

Marcin Tereszewski, University of Wrocław, Poland

DOI: 10.17951/lsmll.2020.44.2.75-82

Piecing Together J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*

ABSTRACT

J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* can easily be classified as his most experimental novel, one that, more than any other of his works, succeeds in presenting, or perhaps representing, the fragmented condition of a media-saturated Western culture. On the surface, it does appear to be a postmodern and seemingly chaotic bricolage of pop iconography, landscapes, and medical references arranged non-linearly and without plot, and yet there is a unifying principle at work, anchoring the texts in a specific ideological context of 1960s Western culture. The main argument of this paper expands on Debord's study of spectacle and regards *The Atrocity Exhibition* as a work that not only attempts to frustrate reading expectations, but also addresses the cultural shift towards spectacular society.

Keywords: Ballard, Debord, spectacle, experimental literature

Much of the formal experimentalism associated with 1960s experimental literature seems to address the issue of coherence and unity: by challenging conventional linear narratives and undermining traditionally established expectations, the text is pushed towards a more writerly direction, thereby putting a greater demand on the reader to provide coherent resolution to distorted plots. Among writers of this loosely defined group of experimental writers, such as B. S. Johnson, Ann Quin, or Alan Burns, James Graham Ballard is perhaps an outlier, having begun his career in the academically and artistically disreputable science fiction genre. *The Atrocity Exhibition*, a clear departure from his more traditional earlier works, can easily be regarded as his most experimental and least accessible work; it is one that, according to critics, more than any other of his previous novels or short stories succeeds in presenting, or perhaps representing, the fragmented condition of a media-saturated Western culture. On the surface, it does appear to be a postmodern and seemingly chaotic bricolage of pop iconography, landscapes, and medical references arranged non-linearly and without plot, and yet there is a unifying principle at work, anchoring the texts in a specific ideological context of 1960s Western culture. *The Atrocity Exhibition* treads similar theoretical ground as Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, which also

Marcin Tereszewski, Instytut Filologii Angielskiej, Uniwersytet Wrocławski, ul. Kuźnicza 22, 50-138, Wrocław, marcin.tereszewski@uwr.edu.pl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8012-9039>

addresses the effects of the contemporary media landscape on the individual psyche.

The publishing history of *The Atrocity Exhibition* is as confounding as the text itself. Between 1966 and 1969, the fifteen “condensed” texts, which today comprise the book, were published separately in various avant-garde magazines, usually accompanied by illustrations and photographs. In 1970 these texts were published together for the first time under the current title, but without the earlier illustrations. In fact, these texts were initially intended to be primarily visual, which is evidenced by the title *Exhibition*. This was meant to correspond with what Ballard regarded as the increasingly visual nature of culture. In an interview with Alan Burns, Ballard stated the following: “I sensed way back in the fifties when I started that the tide was running away from the written word towards the visual mode of expression and therefore one couldn’t any more rely on the reader, you couldn’t expect him to meet you any more than half way”. What is more, *The Atrocity Exhibition* was born out of an earlier idea called *Project for a New Novel*, which was to be published in fragments on advertising billboards. These fragments were to include headlines, symbols, letters from a variety of print sources, but that idea never came to fruition, mainly for financial reasons. Later, the text was republished in a magazine called *Re/Search* with paratextual marginalia and a preface by Ballard and later the American edition appeared with a preface by William S. Burroughs. What the publishing history of this novel makes clear is that there is no one text that is *The Atrocity Exhibition*, all the more so because no one version was granted the authorial stamp of being the final, decisive version, which makes all of the editions, with and without illustrations, legitimate, even though the reading experience is greatly affected depending on which edition is read.

The Atrocity Exhibition constitutes what Brigg (1985) described as Ballard’s “most ambitious extended experiment in the techniques of fiction” (p. 56). It was part of Ballard’s ambition to elevate science fiction literature to a more respectable critical space. However, these ambitions were not met with universal acclaim from within a hermetic and surprisingly reactionary science fiction community, which tended to favor a more traditional approach to literary conventions and looked down upon stylistic excesses, believing that they detracted from the primary function of science fiction, which is to convey concepts. Ballard’s break with this conservative tradition provoked the ire of one of his most avid supporters, Kingsley Amis, who considered this unwelcome foray into experimental fiction to be a death knell for science fiction. Writing of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Amis remarked on the “shock tactics, tricks with typography, one-line chapters, strained metaphors, obscurities, obscenities, drugs, . . . solipsistic, mystification and outrage . . . physical disgust” as completely alien to the genre (as cit. in Ballard, 1997, p. 190).

What upset the conservative science fiction aficionados was the glaring lack of a coherent narrative. Instead, what they found were fifteen randomly placed vignettes, a fragmented and non-linear storyline, held together by a thin thread of recurring images and themes. These passages were not written in the order in which they appear in the book and, as suggested by Ballard in the marginalia, neither are they meant to be read in any particular order. However, extended immersion in the narrative allows the reader to eventually distill the contours of something only vaguely resembling a plot, i.e. that we, as readers, are most likely in the mind of a patient in a mental facility. The identity, or at least the name, of this protagonist changes in the course of the novel: at one point he is Traven, then Talbot, Tallis, Travert, Travis, Talbert and Travers. These sudden changes in names bring to mind Samuel Beckett's protagonist(s) in his trilogy, whose names also shift from Molloy to Malone, and finally to an unnamable voice. Ballard's character takes on various roles: at one point he is a lecturer, a patient at a psychiatric facility, and at another he is a former H-bomb pilot. With the dissipation of proper names and social roles, the narrator's identity is never clearly established, creating what Huntley (2008) describes as "the most acute expression of the slippage of identity that occurs through the text" (p. 25). Traven's psychiatrist, Dr. Nathan, proposes the following diagnosis: "What the patient is reacting against is, simply, the phenomenology of the universe, the specific and independent existence of separate objects and events" (Ballard, 2001, p. 46). Psychopathological reactions to external events and objects are a well-established Ballardian theme, employed in most of his short stories and novels. *The Atrocity Exhibition* is no different in this regard, except for the radicalism with which Ballard pursues this theme. Although it is true that Ballard's other novels also present characters that are deeply affected by external determinants, even to the point of death, this psychological deterioration is rarely mirrored in the construction of the novel. However, it should be remarked that, despite the disintegration of form and narrative, Ballard still employs his trademark scientific language – objective, reserved, and forensic in its precision, which is something that separates him from Beckett.

Because there is no single stable narrator or protagonist, no stable setting or linear plot, we are left with a medley of seemingly disconnected images, i.e., "the independent existence of separate objects and events" (Ballard, 2001, p. 46). These images, however, are not as haphazard as they initially appear and can be classified into categories: pop iconography (with the references to Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor), politics (JFK, Ralph Nader), violence (assassinations, Vietnam War). What all these images have in common is that they make up the mediascape of the 1960s; they present a cacophony of disparate images set alongside one another, as if one were changing channels on a TV set. Not only is Ballard drawing from popular iconography to weave this patchwork narrative, but

he is also referencing various cultural studies theories that were prevalent in the 1960s. Regarding this point, Luckhurst (1997) writes that “the text/s acted like an echo-box of literary experiment and cultural commentary of the 60s: concepts were spliced in from Marshall McLuhan, R.D. Laing, Herbert Marcuse” (p. 35). He develops this observation further: “*Atrocity* is nothing if not a sustained and reflexive investigation of the complex of negation, affirmation and oscillation that constituted countercultural avant-gardism of the 1960s” (pp. 83–84). Far from praising the vibrancy of 1960s culture, *The Atrocity Exhibition* presents the theme of “the emotional and spiritual sterility of contemporary Western culture, its loss of vitality and direction” (Stephenson, 1991, p. 64). This may be somewhat surprising, given the emancipatory impulses of the 1960s, which characterized the sexual revolution and a rebellious youth movement. Nonetheless, Ballard seems to focus only on the insidious undercurrents of this period in history, detailing its apocalyptic and morbid impulses. The landscapes that are molded out of these images are predominantly barren, derelict man-made urban settings scarred by some unknown yet violent atrocities. And, as is the case with most of Ballard’s work, the depicted environment serves not only to project the psychological state of the characters, but also to offer commentary on the current state of culture.

The themes of spiritual sterility and disconnectedness are to be traced to the changes that took place in how media operated in the second half of the twentieth century. *The Atrocity Exhibition* reflects the shift from print-based media to electronic media, a shift which took place in one of the most charged decades in American (or even Western) history. The 1960s saw live images broadcast from the Vietnam War and brought the now iconic and indelible images of the Kennedy assassination to everyone’s home. Though the assassination was not broadcast live, the assassination of Lee Harvey Oswald just three days later was witnessed on live TV; it was a decade of the countercultural revolution, space race, cold war and rampant commercialism. This radically changed cultural landscape is presented in *The Atrocity Exhibition* through a series of fragmented images, as one would see on a television screen, intermixed images of gravity and pulp, tragedy and frivolity, violence and sexuality, glamour and the grotesque, exemplified by the death of Marilyn Monroe, the intermingling of Hollywood fantasy and politics reified in the nascent political successes of Ronald Reagan.

The cut-up techniques are thus used to reflect the disintegrated state of reality as conveyed by the media, echoing Marshall McLuhan’s famous statement that the medium is the message. Ultimately, *The Atrocity Exhibition* is attempting to duplicate the experience of being in the contemporary world. There are similarities between this mode of presentation with that of the stream-of-consciousness method, but with the important difference that Ballard steers clear of internal monologues, concentrating predominantly on external imagery presented to the reader with his characteristic affectless and forensic precision. What this achieves

is a type of lens through which we see consciousness as a reflection of mashed-up imagery; instead of presenting the environment through the subjective experience of the individual (as was the case with modernist novelists such as Proust), Ballard seems to present the protagonist through images of the environment. By depreciating the position of the subject, Ballard in effect undermines the traditional subject-oriented position from which narratives are focalized. And with the exterior environment elevated to such a degree, the subject no longer functions as the organizing principle. The reader is now tasked with coalescing the fragmented images into a coherent whole, as if we were meant to reassert ourselves as the subjects of the narrative. The protagonist's identity is not the only casualty of this disintegration. Other characters, such as Karen Novotny, are reconfigured as an objectified and marketable collection of images: "In a sense one may regard this as a kit, which Talbert has devised, entitled 'Karen Novotny' – it might even be feasible to market it commercially" (Ballard, 2001, p. 84). The presence of capitalist references is ubiquitous, further pressing home the interconnection between spectacular culture and capitalist materialism.

The publication of *The Atrocity Exhibition* came on the heels of Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, published just a few years earlier, in 1967. Debord is credited with establishing the Situationist International movement and providing the theoretical framework for psychogeography, but, more importantly for this discussion, his work addressed the predominance of visual culture and its effects on society. These thematic similarities did not go unnoticed by Ballardian scholars: "Throughout, Ballard's interest is in the inseparability of the political tragedies, traumas and realities of the 1960s from the media landscape, and he is documenting, as much as Debord, the rise of the spectacle" (Paddy, 2015, p. 109). Gasiorek (2004) also comments on how Debord's book "resonates with Ballard's work" (p. 71). A severe indictment of the image-saturated capitalist culture, *Society of the Spectacle* argues that modern culture experienced a paradigm shift, wherein representation has now acquired ontological weight to the extent that it occludes the thing represented. Developing on Marxist theories of reification and alienation, the eponymous spectacle functions here to include everyday manifestations of capitalism-driven phenomena: television, advertising, film, celebrity; it is the "autocratic reign of the market economy" (Debord, 2011, p. 2) with mass media functioning as a mere instrument used by capitalist societies for the purpose of pacifying and distracting the masses. Though Debord's Marxist critique of society is not conspicuously visible in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, there are parallels with regard to the idea of the spectacle itself, which is central to Debord's and, arguably, Ballard's work. According to Ferris (2019), Ballard's "fiction communicates, with greater lucidity than many of his peers, the social realm as spectacle: a landscape invaded and sustained by surveillance cameras, urban signage, communications networks" (p. 125). Debord's concept of the spectacle is never succinctly fleshed

out and remains nebulous to the very end, taking shape with each thesis that adds another dimension to the already convoluted concept.

The 221 short theses comprising *Society of the Spectacle* are divided across nine chapters and are delivered with self-assured, almost aphoristic, precision. The first thesis introduces the idea of the spectacle in the reworked opening line, which was borrowed from Karl Marx's *Capital*: "The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities". This is transformed by Debord (1970) in the following way: "The entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign announces itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Every thing that was directly lived has moved away into a representation" (p. 3). This shift towards spectacle is not merely one of many ideologies vying for hegemony on a superstructural level; instead, it is a shift which has infiltrated the base, or substructure, of cultural production. In this regard, Debord appears as a proto-postmodernist, paving the way for Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality or Jameson's critique of the depthlessness of postmodern culture. Both concepts build on Debord's claim that the emphasis on spectacle leads to a "degradation" of our lives, with reality being reduced to an assortment of commodifiable fragments, which in themselves are meaningless (i.e., they have no use value), and are endowed with meaning only in relation to one another (i.e., they have exchange value). This spectacle is a kind of weightless abstract network of references, founded on the extreme isolation and passivity of the audience; it offers regressive, banal fantasies to make up for the loss of meaningful action and connection and as such is termed in Debord's (1970) thesis 44 as "the permanent opium war" (p. 45). Debord develops Marx's concept of alienation and presents the modern individual as "reduced to consuming entrancing corporate-supplied narratives, which confirm us in our passivity even as they celebrate the freedom and purposeful lives of our leaders and elite celebrities" (Kaplan, 2012, p. 458).

Brigg (1985) in his reading of the novel, though not directly invoking Debord's spectacle, describes Ballard's intentions in the following way: "What Ballard has sought to do in *The Atrocity Exhibition* is to illustrate or suggest the meaning of the public and media fantasies that form so much of contemporary reality and to connect them to the private lives and experiences of individuals" (p. 65). This understanding assumes that there is still a difference between the private lives of individuals and their public fantasies, between fact and fiction. As Ballard put it himself while speaking about the fictive nature of contemporary reality: "the function of the writer is no longer the addition of fictions in [*sic*] the world, but rather to seek its abstraction, to direct an enquiry aimed at recovering elements of reality from this debauch of fiction" (as cit. in Brigg, 1985, p. 59). It is perhaps this aim that brings Ballard closest to Baudrillard's understanding of hyperreality, and there is little surprise that the latter took a keen interest in Ballard's work.

One part of *The Atrocity Exhibition* is especially pertinent with regard to the above considerations. The last section, titled “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan”, brings together many of the earlier noted themes: sexuality, pop-culture and political power. Reagan, like previous icons of American pop culture, is described forensically as if he were a case study in a medical journal, with particular attention paid to sexual imagery:

Incidence of orgasms in fantasies of sexual intercourse with Ronald Reagan. Patients were provided with assembly kit photographs of sexual partners during intercourse. In each case Reagan's face was superimposed upon the original partner. Vaginal intercourse with 'Reagan' proved uniformly disappointing, producing orgasm in 2 percent of subjects (Ballard, 2001, p. 166).

The narrative then moves to a description of Reagan as a media entity and the many constructed identities that he can assume:

Fragments of Reagan's cinetized postures were used in the construction of model psychodramas in which the Reagan-figure played the role of husband, doctor, insurance salesman, marriage counsellor, etc. The failure of these roles to express any meaning reveals the non-functional character of Reagan. Reagan's success therefore indicates society's periodic need to re-conceptualize its political leaders (p. 167).

This points to the absence of Reagan as a person. He is merely portrayed here as a “Reagan-figure”, an image that can represent any chosen theme or social construct. These icons, whether they be politicians, actors or singers, are presented as nothing more than commodities fashioned and refashioned in line with the law of demand. Reagan, an actor turned political candidate, capitalized on his celebrity status to enter politics, taking advantage of his established persona developed in films as an honest cowboy. This persona no longer functioned within the confines of fiction, as it seeped into the political arena, allowing Reagan to assume a prefabricated identity. This point is elaborated by Gasiorek (2004):

For Ballard, Reagan's success lay in the way he grasped that the content of political policy pales into insignificance when set against the manner of their presentation. It was not that the medium could disguise the message but rather that the medium could obliterate the message, rendering it irrelevant to the way that voters decided on their political allegiances (p. 71).

The success of his candidacy provides a fitting example of the potential of spectacle as a blend of reality and fiction, which is able to package marketable politicians and advertise them in much the same way as an automobile. The violent and apocalyptic imagery suffusing many of the descriptions in *The Atrocity Exhibition* emphasizes the destructive potential of constructing dehumanized identities, of maintaining a situation where “all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles” (Debord, 1970, p. 3).

In a society of spectacle the medium reigns supreme, and it is a medium that is in service to the vagaries of market economy, connecting disparate objects and entities, though never signifying anything beyond the immediate message. Many of Ballard's predictions have come true to an extent that perhaps even he would not have expected. Eventually, Reagan did become president within Ballard's lifetime, but other celebrities, such as Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky, the current President of Ukraine, achieved political power after his death. With the advent of Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and social media in general, images and spectacle have come to dominate communication, commodifying human exchanges, emotions and relationships. What *The Atrocity Exhibition* offers is a tour, in the form of a Surrealist narrative collage, of the modern social consciousness that has succumbed to spectacularisation and the attendant dissociation of emotions.

References

- Ballard, J. G. (1997). *User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews*. London: Flamingo.
- Ballard, J. G. (2001). *The Atrocity Exhibition*. [eBook, HarperCollins Publishers].
- Brigg, P. (1985). *J.G. Ballard. Starmont's Reader's Guide 26*. Mercer Island: Starmont House.
- Burns, A. (Ed.). (1981). *The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers Discuss their Working Methods*. Retrieved December 25, 2019, from https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1974_imagination_on_trial.html:
- Debord, G. (1970). *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red.
- Debord, G. (2011). *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (M. Imrie, Trans.). London, New York: Verso.
- Ferris, N. (2019). J.G. Ballard: Visuality and the novels of the near future. In K. Mitchell, & N. Williams (Eds.), *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s* (pp. 125–142). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Gasiorek, A. (2004). *J. G. Ballard. Contemporary British Novelists*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Huntley, J. (2008). Disquieting features: An introductory tour of *The Atrocity Exhibition*. In J. Baxter (Ed.), *J.G. Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (pp. 24–33). London: Continuum International Publishing.
- Kaplan, R. L. (2012). Between mass society and revolutionary praxis: The contradictions of Guy Debord's *Society of Spectacle*. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15(4), 457–478.
- Luckhurst, R. (1997). *The Angle Between Two Walls: The Fiction of J.G. Ballard*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Marx, K. (1887). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Vol. 1*. (S. Moore & E. Aveling, Trans.). Retrieved December 25, 2019, from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf>.
- Paddy, D. I. (2015). *The Empire of J.G. Ballard: An Imagined Geography*. Canterbury: Gylphy.
- Stephenson, G. (1991). *Out of the Night and into the Dream: A Thematic Study of the Fiction of J. G. Ballard*. London: Greenwood.