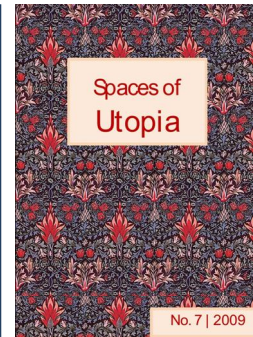


Interview with James Graham Ballard

(Shepperton, 21 January 1997)

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James Graham Ballard died last April at the age of 78. He was described by David Pringle as “one of the most strikingly original English writers of the past half-century” and praised for his capacity to engage in different genres and fields – from science-fiction to avant-garde experimentation, from mainstream novels to crime fiction – “while remaining instantly recognisable” for his recurrent themes, his images, and his style (Pringle 2009).

This interview was held on 21st January, 1997, a few months after the publication of the novel *Cocaine Nights*, the first of a supposed tetralogy of detective stories (including the later *Super-Cannes*, *Millennium People* and *Kingdom Come*). I met Ballard in Shepperton, in the small semi-detached house where he had lived for nearly four decades and from where he observed the world, by then virtually in a state of seclusion. We chatted freely, drinking white wine and sitting in front of the copy of a Delvaux painting; on the walls, two posters of the movie *Crash* directed by Cronenberg and whole shelves full of books with the name of famous painters on their covers.

A part of the interview was then translated into Italian and published in the literary journal *Linea d'Ombra*. Only recently did I start thinking of re-editing and publishing the full text in its original version, especially since I took part in an international conference on Ballard at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, in May 2007. There, around the most credited Ballardian scholars, gathered a large number of young researchers and students who had never had the chance to meet the writer and ask him the many questions raised by his books. My thought goes to them even more now, after Ballard's death.

In our two-hour conversation, back in 1997, Ballard gave proof of his keen understanding and far-reaching insight into the realm of art and the spirit of his times. He also showed that he was still, and would always be, in a way, a science-fiction writer, at least in accordance with his own definition of the genre as an imaginative reinterpretation of present-day reality. Utopian and dystopian tendencies run through Ballard's thought and inhabit his narrative reinvention of this world and of the next. Before being a writer, he was a dreamer and dreams often carry with them the seeds of the future. After all, in Shakespeare's words, "we are such stuff as dreams are made on".

When you speak about yourself do you always tell the truth?

Do you have any suggestions whether I'm not telling the truth? Give me some examples. Honestly, I'm suspicious.

For instance, when you talk about your childhood in the concentration camp...

I've always made it clear that *Empire of the Sun* is a novel. It is semiautobiographical, partly based on my experience. So the question whether what I describe in *Empire of the Sun* is true or not is irrelevant.

What about your interviews?

Oh, I see. Well, in my interviews I try to be consistent. When you look back to the Second World War it's not easy to remember everything clearly. It was a long time ago, and it was a period of great confusion. I have mixed memories: some things were good, some were bad, some were frightening, some were not. Children are very changeable in their emotions, they can feel happy one day and sad the next. Anyway, I try to speak the truth.

How do you feel being considered mainly for *Empire of the Sun* and *Crash*, as it happens in countries like mine? Are there any books which relate to you the most?

There are important films about these books of mine. Honestly, film is such an important medium these days. It is the main art form of the 20th century, I think. If you have major directors making films like Cronenberg, adapting a novel, you reach a huge new audience. Even though only one in a hundred of the people who goes to see the film buys the book, it's a big new audience. In France, for example, over one million people went to see *Crash*. One million! If one in a hundred of them buys the book, that's ten thousand copies. You know, it's a big readership. Even if

one in a thousand buys the book, it's a thousand readers. So films are very important. Of course I've written a lot of books; in particular, I've made a lot of short stories. I've written twenty books now, half are short stories. And people don't really like short stories.

I do.

Many people don't. Publishers don't like short stories anymore. People don't buy them, they want novels. That's a pity to me because I've written a lot of short stories and, in many ways, my short stories are better than my novels, I think. Let's say not better, but they are very important. There are writers, novelists who also write short stories, but their novels are more important. In my case, it's not true: the short stories are just as important really as the novels. You know, there is nothing I can do about it.

Do you think your books might have adverse, unintended side effects, as in the case of medications? I mean, do you think they could be dangerous in some cases? Let's think about *Crash* and the impact it could have on violent people and young generations.

That's always a fear, of course. But so far, as far as I know, it has been shown almost everywhere in Europe – everywhere, I think, except in England – and we had no reports of accidents, criminal acts. I see the book and the film of *Crash* as cautionary tales, they are warnings. What they are saying is that we have an entertainment culture that is obsessed or at least fascinated by violence. In this entertainment culture elements of sexuality and violence are all mixed together.

And what *Crash* – the book and the film – does is to analyse what is really going on. And it is meant to be a warning. If you like, it's saying: "OK, this is where the road may lead". It's like someone putting a sign on the road or beside it: "Dangerous bends ahead". It is meant to be a warning. It doesn't mean speed up, it means slow down. The message of *Crash* is: "Slow down", I hope.

Are you afraid about the future or confident in the power of creativity? I think you said something about the future in your latest book, *Cocaine Night*.

My character says something. That is different. Never think that the character is speaking for the author.

What do I think about the future? I will not be here, but in the long term, for my children and grandchildren, twenty, thirty years from now, I'm optimistic. In a short term I'm pessimistic. I think the next years may be very difficult ones for us. People are getting bored and I think boredom is a big danger. They don't rely on institutions, as they used to. Consumerism no longer means sparkling and new, it is not exciting any more. I can remember in the 1930s and after the war, in the 1940s and in the 1950s, people were very excited by the consumer society. People were getting more prosperous, making more money, they could buy more things. So, they were going out and they would buy new kitchens, new cars, new clothes, new everything. Their life seemed to be richer, better. That's finished now. People are bored with consumerism. In this country certainly the Church has lost its authority. The British monarchy is a joke. And in politics there are no big themes anymore, most politicians are just corrupt. So people have nothing. In a short time – and that's frightening – the world has nothing. There is one rule of nature. In an

English phrase, nature abhors, nature hates the vacuum: it rushes in. And so there are many troubles ahead, but I think we'll come through.

You said that David Pringle knows you better than you do. Do you believe some readers can understand books better than their writers? Would such readers be your ideal reading public?

Yes, absolutely. That's got just implications for your profession, for literary criticism. I don't think the writer is necessarily aware of all that he writes. He or she may be aware of everything in one book or one short story but, when you get more books, you need a carefully trained mind to stand back and look at the whole. The writer is very close, too close to his work to see it clearly, I think.

What is imagination to you?

Well, it's to invent imaginary worlds that have a deeper meaning than the conventional, realistic world. This is the gift of the imagination, not that you can invent fantasy, but that you can invent imaginary things providing meaning. That's why people read novels, go to the opera, listen to music, read poetry. They don't want just fantasy, what they want is meaning. They are looking for meaning in their lives, that's what they want most of all.

And what about science fiction?

I don't read it today. It's finished, it's changed. It's just commercial fantasy, now. Except for, say, people like William Gibson. I like William Gibson very much, but

most science fiction is not very good. Mostly, it's "Star Wars", "Star Trek". I don't care for it, it doesn't express anything relevant to reality.

You said that you like cyberpunk and William Gibson in particular.

I was very impressed by *Neuromancer*, I thought it was good. That's an interesting approach to science-fiction, concerned with the real world. Although I don't believe in science fiction.

What about Philip K. Dick?

Excellent. He was good, he was very good. He was interesting. He was really over completely paranoid. He believed that the whole of life is a big conspiracy.

I prefer William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* in particular; that's a wonderful book. Burroughs contains a lot of science-fiction elements. His work is written in demotic speech, everyday speech, American slang. How do you translate that? I find it difficult to read it because it's not written in English, it's written in American.

In a way, you seem to have been writing just one single huge book since situations, characters, themes and "obsessions" are often repeated. For instance your last work, *Cocaine Nights*, recalls the atmosphere and the setting of *Vermilion Sands*, with its idle community of sunbathers, aristocrats, doctors and artists made to cope with the looming sense idea of an unredeemable guilt. Do you still think that our future will be like that, or is our present already like that? Do you believe that, since you wrote *Vermilion Sands*, we have been moving in that direction?

The present is starting to be like that and the future will probably be like that. The world I describe in *Cocaine Nights* now really exists: if you go down to the Costa del Sol you will find places like that. One sees that's something that is happening all over the world. In America people started retreating from the cities and going into special estates where there are TV cameras for all the residents. That's a very dangerous step; they become a sort of prisoners.

It is somehow like the luxury housing estate monitored by TV cameras you described in the novel *Running Wild*.

Yes, very similar. That's something that has already started. It's bad to live in complete isolation, I think.

"Time" seems to be one of your favourite themes. In *Cocaine Nights* you wrote: "Come to Estrella de Mar and throw away your calendar". Do you suggest that, by throwing away the calendar and putting aside our watches, we would feel more at ease with ourselves?

Well, I don't think so. The person who says that in *Cocaine Nights* is one of my crooks.

I am not a moralist, unlike most 19th- and 20th-century European and American novelists. Such authors as Dostoyevsky, Moravia, Sartre, Camus make a moral judgment, they are asking: "Are the characters behaving in a good way or in a bad way?" And you could say that each novel is a kind of trial where we examine the characters, we see what their moral position is and then we counter-judge. This happens with *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*.

I am not a moralistic novelist. I don't offer my own opinion, I leave everything open for the reader to judge. In *Vermillion Sands* I don't take moral decisions about the characters. There's no verdict: "Do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty?" No, not in my fiction. I don't do that. Even in *Crash*, the most extreme of my novels, I don't take sides. I got a letter from an English student yesterday, saying: "Are you positive or negative about *Crash*? What is your attitude?" It seems he has only read the book and he is writing a little essay. I wrote back saying: "I don't have an attitude. I believe in leaving the things ambiguous because it's not easy, you can't always have a clear moral judgment". It applies to *Vermillion Sands* and it applies to *Cocaine Nights*. That's why maybe some people don't like my fiction, because I don't make it clear.

I think that this position can be related to the idea of playing so often expressed in your books, where the important thing is not winning or losing, but somehow playing against yourself.

True! Well reported, good way of putting it.

You said that you dream a lot and can remember your dreams very well. Is there any relevant difference between the dreams you used to have and the ones you have today? Has your attitude towards the contemporary world changed accordingly?

As you get old your dreams do change. When I was in my 20s and 30s I had disturbing and unsettling dreams. Now that I'm in my 60s my dreams are much more pacific, they are the dreams of an aging person. As you get older you come

to terms with the dreams that, perhaps, upset you for many years. You understand your parents, you forgive them, you have children and you have grandchildren. You get a different perspective on the world.

It is very difficult to say how close dreams are to works of art, to works of imagination, like novels. I think they are very different, I don't think dreams are like novels or short stories. You see it in the surrealist paintings, like that [pointing at his famous copy of a Delvaux destroyed in the Second World War]. It looks like a dream but, you know, nobody ever has a dream like that; they are different. I think that, as you get older, you feel more peaceful: that's a good thing!

Many of your characters are women. In *Vermilion Sands*, for instance, they are a mysterious and mighty presence, halfway between realistic creatures and symbolic beings. Are you afraid of women?

Yes, of course! All men are afraid of women because of their power; I'm not unusual in that respect, I think. Remember that, through the years and through art history, most people are not happy all the time; they are only happy for a small part of their life. For men, of course, women are firstly involved with their vision of happiness, for obvious reasons, not just for sexual reasons. They remember their early childhood, their mothers. At the same time, women are very ambiguous. Young men find them very difficult to understand, they don't know how to please them. So women have become very mysterious figures, and that's why you find them portrayed as enchantresses, magicians, sorceresses, which is true of *Vermilion Sands*, of course. Also, men perceive that women are sometimes *amoral*, they exist outside the morality, they are capable of behaving in a *non-*

moral way, in an *unmoral* way. Not *immoral*, but *unmoral*. And this is very unsettling. When men find them, they are drawn to destruction. You know the connections between the heart of the human experience and the heart of the human imagination, and the connections between love, eroticism and death. For men, women make the links between the two.

Do you think that the Freudian term *projection* can be better referred to showing or concealing?

Oh, it's a technical question. I'm not quite sure what the term *projection* really means, in its full sense, so I want to be careful about what I say. Both, I think, is the answer.

Do you believe that psychopaths have some sort of special insight that the so-called *sane* people lack?

I think that mentally disturbed people often have brilliantly original insights into the areas of dreams and fantasies. Not all, but many indeed. I think the great writers and painters probably share something with them, that derangement of the senses. You know, the French poet Rimbaud talked about a willing, a deliberate derangement of the senses. And I think that the derangement the psychopaths have is very close to that that some artists, some writers have. I've known many mentally ill people, but it comes to my mind there are people who have similar insights. Particularly, those who are getting used to take doses of drug all day long. So, you have to be careful.

What is inspiration to you? When you write a story do you have to identify with the characters and events you describe?

Yes, it is necessary. It can be very disturbing, of course. I mean, writing *Crash* was a very disturbing experience because I had to imagine myself into the novel, to make it seem more true. Now it's twenty-five years and my children were very young – they were ten, twelve, thirteen – so it was a dangerous book for me to write. But that's true of all books. I mean, in *Cocaine Nights* I had to make the character of Bobby Crawford, the tennis player, sympathetic. It's very difficult to make sympathetic and attractive someone who is a criminal, you know. It's difficult. I had to enter his mind and make it likeable and make him convincing. So, while I was writing his part, I had to try to be like him, and that's very difficult. That's what the novelist has to do.

You said that, when you write, you start from some ideas, some obsessions, then words follow one another, like a stream, and you put them on the page. When you finish a book, do you think you said something more, or something different from what you meant at the beginning?

It's always different; it never is what you first imagined. That's the strange thing, it just changes. It is a good thing because you're working with materials that have a texture. That's like a sculptor carving a piece of wood, let's say. The wood has a grain; you can cut it: in one direction it's very easy, in another it's very difficult, if you're against the grain. You know, it influences the shape. Well, the world of words – the narrative – changes and has its own structure, its own logic. That's why it never comes out as you planned, but it's good.

When you begin to write, do you still hope to work out the original idea or you just accept that it will change?

Well, you hope that you'll be able to express the original idea of it, the touch of your imagination, but you've got to accept that, when you actually read it, you'll say: "Well, that's not quite what I wanted".

After you finish a book, do you ever read it again? For instance, when you saw the film *Crash*, didn't you check how faithful it was to the book?

No, I don't, actually. *Crash* is too frightening for me. It's a really frightening book.

How important are style and plot for you?

Story is very important because I think that human imagination expresses itself in terms of stories. You see this in myths, in legends, in the way you describe your life. You come home from the office and your wife says: "What happened today?" And you reply: "Oh, my God, let me tell you, it is something so amazing!" Or your father arrives and tells your mother: "Oh, what a patient I visited!" We explain the world in terms of stories. Stories are very important. You see this in dreams, legends, myths, everything. Story is the way we engage other people's emotions. I think that the partial rejection of stories by the Modernist movement was probably a big mistake. It just produced a lot of unreadable books that have been forgotten; I'm afraid that's probably true. You know, some literary critics say that story is old-fashioned. It's a big mistake because we think in terms of stories.

Maybe that's why you don't like Postmodernism as well, apart from the fact that you seem to hate the label.

No, I don't like it, that's right. I don't like Postmodernism because it plays games, it's really looking at itself in the mirror, it's reflexive. It's saying: "Dear reader, we know this is just a novel", and it's a mistake. We don't think like that, our imagination doesn't work like that. I think it's a big mistake. I think Postmodernism is finished, it's going nowhere, it has killed itself.

You mean that the effect is that you can't identify with what you read.

Well, you can't be emotionally involved. If the structure doesn't even take it up seriously and it's just a game, why should you take it seriously?

You are often described as a visionary writer. I think you like this definition, don't you?

Yes, visionary is good.

Do you think that painters can see or represent things better than other people?

Well, the whole of the Surrealists, and of course the painters, since they are purely visual, have a huge advantage on the writers because they are so immediate. A novel is just made up of letters on the page, it doesn't have the impact of an actual image. But the novel is so holding, so widely read today, not so much as in the past, but still widely read.

You are often asked a lot of questions about your works, your ideas, your vision of reality. Are there any questions you would like to ask to your reading public?

No, there aren't any questions I would like to ask. I just tell stories, I'm a storyteller, you know. As long as a little crowd – few people – would rally around me in the village square and listen to my tales, I'll be happy. If not, I'll move on to the next village.

So you don't seem to have any particular expectations about your reading public. You said you would be content if some of the people who saw Cronenberg's film buy your book. Is that all? Don't you hope them to understand what they read in some way?

That's it. I'm confident. If people make the effort, to me it's enough. I think they are intelligent enough to understand.

How do you look back to your starting point as a writer? And, in particular, how do you recall the atmosphere of the 1960s?

The 1960s were very exciting, I think in Italy too. In the 1950s we were still getting out of the war. Then, suddenly, the consumer society, television... Everything happened in the 1960s. Some things were good, some were bad. The Kennedy assassination was bad, the Vietnam War was bad. But there was a sort of explosion of energy from the youth, and pop music was important. Drugs? Well, hard to say. I didn't take drugs myself. But maybe there were positive sides to the

drug culture, then. Mostly people smoking marijuana. So much was happening in those years! Have you come across a book of mine called *The Atrocity Exhibition*?

Yes, of course.

I think it was published in Italy recently with some notes; it looks good. Well, that's my book about the 1960s and a book about a lot of my fiction. I mean, a lot of my ideas are in that book. I consider it as a key for a lot of my fiction. I think so, not all, but a lot of it.

But maybe it's easier to understand it if you read it after the rest of your fiction, rather than the reverse, because it's not very immediate, I think. I mean, you find images, and spots, and things that are impressive, but it's difficult to work out the overall vision.

You may be right. It's not an easy book to read, because you shouldn't try to read it from the beginning to the end, you should just dip into.

That's the way you believe it must be read?

Yes, just in a scattered way, that's the point. I talked a lot about it. It was astray, *non-linear*. There's also the expression *non-linear novel*, if you like. But you've got to read a *non-linear novel* in a *non-linear* way. You don't start at the beginning and try to impose the kind of expectations that you place on a conventional A+B+C narrative. That book is interesting, you should read it like a newspaper. When we read a newspaper, we don't start at the top letter, we work through it. You read it in a mosaic-like way, don't you? That's the way you read it. *The Atrocity Exhibition* is

going to be made into a CD-ROM. The man who's doing it knew that I started writing it in 1966 or something, a long time ago, long before anybody ever thought of CD-ROMs. And he said the book is a CD-ROM novel written twenty-five years before CD-ROMs, because it's not really straight line, you can go any direction you like. That's what CD-ROMs are good at. You should read it like that: open the pages and wait for something interesting. If nothing interests you, forget it.

Do you think that this idea of *non-linear* writing can be somehow similar to the non-Euclidean geometry asserted by some surrealist painters, like Max Ernst? I mean, the idea of subverting something that was all too fixed and all too conventional?

You put it well, that's exactly the object of it. I'm not saying that I want every novel to be written like *The Atrocity Exhibition*. But once in a while it's useful. I think each writer should write a book in a *non-linear* style, because our brains tend to conventionalise everything. The brain wants to be able to quickly understand what's going on in the world, so it imposes certain conventional views. And that's the problem. Our brain doesn't really like novelty, because novelty is unsettled. You can see it in small children. They don't really like novelty, even if you think they love it. If you ask: "Shall we go to the circus?", they answer: "YES!!!", and get all excited. As a matter of fact they love the circus for one hour, or two hours; but in their ordinary lives, children are very unsettled if something very different happens. They hate too much change, they like everything to be the same. And the brain of some adults is the same. We like everything to be the same, that way we feel reassured. [Pointing at the walls] The walls are white rectangles. My brain tells me:

“They are walls, relax. They are objects. [Pointing at the sofa] Relax, it’s a sofa”. So, what *The Atrocity Exhibition* does is to say: “Wait a minute”. You know, it’s like those toys we call kaleidoscopes: they are all of glass, you can shake them, you look through them and you suddenly see new patterns. *The Atrocity Exhibition* is like a kaleidoscope you could shake and then you can see everything new, in a fresh way, as if for the first time. I think it is very useful. A lot of ideas I’ve written about are in *The Atrocity Exhibition*.

So you think that the reader has an important role in recreating what you wrote? I mean, the images, the frame.

Yes, the reader can arrange it in every way he or she likes. It’s set more like reality. You know what you can feel when you visit a strange city. Everything is very confusing, totally confusing. You can’t make sense of anything. Well, when you’ve lived in a place for a long time, you think: “How the hell did I find this place confusing? It’s so obvious!” It’s like London for me. I’ve been going there for nearly fifty years. I remember when I first came to London I was so amazed and now I’m no longer. But it is necessary to break through all those conventions.

It’s the same breakthrough you wanted to produce in science fiction. It was something fixed, those were the rules of the game and you decided to subvert them.

Certainly true, absolutely! I mean, some people of course – people inside science fiction – when I supposed to have been writing sci-fi, kept saying: “Ballard isn’t really writing science fiction”. Well, I’m not sure how much I did really write it, even

in the early days, it's difficult to say. I've always been interested in science. It's just that the mainstream novel has not been interested in science, in popular science.

When you wrote *The Atrocity Exhibition* it was a great surprise for everybody, because it was an unusual literary work. Would you like to surprise again your reading public and disappoint their expectations as you did in the past?

Yes, but I've got the feeling I'm too old. I don't know if I'm capable of writing another book like that. It's something you can do when your mind is clearer. But maybe I will, who knows? ■

Work Cited

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