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# A 'CLOCK LESS URGENT'

Work, Leisure and Time  
in J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned  
World* and *Vermilion Sands*

## ABSTRACT

This article proposes that the deliberate complication of time in J. G. Ballard's early fiction—specifically *Vermilion Sands* and *The Drowned World*—responds to a certain shift in mid-twentieth-century evaluations of work and leisure. It suggests that the characters who populate Ballard's early fictions can be read as displaced and disorientated late-capitalist subjects, whose experience of time is transformed by the 'weird' temporality of the landscapes in which they find themselves. Written at a time when many were concerned about a

post-industrial future and the resulting "sudden onrush of leisure," Ballard's fictions go beyond a simple critique of what an all-permissive leisure society might look like. Instead, they prod and unsettle the notion of linear time and, by doing so, force us to confront the essential weirdness behind what we consider to be the 'normal' experience of time.

KEY WORDS: J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World*, *Vermilion Sands*, work, leisure, time

## INTRODUCTION

All my own fiction could be regarded as an attempt to escape from time—or, more exactly, from linear time, as it seems to me . . . the most significant relationships and experiences of our lives are intelligible only in non-linear terms.

—J. G. Ballard<sup>2</sup>

During the mid-twentieth century, across the U.S. and western Europe, there were a number of critical attempts to re-examine the traditional ideas, assumptions, and attitudes associated with work and leisure. Broadly speaking, many countries in the political West, and especially the U.S., were enjoying post-war economic booms in which productivity had risen while unemployment had been reduced during a period Eric Hobsbawm famously referred to as the “Golden Age of Capitalism.”<sup>3</sup> The rise of automation began to change the way the manufacturing industries functioned; machines were introduced in major areas of industry and proved to be more cost-effective and more efficient than the older methods that relied on manual labour. This provoked a variety of responses from the media, trade unions, academic communities, and a number of radical artist groups. These responses varied: some were optimistic or excited, others were anxious and fearful. Some commentators were enthusiastic about the prospect of less work, and predicted that machines would all but eradicate the need for human toil, while many were far more concerned about the potential excess of leisure-time and how this might affect “the cultivation of the self.”<sup>4</sup>

In the U.S., David Riesman’s work, most notably *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), and the equally important collection of essays *Abundance for What?* (1964), was a significant example of a trend that saw an increasing number of academics and theorists critically engage with the concepts of work and leisure. Riesman became associated with what came to be known as the “post-industrial society”

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2 J. G. Ballard, “Images of the Future (Comments on Some Recent Experiments),” *The Papers of J. G. Ballard*, ms88938/3/25 “Occasional Prose,” 1966. British Library, London.

3 See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Vintage, 1996).

4 Eric Larrabee and Rolf Meyerson, “Introduction,” in *Mass Leisure*, ed. Eric Larrabee and Rolf Meyerson (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1958), x.

school of thought, which predicted that the rise of automation would not only result in the privileging of leisure in everyday life but also “the creation of new wants,” leading to the “first step toward a better life and wider horizons of choice.”<sup>5</sup> While Riesman saw the inevitable increase in leisure-time as a positive phenomenon, he was still cautious about the “sudden onrush of leisure” that he claimed was already underway in the U.S. His concern lay in the idea that most people’s “education” had “not prepared them for this sudden onrush”—the “creation of new wants at their expense” was moving “faster than their ability to order and assimilate these wants,” echoing an idea John Kenneth Galbraith had postulated the same year in his study *The Affluent Society* (1958).<sup>6</sup>

In a similar vein to Riesman and Galbraith, Hannah Arendt in her study *The Human Condition* (1958) expressed her concern about the “advent of automation.”<sup>7</sup> She felt that the “modern age . . . carried with it a theoretical glorification of labor,” which “resulted in a factual transformation of the whole of society into a labouring society.”<sup>8</sup> Since automation promised to reduce the need to work, “[w]hat we are confronted with,” Arendt wrote, “is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse.”<sup>9</sup> Arendt’s vision of a post-industrial society is a disturbing one: the maladapted worker is thrust into an environment in which the normal work surroundings have been dismantled, and where the obligation to be productive—and the enjoyments to be had from that—is rendered obsolete; no longer is the modern subject governed by the usual time constraints that once structured everyday life. One outcome of this, Arendt suggests, is that the subject is likely to become increasingly conscious of the “cyclical movement” of life, that “endlessly repetitive” loop, which the activity of work had hitherto punctuated with a series of “end[s].”<sup>10</sup> Like Riesman, Arendt was troubled by the erasure of work from daily life since it would likely mean a difficult—and possibly harmful—recalibration of time.

One writer who became increasingly interested in these speculations and their potential psychological consequences was the science fiction writer J. G. Ballard. As Andrzej Gasiorek points out, science fiction “offered Ballard a way of exploring and perhaps coming to terms with the unprecedented scale of twentieth-century social and technological change, a way of grasping how and why human life had developed in the ways that it had.”<sup>11</sup> I suggest here that

5 David Riesman, “Leisure and Work in Postindustrial Society,” in *Abundance for What? and Other Essays* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 166.

6 Riesman, “Leisure and Work in Postindustrial Society,” 166. For Galbraith’s work, see *The Affluent Society and Other Writings, 1952–1967* (New York: Library of America, 2010).

7 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 4.

8 Arendt, 4–5.

9 Arendt, 4–5.

10 Arendt, 98.

11 Andrzej Gasiorek, *J. G. Ballard* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 9.

Ballard's assertions on the changing nature of time during the 1960s and his desire to "escape time" in his fictional narratives (in order to represent that change more faithfully) is bound up with a growing belief that, before long, the individual would have to adapt to a world in which leisure, rather than work, was the dominant activity. The problem here, which Arendt identifies, is that the individual-as-worker would not be ready for such an adjustment. Ballard would grow more suspicious of this idea later on in his career (as any real prospect of a technology-based leisure society diminished) but, in his early fiction, at least, he appears to explore this conceit seriously and, often, as a means to question the supposedly 'natural' order of late capitalism and industrial clock-time (i. e., the most recognisable form of 'linear time').

To examine these ideas more closely, I take two early works of fiction by Ballard, the collection of short stories *Vermilion Sands* (1971) and his first 'serious' novel *The Drowned World* (1962), and analyse the treatment of time in both, before arguing that these affectively unsettling works yield separate yet equally disturbing visions of a future in which the human subject fails to apprehend standardised, linear time. The essay concludes that the many peculiar characters who populate Ballard's early fiction might be better understood as late-capitalist subjects adapting to a new, 'weird' temporality, one that no longer abides by the rules of industrial clock-time. As Jordan S. Carroll and Alison Sperling write, weird temporalities are "moments in which timelines collide with one another," moments that "challenge linear narratives of time that present the future as the outcome of free, human choices."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, if Ballard's fiction insists upon anything, it is the notion that human choice and human experience are more contingent on man-made constructs (such as clock-time, work and leisure) than we often care to admit.

If we consider that *The Drowned World* and many of the stories in *Vermilion Sands* were written during the same period as Ballard's other well-known shorter works of fiction concerning the estrangement of time—for instance, "Chronopolis" (1961)—then we begin to see an obvious literary pre-occupation emerge in his early work, one that has yet to be fully explored from a critical perspective. As Simon Sellars points out, a "recurring theme" in Ballard's writing throughout the 1960s is "the idea of escaping or cheating time, precipitated by a period of psychic turmoil. Recording the Dalí-esque motif of stopped or 'melting' time, Ballard uses the symbolism of time (that is, the unit of measurement; clock time) as an arbitrary, man-made construct imposing order and control on the free reign and chaos of the unconscious."<sup>13</sup> As we shall see, it is the playing with, distorting, and complicating of time, on a narrative level that makes Ballard's fiction feel so weird and strange.

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12 Jordan S. Carroll and Alison Sperling, "Weird Temporalities: An Introduction," *Studies in the Fantastic* 9 (Summer/Fall 2020): 8–9.

13 Simon Sellars, "Introduction," in *Extreme Metaphors: Interviews with J. G. Ballard, 1967–2008*, ed. Dan O'Hara and Simon Sellars (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), xx.

## DELIBERATE REPETITIONS

One of the most notable characteristics of Ballard's early fiction—and perhaps its primary affective quality—is its *weirdness*. This becomes more obvious when we consider how indebted Ballard's work is to the Surrealist tradition, which, as Mark Fisher remarks, has a “predilection . . . for the weird.”<sup>14</sup> While many strange images and elaborately surreal tableaux appear throughout Ballard's early fiction (including several instances of ekphratic depictions of Surrealist paintings in the works), it is worth noting that his early fiction is not *superficially* weird; there is, we might sense, something strange and ambiguous happening at a deeper, structural level. The more you read Ballard's work, and the further you explore his unique fictional topography, the weirder the reading experience becomes. Often, there is a lurking sense you have come across various images, descriptions, or characters before. Anyone familiar with the English writer's work is likely to have experienced this feeling; Ballard's novels and short stories are made up of deliberate repetitions, echoes, visual recurrences, teasing suggestions of familiar figures, and some, as we shall see, share almost identical plotlines. If we agree with Fisher that the weird is “that *which does not belong*,”<sup>15</sup> and a feeling that produces a general “sensation of *wrongness*,” then it is easier to see why these repetitions, which bind Ballard's work together, are able to produce an unsettling reading experience. Whenever we encounter a repeated image or phrase in his work, it is difficult not to think back to previous iterations of the image or phrase. Yet, it is not the repeated image itself that is disturbing but, rather, the reader's encounter with its repetition. It is worth drawing attention to one part of Jonathan Culler's summary of Freud's 1919 essay on “The Uncanny,” in which he relates:

[t]he uncanny results not from being reminded of whatever it is that is being repeated but from glimpsing or being reminded of this repetition compulsion, which would be most likely to happen in cases where whatever is repeated appears particularly gratuitous or excessive, the result of no cause but a bizarre manifestation of repetition itself, as if for the sake of literary or rhetorical effect.<sup>16</sup>

While it is important not to conflate the weird and the uncanny (as Fisher points out), both are commonly instantiated via repetition. Ballard himself revealed his penchant for “deliberate repetition” in several interviews, while

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14 Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 11.

15 Fisher, 10 (emphasis in original).

16 Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), 264.

many literary critics continue to draw attention to the compulsive repetition that marks his work.<sup>17</sup>

Sellars gestures to the significance of repetition in Ballard's work when he writes that:

repetition is vitally important to [Ballard's] work (both in the fiction and in the interviews, and in the body of both combined), as a kind of linguistic hypertext that endlessly turns in on itself, erases itself and erects itself anew, providing no discernible start or end point—evading linear time ... — yet still providing familiar markers with which to orient itself.<sup>18</sup>

Andrzej Gasiorek identifies this repetition as a corollary of the short story form that Ballard enjoyed writing so much: many of his short stories, he observes, “return to abiding preoccupations, which they rework from alternative perspectives, as though trying to get at some tantalising truth that has still to be captured.”<sup>19</sup> The shorter fiction, Gasiorek writes, is a “laboratory for the exploration of themes to which Ballard returns again and again, both in later stories and in longer novels, and the reworking of themes—which occurs from yet another perspective . . .—is a major feature of all his writing.”<sup>20</sup> The image that emerges here concerns a writer, who endlessly—and unconsciously—returns, reworks, and acts out the same compulsions, the same desires, none of which are ever wholly satisfied, in an attempt to get at some kind of ‘truth.’ It is this double motion, of sameness yet difference, which evokes the weird in his works. This deliberate and continuous repetition, so central to Ballard's fictional enterprise, is what generates this effect and there is no text in all of Ballard's early fiction that produces this strange and subtle effect better than the short story collection *Vermilion Sands*, a collection deeply preoccupied with ideas to do with surplus leisure-time and play. As Jeanette Baxter remarks, “the notion of ‘play’ in *Vermilion Sands* translates into a disconcerting form of suspended animation. Locked into a lifestyle of compulsive yet empty reiteration—events, characters, images and motifs repeat obsessively and relentlessly across the nine stories—the vagrant community of Vermilion Sands is as displaced as time itself.”<sup>21</sup> The formal repetitions that make up *Vermilion Sands*, as Baxter suggests and as we shall see, are intimately bound up with the decadent lives of those residents, who populate this weird resort.

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17 Ballard quoted in Will Self, *Junk Mail* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995).

18 Sellars, “Introduction,” xx.

19 Gasiorek, 26.

20 Gasiorek, 26.

21 Jeanette Baxter, “Visions of Europe in Cocaine Nights and Super-Cannes,” in *J. G. Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Jeanette Baxter (London: Continuum, 2008), 95.

## VERMILION SANDS

As one of the weirdest—and most playful—works of fiction Ballard produced, *Vermilion Sands* (1971) is a collection of nine short stories that all take place in an “overlit desert resort,”<sup>22</sup> which, as Ballard notes in the Preface to the book, shares a number of similarities to the leisure resorts that were beginning to attract tourists from across the globe at the time of publication.<sup>23</sup> “Where is Vermilion Sands?” Ballard goes on to ask, before responding with signature irony:

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 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.<sup>24</sup>

In this sense, then, *Vermilion Sands* anticipates the themes found in Ballard’s later fiction, particularly *Cocaine Nights* (1996) and *Super-Cannes* (2000), which are two novels that take this notion of “work [as] the ultimate play, and play [as] the ultimate work” to its logical and most nightmarish extreme. The main difference between these novels and *Vermilion Sands*, however, lies in the fact that the surplus of leisure-time most inhabitants experience in Vermilion Sands only ends up breeding lassitude and listlessness. There is less suggestion it leads to anything more sinister or violent—as it does in *Cocaine Nights* and *Super-Cannes*.

The nine stories in *Vermilion Sands* were written over a fourteen-year period between 1956 and 1970 and some had featured individually in various magazines and science fiction journals before they were finally published together as a collection in 1971. The history of the text’s composition helps to explain why, at first glance, it appears so radically different to the other work Ballard produced in the early 70s. As he notes in the quotation at the beginning of this article, his main literary pursuit at this point was to write fiction that “attempt[ed] to escape from time—or, more exactly, from linear time.” The final result of this pursuit was the splintered, fragmented form of *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), which, both formally and tonally, bears almost no

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22 Ballard, “Preface,” in *Vermilion Sands* (London: Phoenix, 1992), 9.

23 Ballard, “Preface,” 8.

24 Ballard, 8–9.

resemblance to the gaudiness of *Vermilion Sands*, a text that, as Ballard himself remarked, “celebrates the neglected virtues of the glossy, lurid and bizarre.”<sup>25</sup> This aesthetic style feels particularly out-of-place, especially when we consider that Ballard’s next published novel would be *Crash* (1973). While *Vermilion Sands* adumbrates many of the major themes that Ballard goes on to explore and develop in his late fiction, the collection still feels like ‘early’ Ballard—not least because it harnesses so many “soft science fictional” and fantasy tropes.<sup>26</sup>

It is fitting, then, that a work that sits so awkwardly within the chronology of Ballard’s writing is itself deeply concerned with the notion of atemporality and the distortion of time. While Ballard’s introduction tells us that “the skies are larger, the air more generous, the clock less urgent,”<sup>27</sup> we soon learn within the stories themselves that this odd lack of urgency has something to do with the mysterious “Recess,” which, as the narrator of “Prima Belladonna” mentions, was a period in which there was a “world slump of boredom, lethargy and high summer” that lasted “ten unforgettable years.”<sup>28</sup> During the Recess, in which several of the stories are set, this “one-time playground of movie stars, delinquent heiresses and eccentric cosmopolites” all but grinds to a halt.<sup>29</sup> While people still have occupations, there is no real need to work, as the protagonist of “Prima Belladonna” explains.<sup>30</sup> The protagonist himself only “put[s] a couple of hours in at the shop each morning” but is mainly kept busy by “turning the beer” for himself and his friends: “[w]e spent most of our time in those days,” he mentions, “on the balcony of my apartment off Beach Drive, drinking beer.”<sup>31</sup> Aside from the narrator and protagonist of “Prima Belladonna,” most of the narrators and protagonists in the *Vermilion Sands* stories are either artists or in some way connected to the arts, although most, we are told, have stopped working some time ago:

Almost all the studios . . . are occupied by painters and poets—the majority abstract and non-productive. Most of us were suffering from various degrees of beach fatigue, that chronic malaise which exiles the victim to a limbo of endless sunbathing, dark glasses and afternoon terraces.<sup>32</sup>

So fatigued is the protagonist of “Studio 5, The Stars” (who is editor of an unprofitable, avant-garde poetry magazine) that he no longer bothers to write

25 Ballard, 9.

26 D. Harlan Wilson, *J. G. Ballard* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

27 Ballard, 9.

28 Ballard, *Vermilion Sands*, 31.

29 Ballard, 185.

30 Ballard, 31.

31 Ballard, 31.

32 Ballard, 147.



verse. Instead, he and his friends, who make up the list of contributors, use “verse-transcribers” or “vt set[s]”: “I used to write a fair amount myself years ago, but the impulse faded as soon as I could afford a vt set. In the old days a poet had to sacrifice himself in order to master his medium. Now that technical mastery is simply a question of pushing a button, selecting metre, rhyme, assonance on a dial, there’s no need for sacrifice . . . ”<sup>33</sup>

The idea that the little work that is done in *Vermilion Sands* requires only the minimum of effort is obviously an amusing one but one that, as Gasiorek is right to point out, contains a kernel of seriousness for the rather insipid and lethargic male characters, who drift through this landscape. “In this future,” he writes:

men have been made redundant in more ways than one; it is not only that the field of work, such a key determinant of that identity, now lies permanently fallow, but also that a life of enforced leisure has made them spectators of their own lives. The twist here is that a world given over to leisure takes away the traditional male *raison d'être* and reveals that masculinity, bereft of the public props out of which it is constructed, is a redundant product, fit only for the post-technological scrap heap.<sup>34</sup>

Many stories share similar narrative plotlines, most of which are driven by male desire. For instance, the protagonists in both “Say Goodbye to the Wind” and “Studio 5, The Stars” take an unusual interest in their respective neighbours and both narratives are driven forward by the protagonist’s quest to find out more about their neighbours, to whom they are clearly attracted. If residing outside of clock-time intensifies certain obsessions, as most of the stories suggest, then it also makes it harder to depart from the place in which those obsessions are tolerated and permitted. What we end up with is a leisure resort populated by a host of wealthy, neurotic and restless characters, many of whom cannot bring themselves to leave *Vermilion Sands*. The difficulty of leaving an environment, one that not only allows but encourages one to act out their desires while living a relatively comfortable mode of existence, was a prospect that concerned a number of commentators throughout the 1950s and 60s, and one that, as we shall see, Ballard also dramatises (though very differently) in *The Drowned World*.

What more obviously connects *Vermilion Sands* to the earlier novels such as *The Drowned World*, however, is its attempt to trouble our understanding of time by making narrative time feel weird and alien for the reader. On a

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33 Ballard, 153.

34 Gasiorek, 30.

formal level, Ballard achieves this through the deliberate repetition of certain evocative words or colours (cars, skies, and sands are repeatedly described as “cerise”), motifs, images, characters, and plotlines. There are several similar *femme fatale* figures, for instance (Jane Ciracylides in “Prima Belladonna”; Lorraine Drexel in “Venus Smiles”; Raine Channing in “Say Goodbye to the Wind”; and Aurora Day in “Studio 5, The Stars”), each of whom are surrounded by various insipid male characters, some of whom make a cameo appearance in later stories. There is a definite uncanniness permeating the entire collection, owing mainly to the many similarities in plot structure across the stories. “Say Goodbye to the Wind,” for instance, contains a strikingly similar plot structure to “Prima Belladonna” (in both stories the female antagonist enters the shop run by the male protagonist before leaving a wake of destruction). Given that the former story was the final story to be written before publication (and the latter the earliest), it is almost as if Ballard was trying consciously to remodel and imitate the earlier story, a way of formally enacting the kind of repetitive behaviour and actions we witness in most of the characters, as they keep returning to their desired object, over and over again. As a result, time in *Vermilion Sands* and the surrounding area takes on a strange and unfamiliar aspect; it has become an “atemporal holiday zone,” a “liminal space in which the normal laws of reality are temporarily suspended.”<sup>35</sup> Yet, most of the characters in the stories welcome this distortion of time. As the antagonist of “Say Goodbye to the Wind,” Raine Channing, remarks, “[n]othing in *Vermilion Sands* ever changes . . . It’s a good place to come back to.”<sup>36</sup>

One of the most enigmatic lines within the collection, which gestures to a potential break in the repetitious cycle most characters find themselves trapped in, comes when the protagonist of “Prima Belladonna” remarks offhandedly:

[n]ot long afterwards the Recess ended, . . . the big government schemes came along and started up all the clocks and kept us too busy working off the lost time . . .<sup>37</sup>

The mention of government schemes and the starting up of clocks recalls Ballard’s 1961 story “Chronopolis,” in which clock-time has been banned by a repressive government state. While the story (and its ultimately depressing finale) is unlike any of the stories found in *Vermilion Sands*, a similarly weird and unsettling effect concerning the theme of time is produced in both works. Both “Chronopolis” and *Vermilion Sands* intimate that time can change drastically—or, in some cases, be taken away altogether—depending

35 Gasiorek, 27.

36 Ballard, *Vermilion Sands*, 134.

37 Ballard, 46.

on the socio-political order. In other words, Ballard's work emphasises how time—so often understood as something we possess or 'own'—never really belongs to the individual. Without government intervention, it is implied, *Vermilion Sands* stands outside of time; no one here is interested enough to account for it. The passing of time here has very little to do with clock-time, which lends the collection a hallucinatory and distinctly surrealist feel; characters move around according to their personal whim, and often at 'irregular' times (a number of characters throughout the collection find themselves wandering around late at night). This relationship between whim and the distortion of time is something Ballard himself picked up on in a 1975 interview with James Goddard and David Pringle. Asked why he wrote *Vermilion Sands*, he replied:

I suppose I was just interested inventing an imaginary Palm Springs, a kind of world I imagined all suburbs of North America and Northern Europe might be like in 200 years' time. Everyone will be permanently on vacation, or doing about one day's work a year. People will give in to any whim that occurs to them . . . leisure and work will mesh in . . . I'm just writing about one direction that the future is taking us. I think the future will be like *Vermilion Sands*, if I have to take a guess. It isn't going to be like *Brave New World* or *1984*: it's going to be like a country-club paradise.<sup>38</sup>

If *Vermilion Sands* is "just . . . one direction that the future is taking us," one in which there is an excess of capital in circulation and everyone is on holiday, then Ballard offers up another—though starkly different—vision in *The Drowned World*, one in which the flow of capital is suspended and all vestiges of it are floating in a harsh, non-human zone of atemporality.

### THE DROWNED WORLD

If *Vermilion Sands* looks forward to a technologically advanced future in which leisure becomes the dominant activity, then *The Drowned World* imagines the opposite scenario: a world that has slipped back into a pre-human past in which the very idea of leisure seems absurdly irrelevant. *The Drowned World* is the second instalment in Ballard's quartet of novels about natural cataclysms that threaten to destroy the planet and, along with it, all of humanity. Ballard

38 J. G. Ballard, interview by James Goddard and David Pringle, *J. G. Ballard*, published January 4, 1975; accessed August 3, 2020, [http://www.jgballard.ca/media/1975\\_jan4\\_science\\_fiction\\_monthly.html](http://www.jgballard.ca/media/1975_jan4_science_fiction_monthly.html).

dismissed the first, *The Wind from Nowhere* (1961), as a “piece of hackwork” and, during interviews later on in his career, would refer to *The Drowned World* as his first novel, which was followed by *The Drought* (1964) and, finally, *The Crystal World* (1966).<sup>39</sup> Each novel in the cycle takes one of the four classical elements—air, water, fire and earth, respectively—and imagines a scenario in which the element becomes a destructive force and makes the world mostly uninhabitable.<sup>40</sup> In *The Wind from Nowhere*, we see the disastrous consequences of a powerful, gathering wind, which, eventually, forces humans underground. As we shall see, *The Drowned World* depicts a planet in which dramatically risen sea levels make the majority of the earth’s surface uninhabitable, while, in contrast, *The Drought* (originally published as *The Burning World*) explores the idea of a world in which only the barest supply of fresh water is available (i.e., it stops raining). The elemental conceit in *The Crystal World* is more oblique yet no less damaging to human life: the growth and gradual spread of time-distorting crystals threatens to encrust the earth’s surface as it freezes most forms of life, before turning the world into a “landscape without time.”<sup>41</sup>

Taken together, Ballard’s narratives anticipate recent discussions on ‘global weirding’, a term that, as Gerry Canavan and Andrew Hageman write, briefly rose to prominence in 2010 as an alternative to ‘global warming’ and ‘climate change.’<sup>42</sup> ‘Global weirding’, they explain, focused “on the unpredictable disruptions that have been caused and will continue to be caused by the coming years of anthropogenic global warming . . . which will be distributed

39 J. G. Ballard, interview by James Goddard and David Pringle, *J. G. Ballard*, published January 4, 1975; accessed August 3, 2020, [http://www.jgballard.ca/media/1975\\_jan4\\_science\\_fiction\\_monthly.html](http://www.jgballard.ca/media/1975_jan4_science_fiction_monthly.html)

40 It is worth noting that some Ballard scholars, such as David Pringle, see this as a fallacious reading of the first four novels. Pringle argues that not only does this schema give too much weight to *The Wind from Nowhere*, a novel Ballard later disowned, but, more problematically in his view, *The Crystal World* has little to do with representing the element of earth: “In what sense does *The Crystal World* represent earth? . . . What makes them more earthy than, say, the sand in *The Drought*?” See <https://www.ballardian.com/the-wind-from-nowhere-is-now-a-wind-from-somewhere>. I would argue along with Toby Litt, however, that the schema *does* make sense. Ballard’s own feelings towards his first novel are surely not relevant to the discussion, while the narrative of *The Crystal World* does, of course, concern the proliferation of earthly matter, a point mentioned by Paul Bowes, on Simon Sellars’ Ballardian.com. See <https://www.ballardian.com/the-wind-from-nowhere-is-now-a-wind-from-somewhere> for further details of the discussion. Whether the schema is fallacious or not, I think it is significant that recent critics have continued to demonstrate why this schema is pertinent in order to talk productively about the novels and their connection to climate disaster. See Moritz Ingwersen’s “Environmental Catastrophe as Morphogenesis: Inhuman Transformations in Ballard’s Climate Novels,” *Humanities* 8 (2019): 1.

41 Ballard, *The Crystal World* (London: Flamingo, 2000), 16.

42 Gerry Canavan and Andrew Hageman, “Introduction: Global Weirding,” *Paradoxa* 28 (2016): 7.

unevenly across the planet and experienced with different intensities by different populations.”<sup>43</sup> While the narratives might appear to be about the bleak struggle of human life following a natural disaster, Ballard himself seemed just as concerned with what happens to the human experience of time during these crises. They chart the disruption in the characters’ perception of linear time after seismic ecological change:

In my three novels, *The Drowned World*, *The Drought* and *The Crystal World*, I attempted to construct linear systems that made no use of the sequential elements of time; that is, the events of the narrative unfold chronologically, but what determines their movement forward (or backward in the case of *The Drowned World* and sideways or inwards in *The Crystal World*) is the mythological element, the attempt—particularly in the first two novels—to validate the linear element of time by imposing a psychological dynamic and necessity. However, a series of non-linear elements and images more and more began to force themselves through the texture of the narrative—the characters found themselves in situations that owed nothing or little to their place in the sequence of events.<sup>44</sup>

These “non-linear elements and images” give *The Drowned World* a peculiarly disjointed narrative: as Ballard implies above, the events might unfold chronologically but the real narrative dynamic lies in its “backward” movement as the protagonist Dr. Robert Kerans experiences an ambiguous physical and psychological “devolutionary descent”<sup>45</sup> or a kind of “Lamarckism in reverse.”<sup>46</sup> As his colleague, Dr. Bodkin, points out, ever since the flooding occurred, the natural world has steadily reverted back to a former age (the Triassic period), which makes all human survivors, most of whom are now living in Greenland, appear “anomalous” when compared to other organisms inhabiting the radically altered landscape.<sup>47</sup> Part of Bodkin’s and Kerans’ job is to help the government regain a foothold in the world, which sees them venture to the flooded plains in the south. Bodkin and Kerans are charged with mapping out the new geography and examining new species of plants and animals. As Bodkin explains to Kerans:

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43 Canavan and Hageman, “Introduction: Global Weirding,” 7.

44 Ballard, “Images of the Future,” British Library.

45 Ballard, *The Drowned World* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), 113.

46 Ballard, *The Drowned World*, 42.

47 Ballard, 42.

[d]uring the last three years, Robert, you and I have examined something like five thousand species in the animal kingdom, seen literally tens of thousands of new plant varieties. Everywhere the same pattern has unfolded, countless mutations completely transforming the organisms to adapt them for survival in the new environment. Everywhere there's been the same avalanche backwards into the past—so much so that the few complex organisms which have managed to retain a foothold unchanged on the slope look distinctly anomalous—a handful of amphibians, the birds, and *Man*. It's a curious thing that although we've carefully catalogued the backward journeys of so many plants and animals, we've ignored the most important creature on this planet . . . .<sup>48</sup>

As the narrative progresses, we become aware that there are two distinct types of time that compete with one another in this new landscape. One is clock-time, a relic of the drowned (and overtly late-capitalist) world, but one that Kerans and most of the other characters still use in their attempt to control and make sense of the new environment. The other is “deep time,”<sup>49</sup> an inner psychological time that has begun to take hold of Kerans in his “growing isolation and self-containment,” one that steers him away from human ‘civilisation’ and towards a “radically new environment, with its own internal landscape and logic, where old categories of thought would merely be an encumbrance.”<sup>50</sup>

*The Drowned World* opens with Kerans staring into the distance from a “hotel balcony shortly after eight o'clock” in the morning.<sup>51</sup> The unnamed narrator declares that “[s]oon it would be too hot,”<sup>52</sup> Soon—in less than four hours—“the water would seem to burn.”<sup>53</sup> Kerans, we are told, watches “the sun rise behind the dense groves of giant gymnosperms crowding over . . . the east side of the lagoon.”<sup>54</sup> Kerans' perspective is difficult to visualise immediately but the landscape stretching before him is clearly a hostile one: in spite of the “massive olive-green fronds” protecting him, “the relentless power of the sun [is] plainly tangible” as it “drum[s] across his bare chest and shoulders.”<sup>55</sup> The sun resembles a “colossal fire-ball”<sup>56</sup> and is responsible for the “countless thermal storms” and “pockets of air [that] would heat rapidly, then explode upwards

48 Ballard, 42.

49 Ballard, 119.

50 Ballard, 14.

51 Ballard, 7.

52 Ballard, 7.

53 Ballard, 7.

54 Ballard, 7.

55 Ballard, 7.

56 Ballard, 7.

like escaping balloons, leaving behind them a sudden detonating vacuum.”<sup>57</sup> Steam clouds hang over the lagoon, while “miniature tornados” lash “across the 60-foot-high plants, topping them like matchsticks.”<sup>58</sup> Alligators and iguanas travel sluggishly from bank to bank.<sup>59</sup> This imagery of natural destruction (and proliferation), though, soon gives way to the description of conspicuously man-made buildings, including “roofs of abandoned apartment stores”<sup>60</sup> and visible “penthouse suite[s],”<sup>61</sup> which confuses our vision of this tropical landscape until we later discover that this ‘lagoon’ is one of the many flooded plains to have submerged most of the world’s surface. Kerans, we discover, has been living for the past six months on one of the top floors of The Ritz hotel, although he is unable to determine *which* Ritz: “had it once been Berlin, Paris or London?” he asks himself.<sup>62</sup> All these “drowned cities,” we infer, now look the same;<sup>63</sup> if capital was responsible for the individual identity of certain cities or landscapes, then nature in *The Drowned World* acts as a force that homogenises them and breaks down the hierarchical structures that grew out of them.

Kerans is located above (and perhaps, tacitly, *beyond*) the former financial centre of the world, through which all capital once flowed. His leisurely existence above this world, living as he does off the luxuries and riches of the old world, to which only those at the ‘top’ had access previously, is conveyed in the incidental descriptions of the commodities that come into his possession: “[o]n the way out [of the hotel] he picked a monographed cream silk shirt from the stack left in the wardrobe by the [former guest] financier, and slipped into a pair of neatly pressed slacks with a Zürich label.”<sup>64</sup> Kerans is able to lead a temporarily comfortable life off the flotsam of the former world, sealed off within his still “lavishly furnished and engineered” hotel room, and it is this life of temporary leisure that keeps him from his growing impulse to head south.<sup>65</sup> Like the inhabitants of Vermilion Sands, Kerans enters a liminal zone, in which he begins to shirk his work duties. We are told at one point that he “only managed to survive the monotony and boredom of the previous year by deliberately suspending himself outside the normal world of time and space.”<sup>66</sup> This avoidance of work is established at the very start of the narrative when we are told that he normally “woke at five, and reached the biological testing station in time to do at least four or five hours work before the heat became intolerable, but this morning he found himself reluctant to leave the

- 57 Ballard, 8.
- 58 Ballard, 8.
- 59 Ballard, 8.
- 60 Ballard, 7.
- 61 Ballard, 9.
- 62 Ballard, 9.
- 63 Ballard, 9.
- 64 Ballard, 11.
- 65 Ballard, 10.
- 66 Ballard, 15.

cool, air-curtained haven of the hotel-suite.”<sup>67</sup> Instead, Kerans “deliberately delay[s]” his departure, so that he will not have to travel to the testing station. We begin, then, with a refusal to work, the first sign that Kerans wishes to “isolate himself” and “sever his links with the base”—even if he himself refuses to acknowledge it at this point.<sup>68</sup>

The first half of the narrative is replete with images of clocks, which appear increasingly to Kerans like foreign objects with no relevance to the world in which he now lives. We begin to sense that he is still conditioned to act and work according to the rhythms and rules of an older, now irrelevant, framework, one that requires him to work four or five hours a day and to continue the task of “biological mapping.”<sup>69</sup> But, before long, this becomes “a pointless game” for him.<sup>70</sup> There are several strange and unsettling moments throughout the narrative, which depict Kerans gravitating towards clock-pieces, “absent-mindedly touching” them, and appearing unsure about their function.<sup>71</sup> These build up to a key moment in the novel when Kerans loses all concept of clock-time and its ‘meaningless orientation’:

a sudden spasm of nausea knotted Kerans’ gullet, for a moment dizzying him. Pressing a wrist tightly to his forehead, he leaned back against a pillar, listening to the echoes reverberate around him. Four hundred yards away two white-faced clock towers protruded through the vegetation, like the temple spires of some lost jungle religion, and the sounds of his name—‘Kerans... Kerans... Kerans’—reflected off them seemed to Kerans to toll with an intense premonition of terror and disaster, the meaningless orientation of the clock hands identifying him, more completely than anything he had previously experienced, with all the confused and minatory spectres that cast their shadows more and more darkly through his mind, the myriad-handed mandala of cosmic time.<sup>72</sup>

Shortly after this hallucinatory experience, which recalls a Lovecraftian cosmic horror,<sup>73</sup> the antagonist of the novel, Strangman, appears unexpectedly

67 Ballard, 7.

68 Ballard, 8.

69 Ballard, 8.

70 Ballard, 8.

71 Ballard, 15.

72 Ballard, 61.

73 I am referring to Carroll and Sperling’s succinct description of the Lovecraftian glimpse into “the vastness of the cosmos, an incomprehensible timeline along which humanity is only a momentary and insignificant episode.” See Carroll and Sperling, “Weird Temporalities: An Introduction,” *Studies in the Fantastic* 9 (Summer/Fall 2020): 7.



on a “blar[ing] hydroplane.”<sup>74</sup> In the first half of the narrative, plot progression is sluggish, with heavy description of both the lagoon and Kerans’ repeated and limited movements in this new environment. The arrival of Strangman, however, accelerates events and abruptly changes the pace, as the narrative nears its climax: Strangman’s draining of the lagoon to reveal the London cityscape below. After an uneasy alliance is formed, during which Strangman (somewhat surreally) invites Kerans and the other inhabitants of the lagoon onboard his paddle-ship for aperitifs, tensions begin to mount as it becomes clear that Strangman intends to restore the drowned cities (after first plundering and looting as much as he can). He is represented in no uncertain terms as a colonial marauder: he keeps a “crew” of slaves and forces those around him to excavate the landscape in the hope of acquiring more loot. He is always frenetically *busy* and, for Kerans, Strangman represents the many repressed ills of the drowned world beneath, which, it is insinuated, was built on the rationalising spirit that Strangman embodies. Strangman uses clock-time—a means to measure labour and control production levels—in order to achieve mastery over others and his new surroundings, and this is demonstrated when, after escaping the lagoon, Kerans looks back:

At last all he could see were the isolated letters of the giant slogan Strangman’s men had painted, looming out of the darkness over the flat water like a concluding epitaph: TIME ZONE.<sup>75</sup>

Strangman’s demarcation of ‘time zones’ anticipates a future in which the radically altered world will be divided into areas that are run according to clock-time and those that are not. Kerans’ response to head south, and to leave the lagoon, where industry will likely restart in anticipation of a new (but ultimately similar) society, is a way of rejecting the nauseating insistence of capitalist clock-time so inimical to him and, it is insinuated, the natural world itself. Fittingly, the final line of the novel depicts a weird doubling, which both recalls one of Man’s origin stories while hinting towards a utopian vision of a new order:

So he left the lagoon and entered the jungle again, within a few days was completely lost, following the lagoons southward through the increasing rain and heat, attacked by alligators and giant bats, a second Adam searching for the forgotten paradises of the reborn sun.<sup>76</sup>

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74 Ballard, *The Drowned World*, 81.

75 Ballard, 165.

76 Ballard, 175.

The irony here, of course, is that the reality of this overgrown and threatening landscape is *also* deeply inimical to Kerans (and, by extension, the rest of humanity) and, while Kerans might satisfy his own inner need to escape the temporal confines of his previous environment, these new “forgotten paradises” promise nothing more than a harsh future of continuous torment and loneliness. Without any prospect of community, Kerans can only look forward to one activity that is neither work nor leisure: mere survival.

## CONCLUSION

Ballard, it is clear, is interested in some of modernity’s most salient features: the erasure of work, its psychological effects, and the corollary of how leisure can fast become an empty form of labour or just a set of compulsive and routine gestures. In his later work, this theme is explicit but, as this essay tries to show, these ideas concerning work and leisure were already beginning to take shape in the *Vermilion Sands* stories and, more ambiguously, in *The Drowned World*, at a moment when new pronouncements and concerns about the shifting nature of work and leisure took on a higher pitch than ever before. It is worth pointing out that, in both texts, the eventual absence of a standardised clock-time leads directly to the dissolution of the human subject. This could be read as a form of moral conservatism (if we imagine both texts functioning as cautionary narratives about the damaging effects of *too much leisure* or too much deviation from the useful constraints of industrial clock-time) were it not for the fact that Ballard seems equally interested in troubling our assumptions about what constitutes ‘normal,’ linear time. His early fiction might be more productively read as a series of “weird temporalities,” which, as mentioned earlier, “challenge linear narratives of time that present the future as the outcome of free, human choices.” If we read Ballard’s early fiction in light of recent criticism concerning ‘the weird’, and perhaps as a series of conscious attempts to evoke a sense of temporal weirdness throughout the reading process, then we can entertain another interpretation, one that suggests that work and leisure are simply the organisational categories of a much larger system we recognise as ‘normal’ or linear time. While this system is useful, it is also restricting, and it can lead us to think we can ‘own’ or ‘possess’ time in much the same way we might believe we ‘own’ and ‘control’ the natural environment around us. What Ballard’s early weird fiction does so effectively, then, is to challenge that humanist narrative, while supplanting it with something less certain, less comforting which forces us to worry less about a predicted future and more about now. □

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