



## *Science (and) Fiction in Ballard's Vermilion Sands*

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**ABSTRACT:** Science, technology, and the (futuristic and surreal) uses of them are undoubtably essential elements in Ballard's writing. His scientific language is both very elaborate and refined. Sometimes, it attains a metafictional mode, while it allows for an accurate discourse on (New Wave) science fiction, art, and narration. In *Vermilion Sands*, a collection of short stories published in 1971, Ballard describes this overlit place as an exotic suburb of the mind, and of the future. In *Vermilion Sands*, trauma flowers, singing plants, non-aural music, sound jewelry, automated poetry machines, sonic sculptures, self-painting canvasses, psychotropic houses are the psychological drives in these macabre, grotesque, and strange psychodramas. In this paper, I will analyze how science and technology contribute to build neural landscapes through a metanarrative perspective in *Vermilion Sands*.

**KEY WORDS:** Science; fiction VS reality; sf; technology; chronotope; surrealism



## SCIENCE (AND) FICTION IN BALLARD

Science, technology, and the futuristic/surreal uses of them are essential elements in Ballard's writing. In his "Notes from Nowhere," published in the literary magazine *New Worlds* (October 1966), the author affirmed that, in his own perspective, science fiction was deeply concerned with the immediate present in terms of the future, and requires narrative techniques that reflect its subject matter. He depicts a near future studded with endless highways, deserted high-rises, abandoned shopping centers, flooded or charred cities, dried up lakes and seas. It is an apocalyptic world on the brink of collapse. A world dominated by the imperative of high-tech, the breakdown of the human psyche, the death of affect. This is a world in which the traditional social values appear to be obliterated or, most likely, numbed, yet it is a world we can easily recognize, absorbed by the dreams that money can buy, transforming them into spinal nightmares. Ballard considered fiction as a branch of neurology. Thus, he describes the world we live in and the place for humans in it using the language of neurosciences, and of medicine. Readers are so fascinated and convinced by the scientificity of his detailed explanations that they are easily led to believe in the verisimilitude of the narrated (even if surreal) events and descriptions. As a matter of fact, Ballard's medical training allowed him to use scientific notions and medical terms with ease in his artistic and literary universe.

It is known that Ballard studied medicine at Cambridge and was very fond of psychoanalysis and Surrealism. He was particularly interested in the general scientific underpinning of medicine. As he wrote in *Miracles of Life*, science and surrealism were fundamental keys to the truth about existence and human personality. For this reason, his scientific/medical language is both elaborate and refined and is the real key to his inner landscapes. Furthermore, this very language assumes a metafictional mode. He is interested in discussing the art of science and fiction in his novels by using scientific and artistic language. After all, also the much celebrated Bakhtinian concept of chronotope, used frequently in Ballard's fiction, was borrowed from mathematics and Einstein's Theory of Relativity in order to express the inseparability of space and time. In literature, it represents the very perception of the world and Ballard's writing is literally impregnated with it, functioning essentially as 'the chronotope of the post-apocalypse': an ending that—in James Berger's perspective—does and does not take place, because the term 'post-apocalypse' implies the continuation of a compromised and desolate time and space<sup>1</sup> in which art and science, ecology and creativity, technology and invention join and melt, just like fiction and reality, inner and outer space.

Through his transgressive artistic mode, Ballard took traditional science fiction to a different level. In contrast to "the parochialism of mainstream literature" (Baxter *J. G. Ballard* 4), as the 'Voice' of the New Wave SF movement, he decided to respond to the competing vocabularies of the late twentieth century, based on science, technology,

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<sup>1</sup> The chronotope determines genres but also genres determine it: the chronotopes of the apocalypse and post-apocalypse determine the genre of science fiction while science fiction novels offer apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic chronotopes.



advertising, capitalism, and consumerism. He refused to adopt the most traditional and mainstream science fiction tropes and conventions, such as interstellar travel, extraterrestrial life forms, galactic wars, physical scientific facts, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Turning his back on rocket ships, ray guns, bug-eyed aliens, and the outer space of so many traditional science fiction stories, Ballard imagined a “renewed and renewable form of science fiction writing” (Baxter *J. G. Ballard* 4) which set off in search of a Surreal ‘inner space.’ It consists of a series of shifting, hybrid, uncanny imaginative and recognizable geographies in which the outer world and the inner world of the psyche melt and overturn. In a short essay written in 1963 entitled “Time, Memory and Inner Space,” Ballard defined the ‘inner space’ as:

[...] the internal landscape of tomorrow that is a transmuted image of the past, and one of the most fruitful areas for the imaginative writer. It is particularly rich in visual symbols, and I feel that this type of speculative fantasy plays a role very similar to that of surrealism in the graphic arts. The painters de Chirico, Dali and Max Ernst, among others, are in a sense the iconographers of inner space, all during their most creative periods concerned with the discovery of images in which internal and external reality meet and fuse.

As William M. Schuyler Jr. explained in “Portrait of the Artist as a Jung Man: Love, Death and Art in J.G. Ballard’s *Vermilion Sands*,” in Ballard’s lexicon ‘inner space’ is not simply the internal landscape of the mind. It is the interface between the internal space of the unconscious mind and that of the external world. “His stories scrutinize the psychology of their subjects from the inside, but their locale is this interface which is neither quite external nor exactly internal. Inner space in this sense is the space of consciousness; not consciousness itself, but the ‘place’ in which consciousness operates.” Thus, he addresses not only the future but also the past. After all, as Graeme Revell wrote in an “Interview with J. G. Ballard” in 1983, we don’t arrive at every moment of consciousness completely free of the past. The past is enshrined in us, and our minds contain the materials of huge mythic quests formed probably long before we were even born, in the collective unconscious: “A whole set of unconscious mythologies are nestled and locked into one another to produce this individual, who will then spend the whole of his life evolving and fulfilling the private mythology for himself, and setting it [...] against the universe around him” (46). Classical legends, Ballard recalls, are concerned with origins; however, he wishes to have predictive myths—myths that can be used to guide us through our future, and as rites of passage in a Jungian viewpoint.

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<sup>2</sup> In an interview with Goddard and Pringle, Ballard said: “Right from the start what I wanted to do was write a science fiction book that got away from spaceships, the far future, and all this stuff which I felt was basically rather juvenile, to writing a kind of adult science fiction based upon the present. Why couldn’t one harness this freedom and vitality? SF is a form, above all else, that puts a tremendous premium upon the imagination, and that’s something that seems to have left the English novel in the last 150 years. Imagination is enormously important, and I felt that if one could only harness this capacity to think imaginatively in an adult SF, one would have achieved something. Right from the beginning I tried with varying success to write a science fiction about the present day, which is more difficult to do than one realizes, because the natural tendency when writing in a basically allegorical mode is to set something at a distance because it makes the separateness of the allegory that much more obvious.” (Pringle and Goddard).



Through this perspective, the author's haunting, disorienting writings—as Samuel Francis describes them in *The Psychological Fictions of J.G. Ballard*—portray psychic/psychotic landscapes that can be read within the framework of Surrealism. In fact, they represent metaphors for states of mind and soul, like in the paintings of Ernst, Delvaux, Duchamp, de Chirico, Bacon, and Dalì. Moreover, Ballard parodically swallows up images, myths, events, characters, and icons drawn from the media landscape, from politics, from show business, from the movies, from advertising—in strong affinity with Pop Art<sup>3</sup>—and brings them back to life, a new/fetishized life, through an irrational, eccentric, and estranged perspective. As a result, the texts offer a displaced and transgressive way of seeing the universe around us and inside us. Mindscapes and mediascapes fuse, melt, and swap places continuously. In a 1975 interview with David Pringle and John Goddard, Ballard said:

Well, I suppose if I hadn't become a writer I would have been a doctor. So in a sense the protagonists of these stories are myself. I couldn't make them writers - the obvious thing to do was to make them doctors. My training and mental inclination, my approach to everything, is much closer to that of a doctor than to that of a writer. I'm not a literary man. But I am interested in - admittedly popular - science. I approach things as a scientist would, I think. I've a scientific bent; it's obvious to me that these characters are what I would have been if I hadn't been a writer.

In Ballard's narratives science, fiction, and art fuse and melt as one. If science fiction lacks science, it is not science fiction at all, as Asimov once said. For Ballard, science and technology (from the Greek *'tekhnē'*, meaning 'art, craft, skill') are all around us and dictate the way in which we think, speak, write, and create. In fact, writing science fiction signified to him a discourse on the art of writing and on our (inner and outward) contemporaneity. Essentially, not only the images he sketches, but also the methods he applies come from Surrealism. Ballard creates uncanny external landscapes that have a direct connection within our own minds. He calls them 'spinal landscapes,' a middle ground—that he defines as 'inner space'—between the outer world of reality and the inner world of the psyche. Thus, Ballard perpetuates the Surrealists' assertion that their art discloses the contents of the unconscious mind, assaulting the barriers between the deepest levels of the nervous system and the external world. Hence, every image/landscape he depicts is a sort of disaster area. Furthermore, as is also well known, Ballard is very unsure of what the external world is, especially because it is our own creation, composed of a series of illusory images, or at least shows clear signs of our interference. As Colin Greenland observes in *Entropy Exhibition*: "Our proliferating technology gives us unprecedented rations of power to act out inner fantasies and fulfil secret impulses. Psychology has reduced human mentality to terms of its most base drives, and so degraded all intentions and achievements. Rational accounts of what we make and do are dubious, ultimately irrelevant" (104).

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<sup>3</sup> See Bukatman.



On the other hand, in an interview originally published in German in 1968, translated into English by Dan O'Hara, and included in *Extreme Metaphors*, Ballard said that science fiction would have become more and more an aspect of daily reality, migrating from the bookshelf to daily life. He believed that science fiction had always been concerned with psychological perceptions. If Modern science fiction—beginning at the end of the 1920s and the early 1930s—was a vernacular vision of the future seen through the lens of science and technology, then the new SF had come full circle:

The physical sciences now play less of a major role than do the biological, inner space, the world of the mind—which once more reflects the altered attitudes of people toward science in general. After Hiroshima, the whole magic and authority of science was called into question. Now we don't think that the authority of biologists was attacked to such an extent, and to a considerable degree the biologist and the psychologist took over something of the functions of a lay church, in exploring man's place in the universe. (12)

#### SCIENCE, FICTION, ART, AND TECHNOLOGY IN *VERMILION SANDS*.

In an editorial for "Chemistry and Industry" in 1962, Ballard seems to identify his writing with a perspective of science that can only be profitably pursued and shaped by its instruments. It is the celebration of techno-science, scientific knowledge intended to make nature conform to human interests. On the other hand, from his perspective science is based on observation and measurement combined together with experimentation. In Ballard's narrative, there is an evident conceptualization of science and scientific practice and a clear exposition of a techno-scientific world. The author is not only concerned with the way techno-science shapes the world and ourselves, but also with the way in which the eruption of its unconscious contents, released through technological engagements, emerge into consciousness, constituting the self-understanding of a fluid and fragmenting human subject.<sup>4</sup> Thus, through his narration Ballard depicts uncanny landscapes and events in which the imagination has the power to transform everything in order to create a brave new world of isolation and creativity. It is then remodeled in a Surrealist mode, focusing on the deviance and the perversion of science and technology, through art.

As Jeannette Baxter suggests in *J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination*, he appropriates and experiments with Surrealist poetics and politics in order to rupture official surface narratives of post-war history and culture, generating a counter-historical and counter-cultural critique. What's more Ballard's visual influences and artistic roots shape and energize his depicted worlds, melting with science, medicine, and the technology of his own times, just like Surrealism did with Cognitive Science, Modern Physics, Quantum Mechanics and Einstein's Theory of Relativity, and Psychoanalysis. We know that Surrealism drove to reconfigure the world aesthetically

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<sup>4</sup> As we have seen, one of Technoscience aims is to broaden the term 'technology' in order to negotiate possibilities of participation in the production of knowledge and to reflect on strategic alliances. It can be juxtaposed with a number of other innovative interdisciplinary areas of scholarship such as technoetic, technoethics and technocriticism.



and ideologically, and this drive had particular relevance in a period when the fictional elements in the surrounding world were multiplying to the point where it was almost impossible to distinguish between real and false, two terms that no longer had any meaning: "For Ballard [...] the significance of Surrealist aesthetics lay precisely in their ability to penetrate the sub-texts of the consumer landscape and to expose the network of unconscious energies and insidious psychologies at work within it" (Baxter J. G. *Ballard's Surrealist Imagination* 4). In a way, as Ballard wrote in *The Atrocity Exhibition*: "Science is the ultimate pornography, analytic activity whose main aim is to isolate objects or events from their contexts in time and space. This obsession with the specific activity of quantified functions is what science shares with pornography" (44).

Science, fiction, art, and technology are also central to *Vermilion Sands*, a short-story collection published in 1971. In his Preface, Ballard describes this overlit place as an exotic suburb of the mind, and of the future. Its inflamed, tired landscape—taken from a dream, or from a nightmare—mirrors the deep world(s) of the psyche:

Vermilion Sands is my guess at what the future will actually be like. [...] I suppose its spiritual home lies somewhere between Arizona and Ipanema Beach, but in recent years I have been delighted to see it popping up elsewhere—above all, in sections of the 3.000-mile-long linear city that stretches from Gibraltar to Glyfada Beach along the northern shores of the Mediterranean, and where each summer Europe lies on its back in the sun. That posture, of course, is the hallmark of Vermilion Sands and, I hope, of the future—not merely that no-one has to work, but that work is the ultimate play, and play the ultimate work. (7-8)

In *Vermilion Sands*, the ocean has dried up<sup>5</sup>. All that is left is the sand of the ocean bed, which—according to Schuyler's essay—is symbolic with the loss of meaning. In a way, it represents the unconscious freed from any casing or protection. Seen as both the narrative space and the collection itself, *Vermilion Sands* celebrates the crossing of every kind of boundary: the geographical boundary, the boundary between traditional and mainstream within SF as a genre, the boundaries separating science and fiction, science and the arts (sculpture, painting, music, architecture, fashion, and literary writing, as well, among the others) but also the boundaries dividing the conscious from the unconscious. The stories in the collection are set in an abstract near future: a post-geographical inner space full of alienated characters and surreal atmospheres settled in a post-apocalyptic suspension and melting of space and time, directly quoting Dali's deserts with the melting clocks. The inhabitants of this bizarre, sand-bound, post-apocalyptic vacation resort are forgotten movie stars and starlets, insane heirs or wealthy patrons of modern arts, drugged beachcombers and eccentric artists. They are all bizarre and perverted (or inverted) human beings living in a journey of initiation. In fact, they have survived a period called "The Recess": "that world slump of boredom, lethargy and high summer which carried us all so blissfully through ten unforgettable years" (31).

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<sup>5</sup> Significantly, the text coincides with a growing interest on the global ecological crisis conducted by literary and cultural scholars. This heterogeneous movement was called "literary ecology" by Joseph Meeker in 1972; in 1978 William Rueckert coined the term "ecocriticism." Its interest in nature and its interplay with human development was centered on an interdisciplinary approach and called for collaboration between natural scientists, writers, literary critics, anthropologists, historians, and so on.





In the short stories, singing flowers, sound jewelry, poetry-composing computers, sonic sculptures, self-painting canvasses, bio-fabric clothes, psychotropic houses (and so on and so forth)—fed by Eros and Thanatos—are the psychological drivers for some macabre, grotesque, strange psychodramas. In the very first short story of the collection, *The Cloud-Sculptors of Coral D* (1967), we immediately meet the first contaminations: sculpture and music (but also painting) interbred with chemistry, physics, and climatology. Nolan, Petit Manuel, Charles Van Eyck, and the narrator himself build “gliders like condors” (12) and, with sculptors’ hands, learn how to carve the clouds using silver iodide, an inorganic, highly sensitive compound used in cloud seeding. Its crystalline structure is similar to that of ice, allowing it to induce freezing by a process known as heterogeneous nucleation (Lyday). Thus, in a way, this artistic/chemical method of carving the clouds appears to the reader more and more credible, possible, and very plausible. In the first pages of *The Cloud-Sculptors*, we come to know every single principal character of the story. Petit Manuel, a small hunchback with a deformed jaw “twisted like an anchor barb to one side” (12), is an acrobat and weight-lifter. Nolan is an artist who builds sonic statues described as “immense pagodas stranded on the floor of this fossil sea” (11). Charles Van Eyck, who clearly recalls the famous Flemish painter Jan Van Eyck, one of the most significant representatives of Northern Renaissance art, a court painter whose virtuosity concerned his innovative approaches towards the handling and manipulating of oil paint, is described as “a laconic Teuton with hard eyes and a weak mouth,” a “blond-haired pirate of the café terraces in Vermilion Sands,” a “headhunter [...]—maidenheads” (13). The narrator, a retired pilot with a broken leg who faces the prospect of never flying again, teaches them how to fly in order to realize their “astronomy of dreams” (129). Together, they learn how to master “the updraughts that swept the stunted turret of Coral A, smallest of the towers, then the steeper slopes of B and C, and finally the powerful currents of Coral D” (13). So, the uncanny territory of Vermilion Sands becomes a rich mélange of nature, art, and technology, with the precious, musical, coral towers as a clear example.

Anyway, when these strange Psycho-Pop artists meet Leonora Chanel, she invites them to perform at one of her famous ‘garden parties.’ We know that she was in exile wandering endlessly across the globe, after the mysterious death of her husband, Comte Louis Chanel. Her summer house in Vermilion Sands is set in an inflamed landscape: “Sonic statues grew wild along the beach, their voices keening as I swept past along the shore road. The fused silica on the surface of the lake formed an immense rainbow mirror that reflected the deranged colours of the sand-reefs [...]” (19). Half a mile away, the angular cornices of the villa jut into the vivid air, “as if distorted by some faulty junction of time and space. Behind it, like an exhausted volcano, a broad-topped mesa rose into the glazed air, its shoulders lifting the thermal currents high off the heated lake” (20). Obviously, Leonora’s ‘chateau’ is an artistic museum, full of portraits of herself:

I counted more than twenty, from the formal society portraits in the drawing rooms, one by the President of the Royal Academy, another by Annigoni, to the bizarre psychological studies in the bar and dining room by Dalí and Francis Bacon. Everywhere we moved, in the alcoves between the marble semi-columns, in gilt miniatures on the mantel shelves, even in the ascending mural that followed the staircase, we saw the same beautiful self-regarding face.



This colossal narcissism seemed to have become her last refuge; the only retreat for her fugitive self in its flight from the world. (22)

In particular, in the studio on the roof, the narrator comes across a large easel portrait of Leonora. The artist had realized a deliberate travesty of a fashionable society painter, in which she was visualized as a dead Medea, the devouring Mother: “the stretched skin below her right cheek, the sharp forehead and slipped mouth gave her the numbed and luminous appearance of a corpse” (22). Soon the narrator discovers that the uncanny portrait—a sort of ‘Leonora’ version of the portrait of Dorian Gray—was painted by Nolan, and that Leonora refused to have it framed, maybe because it said a lot about herself. It seems clear that, this time, she wants him to paint her portrait as she really envisions it, out of the sun and air, the size of the sky. But in Vermilion Sands it is impossible to hide one’s inner drives. When the performance starts, the cloud-sculptors have to face clouds hanging like “the twisted pillows of a sleepless giant,” columns of turbulent air moving within the clouds and “boiling upwards to the anvil heads like liquid in a cauldron,” storm-nimbus, “unstable masses of overheated air that could catch and aircraft and lift it a thousand feet in a few seconds” (20). The scene is very evocative and fascinating.

The narrator observes the dark billows “hanging like shrouds above the white villa” (20), perfectly preparing the right canvas or stage for Leonora’s “geometry of murder” (27). The clouds are more than simple clouds: “Those are tigers, tigers with wings. We’re manicurists of the air not dragon-tamers” (20), the narrator says to Beatrice Lafferty, Leonora’s secretary, recalling the famous *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate a Second before Awakening* (1944) by Salvador Dalí. Obviously, the performance turns out to be a tragedy, or a psychodrama, in which van Eych is swallowed up by an explosion of vapor, Manuel dies within the huge exploding replica of their hostess’s face, and Nolan—defined by Leonora as “a Michelangelo of the sky” (26)—sculpts, with cruel irony, a portrait of Leonora which appears “too lifelike” (24), and too similar to his portrait of her that she hid in the studio. Then a pilot fish seems to steer the tornado towards Leonora’s villa,

twenty seconds later, when it struck the house, I lost sight of him. An explosion of dark air overwhelmed the villa, a churning centrifuge of shattered chairs and tiles that burst over the roof. [...] Hundreds of smashed glasses and broken chairs littered the terrace. At first I could see no signs of Leonora, although her face was everywhere, the portraits with their slashed profiles strewn on the damp tiles. An eddying smile floated towards me from the disturbed air, and wrapped itself around my leg.

Leonora’s body lay among the broken tables near the bandstand, half-wrapped in a bleeding canvas. Her face was as bruised now as the storm-cloud Manuel had tried to carve (29).

The destroyed villa becomes Leonora’s tomb, her very last refuge. In the end, her body lays covered with the shreds of canvas, the torn faces of herself. But Vermilion Sands is full of self-obsessed female characters. For example, there is Raine Channing, the protagonist of “Say Goodbye to the Wind” (1970), who is an epitome of eternal youthfulness and a victim of serial plastic surgery, like the character of Ida Lowry in Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985). She represents a macabre relict of the Seventies and its teenage





cult. She a young model in her early twenties, had surrendered “her face to the scalpel and needle in order to recapture the childlike bloom of pre-adolescence. She had gone back to the operating theatre as many as a dozen times, emerging swathed in bandages that were rolled back before the arc lights to reveal a frozen teenage mask” (132). In *Vermilion Sands* plastic surgery is a sort of cosmetic or aesthetic performance, mixing medicine and art, surgery and sculpture like a chemist. This futuristic mixture of art and medicine, just a step beyond current plastic surgery and other forms of body modification, appears once again very believable and quite disturbing.

For some years, Raine Channing had been out of the public eye. Only her impresario, Gavin Kaiser, was her confidant. But he was also a genius who had been the brilliant designer of the first bio-fabric fashions, or better, clothes that are no longer made from dead fibers of fixed color and texture, but from living tissues that can adapt themselves to the contours and personality of their wearers. “Other advantages are the continued growth of the materials, fed by the body odors and perspiration of the wearer, the sweet liqueurs distilled from her own pores, and the constant renewal of the fibers, repairing any faults or ladders and eliminating the need for washing” (131). This new tissue celebrates the confluence, or hybridization, of fashion and botany, design and genetics. The woven yarns of these extremely sensible bio-fabrics were bred originally from the genetic stock of delicate wisterias and mimosas, such that they have brought with them something of the vine’s remarkable response to atmosphere and touch: “the sudden movement of someone nearby, let alone of the wearer, brings an immediate reply from the nerve-like tissues” (131). Likewise this time, the reader is pushed to believe that this kind of fabric could become a reality one day. After all, just a few years ago researchers affirmed they were developing clothes that could change their thermal properties to adapt to the environment and the wearer’s body. Maybe, this is the reason why Ballard was the so-called Seer of Shepperton.

Moreover, there are the singing sculptures and flowers, forming the unique flora, or Choro-flora, of the landscape. The male protagonist and narrator of “*Prima Belladonna*” (the first short story published by Ballard in 1956) remembers his first meeting with a half-deaf man called Sayers, who had been a curator at the Kew Conservatoire, where the first choro-flora had been bred. The Director of the Kew Conservatoire was a young botanist of twenty-five, called Mandel (recalling Gregor Mendel, the so-called Father of Genetics), who had discovered the prime Arachnid, an orchid who had taken its name from the Khan-Arachnid spider which had pollinated the flower,

[...] guided, or, as Mandel always insisted, actually mesmerized to it by the vibrations which the orchid’s calyx emitted at pollination time. The first Arachnid orchids beamed out only a few random frequencies, but by cross-breeding and maintaining them artificially at the pollination stage Mandel had produced a strain that spanned a maximum of twenty-four octaves.

Not that he had ever been able to hear them. At the climax of his life’s work Mandel, like Beethoven, was stone deaf, but apparently by merely looking at a blossom he could listen to its music. (34-5)



Interweaving irony and accuracy, Ballard describes mutant flora and artifacts in order to envision a future in which, perhaps, science and technology were not the solution to every problem. The 'magic of science' and the 'moral authority of technology'—on which so much mainstream science fiction was based—are deeply and satirically questioned, criticized, and overturned. From Ballard's perspective, only art and fiction could remake the world in a way that could make sense, through madness, irrationality, violence, a competing system of psychopathologies and freedom. For example, if we think of Jane Cyracylides, the principal female character of "Prima Belladonna," she is described as a beautiful girl whose genetic background was a little mixed: "[...] there was a good deal of mutant in her, she had a rich patina-golden skin and what looked like insects for eyes" (31).

Once again, this woman celebrates hybridity, because she is seen as "poetic, emergent, something straight out of the primal apocalyptic sea" (32). Probably, she is divine, like a second Venus rising from the waves. Her voice, like her body, is quite mystical, she is in reality a 'speciality singer.' "After her performance three hundred people swore they'd seen everything from a choir of angels taking the vocal in the music of the spheres to Alexander's Ragtime band. [...] Tony Miles had heard Sophie Tucker singing the 'St Louis Blues,' and Harry, the elder Bach conducting the B Minor Mass" (38). In a certain sense, everyone can hear in Jane's voice exactly what he/she adores the most. It is as if the tissues adapt themselves perfectly to the bodies and to the desires of their wearers. Similarly, Aurora Day, another surreal goddess living in Vermilion Sands, seems to appear in a different role to different people: "To me, at first, she was a beautiful neurotic disguised as a *femme fatale*, but Raymond Mayo saw her as one of Salvador Dali's exploding madonnas, an enigma serenely riding out of the apocalypse. To Tony Sapphire and the rest of her followers along the beach she was a reincarnation of Astarte herself, a diamond-eyed time-child thirty centuries old" (146).

## A DISCOURSE ON SCIENCE (AND) FICTION, OR, THE SCIENCE OF FICTION

William M. Schuyler Jr. affirms that the arts are in trouble in Vermilion Sands, and that is symbolic of the crisis of the Ego, which is unable to solve its problems. Into this setting come various powerful women, some hostile, some benevolent. They are Anima-figures who are there to catalyze change. If the Ego can survive their attentions and cope with their challenges, it can rediscover the creative powers of the Self. In "Studio 5, The Stars," the penultimate short story of the collection, the female protagonist is Aurora Day, a witchlike figure with her insane poems that drift across the desert, "the broken skeins of coloured tape unravelling in the sand like the threads of dismembered web" (145). Every night her magic shreds flutter around the buttresses below the terraces, entwining themselves through the balcony railings, and by the morning they hang like vivid *bougainvilleas*. Paul Ransom, the male protagonist and narrator of the story, is Aurora's neighbor as well as the editor of an avant-garde poetry review named *Wave IX* (maybe a reference to the British New Wave SF?); his surname clearly declares the metaphorical task assigned to him within the narrative structure. He is professionally interested in analyzing the present malaise affecting poetry, and has to act in order to redeem a lost



art. In this manner, the short story appears to offer a sharp discourse on narrative writing, or, the science of fiction, with reference to Ballard's own writing.

Almost all the studios along the Stars are occupied by painters and poets suffering from various degrees of beach fatigue: "that chronic malaise which exiles the victims to a limbo of endless sunbathing, dark glasses and afternoon terraces" (147). In this artistic desert, Aurora represents the delirious, ecstatic Goddess and Muse of Poetry, faithfully accompanied by her hunchbacked chauffeur with a club foot and a twisted face, a parody of the god Pan. When Paul sees her, almost sleepwalking among the dunes, she wears a long white gown emanating a strange luminosity, her blue hair drifted loosely in the wind like the tail-fan of a bird of paradise: "Streamers floated about her feet, and overhead two or three purple rays circled endlessly. She walked on, apparently unaware of them [...]" (149). If in the past a poet had to sacrifice himself in order to master his/her medium, in the near future his/her technical mastery has become simply a question of using the VT set, or Verse Transcriber: you push a button selecting meter, rhyme, assonance on a dial. No need for sacrifice: "no ideal to invent to make the sacrifice worthwhile" (153). After all, as Tony Sapphire tells Paul, offering a sharp satire on Ballard's (as well as our) time, fifty years before few people wrote poetry and no one read it: "Now no one writes it either. The VT set merely simplifies the whole process" (169). But Aurora's verses are not produced by those dreadful machines, they are fragments taken from Shakespeare, Pound, Milton, Virgil, Wordsworth, Keats, and Eliot, in order to preserve a dying art. She aims at rewriting and personifying the legend of the muse Melander and the poet Corydon, who killed himself for her and for the sake of other poets because they had taken their art for granted, forgetting the source from where it really came. In fact, Aurora Day arranges the death of the poet, Tristram Caldwell, in order to revive the art of poetry.

In this sense, *Vermilion Sands* analyzes and focuses on the question of the science of fiction and poetry, or the art of fiction and poetry, often from a metanarrative perspective. For this reason—as I wrote in an essay entitled "Neural Spaces in J. G. Ballard's *Vermilion Sands*"—the collection as a whole seems to evolve into a kind of metanarrative discussion on the idea of art, poetry, and fiction:

[...] from the first short story of the collection, set in the sky with the cloud-sculptors of Coral-D, until the last one, set in houses replaying the ill, nervous, mad personalities of their (past and present) residents [...]. [i]t is a metaphorical, surreal, fragmented narrative centered on artistic creation in the age of mechanical reproduction, and the long list of amazing artefacts created by the fantastic artists isolated in the desert resort can easily demonstrate that. (204-5)

In "Studio 5, The Stars," in particular, the question of poetry writing is central to the plot, and seems to recall the Surrealist writing techniques seeking to let the voice of the unconscious express itself without any logical limits: the so-called automatic writing.<sup>6</sup> The Verse Transcriber is a device that would produce perfect poetry, given the necessary technological/scientific parameters. In the short story, in fact, Tony Sapphire

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<sup>6</sup> See *Les champs magnétiques* (1919) by André Breton and Phillippe Soupault, which was almost completely written according to the process of automatic writing. And again, *Le message automatique* (1933), also by Breton, considered one of the most significant theoretical books about automatism.



spends most of his time programming an automatic novel, and Aurora (the Muse) asks Paul: "Well, tell me about your work. You must know so much about what is wrong with modern poetry. Why is it all so bad?" (153). The narrator and editor of avant-garde/automatic poetry replies that it is principally a question of inspiration. Writers and poets preferred to sit in front of their VT set instead of writing verses themselves. Their inspiration has dozed off, just like their humanity. Obviously, as it is the Muse who inspires the artist, it is Aurora's task to smooth the question over; in fact, Paul himself recognizes that "she regarded herself as personally responsible for the present ebb at which it [poetry] found itself" (164).

At first Aurora's charisma revives a kind of 'literary duel' with Paul Ransom himself: "A CALL TO GREATNESS!" (161), as she entitles the editorial published—without his knowledge—in Paul Ransom's review. Initially, Ransom reaches a ceaseless bombardment of obscure, bizarre poems written manually by her, and starts to have a series of highly unpleasant, insane dreams. Later, Aurora completely seizes Ransom's review: "The first poem I recognized immediately. I had rejected it only two days earlier. The next three I had also seen and rejected, then came a series that were new to me, all signed 'Aurora Day' and taking the place of the poems I had passed in page proof. The entire issue had been pirated! Not a single one of the original poems remained, and a completely new make-up had been substituted" (161). Mysteriously, Paul Ransom's house is covered with inscriptions cut in the same neat script, the lines crossing each other at random, and also the surface of his skin is interlaced by a thousand tattoos, like insane serpents, covering his face with a living manuscript in which the letters run and change as if the pen still casts them. It is as if she had cast a spell on him and he could only give in. In order to stop these deliberate acts of vandalism, her requests consist in taking absolute control of the magazine, having the total freedom to impose her own policies, and the power to personally select material with the aim of pushing mere 'mechanics' to become poets again. They have to learn everything about their hearts, about the soul of music, searching for their true inspiration; like 'court poets,' therefore, they have to learn how to love and to make sacrifices for the Muse. Her magic usually seems a way to enchant men and to charm poets.

Once all the VT machines are smashed, and the legend of Corydon and Melander is revived, even if Tristram Caldwell has only staged his sacrificial murder during a religious ceremony, the poets have no other choice than to get back to the 'old crafts.' After all, "Poetry is a serious business" (182), as Tristram affirms after all that. Mysteriously, all the twenty-three poets registered at Vermilion Sands the following evening suddenly feel the urge to write something original in the memory of Aurora Day. Eventually, Paul's brain also becomes keen and alive: "A phrase formed itself in my mind. I picked up my pad and wrote it down. Time seemed to dissolve. Within five minutes I had produced the first piece of verse I had written for over ten years. Behind it a dozen more poems lay just below the surface of my mind, waiting like gold in a loaded vein to be brought out into daylight" (184). The prophecy is fulfilled. Once again, in Vermilion Sands technology and creativity short-circuit in order to produce a metamorphosis, a revival, a resurrection: "One poem is enough, [...] a complete statement. Nothing more needs to be said, an interval of eternity closes for ever" (174).



Indeed, Schuyler is completely on the right track when he observes that the collection must be taken as a group, a clear planned sequence of short stories:

[Ballard] arranged them in an order which is not the order in which they were written and which is not in chronological order for *Vermilion Sands* either. The sequence has a larger plan than those of the individual stories. It may have been imposed by Ballard after some of the stories had already been written, but it is none the worse for that. When we read through the stories in the order in which they are placed in the collection, what appears is a meta-narrative in symbolic form constructed by the juxtaposition of disjoint parts.

The metanarrative of the stories in *Vermilion Sands* describes the quest of the Self and of Art, in particular, from my own point of view, it is centered on the writing/reproduction of Science (and) Fiction. The stories take place during "The Recess," a ten-year period of holy days in which a series of rites of passage are celebrated to give the characters the chance to regain their own humanity as well as their ability to perform, to create, to realize artistic actions and artifacts. Sometimes, they use strange but plausible scientific devices and discoveries to nourish their inspirational drives and face the future. Hence, *Vermilion Sands* represents the holy place of lethargy, celebration, and resurrection of the Arts and Subjectivity through Science and Technology. On the other hand, the collection named *Vermilion Sands* occupies a liminal space between science and fiction, post-geography and the fantastic, where the uncanny elements that appear technological in nature continually question the laws of science. Thus, it holds open Todorov's hesitation (25), experienced by someone who knows science and confronts apparently supernatural events and characters. After all, speaking about art or the science of writing in an interview with Thomas Frick (*The Paris Review*, 1984), Ballard affirmed:

I assume one is dealing with a process very close to that of dreams, a set of scenarios devised to make sense of apparently irreconcilable ideas. Just as the optical centers of the brain construct a wholly artificial three-dimensional universe through which we can move effectively, so the mind as a whole creates an imaginary world that satisfactorily explains everything, as long as it is constantly updated. So the stream of novels and stories continues [...].

In this perspective, *Vermilion Sands* represents the lost world of creativity and the repressed three-dimensional universe of the human drives, the utopian/dystopian space of the psyche. For only through art, science and technology human beings can give a sense to the senseless world we are living in.

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