

The Billboard and The Canvas: Exploring J.G. Ballard's 'Project for a New Novel'

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J.G. Ballard's first professional job, in 1953, was as a copywriter at the advertising agency Digby Willis Ltd. His fascination with advertising however, as Rick McGrath has suggested, can be traced back to his childhood in Shanghai and his insatiable consumption of 'glossy American magazines' (McGrath 2009). From his early critique of consumer culture through stories such as 'The Subliminal Man' (1963), via his grotesque exaggeration of commercial media in *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), through to his final novel, *Kingdom Come* (2006), the advertising landscape resurfaces again and again in Ballard's work. But whilst Ballard certainly may have owed some debt to his early experiences as an advertiser, where he learnt how to produce those unconscious hooks within his writing, and to persuade his audience, such manipulative methods were, somewhat paradoxically, exactly what many of his later works confronted and rebelled against. For much like the Pop Artists of the 1950s and '60s, Ballard saw that there was great illuminatory power in creatively readopting the methods of the consumer 'spectacle' (as designated by Guy Debord). As he later wrote:

We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind – mass-merchandising, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the instant translation of science and technology into popular imagery, the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities within the realm of consumer goods, the pre-empting of any free or original imaginative response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. (Ballard 1975: 48)

It could be said, though, that for Ballard it all began with a billboard. Indeed, what else epitomizes the manipulative forces at work within society better than these titanic screens, which loom over the built landscape and radiate their unconscious waves into the surrounding world? Being as he was so enamoured with the architectures of modernity, Ballard's interest in the billboard is somewhat unsurprising. As in many major cities, billboards were towering architectural and geometric structures, created purely for the purpose of channeling and moulding the psyche on a mass scale. In the age of the consumer spectacle, these great billboard-canvases peppered the cityscape, and so where better to reflect this almighty power back on itself, than through these gargantuan canvases? It is more surprising that, with the exception of critics such as Mike Bonsall (2007), Mike Holliday (2009), Rick McGrath (2009) and Rick Poyner (2014), more critical attention has not been paid to the role of advertising in Ballard's work. And whilst Bonsall has explored the influence of Ballard's role as a deputy editor at *Chemistry and Industry* upon his series of billboards cryptically entitled 'Project For a New Novel' (1958), only McGrath has explored this early work in itself. As McGrath acknowledges, these texts were heavily influenced by the *This is Tomorrow* (1956) exhibition, and in particular by the collages of his Ballard's artist friends Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi. The exhibition consisted of creative quartets, each comprising an architect, designer, artist and theorist, together forming a montage of aesthetic and creative responses. The spectator was encouraged to harmonise these components, to find the patterns and coherences, and it was this process of viewer empowerment that greatly inspired Ballard: '*This is Tomorrow* showed how the world could be re-perceived and remade' (Obrist 2014: 385). Jeanette Baxter pinpoints the exhibition as one of the seminal influences on Ballard's literary

development, for it ‘acknowledged a key cultural shift in the role of the audience, which held particular resonance for Ballard’s own ideas on the role of the reader’ (Baxter 2009: 62).

As McGrath explains, ‘Project for a New Novel’ was conceived as ‘an entire novel reduced to resemble two-page magazine spreads’ and ‘posted on billboards’ (McGrath 2009). Ballard told V. Vale in 1984 that the pages represented ‘a new kind of novel, entirely consisting of magazine-style headlines and layouts, with a deliberately meaningless text, the idea being that the imaginative content could be carried by the headlines and overall design, so making obsolete the need for a traditional text except for virtually decorative purposes’ (Vale 2014: 147). Much of the content to be found in these billboards shows the germination of the Ballardian imaginary, and for the most part it would be many years before these characters, images and themes would be fully realised within his novels and short stories. At the time, the billboards would have been entirely alien and antithetical to the usual kinds of advertising; this, allied to the practical difficulties of mounting such a concept, rendered Ballard’s scheme impossible. As McGrath notes, the billboards simply don’t work as billboard messages due to ‘the sheer volume of words and complex, unbalanced layout’ (McGrath 2009). Four of the collages, though, were subsequently published as ‘displays’ in *New Worlds* in 1978 (no. 213), two of which – ‘mr f is mr. f’ and ‘T-12’ – I will focus upon here.

The content of these collages is made up almost entirely of text, much of which utilised a highly scientific language, some hijacked from chemical engineering magazines and journals, as well as seemingly random objects, strange names and even intimate speech. They are evocative of

fragmentary dream-narratives, with their unconscious speech and figures; their festering obsessions, intimacies and longings; their blurred notions which seem to waver in a purgatorial, unconscious white space. Stylistically and thematically, they hold a great deal of resonance with many of Ballard's later works set within dream-like landscapes, bearing enigmatic and psychologically unstable figures, and often written in eerily detached, scientific language, as if written by a psychiatrist making notes on a patient. Yet, despite their cryptic content, their composition is analogous to the Burroughsian cut-up and generates a similar sense of *déjà vu*. They also similarly promote chance meetings and serendipities, and rely on the viewer to find some unifying pattern through their own creative process. When viewed instead as the manifest content preserving a latent logic, these billboards, much like the surreal landscapes of Salvador Dali, Max Ernst or René Magritte, evince a subjective and emotively charged significance, taking on new semantic potentialities as they are transported into the realm of the image. Viewed in this way, the billboards are something akin to a neural switchboard, a kind of 'advertisement of the psyche' with an encrypted, underlying logic desiring to be deciphered. What better way to subvert the spectacle, to free the imagination from the shackles of mass advertising, than to inundate that very landscape with gigantic Surrealist works of art? With works which are presented by way of the billboard, an icon of spectacular manipulation, which instead becomes the very canvas upon which they stand?

Sadly, we will not be able to answer these questions since this audacious project was never realised. Yet, they remain important since they represent 'the very first stage of Ballard's visual experiment' (Baxter 2009: 63). Moreover, they provide great insight into the development of Ballard's fictional methods, for in many ways, these billboards act as the original blueprint for his

authorial hermeneutic, where we see the germinating seeds of so many of his later ideas. They might even provide something of a key to understanding and deciphering Ballard's engagement with Surrealism and its ideology more broadly.

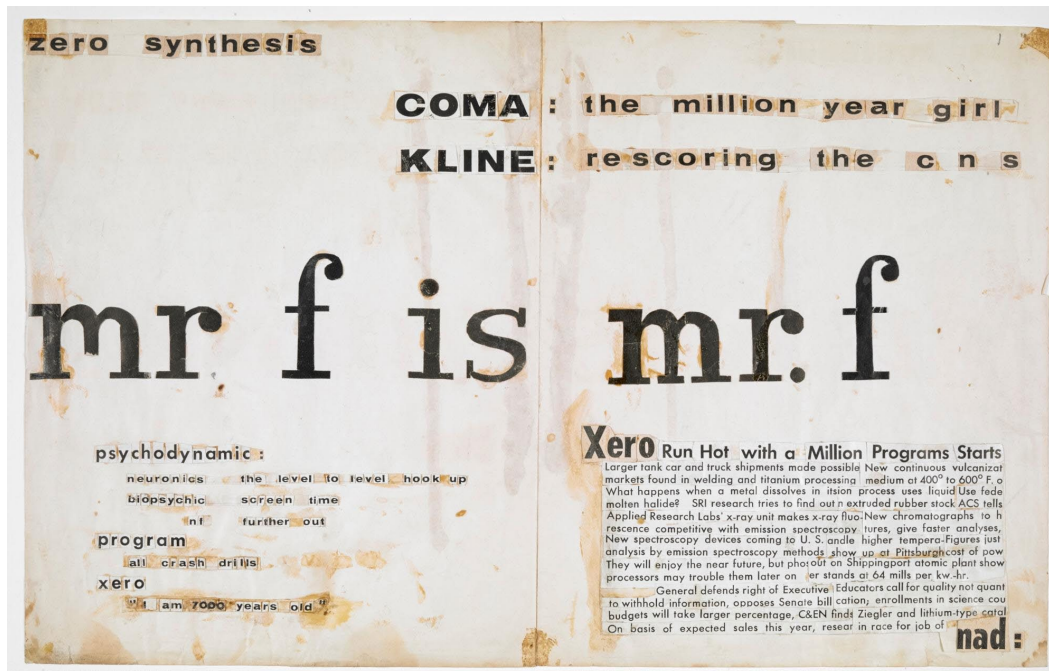


Figure 1. J. G. Ballard, 'mr f is mr f' billboard.

Usurping the Logic of the Freudian Age

Upon first glance, the objective of these billboards seems to be to satirise modern advertising by reversing its normal purpose and processes. Gone is the sleek, eye-grabbing consumer packaging and instead there is a cryptographic narrative montage. Exemplary of this is the 'mr f is mr. f' billboard (figure 1), in which we are confronted with wholly inaccessible blocks of microscopic text, and no determinable advertising rhetoric. Instead words like 'shipments' and 'shippingport', 'markets' and 'marketing' stand out by reiteration, whilst much of the remainder of the text is drowned out by clunky scientific terms like 'vulcanization', 'spectroscopy' and 'chromatographs'.

Ballard here seems to work at inverting customary forms of advertising made up of buzzwords, branding hooks and pre-packaged bursts of information, and instead presents us with what might be considered the advertising equivalent of computer binary. The alienating microscopic text comprising scientific jargon and corporate logistics seems to ironically represent the usual *lack* of information provided to the consumer in favour of fictionalised, relatable and endearing means of subconscious manipulation. Instead, as Jean Baudrillard would later observe, ‘the commodity is buried, like information is in archives, like archives are in bunkers, like missiles are in atomic silos’ (Baudrillard 1994: 93).

However, when Ballard refers to the ‘meaninglessness’ of the text, he seems to exclusively indicate the collective blocks of esoteric science as opposed to the individual fragments (the so-called ‘headlines’) which are scattered sporadically across the page. So, if the blocked text is meaningless, then what about the headlines? It is crucial to note that Ballard is *empowering the image* here: blocked text is used for decorative and design purposes. In which case, how can one create an image purely from text? Instead of seeking out linguistic significance, the reader must consider the words’ visual placement. In the billboards there is a constant battle for dominance between the image, the design and layout, and the word-meanings themselves; between what they say when isolated in language and what they show when viewed purely in the realm of image. Writing of Magritte’s painting ‘The Apparition’ (1928), Michel Foucault observes how ‘the substantive link of the object itself is no longer represented except by its two extreme points, the mass that casts a shadow and the name that designates it’ (Foucault 1992: 40). This is an image of conjuration, of ‘apparition’, and it is analogous to that used within Ballard’s billboards, whereby there are two dimensions to the image: the foregrounded text and the submerged landscape.

References to Surrealists such as Ernst and Magritte, Hans Bellmer, André Breton and Giorgio de Chirico occur frequently in Ballard's fiction, but none of them hold quite the pervasive influence as that of Dali. In a 1969 article for *New Worlds* entitled 'The Innocent as Paranoid', Ballard expressed that Dali was the first Surrealist 'to accept completely the logic of the Freudian age':

Elements from the margins of one's mind [...] become transformed into the materials of an eerie and overlit drama. The Oedipal conflicts we have carried with us from childhood fuse with the polymorphic landscapes of the present to create a strange and ambiguous future. The contours of a woman's back, the significance of certain rectilinear forms, marry with our memories and desires. [...] Dali's work demonstrates that surrealism, far from being a gratuitous dislocation of one's perceptual processes, in fact represents the only reasonable technique for dealing with the subject matter of the [twentieth] century. (Ballard 1997: 95)

It is hard not to read this as self-analysis, and the passage makes clear the considerable affinities between Ballard and Dali, particularly in terms of process and aesthetic. Indeed, in reading Ballard's work one similarly becomes acquainted with a recurrent set of subjective images, much in the same way as when one views works by Dali. These 'elements from the margins of one's mind' appear in the form of empty swimming pools, mannequins and crash dummies, concrete expressways, embankments, high rises, weapons ranges, bunkers, parking lots, downed aircraft, and those many fragmentary, messianic figures who in many ways equate the melting clocks, the succulent pomegranates, the eternal beaches, the burning giraffes and the anthropomorphised crags which populate so many of Dali's paintings. When viewed this way, the billboards become much

clearer, and share much of the style and prescience of Dali's artworks. They evoke the same marginal and obsessive thoughts, the same deeply subjective ideas and imagery, as Ballard's later fiction. These are the manifest content preserving a latent logic. This technique of recurrent iconography was developed by Dali as the 'paranoiac-critical method' (Dali 1935: 7), a process of rendering 'the images of concrete irrationality with the most imperialist fury of precision' (12):

Paranoiac-critical activity organizes and objectivizes in an exclusivist manner the limitless and unknown possibilities of the systematic association of subjective and objective phenomena [...] By this method paranoic-critical activity discovers new and objective 'significances' in the irrational; it makes the world of delirium pass onto the plane of reality. (17)

There is a similar self-analytic lucidity which occurs in Ballard's work. This can be seen within his later annotations to *The Atrocity Exhibition*, which reveal a correspondingly methodical, meticulous, *Dalinian* precision in the choice of imagery to represent his protagonist's inner world, and how it has been shaped by past and external events. The billboards also invite a reading in line with Dali's paranoic-critical method.

Clearly many of the esoteric words, phrases and blocks of impenetrable text hold some subjective significance, and could be seen to represent 'elements from the margins' of Ballard's mind. Retrospectively, in light of the stories in which these esotericisms are fully formed and realised, many of the names, phrases and headings can be identified. The title of the 'mr f is mr. f' billboard is reused for a 1961 short story in which the sleeping protagonist, Charles Freeman, is steadily absorbed back into his mother's womb. As Sigmund Freud argues in his *Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis* (1917), in sleep 'we withdraw into the premundane state, into existence

in the womb. At any rate, we arrange conditions for ourselves very like what they were then: warm, dark and free from stimuli' (Freud 2001: 88). Freeman's reversion can be viewed as a symbolic escape from the oppression of rational, adult life: as he descends further and further into this state of infancy Ballard describes how 'he now felt clearly for the first time what he had for so long repressed. Before the end he cried out suddenly with joy and wonder, as he remembered the drowned world of his first childhood' (Ballard 2006b: 360).

In the original billboard, mr. f's regression is visually enacted through the prevalent block of text on the bottom right, which steadily shrinks before finally ending in the partially obscured word 'nad' (or 'mad') in a thick, sans serif lettering,¹ thus mirroring the journey of Freeman in the later story. The title itself evokes a cyclical return, equivalent to the causal loop of Freeman's regression ending in the moment of conception, which is also visually punctuated. The next most prominent words on the billboard are 'Coma' and 'Kline' who, along with the reclusive and detached Xero, appear intermittently within the short stories that became *The Atrocity Exhibition*. In these texts, Xero is typically situated on the outskirts: 'As he moved across the abandoned landscape near the overpass, the perspectives of the air seemed to invert behind him [...] his shadows formed bizarre patterns on the concrete, transcripts of cryptic formulae and insoluble dreams [...] like the hieroglyphs of a race of blind seers' (Ballard 2006a: 43).

¹ The word was later altered to 'mad' as seen in Mary Ballard's photo of Ballard stood in front of the billboards in 1960.



Figure 2. Salvador Dalí, *Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of New Man* (1943)

In many of the billboards, serif text prefigures the titles of short stories. This visual distinction seems to suggest words and phrases that are of particular importance to Ballard's emerging literary imagination. Whilst being aware of the dangers of hindsight, it is possible to discern in the billboards the gradual manifestation of the latent material that would become the content of Ballard's fiction. In effect, we can begin to conjure up a landscape in which phantasmal, unconscious figures wander across the vast plains of deserted white space, and in the dead centre appears the image of a man being steadily consumed by a gigantic womb. This landscape is reminiscent of one of Dalí's signature paintings, *Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of New*

Man (1943) (figure 2), in which the central male figure is encased by a soft egg or womb and nomadic, phantasmal figures wander in the distance. The ‘zero synthesis’ quote in Ballard’s billboard loosely coincides (upper left quarter in both) with the two embracing figures in the painting, just next to the egg. The female figure appears to be a Geisha wearing a scarlet kimono, whilst the male figure is adorned in a classic 1940s American suit complete with fedora, which seems to emblemise this ‘zero synthesis’ as the collision between East and West – the very stuff of Ballard’s own colonial childhood in Shanghai. Moreover, the figures of Kline and Coma, who weigh upon the protagonist’s unconscious in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, correspond with the airborne sheath which waves above the enclosed man like a shroud as if to emphasise the overbearing strain upon the unconscious. Even the loosely assembled text in the bottom left of the ‘mr f is mr. f’ board, when rotated clockwise 90 degrees, seems to emulate the shape of South America shown in Dali’s painting. Thus, we can begin to see how Ballard manipulates the size and situation of these manifest words or signifiers to represent their visual counterparts. The ‘CNS’ (a medical acronym for ‘central nervous system’) is located almost exactly where the distant concrete structure or monolith appears in Dali’s painting, this in line with Ballard’s frequent elision between the human body and geometric structures as epitomised by the titular high rise of his 1975 novel: ‘the elevators pumping up and down the long shafts resembled pistons in the chamber of a heart. The residents moving along the corridors were the cells in a network of arteries, the lights in their apartments the neurons of a brain’ (Ballard 2006d: 40). An overt visual comparison can be seen through the two figures which stand to the bottom right of the egg: the androgynous figure and the traumatised infant. The text here coincides with these two figures, and thus could represent the regression to a state of sexual non-difference and a cyclical return to the womb.

The Kissing Tides and *The Persistence of Memory*

Although the *Geopoliticus Child* seems an important painting for Ballard in that it represents a release from the social order into a pre-Symbolic state, Ballard was most drawn to Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). In his *New Worlds* article, 'The Coming of the Unconscious' (1966), Ballard summarizes the postcard-sized painting:

The empty beach with its fused sand is a symbol of utter psychic alienation, of a final stasis of the soul. Clock time here is no longer valid, the watches have begun to melt and drip. Even the embryo, symbol of secret growth and possibility, is drained and limp. These are the residues of a remembered moment of time. The most remarkable elements are the two rectilinear objects, formalisations of sections of the beach and sea. The displacement of these two images through time, and their marriage with our own four-dimensional continuum, has warped them into the rigid and unyielding structures of our own consciousness. Likewise, the rectilinear structures of our own conscious reality are warped elements from some placid and harmonious future. (Ballard 1997: 87)

Ballard shows particular interest in the way that Dali uses the shape and 'rectilinearity' of the landscape as a means to encapture a visual rendition of temporality. Looking at Dali's painting (figure 3), we can see how the beach becomes hardened and geometric like a sturdy oaken table (this symbolised through the tree which reaches out towards the horizon), whilst the watches ooze like molten camembert cheese denoting their inability to capture time, the fragility of memory, and the tide frozen in a fixed moment. This theme of reinterpreting and playing with duration recurs frequently in Ballard's writing, for example in 'The Voices of Time' (1960), where peoples' perception of time steadily dissolves before sending them into an eternal deep sleep. Another

version or variation of Coma appears in the story as an enigmatic young woman who is impervious to the illness, perhaps because she embodies the still point at the heart of the temporal malaise.



Figure 3. Salvador Dalí, *The Persistence of Memory* (1931)

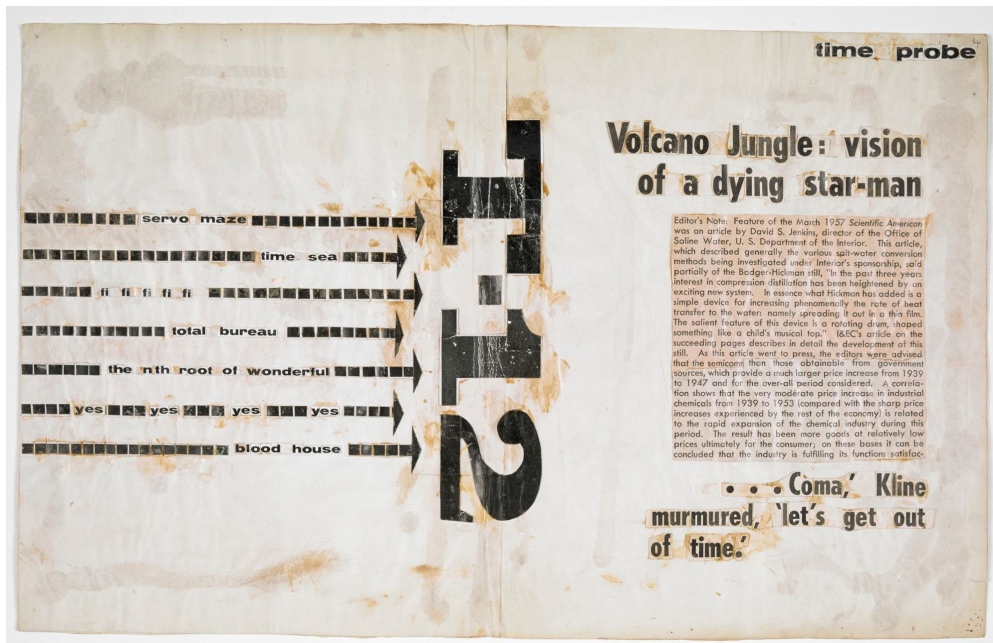


Figure 4. J. G. Ballard, 'T-12' billboard.

Looking at the 'T-12' billboard (figure 4), a clear theme of temporality emerges through Ballard's repeated mention of words and phrases such as 'time probe' which floats in the vacuity of the upper right white space; and 'time sea' which appears intertwined with the dotted arrows which evoke a sense of tidal motion; and 'let's get out of time' which is whispered intimately between the figures of Coma and Kline. The central, domineering 'T-12' also seems to connote some kind of apocalyptic countdown. The serif text again seems to prefigure a short story title, in this case 'Track 12' (1958), which was published just a few months after Ballard's work on the billboards and so still very fresh in his mind.

The story tells of a biochemist, Sherringham, who learns of his wife's affair and lures her lover, Maxted, into his lab, poisons him, makes him listen to various recorded sounds, and forces him to guess what they are. The final, titular track is the sound of Sherringham's wife kissing Maxted. As Maxted succumbs to a state of delirium, Sherringham amplifies the sound to that of a storm: 'the wind in your own breathing... your interlocked pulses produced the thunder effect... Maxted, can you hear the sea? Do you know where you're drowning?' (Ballard 2006c: 94). Finally, Ballard describes how 'a succession of gigantic flaccid waves, each more lumbering and enveloping than the last, rode down upon them [...] the island slipped and slid away into the molten shelf of the sea' (95). There is a striking affinity here between the imagery Ballard uses to describe Track 12 and that which appears in Dali's painting. For instance, 'the molten shelf of the sea' mirrors the way by which the sea looks like a shelf in Dali's work; for indeed a literal shelf appears below the 'shelf' of the sea, as if metaphor and reality are blurring together in this dream-infused world. At the same time, there is a duality of language whereby the anatomical infiltrates upon the

descriptive imagery of the landscape: the ‘flaccid’, ‘lumbering’ waves emulate the lips whilst the two lovers are kissing, the island which slips away appears to represent their tongues. The metaphor is further enhanced by the fact that the sound ‘waves’ are literally increasing as Sherringham boosts the volume of the kiss, and so here metaphor in language and Maxted’s delirium coincide.

Applying these metaphoric dimensions and reapproaching the ‘T-12’ billboard, it begins to take on a great deal of significance: the sweeping arrows coming in from the side in which appears the words ‘time sea’ equates the sea in Dali’s painting and the sound of the tide being played in ‘Track 12’. The emboldened T-12 is ‘blown up’, enlarged just like in the story in which the track is played at a greatly increased volume. In addition, the mechanical stutter of ‘fi fi fi fi fi’ evokes the acronym ‘FI’ for ‘fuel injection’, the sexual euphemism of which is mirrored by the orgasmic phrase ‘yes yes yes yes’, a lover’s discourse that not only echoes the closing words of Molly Bloom in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) but also the adulterous desire between Maxted and Sherringham’s wife. There is further compositional resonance between the billboard and Dali’s painting by way of the rotated ‘T-12’ which mirrors the way that the golden, soft watch hangs vertically from the geometric block of beach, and the centralised melting clock which lounges over the ground-facing visage displays a hand pointed to twelve on the dial. The shape of the tilted ‘T’ also seems to echo the shape of the tree in the painting, and the way that the branch reaches out over the desk. Ballard uses the rotation of text to replicate the sharp contrast between horizontal and vertical lines and shapes apparent within Dali’s painting. His choice to only ever rotate the text by 90 degrees expresses a rigidity of form which emphasises the grid-like structure of the printed text. The ‘time probe’ in the upper right could also be read as a cue for the viewer: it

prompts us to probe the word 'time', and thus gain insight into the underlying narrative. It is perhaps also of note that the word 'time' here appears on three occasions in the billboard, mirroring the appearance of the three clocks in Dali's painting. The text in the lower right of the billboard also seems pertinent in that, much like the shape of South America in the previous billboard, it seems loosely analogous in shape and situation to the soft profile of Dali in his work.

As with the previous billboard then, the text is used to denote where objects should be located when visualised. The text in the upper right quarter which reads 'volcano jungle' corresponds almost exactly with where the cliffs are situated in the background of Dali's painting, thus text is used to create shapes, to denote situation and map relative distance. This can also be seen through the words which are interspersed amongst the checkered arrows on the left side of Ballard's board. The segmented or sedimentary effect of the arrows also recalls Dali's atomic paintings of the early 1950s, in which he took earlier works such as *The Persistence of Memory* and subjected their content to a form that drew upon both the reality of the atom bomb and the theoretical discoveries of particle physics. In the two topmost arrows appear the words 'servo maze' and 'time sea', the former of which refers to a small, flattened marble maze operated by a servo-motor, which was a popular children's toy and possibly a nostalgic item for Ballard. What he may have been doing here was taking everyday objects, just like Dali's telephones, wristwatches and cupboards, De Chirico's gloves and mannequins, or Magritte's top hats, umbrellas and pipes, and emotively infusing them with deeper meaning. This is equally evident a little further down within the fourth broken arrow of the board, the text in which reads 'total bureau', a bureau being a small writing desk with drawers, and a recurring image throughout much of Dali's work symbolising secrets and unconscious desires, as in *The Anthropomorphic Cabinet*

(1936) and *The Burning Giraffe* (1937). Dali once stated that ‘Freud discovered that the human body [...] is today full of secret drawers which only psychoanalysis is capable of opening’ (qtd Keevil and Eyres 2006: 214). The word ‘bureau’ also corresponds to where the geometric oblong of sand, which deliberately mimics a sturdy oak desk, appears in Dali’s painting. The bottom phrase is particularly interesting: it reads ‘blood house’. It positionally equates with the blood-red, downward-facing clock, covered in ants, in the lower left of Dali’s painting. Ants are another recurrent symbol in Dali’s work representing death and decay, an association that stems from a traumatic childhood incident when Dali came across the bloody, ant-riddled corpse of a dead bat in his wash-house (Dali 1993: 14), hence ‘blood house’. Thus, in the billboard, Ballard assimilates fragmentary images and ideas in the manner of Dali, steadily forming a hidden, latent image.

Image versus Text

If the ‘Project for a New Novel’ had become a series of commercial billboards, they would have been viewed from all kinds of different angles and distances. This means that the arrows on the ‘T-12’ billboard would have shrunken and elongated as cars drove past, recreating the tidal motion of the ‘time sea’, thus making the billboards seem more like a visual work of art than a textual mosaic. The meaning of art depending on the viewer’s perspective is also reminiscent of Dali’s anamorphic art, as epitomised in *Mae West’s Face which can be Used as an Apartment* (1934-5) whereby a combination of everyday, inanimate objects such as sofas, picture frames, curtains and mantelpieces, when viewed from a certain angle, mirror Mae West’s vast visage. It seems that the terminology chosen by Ballard often seems charged with an ambiguity which enables for calligrammatic significance. For example, aside from referring to ‘Track 12’, when moved into the realm of image the centralised T-12 could also be seen to imitate the barrel of the T-12 Russian

anti-tank gun or the T-12 Turkish sniper rifle, this furthered by the sweeping arrows which seem to represent the direction of discharged bullets. Or it could appear to represent the T-12 Cloudmaker, a WW2 demolition bomb used by the US military, particularly if viewed in portrait (tilted so that the T-12 is right way up), so that the text itself replicates the shape of a mushroom cloud, emulating the aftermath of a dropped 'cloudmaker'. 'T-12' could also represent the twelfth thoracic vertebra (a spinal nerve referred to as the 'T12'), which is mentioned in the 'Thoraic Drop' segment of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, in which Ballard compares the rocky mountains of Tenerife with the spinal landscapes depicted in works by the Spanish surrealist Oscar Dominguez.

The point here is not to present a melange of contrary interpretations, but rather to demonstrate that Ballard is interested in their multiplicity, the branching-off of signifying networks, epitomised by the bewildering content of the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition. Indeed, this very incitement to creative interpretation further exposes the fundamentally Surrealist underpinnings of the billboards. Whereas other critics have disregarded the billboards as exercises in typography 'with little concern for meaning' (Luckhurst 1997: 99) or read their non-linearity, incoherence and disarticulation as inciting a 'visceral exhalation' from the viewer (Baxter 2009: 63), these responses further reinforce the billboards as pure spectacle. However, with regards to Baxter's point, it seems more likely that these inconclusive and truncated excerpts of text serve to foreground a sense of visual constraint as one might when viewing a painting: for example, half of a distant mountain range flowing off the edge of the landscape. In other words, they emphasise that which one unconsciously assumes to extend beyond the limited frame of the image or the viewer's visual field. In this respect, Ballard's severance serves great purpose, in that it draws us

consciously towards this visual limitation and, in so doing, reinforces the power of the image – of what we can see, of what we can't, and of how image foregrounds the space of the canvas.

Further equations between the works of Dali and Ballard's other billboards can be made. Nonetheless, by focusing upon the two case studies here, I hope to have demonstrated their importance in understanding Ballard's literary development; the affinities between his ideas on time, space and the unconscious, and those of Dali; and the interaction between writer, reader and text as part of a ceaseless signifying practice. Such endless readings and stimuli to interpretation are, arguably, the central purpose of these billboards. They are also perhaps an early attempt by Ballard to show how the ideas, creativity and aesthetics which are so rich in art, and especially that of the Surrealists, are by no means limited to the visual world. As Ballard later suggested in 1971, in conversation with Eduardo Paolozzi, despite the innovations of Joyce and William Burroughs, the novel remained 'an early 19th century structure' which had not been fundamentally altered in the intervening years by Modernism to the same extent as the visual arts (Whitford 2014: 43). To that end, the billboards not only mark the first stage in Ballard's experiments between art and literature, they are also an advertisement for what was to come.

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