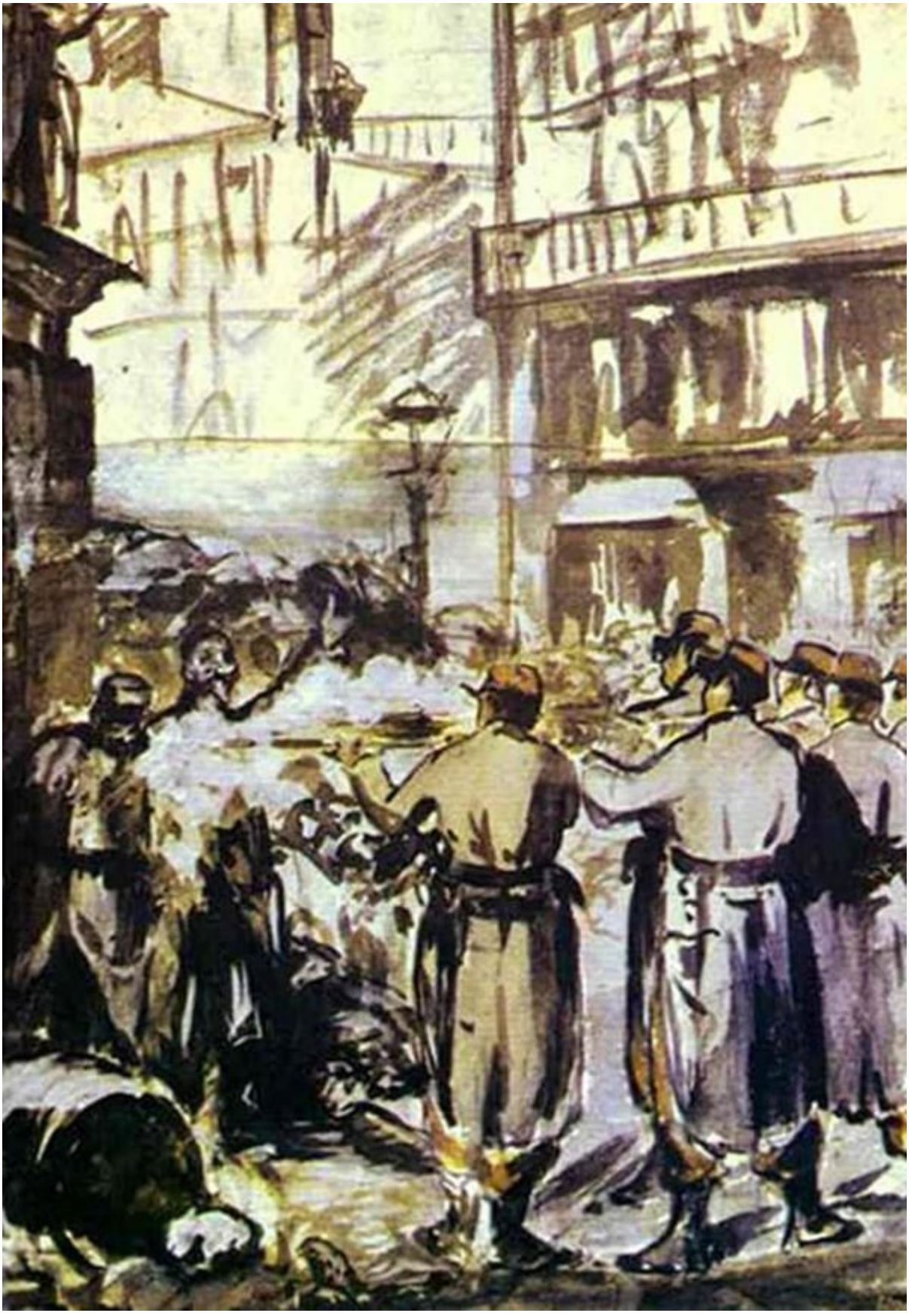
J. G. Ballard’s The Atrocity Exhibition and Postmodern Dystopia

by Pedro Blas González (August 2019)



The Barricade, Edouard Manet, 1871

Essentialist philosophers reflect on the vagaries of human experience in order to put in perspective the order of objective reality. This is possible by understanding how the essences that inform human reality are embraced, distorted or missed altogether by individuals. That is to say, the essences that are taxed with bringing man face to face with objective reality are not dependent on human history. Yet, more often than not, they are distorted, leveraged by man for personal gain. As a consequence, how man construes human reality will serve as the foundation of worldviews, institutions and human values. Albeit, in the long run human reality abides by the force of its foundational essences, not by man's demands.

The nature of human reality is solidified in time. It is time that has the final say in man's appropriation of the worthiness and truth of human contingency. There are several ways that this is achieved. One of these depends on the manner in which reason, that is, man, interacts with time, and uncovers the structure of human reality. Yet we ought not to confuse human reality with human experience, for human experience is often blind and self-serving.

Granted, there is a serious element of intuition involved in grasping the nature of human reality that is not formulaic, and which is not contingent on some people's penchant for distorting reality. Depending on where we are situated in the former spectrum will enable us to understand human reality—or distort it. Man's appropriation of human reality is intensely metaphysical in make-up. This is a patient existential task that requires much patience, prudence and *amor fati*.

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J. G. Ballard and Postmodern Man's Surreal World

Bizarre. Shocking. Theater of the absurd and grotesque. These are some fitting descriptions of J.G. Ballard's 1969 novel *The Atrocity Exhibition*. No doubt, there are many more apt characterizations of this curious work. However, we should be wary of throwing caution to the wind when describing literature or any other human creation in postmodernity as original. Originality is often no more than inverting, that is, distorting the hierarchy of values for personal gain.

The Atrocity Exhibition is an experimental novel. As a form of writing, the novel brings together separate short "chapters" that tell the story of a psychiatrist who is undergoing a nervous breakdown. His breakdown is a response to human reality, Ballard suggests.

Appalled by many events during the 1960s, the psychiatrist leaves his hospital and goes on a quest to re-construct the assassination of John F. Kennedy and other figures from that era. But how can he do this, we ask? He visits the sites where the events took place. Most importantly, the re-construction of a former reality, as the psychiatrist is wont to imagine it, takes place mainly in his own mind. *The Atrocity Exhibition* is an intriguing work—though, not of

imagination—but of insanity in relation to postmodern faux pas values.

J.G. Ballard (1930-2009) is considered to be a science fiction writer. I agree that this is generally true, but misleading nonetheless. The science fiction label often acts as a literary moniker that is hung on works that can't be placed in any genre.

It is true that several of Ballard's works are science fiction. However, it is difficult to pin the label of science fiction on *The Atrocity Exhibition*, for this work truly defies classification. Ballard's novels are not science fiction in the same way that space opera is said to be. Instead, his brand of SF is of the dystopian kind, where reality always outpaces fiction. In Ballard's work, reality is stranger, i.e., more real than fiction can ever prove to be. To showcase the underpinning structure of human reality, regardless of the events and values embraced by any given epoch, is Ballard's task as a writer.

Ballard has said in interviews that his work looks at the world through the prism of the dichotomy between reality and illusion; the distortion of the former by the latter. Tom Wolfe is correct that fiction can never create the extraordinary and unexplainable components of the human world that make up reality. Lamentably, in postmodernity this means that unprecedented aberrations have become embraced by many as the new norm. Yet how long can postmodernity's penchant for delusion last before the structure of human reality roars back with a vengeance?

While *The Atrocity Exhibition* is made up of paragraph-length chapters that move the story along, it is easy for readers to read each chapter as surreal pastiches that are loosely connected, much the same as most people experience life as disjointed in postmodernity. Ballard has admitted in interviews that perhaps he went too far in his description of mayhem in his apocalyptic imagery. Yet this makes for very interesting reading, especially as the moral and cultural aberrations that have become commonplace in postmodernity prove him right.

Reading Ballard, one often gets the impression that he had an enjoyable time writing many of these scenes – if one can call them that. Ballard's work is descriptive of the moral and social/political mayhem brought about by the inversion of values. Ballard understood that the aberrant song and dance routine of postmodern man's hall of mirrors morality cannot be sustained.

The Atrocity Exhibition contains many scenes of automobiles as a form of technology; people driving aimlessly and violent crashes. One of these is a humorous description of the relationship of sex and the automobile, regardless of whether Ballard intended it as such: "One isolated case reported to a psychiatric after-care unit involved the first definitive sexual congress with a rear exhaust assembly. It is believed that the act was conscious. Consultations with manufacturers have led to modifications of rear trim and styling, in order to neutralize these erogenous zones, or if possible transfer them to more socially acceptable areas within the passenger compartment."

Moral Mayhem and Destruction in *Crash*

Let us consider depictions of sex in relation to the automobile in Ballard's work, most notably his 1973 novel *Crash*, where he ties postmodern obsession with sex and violence to the creation of the automobile.

Crash is a kind of dream sequence of the perils of highways and driving automobiles at great speeds. Ballard suggests that man was not meant to handle this form of spatial dislocation. Many scenes of the novel are humorous in their surreal and dark implications.

Crash has been hailed by some critics as a work of avant-garde imagination that responds to the free-wheeling morality of the 1970s. This is only one side of the coin, for Ballard is more interested in describing the nature of man. Other readers and critics have been repulsed by its vulgar celebration of meaningless excess. *Crash* is undoubtedly a vulgar work. Ballard is effective in describing the values that postmodernity flaunts in the second decade of the twenty first century.

The characters in *Crash* do nothing more than think of sex and take drugs. They obsess over death and destruction. None of these people possess a semblance of a moral compass that brings a modicum of meaning and purpose to their lives. They are one-dimensional entities (not characters), who engage and celebrate every sexual, moral and psychological disfigurement that postmodernity has to offer.

Literature and Man's Appropriation of Reality

Ballard's work is enigmatic for its ability to level the field of postmodern man's baseless illusions about the nature of reality and man's alleged infinite possibilities. He is correct that SF is a worthy literary medium to appropriate human reality; in many respects, SF is perhaps better suited for this task than the straight novel. Why is that?

Considering that man's mechanized world has evolved dramatically, the question remains, how have human values adjusted to this? Ballard was not an enemy of technology and mechanization. He has stated that he actually enjoyed the modern world of technology, automobiles and airplanes. Ballard was trained as a pilot for the RAF. He does not psychoanalyze and romanticize the effects that mechanization has on man. His work is not ideological, thus giving it a timeless quality.

In addition, Ballard's work is not tainted by tired clichés and trite Marxist radical ideas of man, society and human reality. Instead, he is a writer who tackles the problematic of man in the cosmos. The cosmos is localized in what he calls our alien world. This is how Ballard tackles spatiality and human contingency. His understanding of man as a cosmic being – who inhabits a given world – is a fine way of appropriating the changeless character of man's nature. What does change is technology; as it advances it eviscerates the naive illusion that man is poised to attain a new-found higher consciousness. Ballard's perspicuity enables us to understand the essential and transcendent nature of human reality.

Ballard lived in China as a small boy and witnessed vast atrocities. From that experience he was able to write *Empire*

of the Sun, a novel that was published in 1984, and was later made into a film. Ballard's wife died in 1964, leaving him to care for his three small children. He explains that the death of his wife was extremely painful for him, in addition to having to work for a living and trying to publish his writing. Honest commentators are not at liberty to speculate how much of a writer's private experiences inform or become fodder for their literary work. However, suffice it to say that our experiences can enlighten or distort our view of human reality.

Ballard is correct in his assertion that civilization—in the form of mechanization—is a unique moment in human history. Electrical power, refrigeration, our elaborate forms of transportation and computerization inform how we live in the world, and most importantly, our ability to make sense of human reality. This is important because in not falling prey to luddism, Ballard's writing offers valuable insight into the human condition through existential reflection. He suggests that postmodern technological advances, coupled with a derelict morality, destroy man's capacity to reflect about the sublime and human transcendence.

Ballard's Short Stories of Desolation

Arguably, it is in his short stories that Ballard shines as a writer. "Low-flying Aircraft" is the main story in his short story collection entitled "Low-Flying Aircraft and Other Stories."

The story is about an apocalypse. As is often the case with

apocalyptic literature, the reason for the mayhem and destruction is not revealed. What matters most is that life has changed, and the life that people once knew and took for granted, is no longer. If the author of such a story spends too much time explaining the background story, the main part of the story can become lost or less effective.

"Low-Flying Aircraft" is a story of the de-population of Europe. The narrator makes no bones about it—the chic practice of not having families has calamitous sociological and economic consequences for Europe. Towns are deserted in a quasi-last man on Earth, *Omega Man* scenario. The few people who are left live off the goods left by the departed.

Another of Ballard's short stories that employs the deserted town/apocalypse theme is "A Place and a Time to Die," where two men defend their town from a non-descript invading army of soldiers and civilians. Ballard creates suspense by not revealing too much about why the town is deserted and who the invaders are, except for a telling paragraph where the narrator describes a traitor, "a young Marxist thug who welcomes the invaders."

In "The Life and Death of God," a significant scientific discovery that proves the existence of God, affects man sociologically and morally. People finally discover the certainty that science has promised but has failed to deliver. In effect, Ballard explores what happens to people's beliefs after this dramatic discovery. In exploring the reality of God as a scientific reality, Ballard is more intellectually honest than many writers and thinkers who merely treat this subject in a banal and trite fashion. Clichés and platitudes, Ballard observes, are what fuel most conversations and social-

political discourse in postmodernity.

The theme of desolation is the de-facto protagonist in “A Place and Time to Die,” as is the case in Ballard’s novels *The Drowned World* and *Drought*. A deserted town is defended by two old stalwarts, a police chief and his deputy. Across the river, a rogue army is poised to attack, or so the two men think. In true Ballard fashion, the narrator does not identify the invading army. In fact, the reader is told that “none of the soldiers wore insignia.” The author offers enough clues for sentient readers to realize the point of the story. At least half of the infantry is made up of civilians; “the women with small red booklets in their hands.” They chant slogans and carry giant photos of party leaders and generals, much as college basketball fans take placards of players to games today.

he people who make up the invading army showcase Ballard’s prescience at work, for he is describing the world of postmodern social-political zombification. Social-political zombies become automatons through a metaphysical-existential apocalypse of their own that takes place prior to radicalization. This castrates the capacity for self-governance that thoughtful persons cultivate by embracing the perils and responsibility of free will.

Ballard’s social-political perspicuity enable the reader to realize at the end of the story that the invaders are only interested in power-play and destruction. Once the town is taken, they have no desire to rule.

Readers of Ballard's work encounter a marked difference between the vulgarity and excess, albeit as satire, that populates some of his novels, like *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, and his short stories. *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash* are not easy novels to read given their grotesque and vulgar subject matter.

Ballard's short stories do not call attention to themselves through outrageousness, as the two aforementioned novels do. Instead, they possess a calming quality that makes the conscientious reader reflect about the alternatives that his stories suggest.

His stories also do not suffer from a dearth of substance at the expense of form. One reason why this story is so powerful as a vehicle for ideas, in addition to being a compelling story, is the author's command of ideas in relation to the real, concrete world—not abstraction.

A fine case in point is "The Life and Death of God," a story that is rife with irony. What makes the story unique is Ballard's perspicuity as a thinker, and his patience as a writer who allows his stories to unravel without making an ideological statement, as is the case in self-indulgent postmodern writing.

The events that take place in the story have to do with a scientific discovery; electromagnetic radiation in space contains "a system of infinitely smaller vibrations." The "ultra-microwaves permeate all matter and space." The important aspect of the discovery is that the microwaves

respond intelligently to human observers. The microwave system is deemed to be an intelligent being that permeates the entire universe: God.

Ballard’s short stories, perhaps more than his sensational novels, explore the relationship of ideas and the ability of human beings to appropriate reality. He is viewed by many readers and critics as a writer of ideas and how ideas affect or correspond to man’s inner world.

What is interesting and noble about Ballard’s short stories is the belief that through literature man can keep a healthy perspective on human reality; understanding that often escapes scientists and many academic philosophers. Ballard’s short stories have a penchant to show how reality is often cruder than any form of fiction. How he achieves this is what makes his stories philosophically noble.

In “The Comsat Angels” 12 child prodigies are tracked from 1958 to 1976. As the children age, they disappear from the public eye. They exhibit the same behavior and life circumstances. The children live with their mothers in large homes that someone has bought for them. The prodigies are linked to secret world organizations that solicit their cognitive skills. The last boy to appear, number 13, might be the Messiah. Ballard leaves the question open. What makes this story compelling is Ballard’s conviction that regardless of the seemingly inter-connectedness of the media in postmodernity, people no longer possess the ability to make sense of human reality. Instead, man merely acts as a blind pawn in the maze of confusion that defines postmodernity.

Read more in *New English Review*:

- **The Justice on Trial**
- Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay, *Fragments: Essays in Subjectivity, Individuality and Autonomy* and *Philosophy Today* *Vol. 42 Issue 2 (Summer 1998).*

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