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LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES



Special Issue
**Ballard's Island:
Histories, Modernities and Materialities**

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Introduction

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Abstract:

This special issue brings together contributions from cultural geographers, design historians and literary scholars analysing J.G. Ballard's 1974 novel *Concrete Island* (Ballard 2008), in order to situate it within its historical and political contexts and to consider its relevance to contemporary debates on architecture, landscape and cultural practice. Separately and together, the articles gathered here, inter alia, trace the literary genealogies of the novel; illuminate the historical and political contexts that the novel comments on; explicate the ambivalences of the various discursive and technological modernities acting within the narrative; focus on the distinctive island materialities which Ballard sketches throughout the text, and explore the heightened embodied sensibilities through which its architect protagonist, Maitland, navigates this unintentional landscape. In so doing, the articles collected here advance new readings of the novel that build on the extant Ballard literature, and the special issue as a whole reasserts the prominence of *Concrete Island* within the wider contexts of Ballard's career and the culture of the period in which he was writing. We conclude by suggesting that Ballard's novel presents us with an anamorphic portrait that complicates and strains contemporaneous narratives of English modernity, consumer culture and technological progress.

Keywords: J.G. Ballard; *Concrete Island*; history; modernity; materiality

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Cover image (Figure 1): Ultimate City #2 (from the series Future Ruins) © Michelle Lord, reproduced with permission.

Introduction

Why a special issue on J.G. Ballard now, and why *Concrete Island* ([1974] 2008) in particular? There is no shortage of scholarship on Ballard, and while in some ways he remains a difficult figure to locate within the canon of twentieth-century literature, the question of whether he deserves to be included in this canon – and what his work contributes to it – has, within the broad bounds of critical disagreement, been settled for some time. Surely we can be confident in our understanding of the technologically saturated landscapes that feature in his writing, and the analytical purchase he grants us on comprehending the social, political and psychological pathologies undergirding them? Ballard is an adept and prescient chronicler of the libidinal implications of the mundane but epoch-defining technologies of the twentieth century; what else is there to know, at this point? And yet, there is a danger that Ballard's work has become too familiar to us, that his critical reception has hardened into a consensus that runs the risk of domesticating the extremities and complexities of his original texts, as well as their provocations to think differently about the social worlds within which we live.

This is an observation that applies to Ballard's work in general but it is of particular relevance to *Concrete Island*. The continued notoriety of *Crash* ([1973] 1995) and the renewed interest in *High-Rise* ([1975] 2005) as a consequence of Ben Wheatley's recent film adaptation of that text (2015) could easily lead to the middle entry in the 'concrete and steel' trilogy being relegated in both critical and popular appraisals and regarded as the least interesting of the three short novels Ballard produced towards the beginning of the 1970s. It is our belief that such a demotion would be a mistake, and our hope that this special issue of *Literary Geographies* will help prevent such an eventuality coming to pass. Regarded with the hindsight afforded us by Ballard's death in 2009, it is possible, when examining *Concrete Island* within the wider context of a career spent mining the irrationalism of modern Western civilisation, to assert quite clearly that this is in no way a minor text. Indeed, while *Crash* and *The Atrocity Exhibition* ([1970] 2006a) continue to attract critical attention as the most arresting entries in Ballard's *oeuvre*, and his popular readership continues to develop due to the fame of *Empire of the Sun* ([1984] 2014a) and the success of the late novels *Cocaine Nights* ([1996] 2014b), *Super-Cannes* ([2000] 2014c) and *Millennium People* ([2003] 2014d), the 1974 novel about an architect isolated on an island formed by the intersection of the Westway and M4 motorways arguably reflects Ballard's spatial imaginary in its most distilled, intelligent and perplexing form. As Andrzej Gasiorek has argued, though at the outset of *Concrete Island* the titular location 'appear[s...] to be a desolate non-place', it ultimately 'turn[s] out to be a historical and social site' (2005: 120). This is an appraisal we agree with, and – through a wide variety of perspectives from critics working in numerous fields – the collection of articles that follows this introduction aims to provide additional explanations as to how and why it is the case.

In line with the founding aspirations of *Literary Geographies* to engage scholars across different disciplines in creative dialogue (Hones et al. 2015), the writers gathered here come from different areas of the humanities and social sciences. We are assembled in order to engage in an exchange of ideas on *Concrete Island*, situate it within its historical

contexts and locate its resonances for contemporary debates on landscape, the built environment and social practice. We present articles from design historians, literary scholars and cultural geographers who themselves work outside these disciplines using writings by, amongst others, architects, philosophers and sociologists. Through this combination of perspectives, we hope to advance new readings of the novel that are of interest to Ballard scholars and literary geographers alike. The special issue aims to offer a kaleidoscopic collection of articles with overlapping concerns and intersecting themes, yet with distinctive positions on the novel and Ballard more generally. Above all, the special issue aims to reaffirm Ballard's position as a radically unsettling observer of twentieth-century society by understanding and reasserting the prominence that *Concrete Island* deserves within the wider contexts of Ballard's career and the culture of the period in which he was writing.

Rather than introducing each article individually in a linear sequence, in this introduction we will propose some points of connection between individual articles and leave readers to assemble their own patterns as they work through the special issue. There is an interweaving of temporal and spatial elements in many of the debates that reverberate across different articles. In terms of temporality, we think of certain articles telling us of the island's different histories, through its various literary and cultural genealogies, not to mention the complexities and ambivalences of the island's disparate modernities; in terms of spatiality, we seek to understand the distinctive island materialities with which Ballard confronts the reader in his novel, particularly through the embodied sensibilities of its architect protagonist. We touch briefly on each of these in this editorial introduction, before concluding with our own suggestions of strategies or methods for how this novel might be approached analytically, drawing on the notion of anamorphosis as one way of understanding the potency of Ballard's strategies for disembowelling the logics and narratives of English modernity.

Histories

Concrete Island's histories work in different ways. We can alternately position the novel's characters with respect to their own pasts, situate the novel in relation to its literary forebears and locate the setting of the novel discursively within its wider historical and political moment, tracing the remnants of that past in the landscapes it represents. In a recent article Christopher Beckett (2015) interweaves narrative and biographical tropes in order to suggest that the external ruination of the island corresponds with the inner journey of the protagonist Robert Maitland. Indeed, Ballard guides us in this direction, oscillating between descriptions of Maitland's relationships with his wife and lover, and memories of his lonely suburban upbringing ([1974] 2008). This has led Michel Delville to characterise the protagonist's narrative arc as 'more or less dictated to him by reminiscences of his childhood, on the one hand, and by a confrontation with the subconscious energies of his inner self, on the other' (1998: 43). Such a reading provides a link to Ballard's earlier agenda of using science fiction (sf) novels to explore his signature notion of 'inner space'.

Certainly, it is helpful to locate *Concrete Island* within the broader context of Ballard's *oeuvre*, as contributors do throughout this special issue. Jeannette Baxter suggestively sets the abrasiveness of visual imagery in *Crash* against that of *Concrete Island*, which seems muted by comparison. Jarrad Keyes draws a portrait of *Concrete Island* as a companion piece to *High-Rise*, in its prefiguring of the changing social and economic geographies of contemporary London articulated at greater length in the latter novel. More generally, *Concrete Island* is placed conceptually as well as chronologically as the pivot between *Crash* and *High-Rise* in Keyes's thesis on Ballard's use of space as an heuristic for apprehending the enmeshment of mobility, technology and subjectivity in capitalist societies, and the drift from civic urban forms to the suburban dynamics satirised in Ballard's later novels. Elsewhere in this special issue, Alexander Beaumont reads *Concrete Island* alongside the earlier short story 'The Terminal Beach' ([1964] 2006b) in order to trace the complexities of the role new technologies played in the development of British statecraft and governance in the postwar period.

The link between *Concrete Island* and Ballard's earlier fiction raises the question of this novel's literary genealogies, with individual articles finding resonances with the work of other authors. In terms of other literary fictions with which *Concrete Island* engages, Ballard himself noted his starting point of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* ([1719] 2008) in his introduction to the novel (Ballard [1974] 2008: 3). Indeed, Defoe's Robinson has been a staple of much commentary on the novel since, such as Simon Sellars's location of the novel within a longer lineage of 'inverted Crusoeism' in Ballard's work, indicating a tense fluctuation between civilising and de-civilising strategies in Ballard's protagonists (2012: 234; see also Delville 1998: 42). In this special issue, Richard Brown complicates the Crusoe benchmark further, suggesting instead that Ballard is working intertextually and subversively to present a Crusoe of the Kafkaesque. Baxter (this special issue) also finds in *Concrete Island* similarities with Kafka's short story 'The Burrow' ([1931] 1961), in the functioning of listening in both texts as a sense which is simultaneously a survival strategy and a source of heightened anxiety.

The intertextual resonances move beyond literary points of comparison into engagements with contemporaneous political discourses, sociological debates and cultural texts. Beaumont's article reads *Concrete Island* as part of a longer rejoinder within Ballard's work to the political and military strategies underwriting Harold Wilson's famous 'white heat of technology' speech in 1963 – a connection also noted by Gasiorek in his study (2005: 108) – and what these strategies tell us about the UK's cultural positioning in the postwar period. Keyes positions the novel against the 1973 monograph *The Country and the City* by Raymond Williams ([1973] 2016), arguing that Ballard's analysis transcends Williams's rural and urban dichotomy to diagnose the interstitial zones on the edges of both city and countryside that have been increasingly recognised as important sociological sites (Gandy 2016; Jorgensen and Tylecote 2007; Martin 2014). Craig Martin's article reads *Concrete Island* alongside the 1972 book *Adhocism*, by Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, and its advocacy of an approach to design which 'involves using an available system in a new way to solve a problem quickly and efficiently' (2013: iv). This book is used by Martin as a foil to consider Maitland's re-appropriation of mass-

produced and high-status consumer goods, broken down and reassembled into different uses to satisfy his physical needs, rather than emotional desires.

Jencks and Silver's book was a polemical piece which sought to capture a moment in aesthetic theory and design history, in which found objects, brought together in creative collages, reconstituted what we might conceive of as art, architecture and sculpture. It stood in contrast to the type of architecture exemplified in the work of Jean Balladur, the French architect whose development in the South of France, La Grande Motte, Ballard mentions twice in *Concrete Island*. In his article, Richard Brown uses this comparison to open out a discussion of architecture and the architectural as figured in the novel. In previous Ballardian commentary, Groes (2012) has used Rem Koolhaas's provocative 'Junkspace' essay (2002) to draw out the architectural and landscape dynamics of *Concrete Island*, but here Sue Robertson delves further back into Koolhaas's archive to highlight points of analytical comparison between Ballard's island and Koolhaas's contemporaneous architecture of enclosure in his *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture* project. In addition, Robertson points to the affinities between the writings of Rosalind Krauss in the 1970s – most notably her concept of the 'expanded field' which describes the decentring of traditions of sculpture being found fixed to gallery plinths (1979) – and the destabilising aesthetics of Ballardian landscapes. At the time of *Concrete Island*, Ballard described the Westway motorway as 'a motion sculpture beautifully constructed and designed' (Orr [1974] 2012: 66); Robertson's article brings Ballard's novel and the history of the Westway into dialogue to illuminate competing claims on that spatial form and territory. Both Keyes and Robertson read *Concrete Island* alongside town planning treatises at the time and in previous decades; whether in reference to Patrick Abercrombie's Plan (Robertson, this special issue) or Metroland – the developing suburban railway network north of London (Keyes, this special issue) – *Concrete Island* alludes to ever-present questions about the overheated growth of the English and British capital within UK regional planning more generally.

Modernities

Concrete Island is located, to use Gasiorek's word, in the political 'interregnum' between the two administrations conventionally understood as the most radically reforming of the British postwar era (2005: 107): namely Clement Attlee's 1945 Labour government and Margaret Thatcher's 1979 Conservative administration. By virtue of this historical situation, the novel captures what Groes terms 'the texture of modernity', characterised in the methods by which 'the dominating technology of concrete reshapes social structures and relationships in monstrous, dehumanized and Americanized ways' (2012: 124). At the most structural level, *Concrete Island* is a novel which, as Beaumont suggests in his analysis of Ballard's tense relationship with English modernity, explicates the logics and politics of the warfare state and confounds conventional historical accounts of this moment as one of post-imperial decline, in tandem with earlier Ballard texts such as 'The Terminal Beach'. Beaumont's analysis moves beyond previous accounts of Ballard as a disenchanting presence in the English tradition (Tew 2013), and rather positions him as a shrewd observer of contemporary England and its recent sociopolitical past.

The consumer culture rhetorically shaped within a UK context by Harold Wilson's 'white heat of technology' speech, and underwritten by the redeployment of technological innovations from the nuclear industries (Beaumont, this special issue), was to seed a different kind of (sub)urban dynamic in early 1970s England. Drawing on Lefebvre's contemporaneous critical urban writings ([1970] 2003), Keyes argues that *Concrete Island* marks a significant moment in Ballard's own spatial thought, moving away from the city as a generator of social distinction and interaction to a more amorphous and dispersed physical form. In his paper, Keyes draws attention to Ballard's 'figurative distancing' strategies when positioning London throughout the novel (and also the subsequent *High-Rise* and his later work). The traditional roles of the city become subverted in this period through new economic cycles of real estate speculation and gentrification, with leftover spaces like Ballard's traffic island operationalised as 'a dumping-ground for the abandoned remnants of a no longer functional technology' (Gasiorek 2005: 113; also illustrated by figure 2). This was part of the period in which Ballard charts 'the changing economic geography of the container, which in turn affects the physical geography of cities as witnessed in the high rise development' (Keyes, this special issue). It was, then, a historical moment of mass (auto)mobility, bound up in the politics of the 1973 oil crisis, which marked the splintering of the urban form (Urry 2007).



Figure 2: Ultimate City #1 (from the series Future Ruins)
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The splintering of the urban form indicates, as Craig Martin notes in his article, a widespread disenchantment with the projects of modernity; *Concrete Island* is precise in its evocation of the aridity of modernity's promise. The traffic island shows us the 'the interstices of the new economy' (Luckhurst 1997: 136) and the grubby underside of Harold Wilson's 'white heat' rhetoric. The novel speaks of disillusionment with the material objects of prosperity that Maitland carries with him onto the island, yet imbues these objects with new possibilities by dramatising the character's survival through a needs-based adaptation of his high-status possessions in this new milieu. In this, as both Keyes and Martin argue, *Concrete Island* may be thought of as a critique of advanced capitalism and its wasting of entire environments, as signified in the dilapidated dwelling places, ruined cinemas and air-raid shelters that are occupied by the main characters on the island, and the rusting artefacts that surround them.

These artefacts and environments combine to form what Jeannette Baxter identifies in her article as 'the visual archive of an exhausted future', laid alongside 'the visual archive of the forgotten past'. At the very least this points to the dual perspective of Ballard's *Concrete Island*: for an author more commonly associated with the ability to anticipate the social implications of technological change, his novel powerfully offers analytical purchase on the cultural and political dynamics of the near past. The objects and spaces in the island are mnemonic devices in the landscape that signify the disenchanted interior lives of the main characters. The island signifies what Joanne Murray has termed 'a persistence of the recent past into the present through aftermath aesthetics' (2014: 92); such a traumatic environment requires a survival mode amongst its individual inhabitants, and the adoption of 'new ways of dwelling' (Robertson, this special issue) that are dependent on the 'discarded material culture of the island' (Martin, this special issue; also illustrated by figure 3). Martin neatly captures the multiple temporalities within which Maitland operates on the island. Thus, Ballard's protagonist draws on an easy familiarity with the materialities of postwar consumer culture: lacking the original Crusoe's agricultural knowledge, Maitland 'knows the workings of the Jaguar and the other cars on the island. He can cultivate them instead'. However, he also reaches back into a different form of engagement with material things as 'a refutation of high modernism', and instead replicates 'longer traditions of architecture, design and making that often approached specific problems through a localised method, driven by the resources to hand and the immediacy of need' (Martin, this special issue).

As Beaumont argues, *Concrete Island* dissects the environments of modernity that are saturated with technologies and yet curiously disempowering; the novel defamiliarises those landscapes that 'represent a fantasy of technology after technicity'. In this, there is an echo of Luckhurst's diagnosis of 'a kind of technological uncanny' in this novel (1997: 135). Maitland's challenge, and Ballard's aim, is in reanimating these objects and engaging their surroundings in order to open up our understanding of their potentialities, and to recognise the significance of '*technē*' as a form of revelation which makes truth appear in the world' (Beaumont, this special issue). These are aims in which the material fabric of the island plays a significant part.

Materialities

The island can be defined as 'a quasi-animate presence' (Gasiorek 2005: 112), in which the agency of the nonhuman and material elements assumes an equivalence to the actions of the human characters. Ballard, writing in advance of philosophers of science and technology such as Bruno Latour (2005), is outlining an actor-network in *Concrete Island* that is shaped as much by designed elements in asphalt, concrete and steel, as well as its wild vegetation, as it is by the intentions of Maitland, Proctor or Jane Sheppard. Material objects, such as crushed cars, have a 'communicative capacity' in this novel (Martin, this special issue). For Martin, the novel argues for a different understanding of the detritus of disposable culture, where progressive qualities might be activated in spite of their fetishized statuses as commodities within which the social forces behind their production are masked. By avoiding their commodity form, we can glimpse in the wreckage of the island not so much technological objects as a rediscovery of technology as a form of instrumental knowledge (Beaumont, this special issue). *Concrete Island*, for Martin, offers us an improvised landscape in which every artefact or element can be repurposed to become something else. This is a world in which the water that washes the car windscreen can become a reservoir for Maitland, and where an 'exhaust pipe *contains* the potential crutch', when needed. Objects on the island are transformative in their potential uses for Maitland and, for Martin, this is where *Concrete Island* retains a radical edge over the design theories of Jencks and Silver's *Adhocism* (2013): Ballard's work 'offers a greater sense of the invisible relations that go into the life-world of the island's detritus [...] Ballard begins to expose the invisible relations of production that are often disguised in the context of the consumer society'.

The repurposing of manmade objects is only part of the story; the 'natural' elements of the island also hold significance in advancing the narrative. 'I prefer concrete to meadow', Ballard suggested in an interview at the time of *Concrete Island* (Orr [1974] 2012: 65); however, one might question this provocation in light of the evidence in the novel itself, where the grass is almost a complete character. As Baxter notes (this special issue), 'Ballard's anthropomorphic descriptions of the grass signal a collapse in the solidity of boundaries between internal and external, human and nonhuman, conscious and unconscious'. The organic elements of the island take their place in the composition of Maitland's inner space, that residing thread of Ballard's fiction. Robertson's article explicates this insight, focusing an analysis on the place of the grass as a 'flickering palimpsest'. Robertson figures the grass in an extended metaphor as an ocean that connotes a landscape which is both vital and vibrant, and as mobile in its meanings as the interior thoughts of Maitland are subject to change. The grass inscribes a point of contrast with the overwritten landscapes of commerce and industrial planning, and the spatial stories they inculcate. Rather, attention to these elements returns the analytical focus to the embodied apprehension of space and the phenomenology of place, as explored throughout the collection by several of our contributors.



Figure 3: Ultimate City #3 (from the series Future Ruins)
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For Brown, the 'critically neglected theme of embodiment' in the novel prompts a richer understanding of the island environment. The understanding of space in embodied terms, and through multi-sensual ways, is a recurrent theme in several articles. In his contribution, Keyes observes the neo-organicist neurological metaphor in Ballard's writing at this time, most fully developed in his next novel *High-Rise*. In *Concrete Island*, Robertson notes, there are 'many direct connections between the grass and parts of Maitland's body: his waist and hands, his face and feet. These are parts of the body with high levels of nerve endings, as Ballard, who studied medicine, would know'. In her reading, 'it is the tactile sense that dominates and Maitland's sensing body receives messages from the grass': again, we have a sense of the communicative capacities of the nonhuman, apprehended in haptic ways. In her discussion, Robertson also makes the connection between Ballard's thinking and French architects Décosterd & Rahm's project of 'a sensual "endocrine architecture" that could be seen and felt on the skin and breathed in', which stands 'in opposition to the conventional understanding of what architecture is and expands the field to what it may be'.

Robertson describes an architectural practice which is deliberate in its effects, using light and atmospheric interventions to act on the human body. In this sense, the novel activates a perception of the built environment that, as Brown reminds us in his article,

was identified by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' ([1936] 1999). Towards the conclusion of his essay, Benjamin distinguishes between the importance of sight and touch to our qualitative experience of architecture. He goes on to argue that '[t]actile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception' (233). Benjamin was discussing the architectural at this point in this essay, but his thesis holds too for the wider question of materialities and the declension of sight: *Concrete Island* is replete with occurrences, most especially in the discussion of the grass but in other objects too, wherein Ballard makes 'historical and internal conditions *felt*' (Robertson, this special issue) in a more potent way than descriptions of the visual practices of the characters would allow.

In this journal, Sheila Hones (2015) has argued that the power of visualisations in literary geography has marginalised other sensual means of apprehending texts, such as the aural: it is our argument too that the visual metaphors we use when approaching Ballard's novel must be supplemented by a fuller attention, utilizing the range of sensibilities and sensualities at play in the text. Baxter provides just such an approach in her article on the richness of analysis that will result from listening to the island, its landscape, its histories and its characters. Connecting Ballard's thought with a relatively little known essay by André Breton, 'Silence is Golden', Baxter argues for a reading of *Concrete Island* with heightened awareness of its 'tensions between seeing and hearing'. For Baxter, Ballard's novel is alive with sounds, of technologies (malfunctioning) and humans (adapting), that prime the reader in ways which precede Ballard's visual clues:

Concrete Island calls for an act of close reading that is also an act of close listening, one that demands, as Nancy puts it, a 'listening subject' who is attuned to variations in 'accent, tone, timbre, resonance, and sound' (2007: 3) whilst also being alive to the tensions and instabilities of listening.

Drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy of subjectivity (2007), which moves from notions of the phenomenological subject, understood in visual terms, to the resonant subject, understood in terms of its sonorities, Baxter reorients our perception of the novel. This is important not only for understanding its characters' inner spaces, but also in that an increased aural sensibility 'makes room for history to sound' through the multiple artefacts and people that animate and enact the island. Thinking about how Ballard makes each of these sound and resound allows a fuller knowledge of the histories they carry with them:

Prompting associative auditory connections between exploding tyres and exploding bombs, or the warning sounds of car horns and the warning sounds of air-raid sirens, Ballard's soundscape not only does violence to our understanding of history by restoring sound to World War II histories that had otherwise been rendered inaudible and therefore forgotten; it also diminishes the temporal, psychological and imaginative distances between the listening subject and historical experience (Baxter, this special issue).

This focus on the listening subject does not elide the importance of visual strategies in maintaining memories of recent (and traumatic) histories, but rather offers an attempt to bring our multiple sensibilities into closer contact with one another to greater analytical effect; as Baxter argues, 'hearing leads to seeing differently'.

Approaching the Island

The desire to see this novel differently, from fresh perspectives, animates the articles in this collection. Yet, to be sure, there are gaps in the discussion. One obvious absence is a sustained analysis of gender: Jane regularly navigates between the island and the city and this affords her character a certain ambiguity in the novel, but does Ballard give us enough of her story to work with? Similarly, there is more work to be done connecting questions of the reinscription of class and status in the island with wider questions of national identity. Elsewhere, Sellars (2012) has written perceptively of the novel as part of a longer strand in Ballard's work of micro-national dynamics, which opens up a consideration of the uncertain notions of sovereignty throughout his *oeuvre* (Luckhurst 1997). We leave it to others to take these questions further. Nonetheless, we hope to have responded to the efficacy of the novel itself in opening up new analyses; Ballard's text is, at the very least, notable for its capacity to reveal original perspectives on the social worlds and spatial cultures it describes. As Groes suggests, Ballard's work has the considerable virtue of 'a genuine interest in the imaginative potential of these new spaces, while the trajectories of the novels themselves point out the futility [...] of these utopian projects' (2012: 139). Nowhere is this more evident than in *Concrete Island*.

Tactically, Ballard's writing affords different perspectives on the social through its positioning at the latter's extremities, allowing us to notice elements of its composition out of the corner of our eyes. *Concrete Island* works its way into the underside of the asphalt and its elaborate signalling, in order to gain a different sense of the motorway and its social meanings (Beckett 2015); in so doing, it reveals a new line of sight, or 'urban parallax' (Keyes, this special issue). To extend this visual metaphor, what Ballard offers us in this novel is an anamorphosis that punctures the meaning of a technologically saturated culture underwritten by systemic patterns of mass consumption and mobility. Here we echo Slavoj Žižek's description of the art tradition wherein an artwork incorporates an 'element that, when viewed straightforwardly, remains a meaningless stain, but which, as soon as we look at the picture from a precisely determined lateral perspective, all of a sudden acquires well-known contours' (Žižek 1992: 90). In his description of this tradition Žižek draws on Lacan's understanding of the anamorphosis, which in turn is based on Hans Holbein's painting 'The Ambassadors' (1533). In this artwork, a portrait of two dignitaries and their assorted artefacts, connoting wealth and righteousness, is distorted from within by an image in the foreground; looking awry at the portrait from a particular spatial point reveals this to be a skull, 'the classic theme of *vanitas*' (Lacan 1992: 135). Certainly, the vanities of Maitland are shown up within Ballard's novel, not least in the internal journey the character makes in acknowledging, addressing and adapting to them in his new situation within the uncanny landscape of the

concrete island. 'The ground of the established, familiar signification opens up', Žižek writes, and 'we find ourselves in a realm of total ambiguity' (1992: 91). This is the effect of the anamorphosis, with its capacity to open out 'a chasm of non-sense gaping in the midst of ideological meaning' (Žižek 1989: 100). And such an analysis can be transposed to offer a description of the effects of *Concrete Island* itself, with the anamorphosis a tidy analogy of Ballard's literary strategies and analytical approach to his subjects. It approximates in aesthetic terms Maitland's 'feverish consciousness', which 'distorts the island', as Tew identifies in his reading of the novel (2008: 113).

Certainly, Ballard's sly wit in composing this *mise-en-scène* – expressing the social logics of advanced capitalism through the incorporation of its distorted artefacts, elements and landscapes – echoes Holbein's conceit of disrupting the smooth representations of status in 'The Ambassadors'. In his 1995 introduction to *Crash*, Ballard famously proposed that in the external world the 'fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality' (1995: 4). In *Concrete Island*, he inserts the reality through an anamorphosis that stains and strains the narratives of English modernity, by distorting its picture of technological innovation, continual leisure and social progress, and through an attention on the urban that is unforgiving because of its patient precision.

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