over chaos. Lost battles can be won in their restaging and history is reversible on the level of the toy. Something akin to the Freudian game of *fort/da* is in operation here, in which the infant consciousness attempts to manipulate the one piece of its environment over which it has control. For Ballard, the world becomes one giant toybox for the unconstrained imagination. The sympathetic magic of toys is a belief one can only hold in a state of derangement or of childhood. It is only when his toys lose their ‘innocence’ following a devastating

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Agamben, p. 81.

bomb in the shopping district of Shanghai that the seriousness of play becomes apparent to the narrator:

[A]s I rested in my bed at Shanghai General, I was thinking not of the bomb by the Amusement Park, but my army of toy soldiers on the floor of my playroom. Even as the rescue workers of the Shanghai Volunteer Force carried me to their ambulance through the dusty streets I knew that I needed to arrange their battle lines. I had seen the real war for which I had waited impatiently, and I felt vaguely guilty that there were no models of dead Chinese in my boxes of brightly painted soldiers. (*KW*, 26)

It is only when the war ‘overtakes’ his troop emplacement that the horror of war begins to affect the narrator. The use of toys in this case is predicated on an inversion of signifier and signified hitherto only possible in a child’s imagination. For the creative imagination, the Sino-Japanese war is a metaphor for the war of the toy soldiers rather than the other way around. This is an elaborate defense mechanism indeed, but an effective one. For the remainder of the novel, the world is nothing more than a metaphor for the equally real conflicts staged in the protagonist’s head, in which the usual confusions of incipient adolescence are heightened by the extreme forum in which it is supposed to develop. Isolated from the broader context of tradition and history, the toys can be manipulated and bent to the child’s will, both sides of the conflict subject to the whim of a single creative puppeteer. Agamben writes:

Like *bricolage*, the toy, too, uses ‘crumbs’ and ‘scraps’ belonging to other structural wholes (or, at any rate modified structural wholes); and the toy, too, thereby transforms old signifieds into signifiers, and vice versa.⁷³

As a desperate measure for desperate times, therefore, a constructive nostalgia for the child’s gift of being able to impose mind on reality and invert their relationship accordingly, is necessary and appropriate. For Ballard, living under constant threat of annihilation makes our only avenue of escape an apprehension of the world as plaything, and the objects therein merely props to be enjoyed on an aesthetic level. Ballard’s texts evince a nostalgia for a mental state in which the absurdity of the world can be appreciated as the scaled-up toybox it is. If the world’s leaders are maniacs, it takes a childlike disposition to think as they think and thereby survive. It is irrelevant whether these toys are consumer durables or not.

x.

The world of objects which the fictions of Ballard and Coupland address is, as both authors appreciate, already too complex to be either militated against or effusively endorsed. It may be argued that any adoption of a fixed position in the debate over whether consumer culture and commodity fetishism are edifying or stultifying would run counter to any balanced exploration thereof.

Having accepted that objects have no essence and hence cannot be ‘nostalgic’, both authors’ approaches to the world of objects strongly suggest that for them, an object

⁷³ Agamben, p. 81.

can only be an object *of* nostalgia. This seems obvious, but when we consider Walter Benjamin's assertion, following Proust, that there exists a type of collector/consumer who believes that the object possesses '[t]he ability, it would seem, of returning that gaze', it is clear that there is a recalcitrant mysticism at play in the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity in our perception of objects.⁷⁴ An unreflected, banal nostalgia for objects, that is according to Benjamin (again, following Proust) the belief that 'objects retain something of the gaze that has rested on them',⁷⁵ is not taken seriously by either author. For Coupland the filth lacquered on to them from the corrosive effects of mass-consumption (which presupposes mass-disposal) *can* be read, albeit with a view to critiquing the very culture in which they were produced. For Ballard on the other hand, there is a nostalgia for the apprehending consciousness which believes that objects can 'return [...] the gaze' – that of the child.

Both authors privilege the context in which the object is found. Whether unique or mass-produced, an object is defined according to its context and is therefore always authentic. For it to be inauthentic, it must be given or presented outside the authentic context in which its original meaning (which again is wholly context-dependent) *had* meaning. The letter over which so many of the madcap conflicts in *All Families Are Psychotic* are fought is, despite its authenticated provenance, as much a forgery as any of the copies the Drummond family bunglingly make over the course of an afternoon, precisely because its *true* 'content' is in fact its *context*. The letter cannot be fully opened, fully *read* because the distance it promises to bridge between the tragedy in/of

⁷⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' in *Illuminations*, ed. By Hannah Arendt, trans. By Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 152-196 (p. 184).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

the British royal family and anyone who would read the letter is unbridgeable. In testifying to an absent rather than a present content, the distance between the nostalgic and the object of nostalgia (a nostalgic context rather than the object itself, which is only a mediator of nostalgia) widens with the present symbol of the absent past.

Ballard's hostility towards nostalgia extends to consumer objects because the nostalgic gesture operates in part by ossifying the significance of a given object, fixing it in a given context. Ballard instead favours an apprehension of objects as toys, meaning that, just as a toy can take on fresh significance by its emplacement in the infinite contexts play supports, the objects of the 'adult' world can undergo the same process. This is not a prelude to greater insights so much as an end in itself; an imaginative remythologising of the object which exposes the limitless, transcendent potential of the individual imagination. However, this philosophy is obliged to depend on an antecedent nostalgia for its exercise. Childhood is an anostalgic condition which is itself a potent object of nostalgia, and this is particularly observable in Ballard's fictions. As narratives of regression, his texts depict a variation on Playland – a child's utopia in which destruction and anarchy hold sway – in Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* (1883). Using this example, Agamben demonstrates that a permanent state of play can indeed be construed as a cataclysm. The character Lampwick is Pinocchio's guide in Playland, saying '[j]ust think that the autumn holiday begins on the first of January and ends on the last day of December.'⁷⁶ Here, objects exhibit illusory signs of life, animated and made constantly new by an unfettered creativity. Ballard's remythologised Shanghai is offered up by the author as the template for this deadly

⁷⁶ C. Collodi, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, trans. by M.A. Murray (London: Unwin, 1892). Cited in Agamben, p. 76.

Playland. If childhood is a site of endless novelty, it is precisely this type of novelty to which Ballard's protagonists sacrifice everything in order to attempt a return. Decayed and degraded objects are both the consummation and deflation of this chimerical hope. If childhood is a theatre of novelty in which familiar objects can be repeatedly encountered as for the first time, to be toys they must only fulfill the requirement of being where they should not be and therefore capable of surprise. Ballard's protagonists' duty is to seek out situations which present an opportunity for a nostalgic return to a realm of novelty. It is perhaps this nostalgia for the world of toys and their plastic connotations which impedes return; the predictable failure in store for the one who strives to discover the object for the first time a *second* time.

Coupland's protagonists, on the other hand, share a perception of the world of consumer objects as already being toys, in that they are already subject to a colloquially accepted logic of drifting signification. While still in need of novelty, Coupland's characters assume they are proceeding from a state of infantilized arrested development, and as such seek the concrete and the determinate in the world of objects. Like Pinocchio in Playland, Coupland's protagonists risk eroding their chances of ever becoming real people. For Coupland, a world of toys is a world with no centre to offer up meaning. They do not attempt to circumvent contemporary fragmentation so much as forcibly historicise it by taking it on its own terms; by taking the culture's profligacy into historical account through its own waste. For Coupland, postmodernism's resistance to grand narratives is itself a grand narrative, and as such it withholds secrets from itself as surely as preceding epochs. These secrets can only be found in landfill of every kind. The urgency of the matter lies in the fact that the 'ragpicker' who would redeem and reclaim junk from the landfill is

now in intense competition with the same culture which produced the waste in the first place. Reflective and restorative nostalgia fight over the same scraps, and the ragpicker may return home with a bedraggled prize only to find a burnished reproduction in the nearest boutique. He is therefore engaged in a literal race against time, which is the empty time of capital. If we now live in an age in which toys only become documents when they are discarded, we must intercept them before a gluttonous consumer culture turns these documents into toys once more. It is nostalgia which is both the driving force behind this emancipatory reclamation and which is most threatened by its opposite, which is the profane, deadening attempt to wrest prizes from the trash in order to fetishise them once more.

6. ‘It’s The End of the World As We Know It, And I Feel Fine’: Apocalyptic Nostalgia

‘When it comes, the Apocalypse itself will be part of that leap of evolution.’¹

Mike Leigh, *Naked* (1993)

[H]ow scared sick they all are. I mean, when people start talking seriously about hoarding cases of Beef-a-Roni in the garage and get all misty-eyed about the Last Days, then it’s about as striking a confession as you’re ever likely to get of how upset they are that life isn’t working out the way they thought it would. (*GX*, 42)

Douglas Coupland, *Generation X* (1991)

‘A disquieting feature’, writes J.G. Ballard in *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), ‘of this year’s annual exhibition – to which the patients themselves were not invited – was the marked preoccupation of the paintings with the theme of world cataclysm’ (*AE*, 1). The choice of words here is very specific; world cataclysm rather than the more evocative Apocalypse. Before any investigation into apocalyptic nostalgia can begin, the nature of Apocalypse must be properly defined. In order to fully engage with Coupland and Ballard’s nostalgic apocalyptic modes, it is worth asking whether or not the content of their fictions is *truly* apocalyptic, cataclysmic or both. While Apocalypse and cataclysm have become largely synonymous, the two are in fact far from interchangeable. ‘Apocalypse means simply Revelation’,² writes D.H. Lawrence

¹ Mike Leigh, *Naked* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), p. 47.

² D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p.3.

in *Apocalypse* (1931), whereas Rev. Walter W. Skeat traces the term ‘cataclysm’ back to the Greek for ‘deluge’, or ‘a dashing over, flood’.³ While cataclysmic scenarios feature heavily in Ballard and Coupland’s apocalyptic fictions, the fictions rarely spotlight the fireballs and orgiastic anarchy familiar to viewers of mindless disaster movies. They focus instead on the apocalyptic intimations available in a contemporary world they hold to be *already* defined by cataclysm. Coupland, in particular, repeatedly asks his readers to consider what kind of masochistic pleasure is being taken when we see global landmarks repeatedly and pornographically obliterated. In fact, it may be argued that Coupland’s fictions strongly inveigh against such representations in a bid to restore the dignity of *Apocalypse*, as this quotation from *Life After God* (1994) demonstrates:

Earthquake; The Omega Man; The Andromeda Strain; Soylent Green; Towering Inferno; Silent Running, films nobody makes anymore because they are all projecting so vividly inside our heads – to be among the last people inhabiting worlds that have vanished, ignited, collapsed and been depopulated. (LG, 80)

‘Post-apocalyptic’ fiction is, therefore, something of a misnomer; ‘post-cataclysmic’ fiction is, while less wieldy, certainly more befitting the developments in these fictions. While the Book of Revelation is an incontestably violent coda to the New Testament, the images of mass destruction and conflict contained therein have been assimilated into secular culture, while the revelatory content has in some cases been

³ Rev. Walter W. Skeat, *A Concise Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 71.

suppressed or even discarded altogether.⁴ Apocalypse does not elicit revelation; it is revelation, and so we may proceed from the assertion that a number of Ballard and Coupland's works are not post-apocalyptic, but rather post-cataclysmic. Where appropriate, the term 'cataclysm' will therefore be used in place of 'Apocalypse'.

Deriving an Apocalypse, that is *a revelation*, from the cataclysmic landscape all of us occupy in the here and now, is a common theme in these texts. This chapter will focus on those shared tropes in Ballard and Coupland's work which offer the most striking contrasts in terms of figuring a nostalgic Apocalypse. The three tropes are: coma, vision and childhood, and they will each be addressed in turn. Coma and childhood might be seen as unusual foundations on which to construct an apocalyptic vision, but this chapter will demonstrate that softer approaches to this kind of speculation allow for a far deeper consideration of its implications. Without the distracting clamour and theatricality of the jejune depictions of Apocalypse with which popular culture is at present inundated, its undeclared nostalgic constitution can be exposed.

i.

If Ballard's short stories are taken into account, it is clear that he never abandoned the cataclysm sub-genre of science fiction altogether. Even in Ballard's later novels, *Hello America* (1981) marks a return to the motifs of the novels of the 1960s. However, cataclysmic scenarios are still present in Ballard's second and third phase fictions,

⁴ The Christian right in America has succeeded in co-opting the grammar of Hollywood in the successful *Left Behind* novels by Terry LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, published between 1995 and 2007. The secular Apocalypse, essentially cataclysmic rather than revelatory, has been smuggled back into the ecclesiastical with significant alterations.

albeit on a much smaller, and therefore critically navigable scale. Of Douglas Coupland's novels, *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1997), *The Gum Thief* (2007), *Life After God* (1994) and *Player One* (2010) explicitly deploy the aesthetics of the cataclysm sub-genre of science fiction. As with Ballard's approach, many of these conventions are undermined. Andrew Tate has made the point that Coupland's 'early fiction features a recurrent narrative strand related to the end of the world'.⁵ *Girlfriend in a Coma*, however, is the exemplar of this cataclysmic sentiment.

The types of cataclysm in Ballard and Coupland's stories deviate from the more determinate cataclysms of speculative fictions cleaving to the model established by H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898). This is because their lack of determinacy allows for evocations of what David Pringle has identified as 'a world [...] changed into a set of surrealistic landscapes'.⁶ Based on this description and taking into account Ballard's stated affection for Surrealism, it is possible to conceive of a form of nostalgia for the cataclysm itself, in the sense that it will concomitantly disclose some numinous truth about our species; not 'from above' in the form of angelic messengers or the tidy disclosure of an underlying purpose to existence, but rather 'from below' in a realisation of the atavism underpinning supposedly civilised social phenomena. This sense of cataclysm as being desirable or even necessary is sufficient to posit Ballard's work as evidence of an individuated, *apocalyptic utopianism*, which is far less paradoxical than it seems. In *Revelation* itself, Paul S. Fiddes argues that, following Northrop Frye's interpretation of fictional endings, *Apocalypse* can be

⁵ Andrew Tate, *Douglas Coupland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 151.

⁶ David Pringle, *Earth is the Alien Planet: J.G. Ballard's Four-Dimensional Nightmare* (San Bernadino, The Borgo Press, 1979), pp. 8-9.

viewed as restorative in that it revives ‘the water and the tree of life, the two elements of the original creation that had been lost,’ adding that ‘this vision is followed by an ‘upward metamorphosis’ to something else, a ‘second Apocalypse’ opened by the invitation to *drink* the water of life’.⁷ Crucially for Ballard’s profane, existential Revelation, the cataclysm presents an opportunity, however scanty, for the realisation of a ‘desired world in which the ego and its guilt has disappeared’.⁸ That this desired world should lie beyond morality and even what Fiddes identifies as ‘the system of law which arbitrates between good and evil’⁹ makes Ballard’s a highly-selective Apocalypse – one in which divinity and meaning are not just unnecessary, but also actively shunned, since these are both categories belonging to *authority*.

Evocations of cataclysmic scenarios are also a *means* by which Coupland and Ballard can isolate their leitmotifs from the white noise of civilisation and address them in relative silence. While both authors also cover the texture of the communications and media landscape elsewhere, the cataclysm represents an opportunity to interrogate the psychopathology of modern life in forensic detail. Michael Delville notes that Ballard ‘focuses less on the disaster itself than on the characters’ various mental and physical adjustments to it’.¹⁰ If Pringle is correct, the ‘surrealistic landscapes’ he identifies indicate that the disaster and the psychopathology it compels are mutually mimetic. The disaster can mirror the mind or the mind the disaster. As trusted science fiction tropes, alien invasions or asteroid impacts offer limited opportunities for internal

⁷ Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000), p. 18.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Michael Delville, *Writers and their Work: J.G. Ballard* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1998), p. 7.

landscapes to be expressed. For Coupland too, the cataclysm is usually intensely ironic, patterned after and presented as a consequence or an extreme rejection of certain contemporary trends, notably the expression of mass ennui in which, inevitably according to Teresa Heffernan, 'Apocalypse is domesticated'.¹¹

Of the generation with which Coupland is most closely associated, Lainsbury states that 'a good part of the Gen X imagination is devoted to the idea of Apocalypse'.¹² One explanation for this might be that, unlike Ballard's generation, for whom the atomic bomb was a novelty, Coupland's grew up with the threat of Mutually Assured Destruction as part of the fabric of everyday life. 'For many, thoughts of nuclear confrontation are one's first true brush with nonexistence,' Coupland observes in *Life After God*. '[A]nd because they are the first, they can be the most powerful and indelible' (LG, 85). As reasonable as this seems, Coupland also points out in the same suite of thematically connected vignettes that '[a]t the age of eight', he found himself 'hearing the sirens wail [...] in a civil defense drill [...] noticing that nobody seemed to care' (LG, 79). Lainsbury explains that this eerie resignation to mass destruction stems from Generation X's awareness that '[c]risis is everywhere, omnipresent and perpetual, but it all seems to fail to add up to anything more significant than the psychic state of panic itself'.¹³ This paradoxical presentation of cataclysm as decidedly anticlimactic would later inform Coupland's *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1997),

¹¹ Teresa Heffernan, 'Can the Apocalypse Be Post?' in *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End*, ed. by Richard Dellamora (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 171-181 (p. 179).

¹² G.P, Lainsbury, 'Generation X and the End of History' in *GenXegesis*, ed. by Andrea L. Harris & John M. Ulrich (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), pp. 184-195 (p. 188).

¹³ Lainsbury, p.188.

but *Life After God* represents an early exposure to the author's implication that an interrogation of apocalyptic visions and desires is of greater significance than the phenomenon itself.

For Coupland, it is above all the controversial perfection of a global capitalist monoculture which informs his apocalyptic narratives. Tate summarises this as 'Coupland's ongoing negotiation with the idea that 'History' has reached its 'End''.¹⁴ That this end should have occurred silently and without a promised revelation is a disquieting prospect for the emotionally-immature Coupland protagonist. In keeping with Ballard's claims regarding an overheated media machine in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Derrida's perspective on this, summarised by Dieter Lenzen, is that 'our day and age [...] can be considered post-apocalyptic because the Apocalypse – even the atomic one – has already taken place in thousandfold form in the media, and because there is no veritable Apocalypse left to come [...]'¹⁵. Coupland's apocalyptic is therefore infested with nostalgia for an apocalyptic *revelation* that never arrived. Indeed, the total eradication of a revelatory potential underpinning Apocalypse can *itself* be viewed as the cataclysm. For Coupland, the cataclysm is nothing other than the characters' conviction that the end of history and some form of numinous disclosure did not coincide; that the Biblical flood of fetishised consumer trinkets prevented rather than enabled access to the Absolute. A facet of his project has been to structure and charge this posthistorical non-paradigm with meaning, echoing David Robson's opinion of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), in which, Robson

¹⁴ Tate, p. 93.

¹⁵ Dieter Lenzen, 'Disappearing Adulthood: Childhood Without Redemption' in *Looking Back on the End of the World*, ed. by Dietmar Kampar & Christoph Wulf, trans. by David Antal (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), pp. 64-78 (p. 75).

writes, ‘characters express a wishful hope that the Apocalypse can be “worshipfully more” than just a synonym for the finality of destruction’.¹⁶ For Ballard, however, this lack of disclosure attends an invigorating existential freedom, which is no less an object of nostalgia and no less revelatory than its orthodox counterpart.

ii.

Ballard’s cataclysmic novels, according to Luckhurst, ‘take place *between catastrophes*, in the space after the initial catastrophe and the ‘catastrophe’ which follows: death’.¹⁷ If we take the earlier example of the Japanese invasion of Shanghai and the nuclear flashes which all but ended the war in the east, the interval stands as a literal one. The dropping of the atom bomb, which cauterised the end of World War 2, is sometimes depicted in a redemptive light by Ballard’s characters. This is a foretaste of that ultimate event, nuclear annihilation, the primal awareness of which in subsequent generations a Ballard-channelling Coupland describes as ‘that first intensity – the modern sex/death formula’ (*LG*, 85). In *The Drowned World*, Bodkin claims that during the atrocities of World War 2, Hiroshima included, ‘the terrestrial and psychic landscapes were [...] indistinguishable’ (*DW*, 74). While Ballard is not cold-blooded enough to approve of the twentieth century’s most appalling atrocities, he does emphasise the opportunity for a creative reading of each and every one. This ‘nuclear sublime’ as Richard Klein calls it, is an established trope obtaining to the

¹⁶ David Robson, ‘Frye, Derrida, Pynchon, and the Apocalyptic Space of Postmodern Fiction’ in *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End*, ed. by Richard Dellamora (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 61-78 (p. 64).

¹⁷ Roger Luckhurst, ‘The Angle Between Two Walls’: *The Fiction of JG Ballard* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), p. 38.

spectacular end of the world, and Klein emphasises its naiveté, as well as the eccentric tense from which nuclear Armageddon must be narrated:

The nuclear sublime is that all-too familiar aesthetic position from which one anticipatorily contemplates the end, utter nuclear devastation, from a standpoint beyond the end, from a posthumous, apocalyptic perspective of future mourning, which, however appalling, adorably presupposes some ghostly survival, and some retrospective illumination.¹⁸

Nowhere in Ballard's corpus is this aesthetic most spectacularly evoked than in the short story 'The Terminal Beach' (1964). A grieving father and widower named Traven picks through the radioactive ruins of a dummy town on the Eniwetok atoll used throughout the fifties as a nuclear test site. Sleeping in the abandoned bunkers, Traven frequently sees mute apparitions of his dead wife and son, spectres of the guilt he feels at their automotive deaths. Suspended in an environment wherein past and future have been obliterated in the kairotic *nunc stans* of a 'thermo-nuclear noon', Traven lives in state of chronic fever and starvation.¹⁹ While this hellish landscape is apocalyptic, it also possesses a narcotic allure for Ballard's protagonist, as do all the 'psychic zero[s]' in which he stages his psychodramas.²⁰ Nostalgia and fantasy intermingle freely in these Burroughsian 'interzones', eventually becoming totally fungible. Traven has travelled to the island on the pretence of 'carrying out a scientific

¹⁸ Richard Klein, 'The Future of Nuclear Criticism', *Yale French Studies*, 77 (1990), 76-100 (p. 77).

¹⁹ J.G. Ballard, 'The Terminal Beach' in *The Terminal Beach* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1974), pp. 136-157 (p. 137).

²⁰ Ballard, 'The Terminal Beach', pp. 138-139.

project'.²¹ This is in truth no less than a bizarre search for his wife and son through a landscape which closely resembles his own mind, facilitated by a necessary 'death of affect' which makes the search possible. He has attempted to find a vantage point outside the ontological and temporal category of home from which to view the tragic events of his life dispassionately; an intermediate zone wherein nostalgia is only *notionally* impossible. An atomic test site is the ideal locus for this venture according to Traven, who confesses that '[f]or me the hydrogen bomb was a symbol of absolute freedom'.²² Traven has experienced a personal Apocalypse, and so seeks out an apocalyptic landscape as its proper theatre. He is seeking a more 'authentic' home for his trauma. The diminished scope for landscapes of this nature through the end of the cold war and its concomitant nuclear disarmament gives rise to a macabre nostalgia for the late Ballard protagonist, who consequently cannot find a landscape sufficiently bleak to host their trauma. When Ballard writes 'World War III began on the instalment plan around 1945', we begin to see the shape of Ballard's dismal late 20th century.²³ Nuclear Armageddon was a future every bit as guaranteed as the three-hour working day and homes teeming with labour-saving robots, and so has the same nostalgic potential. This form of nostalgia is evinced by Neil Dempsey in Ballard's *Rushing to Paradise* (1994), in which a conservation group travels to the Pacific island of Saint-Esprit with a view to stopping nuclear testing in order to save an endangered species of albatross. Far from agreeing with the stated aims of the group, the 16 year old Neil instead finds himself drawn to the prospect of nuclear annihilation, coming to view the bomb rather than the albatross as the true endangered

²¹ Ballard, 'The Terminal Beach', p. 147.

²² Ballard, 'The Terminal Beach', p. 147.

²³ J.G. Ballard, *Quotes*, ed. by V. Vale and Mike Ryan (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 2004), p. 250.

species. As a counterweight to the nebulous cataclysm Neil views the world his parents' generation has established, the bomb itself is cast in a distressingly messianic light. 'Save the atom bomb...' Neil mumbles at one point (*RP*, 14). The implication is that nuclear Armageddon now exists solely in the mind as yet another exhausted future which was promised but never delivered. The scope for existential freedom the nuclear landscape presents therefore makes it yet another profane 'home' for the Ballardian protagonist, who desires nothing more than to be delivered from history, as the following exchange between Neil and his nurse at the hospital in which he is convalescing demonstrates:

'Saint-Esprit's a nuclear test-site, like Eniwetok and Kwajalein Atoll. I wanted to see it.'

'Why?'

Neil shrugged. 'I don't know yet. I didn't get a chance to find out. Maybe it's where the future begins.'

'The future? Neil, all that atomic war stuff is over now.'

'Not for me.' (*RP*, 26)

If nuclear devastation represents an imaginative triumph over reality, then for Neil, yet another avenue of escape from a tedious present has been blocked. It is worth restating that Ballard does not condone this perspective so much as point out that elective psychopathy may be the only salve for boredom. The need for spectacle, for *events*, has never been greater. Richard Klein writes:

The lugubrious tone of the nuclear sublime conceals the interest that may be derived from evoking, in the present, the future possibility of total nuclear war; beneath its grim prospect, it masks some pleasure being taken or some profit being made – here and now.²⁴

Klein is writing with particular reference to political ideology and discourse, but this is true of culture and aesthetics as well. There is a perverse *enjoyment* to be derived from the prospect of the nuclear sublime, not only on the plane of aesthetics but also in terms of the vaporisation of hated bureaucratic and authoritarian structures and a nostalgic return to authenticity and the ‘real’, which in Ballard’s case is the psychological real which directs and underpins the mundane. Nuclear cataclysm would also represent, according to Klein, ‘the end of the archive, the destruction without a trace of the institutions of collective memory’.²⁵ The possibility, however remote, therefore exists that human history could be erased and a vastly attenuated human race survive, providing ideal conditions for the mapping and exploration of a Ballardian fusion of ‘terrestrial and psychic landscapes’. For Ballard’s protagonists, human history is a noisome impediment to self-knowledge. The prospect of what Klein defines as ‘a total burning – a true *holos-kaustos* – in which no public survival, no collective recollection, no institutional mourning, remains’²⁶ is an enticing one for the Ballardian subject. It means freedom, and the recruitment of landscape to the ego and vice versa, with no archive to prohibit the imaginative projections placed upon it. With no orientation towards the ‘real’ of history, the landscape can be liberated from

²⁴ Klein, p. 78.

²⁵ Klein, p. 80.

²⁶ Klein, p. 78.

the tyranny of fixed signification and become an imaginative wonderland (or Playland to return to the previous chapter) for which a few tumours are a small price to pay. Klein's critique of such an aestheticisation of the 'mythic' radioactive landscape is not disconfirmed by Ballard at all. In fact, he embraces its logic and makes the counterargument that the narcissistic element of this fantasy is its greatest strength. Klein writes, '[T]he question forces us to wonder whether the haste with which we anticipate unprecedented destruction may be the only sign of an ideologically motivated ego's wish to be historically undetermined, narcissistically unique in history, and thus relieved of its burdens.'²⁷ It is clear therefore that the 'unprecedented destruction' nuclear holocaust would bring is leavened by the concomitant incineration of an authoritative history, the wellspring of discourses which contribute to the formation of so-called immutable principles of law and reality. The nuclear event would therefore 'restore' a previous, literally a-historical non-epoch in which authoritative structures have been eradicated *in toto* and the freedom to remythologise the self is absolute.

iii.

The present analysis depends on a fringe reading, identified by Luckhurst, of the deaths in Ballard's cataclysmic novels as 'metaphorical acts of transcendence of the bodily [and] the material...'.²⁸ This transcendence is *the* distinguishing feature of Apocalypse; in other words, it is utopian. Gregory Stephenson insists on this transcendental reading:

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Luckhurst, p. 39.

It is not Thanatos, the instinctual desire for death [...] but rather the desire for Apocalypse, in the most literal sense of the word: a destruction that uncovers, a purifying process by which the false and evil are exposed and abolished and the “New Jerusalem” established.²⁹

Stephenson’s Jungian readings of Ballard make no distinction between cataclysm and Apocalypse, conflating them instead into axes of a pure event. I align myself with Luckhurst’s more accommodating claims, but the theological timbre of Stephenson’s position segues neatly into the issue of where this interval can be located in theological terms. The Ballardian Apocalypse does not encompass the cataclysm by which it is exposed, just as cataclysm does not encompass Apocalypse. In fact, it is the anxiety this risk stimulates that forces the issue of nostalgia *after* and *for* the cataclysm. If restorative nostalgia is the prevailing sentiment after the cataclysm, Apocalypse (in whatever form) may never be realised. For Ballard, the only way out is through, with no looking back to the immolated cities of the plain. The ideal Ballard protagonist projects the cataclysm forwards to its ultimate end, which is a (re)union with eternity, conceived of as the natural home. For Ballard, homelessness and history are the same thing, whereas for Coupland, making sense of or redeeming a demised history would seem to be the overriding aim. For Richard Dellamora, this concept finds a surer footing in the notion of ‘endtime-without-judgment’:

²⁹ Gregory Stephenson, *Out of the Night and Into the Dream: A Thematic Study of the Fiction of JG Ballard* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991), p. 40.

Following Derrida's presentation of an "Apocalypse without Apocalypse" – that is, an Apocalypse that includes Apocalypse neither in its meaning of the revelation of an ultimate truth nor in its secondary meaning of a Final Judgment – [Jonathan] Boyarin describes postmodern Apocalypse as "endtime-without-judgment."³⁰

Boyarin and Derrida's 'endtime-without-judgement' is central to Coupland's protagonists' fears whenever the possibility of global cataclysm becomes apparent. For Ballard, the same phenomenon presents hope for liberation; an endtime which dispenses with outmoded notions of good and evil forever. For Ballard, this fear is evinced by whatever passes for an antagonist in Ballard's morally evacuated environments: the mob. It is fair to say that a central anxiety surrounding cataclysm for Coupland is that the phenomenon, and by extension humanity itself, will have 'meant' nothing should the cataclysm arise (or indeed have already subliminally arisen) without some form of accompanying revelation. '[O]ne could join [Elias] Canetti', writes Baudrillard, 'in saying that we have already passed [the cataclysm] unawares and now find ourselves in the situation of having overextended our own finalities, of having short-circuited our own perspectives, and of already being in the hereafter, that is, without horizon and without hope.'³¹

The representation of time differs markedly between Ballard and Coupland. For Ballard, the time to be represented (but which resists representation at every turn) is

³⁰Richard Dellamora, 'Introduction' in *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at The End*, ed. by Richard Dellamora (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 1-14 (p. 5).

³¹ Jean Baudrillard, 'The Anorexic Ruins' in *Looking Back on the End of the World*, ed. by Dietmar Kamper & Christoph Wulf, trans. by David Antal (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), pp. 29-45 (p. 34).

pre-historic or amniotic, whereas for Coupland it is historical time which must achieve fullness and consummation. ‘The time after time of these post-catastrophe texts’, Luckhurst claims, ‘the interval which they portray, is a zone which sustains multiple and even contradictory readings. They must do so, for the unrepresentable catastrophe will always induce multiple callings to potential narratives of explanation.’³² These readings do not only extend to interpretation of the text itself, but also to interpretation of the behaviours appropriate to a post-cataclysmic space by the protagonists. A fatalistic submission to or even active pursuit of Apocalypse is contrasted with atrophying, restorative nostalgic attempts to revive the obsolete or moribund world. That the pursuit of this secular Apocalypse is itself an expression of nostalgia is clearly signposted throughout Ballard’s work. Of Ballard’s existential heroes, Delville tailors James Cawthorn’s ‘The Dissolving Hero’ to Ballard. ‘Facing the breakdown of the Universe’, Cawthorn writes, Ballard’s ‘Dissolving Hero’ does not fight, but instead seeks, literally, to be absorbed.³³ To fail to ‘bring to an end’ in Ballard and Coupland’s cataclysmic fictions, or more properly to attempt to resurrect the vapid pre-cataclysmic world is the only sin. On that much they agree. That said, Ballard’s rejection of the antediluvian world is absolute, whereas Coupland’s is highly conditional. Coupland sees elements worth preserving in the obsolete and rejected materials of the historical world.

³² Luckhurst, p. 45.

³³ Delville, p. 9.

iv.

Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1965) insists upon an apocalyptic element in play. 'Carnival', in which 'there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life' is spoken of as antique, surviving only as the 'carnivalesque' mode in the arts.³⁴ Its hegemonic and revolutionary potentials are emphasised by Bakhtin, who owns that such suspensions of hierarchies can be used to maintain as well as subvert political power. In both cases, Bakhtin underscores the importance of carnival's impermanence, which is its *sine qua non*. Without it, it has no revelatory power. In the West in recent decades however, the carnival mode, instead of accruing significance through its very evanescence, was in the process of being installed permanently in culture, not as a transient mode of being but as *the ideal* bourgeois mode of being; not resplendent but habitual. Bakhtin's view of carnival shares similarities with some definitions of postmodern social phenomena, as this passage illustrates:

This experience [carnival] as opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever-changing, playful, undefined forms. All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of all prevailing truths and authorities.³⁵

³⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 15.

³⁵ Bakhtin, pp. 10-11.

We can see uncomfortable parallels here with our own dominant (and decaying) cultural assumptions. While Bakhtin owns that carnival, with its inversions and fragmentations of the established order was ‘tolerated and even legalised outside the official sphere’, the extent to which it has been ‘turned over to the popular sphere of the marketplace’ in the late capitalist bourgeois paradigm has seen it imbued with a wholly unintended permanence.³⁶ Rather than celebrating ‘the world’s revival and renewal’ as Bakhtin maintains was true of the carnivals of the Middle Ages, contemporary carnival only celebrates itself.³⁷ If carnival’s purpose is to undermine ‘all pretense at immutability’, installing itself as an immutable reality and end in itself raises unsettling questions about consumer culture.

Carnival in the late capitalist mode celebrates and is nostalgic for *its own* revival and renewal in an intensely ritualistic manner that is not immediately obvious. It is an example of restorative nostalgia at its most opaque; carnival and cataclysm can mutually lead to one another. ‘We are no longer in a state of growth’, insists Baudrillard. ‘We are in a state of excess. We are living in a society of excrescence, meaning that which incessantly develops without being measurable against its own objectives.’³⁸ In contrast to this dismal assessment, Bakhtin has written of carnival that its laughter is ‘universal in scope’.³⁹ He goes on to emphasise its ambivalence – that it ‘asserts and denies, buries and revives’.⁴⁰ In the era of late capitalism (or late

³⁶ Bakhtin, p. 9.

³⁷ Bakhtin, p. 7.

³⁸ Baudrillard, p. 29.

³⁹ Bakhtin, p. 11.

⁴⁰ Bakhtin, p. 12.

cataclysm), this ambivalence has been replaced by indiscriminateness. Of Coupland's Generation X's attitude to this spent carnival mode, Lainsbury writes:

The cynicism of Gen X might be usefully compared to what Arthur Kroker calls "a carnivalesque mood of bitter hysteria at already having lived on borrowed time after the catastrophe, with nothing to lose because one is cheated of life anyway." The future only exists as commodity, onto which people project a putative sense of ownership.⁴¹

This is hardly a ringing endorsement for carnival in the postmodern moment, and illustrates how the rejuvenating laughter of carnival can become morbid if pursued for its own sake. This is a situation confronted unflinchingly in *Kingdom Come* (2006), Ballard's fiction swansong. The novel represents Ballard's closest engagement with a recognisable Coupland terrain; that of fanatical consumerism, and the phenomenon is envisioned by Ballard as one in which the leisure pursuit of shopping has become ritualised to the point of insanity. Former advertising executive Richard Pearson travels to Brooklands in Surrey, an arm's length London suburb, to uncover the truth behind his father's assassination by a sniper in the sprawling, self-contained ecosystem of the Brooklands Metro-Centre shopping mall. Brooklands proper is a remote suburb whose nostalgic self-image is shattered by the arrival of the shopping centre. Pearson, as adviser and counsel to David Cruise, the charismatic-but-vacuous cable TV host and symbolic figurehead of the shopping mall's own fascist resistance, becomes trapped in the mall when he and thousands of other shoppers are taken hostage by the mall's fanatical supporters. Cruise becomes a messianic, Dionysian

⁴¹ Lainsbury, p. 189.

figure to the mall's militia, and the siege by the police occasions a regression into animistic object-worship beyond the wildest dreams of new age gurus. ““We’re like bored children,”” observes Dr. Maxted, the psychiatrist and key conspirator in the accidental shooting of Pearson’s father. ““We’ve been on holiday for too long, and we’ve been given too many presents”” (*KC*, 102–103).

As evidenced in the previous chapter, Ballard goes to great lengths to draw parallels between consumerism and infantilism; an infantilism Ballard refuses to condemn. ‘In this “material paradise,” this “timeless area,” disconnected from but nostalgic for the past, we inhabit a future that has no future. We are beyond history and at the end of difference’ writes Teresa Heffernan, unintentionally describing a Ballardian paradise.⁴² This morbidly-carnivalesque tendency within consumerism enacts the old Ballardian standby of a descent through archeopsychic time into the true ‘home’, a primal fiesta wherein the realisation of total freedom engenders a frantic and largely indiscriminate need for some form of authority in most cases. Ballard’s ironic straw dog here, the supposition that consumerism can be relied upon to take up the slack in the absence of viable authority figures, is conceived of as faulty from first principles. This is concretised through the figure of Pearson himself, who, in the absence of a father who was mostly absent anyway, becomes subject to a profoundly oedipal, terrestrial recapitulation of the death of God. Figured as a ‘religious experience’ the mall has not only taken over from politics as the source and fount of authority, but also from religion (*KC*, 40). Consumer behaviour, Ballard asserts, is profoundly votive – a palliative for the death of God in secular society. The ersatz carnival mode that

⁴² Heffernan, p. 171.

predominates in consumer behaviour is a response to the initial rush of a total absence of authority.

“‘Existential choice,’” says the demented Tom Carradine, PR manager for the Metro-Centre. “‘Isn’t that what the Metro-Centre is all about?’” (*KC*, 173). This ‘choice’, whose only proscription is to choose nothing, is cast by Ballard as a form of existential terror. Faced with the sucking emptiness of the cataclysmic consumer carnival, the shoppers crave and violently enthrone fascist messiahs precisely because they are nostalgic for the structure a paternalistic figure such as God or the father brings to the festivities. In this, we may argue that the physical cataclysm, whose signature is extreme violence, is initially compelled by an anti-Revelation, characterised by an awareness of the emptiness of consumer culture. The shoppers are desperate for someone to underwrite their shopping experience and make it meaningful, or better yet to tell them to stop, pick up their toys and go home. ‘It’s more than a shop, Mr. Pearson’ a terrorised Muslim neighbour of Pearson’s father tells him. ‘It’s an incubator. People go in there and they wake up, they see their lives are empty. So they look for a new dream...’ (*KC*, 59). This is confirmed in an exchange between David Cruise and Pearson, in which Cruise asks Pearson what he considers to be the significance of the painting in his office, of ‘Francis Bacon’s screaming popes...’ When asked ‘... what exactly is he screaming at?’, Pearson chillingly replies, ‘[E]xistence. He’s realised there is no God and mankind is free. Whatever free means’ (*KC*, 178). In the absence of the father he barely knew, Pearson experiences a form of the same anxiety. He reveals early in the novel that he was deprived of gifts by his mother following her separation from his father, and the mall, with its open promise of gifts galore, is sufficient to break his advertiser’s immunity to

consumerism. 'I [...] opened the windows with their view of the Metro-Centre. Its presence was curiously inviting, filled with those treasures I had spent my childhood coveting' (KC, 54). For Pearson, consumerism promises to fulfil nostalgia for his own childhood, causing him to withdraw and remain a placid hostage during the siege long after the opportunity for release presents itself. 'I paused to gaze into these magical grottoes, aware that I was surrounded by all the toys I had so longed for as a child, and could take whatever I wanted' (KC, 247). Tellingly, he does not. Largely indifferent to the suffering of the hostages, Pearson instead burrows into his own past, attempting and failing to consummate a gift-deprived childhood in the foetid drowned world of the mall. A corrupt local police officer, Sergeant Falconer, tells Pearson upon hearing of his unwillingness to leave the mall (even though he could at any time), '[s]oon you'll be alone here, Mr. Pearson. You're a little boy lost in a toy factory' (KC, 248). The cataclysm has revealed to Pearson a gilded world free of authority. While the other inhabitants of the mall look to Cruise and Tom Carradine, the fraying autocrat who controls the armed militia, for absolute authority to provide a form of punitive consolation far preferable to complete existential freedom, Pearson sees his immurement as the purest form of the latter. Extreme claustrophobia, whether geographic or social, inspires intensely creative and introverted bids for freedom.

Corralled into narrow, artificial wombs, the Ballardian subject escapes by projecting their own ego onto its venous screen. This is echoed in *Concrete Island*, in Maitland's uncanny nostalgia for his own solitary childhood that rises to meet his imprisonment on a traffic island:

More and more, the island was becoming an exact model of his head. His movement across this forgotten terrain was a journey not merely through the island's past but through his own. His infantile anger as he shouted aloud for Catherine reminded him of how, as a child, he had once bellowed unwearyingly for his mother while she nursed his younger sister in the next room. For some reason, which he had always resented, she had never come to pacify him, but had let him climb from the bath himself, hoarse with anger and surprise. (*CI*, 69–70)

This cataclysmic island, the collapsing western world in miniature, presents an opportunity for a form of Apocalypse/revelation for Ballard's protagonist. Like Pearson, whose father abandoned him, Maitland's unspoken identification of his absent mother with the death of God or, better yet, of the *deus absconditus* eventually leads to a process of childlike regression and an embrasure of the existential freedom which attends a world without authority. Rising from the uterine sea of the cooling bathwater, Maitland is reborn, acting as existential midwife to his infant self. For Ballard, the ur-cataclysm is the ejection from the womb, and so the state of emergency is nothing less than existence itself. For Ballard, human life takes place between two cataclysms; birth and death. We need not fear global cataclysm since it bookends and corrects what amounts to a fatal aberration.

Ultimately, what insulates Ballard's protagonists against the convulsive shock of the abandonment of the social is that they have been, in a sense, inoculated against it in earlier life. These 'cataclysmic childhoods' enact the cataclysm in miniature, allowing the Ballardian protagonist to distance themselves from the event and appreciate its

aesthetic qualities, treating it as a Playland in which all the useless starched collars and affected social conventions only serve to fuel the chaos. An encounter (emphatically *not* a reunion) with the nostalgic child-self that *might have been* had authority in the form of parents not interceded between the protagonist and total freedom is compelled by the cataclysm:

For years now, [Maitland] had remythologised his childhood. The image of a small boy playing by himself in a long suburban garden surrounded by a high fence seemed strangely comforting. It was not entirely vanity that the framed photograph of a seven-year old boy in a drawer of his desk at the office was not of his son, but of himself. (CI, 27)

If we crown the ‘high fence’ of the suburban garden with the barbed wire of the Lunghua concentration camp, the Ballard devotee will note that this echoes the remythologised childhood presented as Ballard’s own in *Empire of the Sun*. Despite ‘Shanghai Jim’ sharing a name and many pivotal adventures and hardships with his author, the two are not identical. The author and his fictional namesake are uncanny doubles, not clones. These possible adumbrations and embellishments, however, are as nothing to the colossal omission of Ballard’s own parents from the fictional counterpart of the Lunghua internment camp. When interviewers have raised this point, Ballard’s response has remained consistent since the book’s publication. From a 2006 interview with Travis Elborough appended to the Harper Perennial Modern Classics edition of the book, Ballard is quoted as follows:

When I came to write *Empire of the Sun*, I thought I would have to follow my own life and have the parents in the camp too. But it didn't really give the right impression. People would think that if the parents were in the camp as well, then they would be able to protect Jim and that he wouldn't be in any danger. And that they'd never be in any danger from the Japanese, or that he would never be in any danger from himself, or from his own growing imagination. [...] I decided to make him a sort of war orphan.⁴³

The absence of any parental authority in the novel docks with the evacuation of the social and parental that pervades Ballard's work, reconfigured in other novels as a phenomenon which enables existential awareness. By amputating the civilising structure *par excellence* of the family unit, Ballard allows Jim's reveries to run riot without ever coming into conflict with the expectation of parental discipline on the part of the reader.

Ballard has frequently and unambiguously declared that he 'was happier in the camp than [he] was until [his] marriage and children', but this happiness, according to the author, arose from incidents and adventures experienced without parental supervision (*MoL*, 82). With their peremptory '[n]ot now, dear[s]', Jim's parents are introduced in the novel through well-intentioned injunctions to their son, which persist up to the very moment they are lost to him in the stampede occasioned by the initial Japanese bombardment of Shanghai (*ES*, 24). Jim's separation from his parents is necessary, therefore, to establish the radical freedom which allows him to recontextualise the war in terms of an emancipatory cataclysm.

⁴³ J.G. Ballard, 'An Investigative Spirit' in *Empire of the Sun* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 5-6.

Ballard has since written of his parents during the period of internment in his recent memoir that '[o]ne reason for our estrangement was that their parenting became passive rather than active' (*MoL*, 82). The Ballardian protagonist therefore follows a self-destructive compulsion to procure the total existential freedom promised by the cataclysm, but this can only be articulated using the limited vocabulary of childhood freedoms that only existed at the cost of an affective relationship with real or divine parental figures. The physical cataclysm presents an opportunity for the Ballard protagonist to salvage something from the far more impactful and resonant cataclysm of familial abandonment. The diegetic and extradiegetic parricides in Ballard's fictions therefore 'remythologise' in the sense that they depict acts of liberation necessary to recast the death of God or parental absence in positive terms. Parental rejection is remythologised as a reversal in which the parents and not the child are the rejected objects, as *Running Wild* gruesomely corroborates. Emotion, we may conclude, lies at the heart of the specious 'death of affect'.⁴⁴

v.

The only disappointment for the Ballardian protagonist in the post-cataclysmic environment is the existence of other survivors. Indeed, they make every effort to withdraw from them at the earliest opportunity, free to explore the bars of their prison as mirrors of themselves. For Ballard, in the post-cataclysmic world, Hell truly is other people. The presence of others in the Ballard protagonist's private world is cast as unwelcome and invasive. Communion with the Absolute is always thwarted when

⁴⁴ *Quotes*, p. 225.

the Ballard protagonist has ‘passengers’. Just as socialisation enables the transition from childhood to adulthood, it also impedes the transition from adulthood back to a nostalgically-imagined, liberated childhood.

The cataclysmic childhood is therefore a theatre of tension between two forms of nostalgic childhood for Ballard. The first form of childhood, experienced by the protagonists as a form of transcendence, is a childhood free of constraint and moral instruction; Collodi’s Playland, albeit a solitary one. With no distinction between inner and outer, the Ballardian subject can attempt a communion with the Absolute and resolve all difference by pursuing activities such as consumerism to their illogical extreme.

The other form of childhood, to which ‘the mob’ regresses, is an infantile need for the cataclysm to be reversed by a demonic messiah-figure who will take on the role of Father-God, commanding and judging them in accordance with a demented, but admirably creative agenda. As E.M Cioran forcefully opines in his essay ‘Mechanism of Utopia’ (1960), ‘a child who does not steal is not a child’, tending towards Ballard’s view that an infant who demands authority is a craven one.⁴⁵ The scope for existential revelation in the latter is deemed wholly insufficient by Ballard, who instead firmly takes the part of the former species of nostalgic, whose ideological and physical proximity to the leader of the pathetically obedient multitude indicates that the leaders of these movements are also mapping their own psyches onto the world around them and vice versa.

⁴⁵ E.M. Cioran. ‘Mechanism of Utopia’ in *History and Utopia*, trans. by Richard Howard (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), pp. 80-98 (p.85).

While Ballard's protagonists rarely go as far as their crazed doppelgangers, there is an identification and a shared nostalgia presented by the cataclysmic scenario. Thus, while the cataclysm always gives rise to infantile regression in Ballard's fictions, an ahistorical solipsistic nostalgia augmented by a petulant will to power is presented as more appropriate. The more historical variety on the other hand, characterised by submission to authority and an abrogation of existential responsibility, is the subject of a repeated ironic scorn. Cioran goes on to imply that any utopia predicated on boredom takes on all the features of an Apocalypse. 'Conventions of horror, routine procedures', he writes. 'Saint John had to go in for them, once he opted for that splendid gibberish, that procession of downfalls preferable, all things considered, to the descriptions of cities and islands where you are smothered by an impersonal bliss, where "universal harmony" crushes you in its embrace.'⁴⁶ That the latter utopia, so easily transposable onto consumer and suburban culture, could in fact compel the former 'splendid gibberish' is Ballard's major contribution to cataclysmic fictions. The claustrophobia of modern life compels a cataclysm-cum-flight; an emancipation from time itself, as the closing pages of *The Unlimited Dream Company* demonstrate when Blake, the resurrected Dionysus/Christ figure transfigures the town's inhabitants into majestic birds of paradise. 'Again I felt that the town was closing in on itself', he reflects, 'forcing the birds into an ever-smaller space. Already the condors were looking upwards ready to seize their spaces in the sky' (*UDC*, 218).

It is not poverty or the yoke of oppression which makes cataclysm desirable in our vacuous present for Ballard, but rather extreme, suffocating tedium. The only gift the

⁴⁶ Cioran. 'Mechanism of Utopia', p. 84.

child who has everything can give to itself is to throw its own toys out of the playpen before it is itself ‘ejected’ by the socialisation process and the ineluctable process of physical growth; to take flight, violently if necessary. To take the toys back afterwards, to repeat the cycle, is a source of great ironic contempt for Ballard, as this reclamation is logically every bit as violent as the rejection. Rather, an authority wherein the sovereign self, a historical confection at best, dissolves into its products is the disclosure of their final, ironic purpose. That this is not far from the utopianism which is unwitting heir to Christian apocalypticism is a fascinating effect of this existential witches’ brew. Indeed, that the existential freedom posited by Ballard should lead inexorably back to the womb (itself a site of development and becoming as well as horror, to which the Absolute is perforce hostile), surely the ultimate abrogation of existential responsibility, is an irony of which the author must surely be aware. Barred from (and rejected by) the maternal womb, the existentially-aware Ballard protagonist uses his freedom to seek out the ontological womb of creation itself. The secularised version of the transfigured ‘new earth’ promised by Revelation, is in fact at a greater intellectual distance from Ballard than the Christian version. While Cioran’s execration of utopia shares affinities with Ballard’s perspective, he anticipates the inconsistency of the latter’s vision:

[T]he golden age matches [...] the Biblical Eden. One is as conventional as the other [...] At least they share the merit of defining the image of a static world where identity ceaselessly contemplates itself, ruled by an eternal present, that

tense common to all visions of paradise, a time forged in opposition to the very idea of time.⁴⁷

It would appear that in Ballard's early works, Cioran's contemptuous description of the eternal present represents an achievable utopia, but only on the proviso that we enter into it liberated from the acculturation synonymous with adulthood, a secular correlate of Christ's exhortation to the disciples, '[E]xcept ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 18. 3).⁴⁸ The sacrifice which must be made in order to gain entry into Eternity is therefore an apprehension of the self as an adult, socialised human being; in other words, of the self *as* self. The post-cataclysmic environment in Ballard's fictions is therefore a proving ground (in which the anti-Revelation is one of divine absence rather than of divine presence), after which those who have made the proper adjustments to the cataclysm can be rewarded with an individuated regression (Ballard's 'ontological Eden') and the 'unjust' or restorative nostalgics are punished for their egregious imaginative deficit.

In Ballard's defence, it must be noted many of his protagonists fail to transcend the body, precisely because they cannot cross the final threshold into full regression, set apart as they always are by a cool intellect, the irony of which is that they crave nothing more than its total annihilation. This is a perspective shared by many Coupland protagonists who, like fading small screen starlet Susan Colgate in *Miss Wyoming*, claim that they are 'pretty tired of being 'me'' (MW, 9).

⁴⁷ E.M. Cioran. 'The Golden Age' in *History and Utopia*, trans. by Richard Howard (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), pp. 99-118 (p. 99).

⁴⁸ Cited in Lenzen, p. 72.

The Ballard protagonist is usually stymied at the last moment by the paradox of their involvement with the cataclysm; of their intellectual fascination with the possibility of transcendence, and the hostility of that transcendence to all intellectual contemplation. His work is characterised by an undeclared nostalgia for the true, ahistorical Eden, whose only serpent-figure is the socialised consciousness of the thinking ego.

‘However much we may yearn to go back’, writes David Pringle of the Ballardian protagonist’s defining dilemma, ‘the gates of Eden are closed. If we attempt to return we can succeed only at the expense of ceasing to be fully human.’⁴⁹ The existential ‘no’ gives way to the Forsterian ‘not yet’ in many cases, and we often exit Ballard’s texts with a sense that their ‘heroes’ are not yet sufficiently (im)mature or dehumanised to return to the true, ancestral home in which, according to Father Balthus in *The Crystal World*, ‘we see [...] everything [...] transfigured and illuminated, joined together in the last marriage of space and time’ (*CW*, 162). For the child, the resolution of all difference is possible, but the Ballard protagonist, too invested in the world despite their obsession with the possibilities presented by its demise, can only rarely approach it with the proper childlike comportment. Nowhere is this more explicit than in Ballard’s novel *The Day of Creation* (1987), a threshold novel between Ballard’s second and third phases, in which naive clinician Dr. Mallory witnesses the eruption of a hitherto undiscovered ‘second Nile’, which floods the desert and makes it bloom, albeit with the concomitant effect of giving rise to many outbreaks of cholera and malaria among the guerrilla factions who attempt to control it. Accompanied by Noon, the twelve-year old Central African girl who Mallory comes to identify with the river, he attempts a Conradian metaphysical voyage to the

⁴⁹ Pringle, p. 21.

river's primordial source in order both to commune with and 'kill it', thereby sealing his existential freedom. Convinced that the source of all life is to be found at the river's source, Mallory's journey is strongly evocative of a pilgrimage back along the amniotic current to the womb of creation itself. However, disappointment follows, occasioned by the realisation that the magnificent wellspring of creation has diminished to little more than a trickle, emphasising once again that the Absolute is barred to the Ballard protagonist as long as they approach it with anything less than a completely dissolved ego. 'The Mallory moved among the dunes', Mallory despairs, 'a faint thread only few inches deep' (*TDC*, 282). At this point, Noon departs the skiff and disappears among the aforementioned dunes, there to effect the communion forbidden to Mallory. 'Each of us had abused the Mallory, trying to use it for our own ends', Mallory later owns, 'and only Noon remained true to our first dream' (*TDC*, 286).

In keeping with the author's fetishisation of childhood, Noon's communion is made possible by her childlike bearing (admittedly diminished by Mallory's successful sexual advances on the voyage), which presents an uncomfortable recapitulation of the 'noble savage' motif rightly shunned in contemporary anthropological discourses. For Ballard, she approaches the source equipped with a recalcitrant unwillingness to be socialised, of one flesh with the true source. She exists in a perpetual present, oblivious to calendar and clock time, attuned to her own biological ebbs and flows, and as such is part of the cataclysm, whose nature is disruption and the subversion of all attempts to divide time into measurable increments. For Ballard, the cataclysm must be embraced before (anti) revelation can be achieved:

I assumed that, like a child, [Noon] found it difficult to count more than three days ahead. Beyond the fourth day lay infinity. Meanwhile, a resplendent present was waiting to be seized. (*TDC*, 153)

The ‘authentic’ child, therefore, is granted access to the Absolute, whereas the arriviste western adult is not. Ballard’s texts sometimes fall prey to a hoary colonialist perspective in which the infantilised native other is seen as ritualistically closer to the Absolute, or authentic being. This perspective is never overtly condoned, nor is it depicted as unproblematic, yet Ballard’s texts are perennially open to an idealisation of the authentic, amoral native other in the sense that they alone are uniquely equipped both to survive and adapt to the cataclysm. Because ‘they’ are uncivilised, ‘they’ see the world as it ‘really is’, unmediated by the gauze of the social. However, an irony to which Ballard is by no means insensible is that the attempted importation of the specious ‘authenticity’ the native childlike other represents would unmake the world. The ‘world’ in this instance refers not to the geological reality of the planet, but rather to the civic, legal and economic structures taken to be ‘the world’ by a relatively small, affluent elite. In other words, to survive the cataclysm *that is* civilisation, we must by necessity become uncivilised in order to regenerate and rehabilitate the world. History must be obliterated, but the thinking subject who would experience relief at this obliteration would be obliterated too. This intensely paradoxical stance is explained by Dieter Lenzen:

[A] simple belief in redemption via a totalisation of childhood would seem to be the expression of a mechanism with the help of which a culture is attempting to regenerate itself [...] Plato has described cataclysms with the

help of which [...] a regression from adults to children could cause people to disappear completely in the end, opening the way for a renewal of the world.

We can see from this that the phenomenon of expanding childhood observable on all sides can be interpreted as an apocalyptic process. Correspondingly, the disappearance of adults could be understood as the beginning of a cosmic regeneration process based on the destruction of history.⁵⁰

vi.

In Coupland's case, while he retains the sense of a primordial childhood as a nostalgic ideal for his characters, he consistently questions and undercuts it with tacit disapproval. 'It's indeed a mistake to confuse children with angels', says the doomed (and demised) Cheryl Anway in *Hey! Nostradamus* (2003) (HN, 15). With its shocking, Columbine-inspired shootings, the novel makes frequent allusions to childhood and innocence, often through the narration of dead high school students. Cheryl Anway, one of the victims who narrates the book's opening pages, mirrors Ballard's position on cataclysm in a memorable aside:

I tried finding solace looking at the squirrels in the front yard, already gathering food for the winter – and then I got to thinking about how short their lives are – so short that their dreams can only be a full mirroring of their waking lives. So I guess for a squirrel, being awake and being asleep are the same thing. Maybe when you die young it's like that too. A baby's dream would only be the same as being awake. (HN, 20)

⁵⁰ Lenzen, p. 71.

The alchemical wedding of dream and wakefulness is Ballard's romantic cataclysmic scenario; his Apocalypse. Read through Cheryl's reverie, Ballard's position might be viewed as ecstatic expression of modern *anomie*. That this prelapsarian bliss precludes agency and becoming is a given for Coupland, and this idealised conception of childhood is undercut by the possibility, not of heavenly transcendence, but of a dilapidated material one, in which tragedy can be resolved through identification and communion with the very 'other people' whose presence the Ballard protagonist finds unbearable. The attainment of an eternal present after the cataclysm is unsettling in Coupland's texts, not in spite of but rather because of its ability to coerce humans into 'achieving' an animal (and eventually vegetal) state. However true it may be that, according to the quasi-autistic Rachel in *Player One* (2010), 'humans have to endure everything in life in agonisingly endless clock time – every single second of it', ours is also the time of becoming and growth, as evidenced by Rachel's sexual awakening and hard-won personal development in the cataclysmic scenario itself (*PO*, 205). 'Unlike Rachel, Player One has a complete overview both of the world and of time', writes Coupland of Rachel's 'Second Life' alter ego. 'Player One's life is more like a painting than it is a story. Player One can see everything with a glance and can change tenses at will. Player One has ultimate freedom' (*PO*, 35–36). This is surely a model of the Ballardian transcendent ideal, remote from the world and immune to its emotionally corrosive possibilities. This is consonant with Rachel's 'Happy Place', a side-effect of her outwardly affectless condition:

She responded to [...] violence with the fugue state her brain often deployed when overwhelmed, a state that made the meaner boys in her class at school

call out during fire alarms, “Rachel’s gone to her Happy Place” [...] When Rachel goes to hers [...] [s]he can be objective. She can analyze. She feels free and powerful – it’s as if suddenly she’s been given the search result for every keyword ever put into Google. (*PO*, 81)

With a child’s imaginative response to trauma, Rachel can retreat into her imaginative life and inoculate herself against personal cataclysm. This is perhaps a broader observation regarding the quasi-autistic state effected by amok late capitalism, in which all consumers are infantilised by their virtual counter-lives, realised in miniature on the computer screen. However squalid (in the back of an airport bar) her improbable loss of virginity is in the novel, it does grant Rachel a sought-after physical intimacy and a rite of passage into adulthood. This is both enabled and impelled by the cataclysm, whose major impact in the novel is to foster an extemporised sense of community between lost souls sheltering from the cataclysmic social collapse occasioned by the mushrooming price of crude oil. For Rachel, the cataclysm does not enable a regression, but rather a maturation. ‘[G]oing to the Happy Place would mean going back in time in a way that wasn’t good’, says Player One. ‘Rachel had come too far in the last few hours – she had earned her right to be part of the world’ (*PO*, 163). In the cataclysmic moment, Rachel elects to abandon her comforting solipsism and engage with the world, with all the scope for emotional laceration that entails. According to the novel, to do this is to not only embrace maturity, but also the human experience as a whole:

What makes us humans unique? Our ability to experience time? Our ability to sequence our lives? Our free will? What single final Russian Roulette gene

sequence condemns us all? We're so close to other animals, and yet we're so utterly different. (*PO*, 169)

Sequencing, therefore, that is the imposition of narrative, is both the source of our doomed utopianism and our greatest triumph, since it differentiates us from the animal world. 'Dogs in dog shows have to be led from task to task', writes Coupland, 'because they're unable to sequence. They live in a perpetual present, something humans can never do, try as they may' (*PO*, 21–22). As in Ballard's texts, a nostalgic return to an atemporal, beatific state is all-but impossible for the late Capitalist consumer. However, it is Coupland's contention that this consciousness of time – the meat and matter of the one true Fall – is also the source of our greatest strength; that while the time of passage removes our capacity to experience a self-identical, eternal present, it also allows us to evolve, well beyond our biological limitations in Rachel's case. The nostalgic desire to return to innocence only allows for the more terrifying possibility of being incapable of growth. In *Player One*, the Christian fundamentalist sniper who gives his name as Bertis is taken in and forcibly restrained by the cataclysm's survivors, and thereafter acts as an external voice for the group's own doubts and insecurities over their place in the modern world, and their profound sense of homelessness in the 21st Century.

Bertis constantly harangues his new flock, testing them to the point of personal and spiritual collapse out of what turns out to be a simple case of oedipal spite against his life-coach father. Insisting that 'the only valid viewpoint to make any decision from is Eternity', Bertis aspires to a death of affect which Coupland renders laughable in light of Bertis' deeply oedipal reasons for mass murder (*PO*, 138). Bertis also embodies a

nostalgic desire to regress to a childlike state, evidence of his unforgiving, doctrinaire position on the irredeemable state of Western culture. He claims to be impelling a non-negotiable rebirth of humanity, harrowing the soil until only those capable of regressing beyond the point of original sin are permitted to remain. To Karen, the lonely middle-aged divorcee, he paints a compelling, vivid image of the apocalyptic, paradisiacal rebirth made possible by the cataclysm. “‘You are free of memory’, he whispers. ‘You now look at the world with the eyes of an embryo, not knowing, only seeing and hearing.’” (*PO*, 129). This facile perspective on Apocalypse finds its modest counterpoint in the opening paragraphs of *Eleanor Rigby*, in which this apocalyptic rebirth is penetratingly contradicted. ‘I had always thought that a person born blind and given sight later on in life through the miracles of modern medicine would feel reborn’, claims the novel’s protagonist, lonely spinster and mother Liz Dunn. Her further musings on the matter expose the inanity of Bertis’ ravings:

And yet I’ve read books that tell me this isn’t the way newly created vision plays out in real life. Gifted with sight, previously blind patients become frightened and confused. They can’t make sense of shape or colour or depth. Everything shocks, and nothing brings solace. My brother, William, says, “Well think about it, Liz – kids lie in their cribs for nearly a year watching hand puppets and colourful toys come and go. They’re dumb as planks and it takes them a long time to even twig to the notion of where they end and the world begins. Why should it be any different just because you’re older and technically wiser?” (*ER*, 1)

Again, Coupland's position docks with Ballard's, except in this instance the notion of an infantile regression, of an apocalyptic rebirth, is viewed as not only impossible, but also, *contra* Ballard, emphatically undesirable. A technological Apocalypse, embodied in muted terms as sight-restoring surgery, is conceived of as a fearful, cataclysmic awakening. While an Apocalypse does arrive in the novel in the form of Liz's abandoned son Jeremy's return into her life, her rebirth is not ecstatic or infantilising, but rather hard-won and painful. Jeremy's death from a particularly cruel and debilitating form of multiple sclerosis forces an awakening in Liz, but very much on the order of maturation, shaking her from her withdrawal from the world and the precipitous risk of romantic love. Her minor Apocalypse ends in an expulsion from a state of arrested development and into a frightening, exhilarating adult world:

In the end, those gifted with new eyesight tend to retreat into their own worlds. Some beg to be made blind again, yet when they consider it further, they hesitate, and realise they're unable to surrender their sight. Bad visions are better than no visions. (*ER*, 1–2)

There are three facets to the above quotation, two of which pertain to Ballard's fictions, while the third forms perhaps a core point of departure for Coupland. The Ballard protagonist, 'gifted with new eyesight' (in fact old, or primordial eyesight) by the cataclysm, exploits it by enacting a 'retreat into [his] own world'. The unimaginative fellow-fallen in Ballard's texts, meanwhile, 'beg to be made blind again' by following the closest authority figure to hand, no matter how disordered their response to the cataclysm may be. The third, the refusal of the newly-sighted to relinquish their vision, with all its attendant pain and sensory overload, is the uniquely

‘Couplandesque’ response to cataclysm; in other words, to grow up and wake up. The immaturity of the *destructive* apocalyptic desire is asserted by Coupland in *Life After God* to memorable effect:

When you are young, you always expect that the world is going to end. And then you get older and the world still chugs along and you are forced to re-evaluate your stance on Apocalypse as well as your own relationship to time and death. You realise that the world will indeed continue, with or without you, and the pictures you see in your head. So you try to understand the pictures instead. (LG, 84)

The centrality of vision is once again insisted upon by Coupland in the above quotation. Only the child takes Apocalypse literally. An apocalyptic return to nature then, especially the nature of all things to regress into earlier forms when idleness is the dominant behaviour, is no solution for Coupland. In many of his novels, he recognises the desire to return home, but refuses to sanction it because it leads to the very stagnation which engenders Apocalypse. Robert McGill provides an elegant quotation supporting the view that radical homelessness and therefore a regressive nostalgia indeed exists in Coupland’s *Girlfriend in a Coma*:

In Girlfriend in a Coma, Richard sees “a thousand salmon waiting to spawn, unable to swim upriver, trapped together, this clump of eggplant-purple salmon whose only wish, whose only yearning, was to go home” (107). [T]he salmon [...] find themselves blocked from their real destination and gazing upward.

This is the position in which the characters of Girlfriend in a Coma find themselves.⁵¹

As in Ballard's fictions, we find in Coupland's powerfully evocative images of futile attempts to return to 'the source', a fecund and spiritually nourishing utopia akin to the ontological womb. Rick in *Player One* sadly reflects on this condition (echoed if not lifted almost verbatim from *The Gum Thief*). '*If foetuses aren't getting alcohol, what, exactly, are they getting in there that makes the womb everybody's dream vacation spot?*' he muses (*PO*, 56). The goal for Coupland is to 'make do and mend' rather than withdraw into an individuated, affectless and infantile condition. 'Growing up means [...] moving to the city and an adult life of desiring to return to the utopian Never-Never Land atop the mountain',⁵² posits Robert McGill, resolving the tension between regressive and progressive nostalgia in evidence throughout Coupland's work. Transcendentally nostalgic utopianism can be *useful*, in the sense that it guides rather than compels. As with reflective nostalgia, it contemplates distance and loss without attempting to raise the dead or recapture an irretrievable childhood. The *intentional* striking out into apocalyptic spaces traditionally heralding revelation of some kind is also no salve. For John Johnson in *Miss Wyoming*, the attempt to seek out revelation in a space apocalyptic literature underwrites as revelatory is thwarted from the outset, leading to a series of miserably bathetic episodes:

⁵¹ Robert McGill, "Sublime Simulacrum": Vancouver in Douglas Coupland's Geography of Apocalypse' *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 70 (Spring 2000), 252-277 (p. 258).

⁵² McGill, p. 260.

John was a noble fool. His plan to careen without plans or schedules across the country was damned from the start. He was romantic and naive and had made pathetically few plans. He thought some corny idea to shed the trappings of his life would deepen him, regenerate him – make him king of fast-food America and its endless paved web. (*MW*, 103)

Clustered around and critically defined by ‘Wordsworthian ‘spots of time’’⁵³ according to Tate, the intimations of Eternity or Apocalypse replace and to a certain extent implicate the cataclysmic death drive, which is one facet – among many – of postmodern consumer culture. If Ballard’s texts are characterised by cataclysmic and apocalyptic scenarios, Coupland’s are characterised by cataclysmic and apocalyptic *visions*. While childhood is still a privileged condition in which these visions generally occur, it is only an adult perspective which can render them both intelligible and instructive. ‘Flashes of visual perception – real or imagined – are a defining motif across the writer’s body of work’, Tate argues. ‘In his early fiction, in particular, such moments constituted rumours of grace amidst the ruins of consumer culture.’⁵⁴ Even in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, perhaps Coupland’s most overt deployment of apocalyptic motifs, the Apocalypse begins in reality and ends in the realm of vision. Whilst global within the main body of the novel, the cataclysm is reversible through Karen’s act of self-sacrifice, and therefore never truly happens except within the minds of the slacker ‘elect’ who survive the mass-coma. For the characters returned to linear time, it becomes instead a *vision* of Apocalypse; a shard of eternity briefly and transformatively flashing before their eyes. The global coma becomes a blink, and

⁵³ Tate, p. 144.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

their inauguration into adulthood, in which the present is revealed as contingent and fragile, becomes the engine of their new missionary drive. Childhood is conclusively left behind, as is the characters' desire to return to their formerly torpid lives.

Apocalypse in Coupland's fictions, therefore, is not an 'event' on a grand scale.

Rather, it is the revelation accompanying fleeting visions that disappear as soon as they are registered. A pellucid example of this is to be found at the end of Coupland's *Shampoo Planet*, in which the aspiring yuppie Tyler and Anna-Louise wake in her apartment to find themselves in an Edenic 'drowned world'. 'What was once a ceiling has become a bridge', Tyler marvels. 'The floor above Anna-Louise and me has collapsed from the weight of the carp pond's water and has fallen into the bedroom below – become a gangplank for the many animals of [upstairs neighbour] Mr. Lancaster's menagerie' (SP, 281). Surrounded by animals and aerated water, Tyler experiences an epiphany, calling to Anna-Louise, "[W]ake up – *the world is alive*" (SP, 282). The apartment has been destroyed by the deluge while the animals file in in a mundane cataclysm; a Biblical deluge on a minute, intimate scale. A momentary return to nature, to innocence, is effected for the most banal of reasons – a structural weakness in the apartment above – and yet revelation and cataclysm coincide nonetheless. Coupland suggests that the expectation and anticipation of global cataclysm properly belongs to the era of grand narratives; a grand narrative of destruction to vanquish grand narratives. The best his protagonists can hope for is an evanescent Apocalypse before being plunged back into profane time, albeit in the hope that incremental change and betterment is possible in a fallen world. Apocalypse and revelation are all around us, we merely lack the eyes to see. A realignment and openness of perception is the prerequisite for revelation, as this interview with

Douglas Todd, demonstrates: ‘we’re lost. But we have this unbelievable set of new symbols and meanings around us. And all we have to do is open our eyes and look a bit harder and figure out how they relate and what the new mythologies are.’⁵⁵

An Apocalypse stamped with human values and imaginative hallmarks is precisely the ‘cartoon’ evoked so bitterly in *Player One*. It is also the Apocalypse of Ballard’s protagonists; solipsistic, and incapable of revealing anything but the narcissistic self. This is by no means a valueless insight; precisely the contrary. However, Ballard’s acknowledgment of this notwithstanding, his Revelation is neither humble nor edifying. It is not nihilistic either, but nor is it numinous. Crucially, Coupland’s Apocalypse, assembled from scraps and refuse, requires vigilance and attention in order for it to be seen at all. Unlike Ballard’s revelations, which rise up from the depths like leviathan, Coupland’s tend to be found under the cushions on the couch, right where you left them. In other words, to experience revelation in Coupland’s texts, you have to be *awake*.

vii.

In a word, we are dreaming of our disappearance. We dream of looking at the world in a state of formal cruelty, in its inhuman purity, (which is not a natural state at all but rather, quite the contrary, the world with a human face).⁵⁶

– Jean Baudrillard

⁵⁵ Douglas Todd, *Brave Souls: Writers and Artists Wrestle With God, Love, Death and the Things That Matter* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1996), p. 87. Cited in Tate, p. 147.

⁵⁶ Baudrillard, p. 37.

Of the approaches to cataclysm shared by Coupland and Ballard, it is sleep and/or the coma which most clearly underscores the difference between the two authors' approaches. 'The world was never meant to end like in a Hollywood motion picture' Karen laments in *Girlfriend in a Coma*. '[Y]ou know: a chain of explosions and stars having sex amid the fire and teeth and blood and rubies. That's all fake shit' (GC, 205). On this point, Ballard and Coupland are in agreement. The fantasy element of this is elaborated upon by the science fiction author Brian Aldiss, who Luckhurst tells us 'has given an influential portrait of the [cataclysm] genre as 'the cosy catastrophe', whose essence is that the hero should have a pretty good time (a girl, free suites at the Savoy, automobiles for the taking) while everybody else is dying off.'⁵⁷ As outwardly different from this genre as Ballard's texts appear to be, in reality they are extreme examples. The Ballardian protagonist is perfectly at home at the end of the world. While Ballardian cataclysmic environments (Kerans' free suite at the Ritz in *The Drowned World* notwithstanding) are not immediately evocative of 'cosiness' for most readers, they are just that for the Ballardian protagonist, whose inner and outer worlds become progressively more indistinguishable as the narrative progresses. Consonant with the Ballardian 'death of affect' and amniotic regression is the coma, which appears as both figure and recurrent motif in Ballard's novels and short stories, and in both cases is figured as something or someone to be welcomed. In no less than three stories, 'Myths of the Near Future' (1982), 'Manhole 69' (1957) and 'The Voices of Time' (1960), sleep and an accelerated dreamlife (closely aligned with elective madness for Ballard) is figured as the only reasonable response to oncoming cataclysm. In both 'Myths of the Near Future' and 'The Voices of Time', the human

⁵⁷ Ibid.

race is succumbing to a primal sleeping sickness which renders them comatose and dreaming. Referred to as ‘terminals’ in the latter short story, the sleepers are cast in heroic terms as ‘the vanguard of a vast somnambulist army massing for its last march’.⁵⁸

The protagonist, Powers, is not immune to this epidemic, but his initial resistance to it gives way to a curious detachment; a clinical observation of his slackening metabolism and waning attention span. Instead of actively fighting the effects, after a time he evinces a fascination with his own disease, his resignation to it perfectly encapsulated by the description in his diary of his packing away of his personal effects:

*June 7: Conscious, for the first time, of the brevity of each day [...] Spend the time slowly packing away the library; the crates are too heavy to move and lie where they are filled.*⁵⁹

What Powers is metaphorically packing away here is the entire human archive, which is bulky and useless in this torpid cataclysm. An unwieldy history is left to rot as the coma takes hold by increments, as is subtly intimated to opposite effect by Walter Benjamin in the posthumously published ‘Unpacking My Library’ (1955). He writes, ‘[T]he chance, the fate, that suffuse the past before my eyes are conspicuously present

⁵⁸ J.G. Ballard, ‘The Voices of Time’ in *The Voices of Time* (London: Orion Books Ltd, 1992), pp. 9-41 (p. 14).

⁵⁹ Ballard, ‘The Voices of Time’, p. 28.

in the accustomed confusion of these books'.⁶⁰ There is no nostalgia for any history that may be deemed 'historical' in this story, or indeed any of the others. 'Only in extinction is the collector comprehended', Benjamin writes, and while this is certainly true of Ballard's protagonists *en bloc*, the 'collection', here allegorised as the entire historical archive, is extinguished alone with the collector, as in the promise of the aforementioned liberating nuclear holocaust.⁶¹ Indeed, in Ballard's terms, it is the 'collection' which must be extinguished in order for the collector to be comprehended, not least by himself.

Powers cedes all agency to the phenomenon (a literary analogue of universal entropy) and lapses into a terminal coma at the end of the story. This transformative disease, which effects a fusion of dream and reality, is also present in 'Myths of the Near Future', in which the sleeping sickness is once again held to be a gradual process which comes to encompass all of humanity, not as a survival strategy, but rather as a survival strategy for the psyche, as a 'retreat into a hibernating self'.⁶²

There is another dimension to this malaise in 'Myths of the Near Future', which is that prior to the final, terminal loss of consciousness, '[a]lmost without exception, the victims became convinced that they had once been astronauts'.⁶³ Here the dream dimension of the sleeping sickness takes on an even greater importance, lashed as it is

⁶⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library' in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 61-69 (p. 62).

⁶¹ Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library', p. 68.

⁶² J.G. Ballard, 'Myths of the Near Future' in *J.G. Ballard: The Complete Short Stories: Volume 2* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 602-634 (p. 607).

⁶³ *Ibid.*

to Ballard's absolute conviction that exploration of outer space is of marginal importance compared to the far more urgent mapping and colonisation of inner space. This applies to the genre in which he chooses to write as well, since Ballard's fictions tend to eschew the overfarmed soil of cosmic science fiction and its specious scientific verisimilitude in favour of psychopathology and a prurient medicalisation (or medicalised eroticisation) thereof. The former approach to science fiction is surely, in Ballard's terms, truly somnambulic, whereas Ballard's valorisation of the coma as a forum for neural geology is anything but. That it effectively ends the world, returning mankind to its primordial home beyond the somatic, casts the coma in terms of an escape hatch into deep time, idealised childhood and carnival; a fire exit for refugees from consciousness – a theme that is taken up in Ballard's 'Manhole 69'. In this short story, a number of research subjects participating in sleep deprivation experiments begin to manifest strange symptoms after an initial rush of euphoria associated with greater productivity and conscious engagement with complex tasks. Surgically prevented from sleeping, the research subjects have to be observed in shifts as their observers' natural sleep cycles prevent them from keeping up with the objects of study. With breathtaking rodomontade, Dr. Neill claims that his achievement is one of the greatest advances in the history of medical science, jumpstarting an evolutionary leap as significant as any in prehistory:

None of you realise it yet, but this is as big an advance as the step the first ichthyoid took out of the protozoic sea 300 million years ago. At last we've

freed the mind, raised it out of that archaic sump called sleep, its nightly retreat into the medulla.⁶⁴

Neill is warned against being precipitate in his assessment of his own achievements, but brushes them aside with the hubris of a classic mad scientist, too infatuated with his discoveries to consider their possible consequences. ‘I suppose’, he scoffs, ‘you’re trying to say that sleep is some sort of communal activity and that these three men are now isolated, exiled from the group unconscious, the dark oceanic dream.’⁶⁵ Of course in Ballardian terms, this is *precisely* what is occurring. Left alone for mere minutes in dwindling light, the test subjects become convinced they have been left for hours and that the dimensions of the huge gymnasium in which they are being observed are shrinking to the point that extreme, neurotic claustrophobia sets in and the men tear each other to pieces. ‘How much of yourself can you stand?’ a character muses, challenging Neill’s founding assumption that sleep is both unnecessary and actively counterproductive. ‘Maybe you need eight hours off a day just to get over the shock of being yourself.’⁶⁶ As in most Ballard texts, consciousness and identity are seen as evidence of a cataclysmic evolutionary misstep (an *a priori* impossibility since evolution is *reactive* rather than *active*), and sleep is the more primordial (and therefore legitimate) phenomenon. When sleep, the substratum of consciousness, is removed, so are dreams. As with the pampered bourgeois who inhabit Ballard’s novels and short stories, whether colonial or suburban, the absence of dreams is what precipitates cataclysmic violence, which itself constitutes a surrogate dream state.

⁶⁴ J.G. Ballard, ‘Manhole 69’ in *J.G. Ballard: The Complete Short Stories: Volume 2* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 66-89 (p. 67).

⁶⁵ Ballard, ‘Manhole 69’, pp. 68-69.

⁶⁶ Ballard, ‘Manhole 69’, p. 69.

Apocalypse and cataclysm are placed in opposition according to this formulation.

Because some form of *telos* is always rapidly approaching in Ballardian texts, the ability to dream is the only possible means of extracting some form of consolatory revelation from the cataclysm. According to Peter Brigg, '[Kaldren in *The Voices of Time*] is fully awake to man's coming end but unable to accommodate to it because he has no sleep-life.'⁶⁷

Douglas Coupland's *Girlfriend in a Coma* views the coma from the other end of the telescope. For Ballard, the dream state is a nostalgic site of pure consciousness, which is projected outwards onto advertising hoardings and airport architecture. Coupland argues the reverse, that is, that the cataclysmic shift from production to consumption has glued up the collective dream life with slogans and ironic detachment. This shift in tone from traditional cataclysm fictions is exemplified by the death of Lois, Karen's mother, who falls into a lethal coma in the frozen meat section of the 'Super-Valu' chain supermarket, cruelly described as 'her empire'. Suddenly overcome with the accumulated fatigue of a century, Lois 'lifts her legs and climbs up onto the meat. She breathes deeply; the plastic-wrapped beef cool on her cheeks. She closes her eyes and goes home' (GC, 182). While not intended to do so, this excerpt serves to parody Ballard's conviction of a totalising, deep structure for which consumerism is an ingenious alibi.

The last thought to spark dimly through Lois' collapsing synapses is classically Ballardian, at once nostalgic and morbid; 'she remembers photographs of Elizabeth Taylor with a bald, scarred head after brain surgery' (GC, 182). Taylor, whom Ballard

⁶⁷ Peter Brigg, *J.G. Ballard* (Mercer Island: Starmont House, 1985), p. 41.

describes as ‘the last of the old style Hollywood actresses’ is thus the focus of wistful nostalgia for the ‘unique collision of private and public fantasy [that] took place in the 1960s’ (*AE*, 17). In a Ballardian manoeuvre, Coupland transforms her into a Universal Pictures monster, all the more disturbing for being grounded in reality.⁶⁸ What Coupland implies is that it is the frozen meat that has conjured the association with Elizabeth Taylor. The nostalgic assurances of Lois’ Hollywood-mediated past have become, in keeping with the Taylor motif, mutilated. Even the eternal beauty of the last traditional Hollywood star is apparently not inviolable. The ‘collision of private and public fantasy, which results in what may be properly termed a ‘nostalgia industry’ disfigures the lost fantasy object in the postmodern moment. However, Coupland’s choice of words here is potent: Lois’ terminal coma is described as a homecoming, a return. The world and the present are considered alien by, not just Lois’ generation, but humanity as a whole. However, the homecoming is undermined by the irony of Lois’ climbing into the frozen meat, her ‘true’ home. Instead of returning to some nebulous Absolute by the sleeping sickness, Lois instead ‘returns’ to the condition of meat, a carnal reading of the body as utterly commodified and incapable of agency. Hamilton articulates this best when, reflecting on a middle-age hurtling towards him like a runaway train, laments, ‘I’m getting old; it’s becoming harder and harder to be a unique individual’ (*GC*, 93). Narcissistic to the last, Hamilton fails to realise that his condition does not extend to his generation alone, but also to everyone in his extended family of friends and lovers. Even Megan, the teenage daughter of Karen and Richard, adopts the Goth look to assert an individuality

⁶⁸ Taylor underwent brain surgery to remove a benign tumour in 1997, the year in which the novel is set.

profoundly threatened by the aestheticisation of all difference in the high capitalist economy.

The Couplandesque coma, then, differs from Ballard's reading in that it is figured not as a *response* to impending cataclysm – a reflection of a need for violence in dark water – so much as *an allegory for the cataclysm that is consumer capitalism itself*.

This mass-coma *as* cataclysm, as quiet and demure as any of Ballard's, is a literalised representation of the cataclysm which, Coupland implies, we are ourselves experiencing. The cataclysm here is occasioned by a coma of compulsive consumerism rather than the more salacious alternatives provided by disaster movies from the 1990s, which posited the end of history as a spectacle; a pyrotechnic display commensurate with our own conviction that humanity and the world must end at the same time. The coma is not the beatific shepherd herding humanity into an enriching primordial dream life in Coupland's fictions. This is not to say that the coma victim in Coupland's fiction is a *tabula rasa*. Karen in *Girlfriend in a Coma* has a conviction that while 'her coma was dreamless [...] she *knows* she went *to* some place real' (GC, 135). The metaphysical reading of the comatose state is not dismissed by Coupland, but in no way is it considered primordial either. It is not figured as a nostalgic return, but rather as something wholly other; something ineffable and frightening. She believes instead that her coma did not take her to 'the place you go when you die', but rather 'some other place' (GC, 135). While this conception of the comatose state is a state of consciousness, it is not the 'home' posited by Ballard. Coupland believes that the comatose state is a category of consciousness inextricable from the modern world and its medical innovations:

“Comas are rare phenomena,” Linus told me once. “They’re a byproduct of modern living, with almost no known coma patients existing prior to World War Two. People simply died. Comas are as modern as polyester, jet travel, and microchips.”(GC, 62)

As in the most interesting Ballard fictions, new technology can act as a reanimating agent for primal neural architecture. The idea is that by ‘waking into the coma’, a more authentic, essential self is given free rein. Where Coupland takes issue with this formulation is over the question of authenticity. If the unconscious has been hijacked to the extent Coupland proposes, there can be no reclamation of an authentic, individuated self in the absence of external stimuli. The comatose state is recast by Coupland as a profoundly threatening condition, symptomatic of passivity and a capitulation to routine and ennui. As in Ballard’s texts, the coma is advanced as a metaphor for flight and escape, but Coupland’s version is not an ecstatic release. It is a defeat; a surrender to an infantilising consumer culture whose transcendent metaphorical expression is the coma, as evidenced by Karen’s childhood friend Wendy’s ironic musings about the permanent traffic jam caused by the huge number of drivers falling asleep at the wheel:

The traffic slows down and freezes, never to start again. *Is everybody going home? Will home be safe? Or perhaps home is only familiar. What do they expect at the other end that will make them feel safe? What will make them strong?* (GC, 187)

There is nothing laudable, according to Wendy, in the return enacted by the comatose state. A more authentic self is not revealed, but rather an ossification of all ambition, imagination and, crucially, hope. Coupland's coma is a nostalgic phenomenon inasmuch as it screens out the white noise of the present and revives a state of vegetative simplicity, even though the entire complex of media and entertainment are geared to induce a condition akin to a waking coma; a condition of living death. In a present in which the dreamlife of consumers has been flattened and democratised almost beyond irony, the unconscious does not push back with a Ballardian coma of its own in Coupland's books, but rather accepts its fate with exhausted resignation. For Coupland, the coma signifies a failure of imagination rather than its apotheosis.

A grim irony in Coupland's novel is that after the mass coma has spread around the globe, leaving five billion bodies in its wake, the sole survivors and protagonists of the novel remain in their consumer comas for a whole year in a series of gestures every bit as absurd as Strangman's looting of London in *The Drowned World*. After the End, in which these characters are granted a future that is outwardly historically sterilised, they fall back on old habits and fritter their time away in nostalgic retrieval of the bourgeois world they have lost; in other words, they remain comatose despite any number of environmental injunctions to wake up. 'All that we've seen and been through', protests Linus, one of Karen's friends, 'and we watch videos, eat junk food, pop pills and blow things up' (GC, 256). The boundless *counter-carnival* of the postmodern end of history is here set up as a meaningless, dismal ritual profoundly lacking in imagination or verve. With cataclysm presenting an opportunity for the total fulfilment of their bourgeois aspirations, the protagonists realise that their carnival behaviours are intensely nostalgic. A poignant aside to this is provided by Coupland in

the collection of vignettes entitled ‘The Wrong Sun’ in *Life After God*, in which he presents a seemingly autobiographical fragment from his own childhood on an American airbase in West Germany:

For the first time the women are escorted into the “bunkers” – unused furniture storage lockers with windows on the ground floors of the PMQs. There is no furniture inside, nor food nor supplies – no diapers, tranquillisers, bandages, or clean water. Oddly there *is*, though, six tins of caviar sitting in a corner. (LG,

77)

Here we find a distillation of *Girlfriend in a Coma*’s position on bourgeois nostalgia in the era of nuclear proliferation; conspicuous consumption as a cancerous form of carnival. Decadence, by its very gratuitousness, does not and cannot nourish. We are given no indication, for instance, of the presence of a can opener. Bourgeois aspirations are revealed in all their risible aspect when the cataclysm shivers time to pieces and the coma shifts from metaphor to reality.

The coma is not confined to metaphor in Ballard and Coupland’s texts; it is also personified. Karen in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, in her messianic role as sacrificial calf destined to awaken the sleeping dead once more, is an obvious example. Her return to her deathly coma brings the world before the cataclysm back in its entirety, albeit with her friends’ recollection of the year spent in the ruined world left intact. Karen’s function is therefore to show her friends that it is possible to awaken from a decades-long coma, in both the metaphorical and literal sense. She proves to her friends that change and rebirth are possible, but also costly, as her atrophied limbs upon waking

testify. Ballard's character 'Coma' on the other hand, is Karen's antipode. She is a Ballardian air hostess or kindly Siren, softly calling the Ballard protagonist to transcendence and departure from a doomed space-time into a nostalgic prehuman 'home'. Peter Brigg's description of Coma is true of every appearance she makes:

In "the Voices of Time," [...] she is attentive, agreeable, and charming, the image of the anima, the feminine inner self of humanity. Coma may serve [...] as the personification of the need for the dreamlife.⁶⁹

Where Karen in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, through her unique perspective on the contemporary (at the time of writing) world, is a catalyst for the awakening of her friends in the face of cataclysm, Coma's role is the opposite; to lull her charges to sleep and a kind of authentic, primordial wakefulness which demonstrates that history and 'reality' are dreamless dreamscapes. As a normative concept, the world is not taken as in any way 'given' by Ballard, and yet its interrogation is always cut short by the act of somnolent transcendence. This is not to assert in any way that Ballard's explorations of inner landscapes are not exhaustive or rigorous, but the assumption that reality and history are so much vapour fails to be substantiated in any cogent way.

The suggestively-named Karen in *Player One*, who has arrived at the airport bar for an abortive internet date, is chided by Bertis for her refusal to 'wake up' out of her consumerist, anaesthetised life; a tried and tested Coupland motif. However accurate Bertis' diagnosis of Karen's flaws may be, the source of that diagnosis immediately undermines its legitimacy:

⁶⁹ Brigg, p. 41.

Bertis [...] turned back to Karen. “Karen, I like you, and this could be the day you wake up from the long, dead sleep that has been your life until now.”

“So you’re telling me I’ve been asleep for some four decades? What was I doing all that time, then?”

“I don’t know. Being a part of the world – being in time rather than in Eternity.” (*PO*, 158)

Bertis is a killer, and as such his diagnoses of his captors’ flaws are driven by a malign agenda. However, it is tempting to view him as a Ballardian irruption into the text. The above exchange, amounting to a dialogue between Karen and her own self-destructive compulsions, is not (if Coupland is being true to form) intended to be taken at face value by the author. While Bertis’ point is valid inasmuch as Karen has indeed somnambulated through her adult life, chronological time is inescapable and, contra Ballard, the only time available to her. Reflection on this sense of loss is vital to time’s rehabilitation, but its abandonment is neither possible nor desirable.

To return to Dag’s observation in *Generation X* that the contemporary landscape is made up of alienating and depressing ‘blips and chunks and snippets on bumpers’ (*GX*, 6), it can be applied to *Apocalypse* equally well in Coupland’s case. In its revelatory reading, *Apocalypse* is only available in the form of momentary glimpses and visions. An eternity-heralding moment in which the disclosure of ultimate truth and cosmic rebirth coincide is too much to ask for in a universe of cause and effect according to Coupland. Instead, the spectre of *Apocalypse* and utopia *informs* the present as opposed to determining it, thereby opening up signification and refusing to

condone a static world with no possibility of process or becoming. After all, '[A] world of continuous miracles would be a cartoon' as Karen opines in *Player One* (PO, 134). In sharp distinction to Ballard, Coupland argues for a revision of the present rather than a flight into the temporal anterior in which we permanently (albeit painlessly) lose all sense of selfhood. Instead, we must content ourselves with intimations of eternity; fleeting glimpses of the Absolute which not only generate hope, but also a painful recontextualisation of the unhappy present, which consequently reveals an enjoinder to leave childhood behind and change the present *within time*. 'The goal [...] is not to discover a new space but to revise an existing space'⁷⁰ insists McGill, harking back to the frontier mentality addressed in chapter two. This is not to suggest that there is no nostalgic bent to Coupland's apocalyptic, but it is grounded both by its reflective (as opposed to restorative) quality and by the fact that it is bound to the commercial and political realities we face each day. With his apocalyptic visions and theological ruminations, it is tempting to position Ballard as the realist since he engages with sex and viscera less abashedly than Coupland, but it is not difficult to 'out' Ballard as the greater transcendentalist because he insists on representing Apocalypse and cataclysm as imaginative fire exits for the saturnine ego. His characters wish to be fully consumed by the cataclysm precisely because it is presented as inherently purging; a means by which a remythologised childhood can be (re)captured and indulged to its thanatotic end, which is a reunion with eternity; the elective coma whence we came and whither we long to return. This contrast between the authors demonstrates that once again, one generation seeks to revise and undo a preceding generation's assumptions on the plane of nostalgia. The clearest index of a generation's value system is its choice of nostalgic focus, and this chapter has shown

⁷⁰ McGill, p. 263.

that in order to pull a generation back from the brink of a precipice to which they believe they were pushed without consultation by the preceding one, a critique and correction of nostalgia is the most effective tool for reversing the trend. If Ballard's work is a dark reflection of a suicidal impulse inherent to his generation, Coupland and his generation attempt to dispel its eroticism. As the most extreme example of nostalgia, nostalgia for Apocalypse is therefore the most illuminating.

7. Conclusion: Irony Lost, Nostalgia Regained?

On the other side of ironic estrangement might be emotion and longing; they are yoked as two sides of a coin. In this moment of nostalgic embarrassment one can begin to recognise the nostalgic fantasies of the other and learn not to trample on them.¹

Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*

This thesis has demonstrated that the postmodern moment has riven nostalgia into a huge number of internecine nostalgias, not least nostalgias for a discursively-constructed ‘primordial’ nostalgia that are in reality artefacts of the recent past. As a battlefield of competing nostalgias, our current condition is also marked by a callous irony which for some is the last line of defence against these myriad nostalgias. The purpose of this conclusion is therefore to demonstrate that while postmodern irony and postmodern nostalgia have not comfortably co-existed in the late Twentieth century, they have maintained a dynamic antagonism in which the one cannot exist without the other. The differences between the two authors’ approaches to nostalgia proves that postmodern nostalgia is far from homogenous, and that while nostalgia is the only bulwark against general irony, irony is the only bulwark against nostalgia’s total implosion. Coupland’s work indicates that we are perhaps entering a new paradigm in which mastery over nostalgia need not mean its attempted eradication, as is the case in Ballard’s corpus. It is for others to determine whether this has always been the case.

¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 354.

As has been established in the introduction, a stable definition of nostalgia in postmodern thought is not possible. The complication attending any attempt at a definition arises from the term's primordial illegitimacy. As a portmanteau neologism which refers to a desire for restoration of the authentic and the elemental, it is itself evidence of the irretrievability of both. It finds itself reluctantly on the side of progress since it is the result of a ferociously innovative combination of two 'authentic' and 'elemental' components: *nostos* and *algia*. A new term composed of old materials, it attests to an irreducibly modern irreverence towards formerly discrete historical objects. As an articulation of a yearning to return to a state of vegetal tranquillity, it is the product of a frantic, incomprehensibly complex modernity. It has therefore never had, nor will it *ever* have, the authenticity whose 'loss' it attempts to describe and delimit. The term itself is its own impediment to the cure for the condition it describes, testifying instead to the ineluctable march of progress and the irretrievability of lost time. In summary, the word itself is evidence of a both a 'yearning for' and prevention of its own negation. In this regard, the sentiment and the term are reflective of one another. Nostalgia 'craves' its own negation, and yet it is precisely that craving which prolongs it and turns it into a source of masochistic pleasure. The impossibility of fulfilment is implicit in the desire for restoration.

What has hopefully emerged is a sense that nostalgia is one plane on which intergenerational conflict is at its most intense. A younger generation usually takes their elders' objects of nostalgia as their primary targets. It is over and through nostalgic objects that the first exchanges of fire between generations takes place. Ballard belongs to one of the last generations who enthusiastically participated in this stale intergenerational melee, exposing the mannered colonial nostalgia to a corrosive

ironic stew of his own concoction. The originality of this approach lies in its prodigious masochism, that is to say in the willingness of its author to expose the hypocrisy of, and thus reject, *all* civilised conventions in order to evict nostalgia in particular. This arguably pathological enmity towards nostalgia is only explicable through details provided by Ballard himself. Taking into account the author's widely-known and admired autobiographical chicanery, it is apparent that its fountainhead cannot be definitively located in any available material. The texts themselves, however, perform a persistent and curiously repetitive ironic desecration of familiar, often nostalgic, social phenomena. The first conclusion to be drawn from this approach is that, as our hyper-nostalgic cultural paradigm attests, it has proven to be largely ineffective. Irony has not overcome nostalgia; rather, it has taken on a spuriously counteractive function, giving rise to an apprehension of a safe, non-transmissible nostalgia where the risk of 'contagion' is low. To speak of 'ironic distance' is to acknowledge the role it plays in insulating the reified postmodern subject from the contestable frangibility of the values and institutions in whose maintenance they have an unspoken (or unspeakable) and enormous investment.

For Ballard, an earnest irony is, according to Jack C. Gray, 'the high road to acceptance'. Irony allows the ironist and ironic audience to accept '[c]ontradictions, contrasts, and discrepancies [...], and while [it] does not resolve the clash of the contestants, it somehow provides an atmosphere in which both can reside without destroying each other'.² This leads to an understanding of irony as a form of evasive manoeuvre which allows the postmodern subject to cope with the horde of contradictions daily yielded up by a media machine which insists on giving all events,

² Jack C. Gray, 'Irony: A Practical Definition', *College English* 21, 4 (Jan., 1960), 220-222 (p. 222).

whether it be a red-carpet premiere or a political assassination, equally shallow coverage. This results in a disorientating cultural landscape with no depth of field, analogous to the vertiginous effect engendered by Coupland's incompatible yet coexistent notions of 'Historical Overdosing' ('to live in a period of time when too much seems to happen') and 'Historical Underdosing' (to live in a period of time when nothing seems to happen') (*GX*, 9).

Michael Delville asserts that 'Ballard's oeuvre seems informed by a recognition that no stable representation can result from the jumble of material and ideological elements that constitute contemporary culture.'³ As a result, the only perspective on this failure of representation to consciousness that makes sense is irony; the same irony which, we are led to believe, renders nostalgia inert. Coupland's response to this posture is to assess the terrible price irony demands of us. Irony has aided in the creation of a perception of nostalgia as a risk-free sentiment, in a sense 'sterilising' it in preparation for its absorption into commodity capitalism. However, as we have seen, for Coupland the inoculum is at least as dangerous as the disease. Living as he did through the most destructive period of bellicose nationalism the world has ever known, Ballard's contempt for nostalgia is understandable, but Coupland considers a cultural tendency in which irony forces nostalgia to be treated with the utmost cynicism to be one which offers little hope for innovation or, to call upon an illustratively unfashionable term, hope. Dylan Trigg writes:

As New Ageism is relegated to spiritual ineptitude, cultural pessimism continues to thrive while cynicism exploits the end of the absolute. Through

³ Michael Delville, *J.G. Ballard* (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers Ltd, 1998), p. 4.

the mode of cynical thought, Postmodernist irony is employed to disarm the fate of decline. The cynic is removed from the process by becoming a detached voyeur to decline. In turn, the cynic fulfils the nineteenth century role of the urban *flâneur*. The position of critical engagement, originally a tool to dispute claims of rationality, morphs into a posture of affected scorn and uncritical opposition by habit.⁴

Ballard's fiction also allows for and explores this cynicism. While Ballard accepts that it is, as Coupland fears, apocalyptic, he also posits that this trend is only retrograde or counterproductive when viewed from *within* a culture in decline. Unashamedly taking eternity's part, Ballard instead points to the possibility of an un-nihilistic reading of this apocalypticism, of which cynicism is a necessary precursor. According to Peter Brigg, '[the] threat of death' in Ballard's fictions 'forces the development of the psyche'.⁵ This amounts to, in Delville's opinion, 'a deliberate attempt to depict a society which is essentially post-emotional, one in which human beings emerge as strangely distanced and detached observers of their own affectless condition'.⁶ For Ballard, the general irony and over-rehearsed emotions abetted by an omnipresent, media-saturated culture lead to an aestheticisation of decline and a retrenchment of the psyche into expansive, luminous inner worlds. The sybaritic or even atavistic behaviours evinced by Ballard's protagonists are the storm before the calm; the frantic

⁴ Dylan Trigg, *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia, and the Absence of Reason* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2006), p. 116.

⁵ Peter Brigg, *J.G. Ballard* (Mercer Island: Starmont House, 1985), p. 55.

⁶ Delville, p. 5.

evolutionary scramble before the eternal armistice of the void. Ironic detachment is the proper mode for a reputedly post-historical, eternal present.

Where Coupland's characters bridle against the Ballardian and Jamesonian 'waning of affect', Ballard's are thoroughly ambivalent towards it. History seems to confirm Ballard's thesis that an apocalyptic sensibility generates its own aesthetic and its own fascinating tropes relating to decline and a redemptive reading thereof.

Through his fascination with ruins both physical and epistemological, Ballard clearly possesses a highly-developed sense of irony where decline is concerned. David Pringle writes that '[Ballard's] protagonists generally have a sense of humour, but the jokes are almost always on themselves. It is precisely this dimension of irony which redeems them from the surface clichés of their conception.'⁷ The vast majority of Ballard's protagonists are ironic observers, since they and often only they penetrate the veil of appearance to the reality of the situation, which is often the revelation that appearance and reality are meaningless categories in a wholly synthetic environment. However, as Pringle points out, not only are they ironic observers, but also ironic victims. The ironic detachment with which they confront the paradigm shifts of which they are a part and in which they are usually complicit is the only means by which this awareness of victimhood can be borne. Their flesh is mortified, their world begins to deliquesce, they find themselves stranded on an existential terminus from which the only way out is through inner space, and yet Ballard's protagonists experience all

⁷ David Pringle, *Earth is the Alien Planet: J.G. Ballard's Four-dimensional Nightmare* (San Bernardino: R. Reginald, The Borgo Press, 1979), p. 38.

these phenomena, the stigmata of their victimhood, as both ironic victim and, in Hutcheon's words, 'comprehending (attributing) interpreter'.⁸

The superiority and elevated status of Ballard's protagonists over the secondary characters lies in the protagonist's appreciation of what Muecke identifies as 'the irony of an ironic situation or event in which there is no ironist but always both a victim and an observer', albeit within an inescapable narrative in which the observer himself is a victim.⁹ This alone is enough to make pandemonium and misrule palatable because, explains Muecke, the 'ironic situation or event is a spectacle, which is to say, something observed from outside'.¹⁰ This standing over events, aloof and untouchable, is ultimately what the ironist strives for when faced with irresolvable tensions. 'What an ironic observer typically feels in the presence of an ironic situation', asserts Muecke, 'may be summed up in three words: superiority, freedom, amusement. Goethe says that irony raises a man 'above happiness or unhappiness, good or evil, death or life.'¹¹ As an expression of a desire for a transcendence of contradiction and murky epistemology, then, irony is opposed to nostalgia. Nostalgia emanates from the same 'place' as irony, that is ulterior to a given focus, and yet it yearns for a reunion with it, whether there has been a first encounter or not. Irony, on the other hand, does not seek a reunion; it valorises the very distance nostalgia seeks to elide. That it insists on a *transcendence*, however, exposes its 'secret affinity' with nostalgia. Transcendence is usually figured as a *return* since, as Derrida has so

⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 54.

⁹ D.C. Muecke, *Irony* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1970), p. 28.

¹⁰ Muecke, p. 36.

¹¹ Muecke, p. 37.

remarkably and consistently maintained, ‘there is nothing outside the text’, meaning any articulation of a transcendent condition is rendered impossible by the structural biases preinstalled in language itself.¹² As such, any evocation of a transcendent condition must be composed of tropes relating to a paradisiacal, preconscious state termed the ‘Oceanic’ by Freud in his influential paper ‘Civilisation and its Discontents’ (1930).

Akin to the sublime in that it is ‘a feeling of something limitless, unbounded’,¹³ the Oceanic is, according to Freud, ‘a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole’.¹⁴ Founded on an entirely suppositional, secularised state of grace, the Oceanic is related to infancy inasmuch as the infant mind makes no distinction between subject and object, self and world. For Freud, then, the archetypal Fall is the fall into consciousness and individuation. Ballard’s work consistently presents speculative scenarios in which the Oceanic state is striven for, with increasingly destructive results. The ‘terminal beach’ on which his protagonists find themselves existentially shipwrecked is the result of an ironic paradox in that those characters who can articulate their desire for the Oceanic are prevented from achieving it precisely *because* they can articulate it. As ‘the consolation offered by an original and somewhat eccentric dramatist to his hero who is facing a self-inflicted death’, the Oceanic reunion is often withheld from Ballard’s protagonists either until

¹² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, trans. by Joan Riviere, ed. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975), p. 1.

¹⁴ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 2.

the last possible moment or indefinitely.¹⁵ Ballard's 'mob', meanwhile, liberate themselves from the yoke of reason with alarming celerity. This vertiginous slide into atavism, so far from the Oceanic state and yet presented as a *means* by which it might be achieved, in the sense that a beatific peace might follow a vast expenditure of violent energy, is given by Freud as 'the *conservative* nature of living substance'.¹⁶ This can be understood in terms of an instinctive nostalgia for, not just the uterine seas of Ballard's early fiction, but decomposition into insensate materials for which time is meaningless; a pre-mitochondrial, immortal silence. 'The tension which [...] arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavoured to cancel itself out', Freud speculates. 'In this way the first instinct came into being: the instinct to return to the inanimate state.'¹⁷ In Freud's view, it is not enough that the organism is extinguished, but that it must be extinguished on its *own terms*.

The Ballardian protagonist's overriding obsession is to annul himself, to acquiesce to the Precambrian nostalgia purportedly shared by all beings. However, whether in his catastrophe novels or his novels of social catastrophe, the Ballardian protagonist's pursuit of the Conradian 'destructive element' as a possible passport to a pre-historical Eden underestimates the ingenuity and complexity of the structures he seeks to pass through like a purging flame to the nebulous existence beyond.¹⁸ Delville writes:

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1990), p. 43.

¹⁷ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 46.

¹⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim: A Romance* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co., 1905), p. 200.

Ballard's postulate that televised sex and violence can promote social emancipation seems to ignore the blatant mercantilism of media culture, which – dominated as it is by corporate interests and conservative ideology – has arguably little to offer in terms of genuinely subversive libidinal investment and little to do with any protopolitical prospects of real or fantasized social improvements. In fact, one could argue the opposite and conclude that all the consumers of these mass-cultural artefacts will ever be capable of is what the market demands of them.¹⁹

This intellectual impasse, arguably the point beyond which Ballard's project breaks down, is the same point from which Coupland's texts proceed. The younger author does not share the elder's *unconditional* dark optimism over the possibility that dominant socio-political and cultural structures will inevitably implode through their own contradictions and create a space for transcendence. The allegedly post-historical condition of late Capitalism insists that the perfection of free-market capitalism means 'trickle-down' prosperity for all, hence the redundancy of insurrection, whether cultural or political. If capitalism is so broad a church that it can safely incorporate its own critique, Ballard's implosion and resultant transcendence may never happen. In keeping with the North American Protestant tradition, for Coupland transcendence is achieved neither permanently nor cheaply. It presents itself as a possibility in moments of crisis, then disappears. It is an intimation of transcendence that (dis)appears rapidly enough that it cannot be assigned a given shape, nostalgic or otherwise.

¹⁹ Delville, p. 89.

Ballard's is a teleological model in which transcendence through social collapse is inevitable, and therefore deniable as a nostalgic fantasy. Coupland's model (if it can be so-called) is non-teleological in that it actively resists *some* elements of neoliberal teleology, searching for an arcane combination that would open up a polyvalent future in the rust and ruination of the system's voluminous waste. Where Ballard's system makes a cogent case for an abandonment of the social, which its own contradictions will assuredly instigate, Coupland instead argues for a reconfiguration using existing and nominally obsolete materials. As a desire for reclamation, a disciplined reflective nostalgia which makes allowances for irony is a means by which a collective will for change can be marshalled. The same muzzled nostalgia can allow the 21st Century subject to sift out history's impurities and excesses in order to preserve the salutary elements. For Coupland, this can lead to a practical nostalgia for what Forshaw terms 'questions about effective *alternative* strategies of political and cultural resistance'.²⁰ Even though Coupland clearly mourns the decline of faith-based grand narratives, it is not the promise of an eternal, ahistorical paradise that is the lost object of nostalgia; rather, it is an incontrovertibly corporeal and historical faith *as object*. This is an expression of nostalgia for models of resistance and human connection forged *in* history, and while Ballard's nostalgia also depends on discourses whose creation are the result of a confluence of profoundly historical forces, Ballard's nostalgia is nonetheless focused *outside* history. The protagonists of both authors' fictions are embedded in an indefinable temporal context in which history as a legitimate epistemological datum is gravely in question. For Coupland's protagonists, this awareness compels a profound sense of dislocation and anomie, whereas for Ballard's,

²⁰ Mark Forshaw, 'Douglas Coupland: In and Out of 'Ironic Hell'' *Critical Survey* 12, 3 (2000), 39-58 (p. 55).

this is an opportunity for colonial-style psychological hijinks on the high seas of the mind. To preside over history from the ironist's God's eye view is therefore to detach oneself from the real struggles, defeats and achievements endured therein.

If irony can be defined as a trope which concerns itself with the disparity between reality and appearance, then it follows that nostalgia must then be apprehended as a trope concerned with the disparity between reality and *non-appearance*, that is between reality and a *failure* to appear. This liberates the term from its past-tense orientation, allowing for both the future and the never-occurred to fall comfortably within its compass. Ballard's conviction that nostalgia affirms the loss of the future is misplaced because irony has become by far the greater threat, inasmuch as it can lead to a despairing lassitude and a sense of self-indulgent, cosmic martyrdom.

Contrastingly, for Coupland, only an irony in service to nostalgia can save us from irony. These two perspectives are irreconcilable, and yet the apocalyptic imagery, the fascination with found objects and the underscoring of the suburbs as a site of resistance are all subjects both authors make their own, albeit in service to directly opposing agendas. In the case of the suburbs, Ballard's attempt to both celebrate and mobilise irony to destroy its nostalgic associations, most notably the nuclear family, ends in failure. He only succeeds in reconfiguring it, leaving the nostalgic object distorted but intact, which is true of all his attempts. Coupland attempts no such destruction; indeed, the reconfiguration is precisely the point. It is only through disassembly and reconstruction, on both the practical and ontological level, that innovation can occur.

Coupland is in lockstep with Svetlana Boym when she states that ‘[c]ontrary to common sense, irony is not opposed to nostalgia.’ She argues instead for a complementary relationship in which ‘humour and irony [are] forms of passive resistance and survival [...] allow[ing] affection and reflection to be combined.’²¹ Instead of replacing or crushing nostalgia, for Coupland irony should be used to focus and refine nostalgia, placing it in service of the individual threatened by a condition of general irony exploited by the system of exchange that has bartered its way into our collective dreams. The problem for a self-aware, ironic culture resides in the fact that nostalgia requires an openness and vulnerability that can be abused if recognised, leading Boym to observe that in postmodern culture, the would-be nostalgic spectator ‘risk[s] embarrassment, the loss of mastery and composure’.²² If this is the case, then Ballard’s protagonists, who emphatically *desire* a loss of ‘mastery and composure’ should have no qualms about admitting to and even enthusiastically endorsing, nostalgia. Coupland’s protagonists, however, occupy an ambivalent position in that they are hyper-aware of their own nostalgia whilst simultaneously treating certain commodified nostalgic objects and phenomena with warranted suspicion. A case could therefore be made for an assertion that there now exists an awareness that critics of nostalgia can only attack it through its *objects*. As has been made clear, as an ineradicable mode of affect, nostalgia can ‘jump’ objects with ease, making any critique extremely difficult. To extend the disease metaphor, nostalgia can move from host to host, leaving any would-be exterminator of nostalgic traces to destroy the host without eradicating the disease. Nostalgia for the early, uninhibited cyberspace frontier, for instance, can be viewed as a nostalgia at one remove for the American

²¹ Boym, p. 354.

²² Boym, p. 354.

frontier that survives the demise of its former host. Both objects of nostalgia can be easily critiqued and problematised, but the sentiment projected towards them cannot. Any criticism of nostalgia in the here and now can therefore be taken as, in some instances, a cover for criticism of nostalgics rather than nostalgia itself. This explains why Ballard's nostalgic attachment to anthropic depth models constructed in the present is so strong. Finding his peers' relatively recent objects of nostalgia justifiably pernicious, Ballard's own nostalgia is projected so far back as to be defensibly anostalgic. For Ballard, nostalgia is first and foremost a *historical* attachment, and as such prehistory is a reasonable alternative. Coupland recognises the essential truth of prehistoric metanarratives, which is that they are contemporaneous with progress. This is not to suggest that Coupland disputes the fossil record or inveighs against Darwinian natural selection. Instead, in such works as *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998) and *Shampoo Planet* (1992), he recognises that essentialist narratives of human development are almost as recent as the coma or the concept of the teenager. Any prehistoric nostalgia is therefore directed towards the time in which the narrative itself was constructed, not the narrated epoch in question.

Ballard's fictions are conspicuously 'fenced off' from the threat of an encroaching nostalgia that is, like the serpent, already in the garden. His works' nostalgia for a pre-history whose tropes were constructed *within* historical time is suspect from the outset. Read through Coupland, it is possible to view Ballard as nostalgic for the Age of Reason, whose function for Ballard was to presuppose a prior Age of *Unreason*. Nostalgia and progress are not mutually hostile according to this reading. In fact, we are now arguably at the height of a 'Couplandesque' state of cultural emergency in which certain forms of progress, particularly *social* progress, are themselves objects of

nostalgia. Consequently, as a more moderate voice who incorporates many of Ballard's concerns over nostalgia, Coupland refuses to condemn it, proposing instead that, to reiterate, a deployment of nostalgia with a view to reconfiguring the world using existing objects has redemptive potential. Indeed, as the end of the American frontier and subsequent pursuit of fresh horizons attests, nostalgia can and often does lead directly to the new.

Ballard's hostility towards nostalgia is, contrary to Coupland's softer assessment, born in part of a conviction that it is nostalgia and nostalgia alone which impedes progress, even if that progress leads to the grave. Brian Baker proposes that 'Ballard's protagonists are only too eager to embrace the transformative possibilities of the disaster, even if this is at the cost of personal dissolution.'²³ The destructive search for the Oceanic is heavily implicated in this suicidal tendency. The question of whether this dissolution is a consequence of progress or its tacit goal is one on which Ballard's fictions hinge. 'Through my books', Ballard writes, 'what I'm seeking to discover is whether a new sensibility exists on the far shore.'²⁴ A kind of profane transcendence is therefore the overt ambition underpinning Ballard's work. However, what his protagonists are seeking to transcend is time itself, and as such the transcendence cannot be 'progressive' in the classic sense since progress is, by definition, something which can only occur *in time*. Facing the brick wall of the future, the only solution is to posit time itself as a trick of subjectivity, thereby enabling a decidedly nostalgic

²³ Brian Baker, 'The Geometry of the Space Age: J.G. Ballard's Short Fiction and Science Fiction of the 1960s' in *J.G. Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. By Jeanette Baxter (London: Continuum, 2008), pp.11-22 (p. 15).

²⁴ J.G. Ballard, *Quotes*, ed. by Mike Ryan & V. Vale (San Francisco: RE/Search, 2004), p. 319.

conception of ‘archaeopsychic’ regression to take place within the mind itself. Baker writes:

It is not that Ballard fails to move ‘below the unconscious’ to the determining ideological base, but that he focuses upon subjectivity itself as a crucial and constitutive framing of human experience. Perhaps, as Gregory Stephenson insists, there is a thirst for transcendence in Ballard’s fiction, a move, that is, towards an ‘absolute, authentic being [...] an ontological Eden’ (1991: 49), but it is subjectivity itself, *and* its corollary and condition, time, that must first be dissolved.²⁵

Ballard’s science fiction is usually set in a surreal present in which time is literally running out. The admirably resourceful human brain then fashions an emergency exit *out of itself*, using its own dormant structures as a means of escape into what Ballard believes may be ‘a larger, more interesting world – on the other side’.²⁶ That the direction of escape is *backwards* via a regression into childhood and beyond raises questions about the efficacy of Ballard’s evasion of nostalgia as a determining trope. While it is true that Ballard posits regression as a *tendency* instigated by catastrophe, the author’s collusion with the Freudian model means desire cannot be excluded from the same tendency. It could be argued that what Ballard is depicting is the result of the mind’s nostalgia for its own prior configurations. Freud himself proposes that ‘in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish – [...] everything is somehow preserved and [...] in suitable circumstances (when, for instance, regression

²⁵ Baker, p. 16.

²⁶ *Quotes*, p. 8.

goes back far enough) it can once more be brought to light.²⁷ This regression cannot occur in a vacuum, and in the case of Ballard's protagonists it is clear that the catastrophe only ever enables the conscious mind to rationalise its own nostalgic desire to revert to an earlier form. Ballardian nostalgia seeks to eradicate the developmentally-recent mental structures designed to recognise (or indeed 'create') time. Since nostalgia is an affective disposition towards lost time, Ballardian nostalgia takes as its object the substratal mind which is constitutionally incapable of nostalgia. This is a notionally 'safe' form of nostalgia in that it is founded on the belief that it has no external object. However, when Derrida writes that 'the central presence [...] has never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute', the possibility is raised that the substratal mind *is* external since it has already been substituted in the act of its articulation.²⁸ It exists textually *in* the world, not purely and inviolably apart from it, and thus externalised can be fixated upon as an object of nostalgia. Nostalgia must exteriorise the object before it can recognise it as something which should be 'interior', thus engaging in a high-stakes game of *Fort/da* in which the naming of that which must be drawn to the centre dislocates both the object and the centre. The act of naming that which has been lost renders the loss complete, since the naming literally objectifies the lost object, placing it outside ourselves as something over which we have a claim but that no longer 'belongs' to us.

Even when an object is in one's possession, the Other always has an intellectual and imaginative claim on it. Ownership is therefore not simply a matter of possession. For

²⁷ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 6.

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 278-293 (p. 279).

Ballard, imaginative ownership of objects and phenomena means turning them into playthings. Their strategic redeployment and recombination under the liberating gaze of the dreamer both artfully recharges and territorially ‘marks’ the objects in question. Ballard’s texts often feature a battle between two actors over the Adamic power of naming, of ascribing name and therefore value. One tyranny is exchanged for another. Repetition of stories, tropes and objects is a restatement of ownership in this sense; *my* story, *my* toy. For Coupland, neither the univalent significance of advertised consumer objects nor the imaginative domination of formerly ‘fixed’ objects is desirable. He shares with Ballard a sense that the extreme juxtaposition of objects opens up the imagination to fresh possibilities, but he does not exchange one form of domination for another. The objective for Coupland is not simply to wrest the power of ascribing significance from the Big Other in order to make it part of an individual’s imaginative ‘toy collection’. Instead, in keeping with his North American provenance, his objective is to ‘free’ the object from its burden of univalent signification with a view to democratising it. Just as America now has to devise ingenious ways of satiating its nostalgic yearning for free space, Coupland attempts to recombine and juxtapose extant consumer objects in order to create ‘free space’ for interpretation, but not before its former significance has been assessed. The difficult balance Coupland is constantly attempting to strike is therefore how to demonstrate the ontological plasticity of objects without allowing them to become ‘toys’. The danger of them becoming so lies in the assumption of individual ownership surrounding the toy. Coupland rejects the exuberant relativity of popular postmodernism because, while nostalgia fixes the significance of things, that significance cannot be properly processed and absorbed in an accelerated culture. As such, a nostalgic reclamation of

objects must be attempted with a view to interpreting them before they are reabsorbed into the commodity exchange circuit and sealed within another auratic sarcophagus.

Mark Forshaw insists that Coupland is emphatically not a postmodern writer; that he is rather ‘a novelist who writes *about* postmodernity [...] with increasing distaste for both its cultural and its economic manifestations’.²⁹ For Coupland, the worst of these is uncritical irony. His use of apocalyptic imagery, particularly the coma and its somnolent equivalents, is intended to flag up the possibility that irony and somnambulism are one and the same; that irony, which Kierkegaard believes, ‘in its divine infinity [...] allows nothing to endure’, is the cause rather than the symptom of any notional apocalypse.³⁰ Whereas Ballard consistently pushes irony to its limit in order to achieve a state of grace beyond, Coupland offers a tantalising hope that what lies beyond may, in fact, be nostalgia itself. This arises from a recognition that nostalgia is ineradicable, a secondary effect of the human need to construct stories about what has been lost. Through selective narration, these lost objects are preserved in memory. While there can be no doubt that many of the lost (or perceived to have been lost) object’s complexities are limited or removed altogether, our need to construct stories about lost time, objects and homes is an inevitable consequence of modernity. Martin Heidegger adds an ontological dimension to this when he laments ‘the homelessness of contemporary man from the essence of Being’s history’.³¹ Pio

²⁹ Forshaw, p. 53.

³⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony: With Constant Reference to Socrates*, trans. by Lee M. Capel (London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, 1966), p. 77.

³¹ Martin Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’ in *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 214-265 (p. 241).

Colonnello clarifies this perspective, attributing to Heidegger the view that ‘[h]omelessness, feeling lost or deprived of human relationships is the metaphysical condition of contemporary humanity’.³² Far from a ‘death of affect’ then, in Coupland’s view the anomie and sense of isolation engendered by technological and cultural acceleration appears to have compounded cultural anxiety and despair. Whilst agreeing with Heidegger’s diagnosis, unlike Ballard he does not support the philosopher’s conclusions. Ballard meanwhile is in partial agreement with those conclusions,³³ insisting with him that ‘the “not-at-home” must be conceived as the more primordial phenomenon’,³⁴ thereafter rejecting nostalgia as a palliative for contemporary alienation according to Colonnello:

The identity of “home” and “homelessness” defines the condition of contemporary people, for only in estrangement is it possible to find oneself. A

³² Pio Colonnello, ‘Homelessness as *Heimatlosigkeit*?’ in *The Ethics of Homelessness*, ed. by G. John M. Abbarno (Rodopi: Atlanta, 1999), pp. 41-53 (p. 41).

³³ Ballard and Heidegger cannot be precisely mapped onto one another, but their positions on technology, while outwardly opposed, are remarkably similar. As a potential truth in itself, technology has the capacity to reverse the amnesiac effects of the river Lethe (hence *A[le]the]uein*), bringing beings to full awareness of their essence. Heidegger writes ‘[T]echnology is in its essence a destiny within the history of Being, a truth that lies in oblivion. For technology does not go back to the *technē* of the Greeks in name only but derives historically and essentially from *technē* as a mode of *alētheuein*, a mode, that is, of rendering beings manifest.’ Martin Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’ in *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 244.

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John McQuarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), p. 234.

human being's only duty is to accept, without nostalgia, a personal solitude in homelessness as a formative element of personal being.³⁵

Ballard and Heidegger's shared assumption is founded on an apprehension of the existence of the authentic, either of Being in Heidegger's case or the pre-social self in Ballard's. In both cases, we are never further from 'home' than when we settle into the inflexibly codified behaviours appropriate to both the social and domestic spheres; living amongst and for beings, we forget Being, thereby experiencing 'a homelessness in which not only man but the essence of man stumbles aimlessly about' according to Heidegger.³⁶ Colonnello claims that 'Heidegger maintained that the condition of homelessness represents the watershed between "non-authentic" being, which gives us a falsely reassuring sense of living "in one's own home," and the true "authentic" being, totally estranged from the everyday world.'³⁷ The paradox here can be located in the seemingly arbitrary division between authentic and non-authentic. If non-authentic being is characterised by an anaesthetised sense of being 'at home' and authentic being is characterised by alienation and separateness, then logically authenticity itself presupposes a sense of being 'at home' in the condition of being 'not at home' or *unheimlich*, since that is where truth resides. If one is authentic, one is 'at home' in siding with the natural and the true, however discomfiting that may be. Nostalgia takes authenticity rather than home (in the implicitly understood sense) as its object in this case. It is a complex reversal which presents no threat to nostalgia since it is both explicitly and implicitly present on both sides of the opposition.

³⁵ Colonnello, pp. 43-44.

³⁶ Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', p. 242.

³⁷ Colonnello, p. 41.

Wherever we locate the true and authentic is wherever we find nostalgia at its most potent. When Heidegger writes ‘[T]he homeland of [...] historical dwelling is nearness to Being’, he is positing the same zero-sum game as Ballard, in which the cost of a return to this nearness – this *homeland*, is estrangement and distance from *beings*.³⁸ In this, we could not be further from Coupland’s conclusions concerning a democratised, shared nostalgia.

The Ballardian emphasis on personal solitude is also open to charges of covert nostalgia in terms of atheistic Existentialism, since solitude involves a ‘return’ to the speculative, utopian ‘I’. Summarising Sartre’s take on Existential homelessness, Colonnello raises the possibility that if we consider nostalgic objects to be evidence of the other’s liberty to choose their own nostalgic foci, a militant rejection of nostalgia may in reality be a militant rejection of *the other*’s nostalgia, not nostalgia *en bloc*. ‘The fact is’, Colonnello explains, ‘that, once the ego finds it impossible to deny the other’s liberty, which in any case transcends it, the subjectivity decides to set up a project or create a world in which the other does not exist.’³⁹ Ballard’s evacuated, highly subjective landscapes seem to be an expression of this existential tendency. When nostalgia is added to the mix, Ballard’s rejection of nostalgia is exposed as an attempt to exclude the nostalgia of the other in order to enable a personal nostalgic pilgrimage to the reptilian brain.

Acknowledging that an escape from nostalgia is impossible, Coupland instead makes a bid for its acceptance and redemptive mobilisation. If Colonnello’s reading of

³⁸ Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’, p. 242.

³⁹ Colonnello, p. 46.

Nietzsche is faithful to the philosopher's intentions, both the philosopher and the author accept that 'humanity's historic-epochal dimension [i]s rooted in "homelessness," a radical estrangement from the day-to-day world, in which "homecoming" reveals the lack of a stable abode'.⁴⁰ This acceptance does not lead to a vitiation of affect on Coupland's part, however. For Coupland, a recognition that we are all equally 'without an ontological bedrock' and therefore homeless should be one node of affinity between generations and individuals, not a justification for voluntary segregation and secession from the world.⁴¹ Shared acceptance and exploration of homelessness and its isotopes leads to entente and understanding, which is the only way to cope with a culture evolving more rapidly than the individual's faculties of comprehension. The quotation with which the author opens *The Gum Thief* (2006) is an apt summation of this softer approach to nostalgia, which acknowledges that our shared condition of separation is grounds for empathy and fellowship:

Q: Brother, are you headed home?

A: Brother, aren't we always headed home?

-Question used by Masons to identify themselves among strangers. (GT, v)

A 'soft' or modest utopianism arising from a similarly 'soft' nostalgia is therefore the answer according to Coupland. We may not share the same nostalgic objects, but we all share nostalgia. Only this awareness can dispel the pall cast over contemporary culture by the omnipresent cynicism and irony Ballard's generation rightly felt was the only solution to a condition of widespread reactionary nostalgia, which 'bred

⁴⁰ Colonnello, p. 47.

⁴¹ Colonnello, p. 42.

monsters' in the first half of the twentieth century. A recognition of shared nostalgia allows the contemporary subject to entertain the notion of a non-teleological utopianism; one without which, we may conclude, the first dwelling would never have been built, the first settlement never established and so on. '[T]he ontological-existential disposition of humankind', Colonnello claims, 'is "utopian" not because it anticipates or pursues some far off, rose-tinted vision to substitute for the present reality, but because the human condition is to be "without a place," "without a home."'⁴² If correct, this means that if utopianism is nostalgically inflected, we need it for progress to occur, albeit a progress liberated from the cumbersome and unrealistic expectations of grand utopian projects. Through a restrained and moderate nostalgia, Coupland believes we can forge modest connections and rescue a modest future from the ironic oblivion to which it has been consigned through postmodern irony and a fashionable cynicism.

In conclusion then, we may suppose that when read through Coupland, Ballard's project may have an ironic unintended consequence. 'We seem to be in the trough of a wave', Ballard writes. 'There's a huge wall rushing towards us with a white crest, and I just hope we can ride to the top of it and maybe see something – a larger, more interesting world – on the other side.'⁴³ Ballard insists that nostalgia is the sailing ballast which must be tossed overboard in order to ride the crest of the wave and transcend restrictive temporal categories, allowing us to see 'beyond'. That this 'beyond' can only be figured as a return leads us to Coupland, who evinces the enticing, but perhaps quixotic hope that Ballard's 'larger and more interesting world'

⁴² Colonnello, p. 42.

⁴³ *Quotes*, p. 8.

could be characterised by a more empathetic form of individual nostalgia which comfortably co-exists with the nostalgia(s) of the other. With our present cynical condition as the purifying flame, for Coupland nostalgia can emerge from the other side in a more enlightened and tolerant form.

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