

The Technological Posthumous

Fantasies of J. G. Ballard

Pedro Groppo

Departamento de Letras Estrangeiras Modernas
Universidade Federal da Paraíba

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ABSTRACT: In J. G. Ballard's fiction, death represents a drive towards transcendence, a logical next step of an extremely abstract approach to the changed psyche brought about by 20th century technology. These propulsions towards death, against the instinct of self-preservation, are, on the one hand, manifestations of the perverse desires and suicidal manias of their protagonists; on the other hand, they can be read as metaphorical instances in which death figures as a mode of transcendence. Ballard's writing is characterized by an obsessive return to certain archetypal situations, character types, and images which recur throughout his work in different configurations. With particular focus on *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979), I argue that Ballard's apparent shift from technological to organic imagery represents not a break in his thinking but a sustained exploration of consciousness at the threshold of transformation. Therefore, the suspended moment between life and death becomes, in Ballard's work, a space of radical possibility. This reading reveals how Ballard's various protagonists inhabit different versions of the same liminal territory, each offering another perspective on how death might function not as an endpoint but as a transformative threshold for consciousness and imagination.

KEYWORDS: Death; Death drive; English literature; Surrealism; *The Unlimited Dream Company*.



RESUMO: Na ficção de J. G. Ballard, a morte representa uma pulsão em direção à transcendência, um passo lógico dentro de uma abordagem extremamente abstrata à psique alterada pela tecnologia do século XX. Estas propulsões em direção à morte, contra o instinto de autopreservação, são, por um lado, manifestações dos desejos perversos e manias suicidas dos seus protagonistas; por outro, podem ser lidas como instâncias metafóricas nas quais a morte figura como um modo de transcendência. A escrita de Ballard caracteriza-se por um retorno obsessivo a certas situações arquetípicas, tipos de personagens e imagens que reaparecem ao longo da sua obra em diferentes configurações. Com particular enfoque em *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979), defendo que a aparente mudança de Ballard do imaginário tecnológico para o orgânico não representa uma ruptura no seu pensamento, mas antes uma exploração da consciência no limiar da transformação. Assim, o momento suspenso entre a vida e a morte torna-se, na obra de Ballard, um espaço de possibilidade radical. Esta leitura revela como os vários protagonistas de Ballard habitam diferentes versões do mesmo território liminar, cada um oferecendo uma nova perspectiva sobre como a morte pode funcionar não como um fim, mas como um limiar transformativo para a consciência e a imaginação.

KEYWORDS: Literatura inglesa; Morte; Pulsão de morte; Surrealismo; *The Unlimited Dream Company*.



Introduction

The work of British writer J. G. Ballard can be considered part of the literature of catastrophe.¹ From his first four novels, firmly belonging to a subgenre of science fiction known as the 'catastrophe novel' or 'apocalyptic' science fiction, in which the Earth has been ravaged by different climatic cataclysms, to the mid-career 'urban disaster' trilogy in which characters explore the psychic consequences of their extreme involvement with urban technologies of motorways and high-rise apartment complexes, to later semi-autobiographical war narratives, all take as a starting point a breakdown of the established order. The catastrophe functions as opening up a space or an interval, occurring between two events: an initial collapse (be it a cataclysmic ecological disaster, or a simple but transformative car crash) and death itself. In Ballard's early novel *The Drowned World* (1962), in which the Earth has been flooded by climate change, the protagonist abandons his research team who is fleeing towards North, away from the tropical heat, and turns South (into the 'destructive element', so to speak), embracing the demise of his body amid the sweltering weather.

Many versions of this predicament echo in Ballard's fiction, notably in *The Drought* (1964) and *The Crystal World* (1965). Christian resurrection and messianic tropes will be present later in *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), *Crash* (1973), and the often-overlooked novel *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979). Death, in Ballard's fiction, is a drive towards transcendence, a logical next step of an extremely abstract approach to the changed psyche brought about by 20th century technology. These propulsions towards death, against the instinct of self-preservation, are, on the one hand, manifestations of the perverse desires and suicidal manias of

¹ For a thorough contextualization of Ballard and the literature of catastrophe, see Chapter 2 of Luckhurst (1997) and Chapters 2 and 3 of Wilson (2017).

their protagonists; on the other hand, they can be read as metaphorical instances in which death figures as a mode of transcendence. In Ballard's fiction, one does not flee from the catastrophe, but *towards* it. Significantly, both *Concrete Island* (1974) and *The Unlimited Dream Company* are 'posthumous fantasies,' narratives in which the protagonists are already dead and undergo a rite of passage of sorts to achieve liberation. The climax of one of Ballard's most famous novels, *Empire of the Sun* (1984), has the protagonist, Jim, hallucinating a reversal of the process of death as he experiences the dead prisoners-of-war in World War II China coming back to life.

In Groppo (2017), I have discussed Ballard's literary treatment of death in his novel *Crash* and, in Groppo (2021), the treatment of death in his autobiographical war fictions. In this article, I discuss Ballard's representation of death as a drive towards transcendence and recreation of the world via imagination, through a reading of the novel *The Unlimited Dream Company*, but frequently alluding to other novels and short stories of the Ballard canon. *The Unlimited Dream Company* represents the other side of Ballard's most known text, *Crash*, as it moves away from the technological and dystopian settings of steel and concrete that have come to be known as 'Ballardian' to an 'acid pastoral' vision that reinstates the previous novels' recurring themes of transfiguration and transcendence. This movement, however, should not be read as a simple opposition between technological and natural imagery, but rather as complementary explorations of the same liminal space between life and death.

***The Unlimited Dream Company* and Fantastic Hesitation**

Ballard's work takes an interesting turn after what has become known as his 'urban disaster' trilogy of *Crash*, *Concrete Island*, and *High-Rise* (1975). In the period that follows, we can trace his exploration of alternatives to these technological

dystopias through three key texts, each handling the tension between pastoral and technological spaces differently. First, his 1978 novella "The Ultimate City" sets up a direct opposition between two spaces: Garden City, a pastoral post-industrial society that proves stifling in its limitations, and the Ultimate City itself, an abandoned technological metropolis that offers tools for imagination. The protagonist's journey between these spaces reveals a crucial paradox: while the technological city provides psychic fulfillment, its reactivation inevitably leads to its own collapse. *Hello America* (1981) expands this theme to a continental scale, reimagining America as an abandoned post-industrial landscape, with Las Vegas standing in as another version of the 'ultimate city.' Both these works suggest a kind of ambivalent attraction to technological ruins, what we might call a quasi-accelerationist embrace of technology's potential. *The Unlimited Dream Company*, however, takes a radically different approach. Instead of oscillating between pastoral and technological spaces, it situates itself firmly within the pastoral, specifically in Shepperton, Ballard's own suburban home. This shift from the concrete worlds of his previous novels to an almost psycho-pastoral mode marks a significant development in Ballard's theoretical project. Where "The Ultimate City" and *Hello America* explore the possibilities within technological ruins, *The Unlimited Dream Company* asks a different question: what forms of liberation are possible when such a technological embrace is no longer an option?

To this day, the 1979 novel remains one of the strangest and least discussed books in the Ballard canon, along with *The Day of Creation* (1987) and *Rushing to Paradise* (1994), all of which share a concern with madness and imagination. In Sam Scoggins's 1983 film *The Unlimited Dream Company*, Ballard introduces the novel:

The Unlimited Dream Company is set in Shepperton, where I live, and it's about a young pilot

who steals a light aircraft and crashes into the Thames. He, in a sense, dies—he's trapped and drowns in his aircraft. He frees himself by an enormous effort of the imagination, and through his imagination, transforms Shepperton into an Edenic paradise full of exotic plants and animals. In many ways I feel that, without realizing it at the time, that I was writing a piece of my autobiography: it was about the writer's imagination—particularly my own imagination—transforming the humdrum reality that he occupies, and turning into an unlimited dream company. (Scoggins 1983)

The Shepperton of *The Unlimited Dream Company* is another of Ballard's conscripted spaces, the "everywhere of suburbia, the paradigm of nowhere" (Ballard 1979, 31) that becomes a lush jungle paradise through the protagonist's enormous act of the imagination, a pagan god with the power to transform himself and the world. For Alistair Cormack, *The Unlimited Dream Company* is the most forgotten of Ballard's novels because it is so superficially unlike other novels in the Ballard canon and not very 'Ballardian' (2012, 143). Admittedly, in a 1980 interview, Ballard acknowledges the deviations: "I felt that after all that steel and concrete there was a tremendous pressure of sheer imagination building up. [...] [T]he idea occurred to me that it would be possible to transform, in a fantastic way, the most infinitely humdrum place in the world [...] into something rich and strange" (1980, 5). *The Unlimited Dream Company* seems to be quite a different monster, and one of the major departures is a shift from the bleak solipsism of novels like *Concrete Island* to a wholehearted embrace of a certain kind of utopian impulse. Andrzej Gasiorek discusses the future possibilities, vehemently shut in *Concrete Island* or *High-Rise*, but open in *The Unlimited Dream Company*, a novel that "dreams a new life in which the sicknesses of a postlapsarian realm are purged away through a rapturous fusion of all elements of the creation into a delirious unity" (2005, 133).²

² A more complete literature review of the critical readings of *The Unlimited Dream Company* would include Tew's (2013) political interpretation that sees Blake's transforming of Shepperton into a tropical jungle as a reinstitution of an Imperialist, neocolonial imagery, and Parkinson's (2016) thorough contextualization of the novel alongside the work of William Blake, Hans Bellmer, and André Bréton.

Like *Concrete Island*, the novel is described by Gasiorek as an example of “fantastic hesitation, wherein the membrane between the fictive and the real is permeable, its textual world situated in that liminal space between waking life and insubstantial dream” (2005, 134), and it all hinges on a crash. This time, it is not a mundane, urban crash of everyday life but a ritualized plane crash. There are brief hesitations in the first half of *Concrete Island* that suggest that Maitland, the novel’s protagonist, might still be trapped in the car, enacting a sort of posthumous fantasy in the style of William Golding’s *Pincher Martin* (1956), in which the entire story takes place moments before death: “Was the entire island an extension of the Jaguar, its windshield and windows transformed by his delirium into these embankments?” (Ballard 1974, 67). In *The Unlimited Dream Company*, Blake’s status is always hesitant. In a passage reminiscent of Maitland’s attempt to escape the island by going over the embankment in which he has crashed, Blake realizes that he is trapped in the town of Shepperton:

Although I was walking at a steady pace across the uneven soil, I was no longer drawing any closer to the pedestrian bridge [...] If anything, this distance between [me and the motorway] seemed to enlarge. At the same time, Shepperton receded behind me, and I found myself standing in an immense field filled with poppies and a few worn tyres. (1979, 33)

This is a field not unlike the no-zone of *Concrete Island*, a place that seems to have a will of its own and is intent on trapping Maitland. The same logic is at work in this passage, as the landscape functions as Blake’s unconscious will, preventing him from escaping. In *The Unlimited Dream Company*, the way the fauna and flora of Shepperton explode in luxuriant growth is an extreme version of the ‘sentient’ grass of *Concrete Island*, and more importantly, both are part of the protagonists’ bodies. *The Unlimited Dream Company*, however, distances itself from the world of concrete and metal of the three previous novels, isolating

its world geographically from London and its motorways. If the expulsion from reality in *Concrete Island* was only illusory — Maitland is, after all, trapped inside the machine —, in *The Unlimited Dream Company*, Ballard is moving purposefully away from the technological, towards a more primal and organic world, wondering what could be created in its stead.

Transforming the 'Everywhere of Suburbia, The Paradigm of Nowhere'

Ballard invites reading *The Unlimited Dream Company* as a 'piece of his autobiography':

[The novel is] a surrealist's vision of Shepperton where I live. But it's a sort of parable of my own life. I fell to earth there thirty years ago and got to work transforming the modest little town into this exotic pagan universe. I wait hopefully every day for the scenarios laid down in the book to come to pass. (2012, 266)

This reveals how Ballard understood his own role as a writer: like Blake, he too was an outsider who arrived in Shepperton and set about transforming it through imagination. The town's artificial nature — its status as a film studio town — makes it the perfect setting for both Ballard's real-life transformative work as a writer and Blake's supernatural transformations in the novel. In *The Unlimited Dream Company*, Shepperton is much more than just a modest little town: it is an ersatz world in which the logic of its real film studios has come to dominate, a gigantic film set peopled by "actors recruited [...] to play their role in an elaborate conspiracy" (1979, 20). Blake's metamorphosing god enlists the help of the inhabitants of Shepperton and teaches them to fly, offering them a glimpse into the real world as he draws back "the curtains that muffle Shepperton and the rest of this substitute realm" (1979, 90). Throughout the novel, life in the humdrum suburb of Shepperton is characterized as a substitute, unreal existence, which Blake will unmake through his protean powers and pierce the veil of illusion. The

metaphors of the theater and cinema ('actors,' 'curtains') are echoed in the title, as the 'company' refers to the inhabitants of the town who are only waiting for someone to *dream* for them so they can be liberated. Often Blake will compare his 'family' of seven witnesses to "actors waiting for a director's cue" (1979, 13): "It occurred to me that whenever I woke I found the members of my 'family' in their original places, like so many actors setting up another take in their impersonation of reality" (1979, 135).³

Vaughan, in *Crash*, also functions as a messianic or satanic leader that offers liberation and transformation of the world through a libidinal resignification of the violence of the car crash and the technological machine that is the car. Both characters have an intense charismatic energy, simultaneously creative and destructive. Where Blake's body becomes a kind of fertile ground from which new life springs (albeit very disturbingly), Vaughan's scarred body becomes a template for a new kind of technological evolution. The key difference might be that Blake's transformations still follow a kind of natural logic — even if twisted and psychosexual, they are about flesh becoming other kinds of natural flesh — whereas Vaughan's vision is about flesh becoming something else entirely, merging with chrome and steel. The reality that both Vaughan and Blake seek to uncover is one free of social convention and sexual repression. Norman O. Brown's reading of the Freudian 'polymorphous perversity' in *Life Against Death* as a delight in the full life of the body rather than in rationalized erogenous zones or "sexual organizations" (1988, 291) is apposite:

³ Significantly, Ballard's vocabulary in this novel is uninterested in the language of film. There are no allusions to a fixed perspective or a directorial eye, or even to cutting, as there are in *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and numerous short stories, namely "The 60-Minute Zoom" (1976), "The Intensive Care Unit" (1977), and "Motel Architecture" (1978). If Blake is a director, he is closer to a reality show runner than to Michelangelo Antonioni. For a discussion of Ballard's approximations with the language of film, see Depper (2011).

[A] man freed from all sexual organizations—a body freed from unconscious oral, anal, and genital fantasies or return to the maternal womb. Such a man would be rid of the nightmares that Freud showed to be haunting civilization; but freedom from those fantasies would also mean freedom from that disorder of the human body, which Freud pitilessly exposed. In such a man would be fulfilled the mystic hope of Christianity, the resurrection of the body, in a form, as Luther said, free from death and filth. (1988, 291)

To do so, Blake requires becoming one with the natural world and the inhabitants of the town. He metamorphoses into a bird, a whale, and, on the chapter titled “The Remaking of Shepperton”, a stag, when he “[...] scatter[s] his semen on this dawn circuit of a town, [...] leav[ing] new life clambering into the air behind me” (Ballard 1979, 129):

I moved in and out of the empty streets, a pagan gardener recruiting the air and the light to stock this reconditioned Eden. Everywhere a dense tropical vegetation overran the immaculate privet hedges and repressed lawns, date palms and tamarinds transformed Shepperton into a jungle suburb. (1979, 129)

Later he absorbs the inhabitants of Shepperton “into the host of my flesh [...] merging with all creatures until I had taken into myself every living being, every fish and bird, every parent and child, a single chimeric god uniting all life within me” (1979, 191), not unlike Friedrich Nietzsche’s Dionysus who “transforms things until they reflect his power” (1978, 47) and who “adopts every skin, every emotion: he is constantly transforming himself” (1978, 48). Both of the characters’ bodies transform into landscapes: Blake literally dissolving into Shepperton’s soil, while Vaughan’s scarred body is often compared to the crashed cars themselves: “The passenger door had been crushed into the front fender, the deformed metal welded together by the impact. [I thought] of Vaughan’s scar-tissue, fused together in the same way along these arbitrary seams, contours of sudden violence [...]” (Ballard 1973, 207). Both are messianic figures that embody the transformation they bring

about.

The theme of dissemination is taken up in Blake's mythic sexual fecundation of an entire town, engaged in a certain naiveté about the future of this new ontological order that is being created. As David Punter describes:

Stuck after his fatal crash in a realm where the boundaries expand like elastic and continually bounce him back to the still centre, he is thereby paradoxically enabled to convert the raw material of suburban life—the contents of the supermarkets and used car lots, the equivalent contents of the fantasies of housewives and executives—into energy, and thus he finds a place for himself in the systems of exchange, his dream of manpowered flight literally acted out in his absorption of souls and conversion of them into the force which will lift him ever higher off the ground. (1985, 20)

Blake is an active transmuter of suburban banality. His body becomes a complex system of energetic exchange that converts the repressed desires and mundane materiality of suburban life into a transcendent force, resulting in a fluid ontological state where traditional distinctions between body and space dissolve. After a ritualized wedding with his paramour Miriam St Cloud — dressed up like a bird, an allusion to Max Ernst's surrealist painting *Attirement of the Bride* (1940) — Blake is shot by the rebellious Stark and loses his powers, only to be buried and reborn by the three children that witnessed his crash. He is constantly measuring the size and shape of their hands, trying to match them with the bruises on his own chest. By the end of the novel, he discovers that the hand shapes are his own, and the pilot — his former self — is still inside the crashed Cessna. In this act of regaining his strength to fight Stark — who is perversely trying to recover the aircraft in an attempt to show Blake the reality of his death —, Blake does so by "giv[ing] himself away" (Ballard 1979, 233) quite literally, like a benevolent messiah, by visiting a hospital and giving his blood and parts of his body to the diseased. The townspeople then gain the ability to fly and are able to move on

to another realm, leaving Blake to confront Stark and his own former self, now “[h]alf-submerged, as if between two worlds” (1979, 230). In a surreal scene, the “skeleton fought his way past my hands, his bony mouth clamped against my lips, trying to suck the air from my lungs” (1979, 231), but ultimately Blake is able to “calm my dead self, taking my bones into me, my shins and arms, my ribs and skull” (1979, 231).

The ending of the novel reveals Blake still caught in his delusional fantasies, alone in an emptied Shepperton after having ‘liberated’ all its inhabitants. Far from coming to terms with death, Blake remains trapped in elaborate fantasies of transcendence, his solitary consciousness constructing ever more elaborate visions of a cosmic merger that can never actually arrive. Blake exemplifies the classic Ballardian unreliable narrator. Like *High-Rise* and *Crash*, the novel’s temporal structure is telling: these narratives begin near their endpoint, just before their final dissolution, then proceed to tell their stories chronologically — not exactly in medias res, but positioned at the brink of their narrators’ extinction. The first chapter of *The Unlimited Dream Company* follows this exact pattern, showing Shepperton invaded by helicopters — an ominous Ballardian symbol representing the technological supersession of Blake’s ‘natural’ flight, marking his reign as definitively temporary. This structural technique is characteristic of Ballard’s endings: ostensibly open-ended, yet inexorably moving toward a single possible outcome. Despite whatever salvation Blake believes he has brought to Shepperton’s inhabitants, there is no rapture awaiting him; in these final moments he cowers from the helicopters, dreading the encounter that will terminate not just his narrative but his elaborately constructed understanding of life (and death). The intrusion of technology in the novel’s closing moments serves to undermine Blake’s pastoral fantasy of transcendence. Freedom, like death itself, remains fundamentally inscrutable.

The Ritual of Forgetting in “The Terminal Beach”

“The Terminal Beach” (1964), one of Ballard’s key texts, marks the first version of the exploration of the motif of death and dissolution that will recur in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, *Crash*, and *The Unlimited Dream Company*. A pilot named Traven maroons himself on the former Pacific test site of Eniwetok, and there he tries to come to terms with the reality of World War II and the premature death of his wife and son. Traumatized by these events, he goes to the deserted island as a ritual of psychic pilgrimage to the ground zero of the catastrophe. The testing blocks are a hybrid space, neither fully technological nor natural, where Traven goes through a sort of dissolution that prefigures both Vaughan and Blake. Surrounded by massive concrete cubes, almost organic in their repetition, he experiences hallucinations and time distortions. In this story Ballard tests what happens when the technological sublime starts to decay.

Eniwetok, in “The Terminal Beach,” is a fictionalized space where mind, space, and body fuse into one to enact a double play of remembrance and amnesia, an “ontological Garden of Eden” (Ballard 2010a, 603). Traven finds among the dunes “the tops of what seemed to be a herd of square-backed elephants” (2010a, 595), that turn out to be two thousand cubes of “15 feet in height, regularly spaced at ten-yard intervals [...] arranged in a series of tracts, each composed of two hundred blocks, inclined to one another and to the direction of the blast” (2010a, 595). In the blocks, Traven finds an “image of himself free of the hazards of time and space” (2010a, 603). Later, in the section titled “Total Noon: Eniwetok,” the blocks carry Traven upwards into the sky, “and then down again through the opaque disc of the concrete floor”, described as an “ultimate rejection [...] [that] gains him nothing” (2010a, 601). It is through concrete and geometry that Traven begins to reconfigure this space of desolation and destruction into something that can relieve him of suffering. There is no manipulation of material reality as

there is in *The Unlimited Dream Company* — Traven has no powers other than his imagination.

In the section titled “The Catechism of Goodbye”, time becomes quantal: “For hours it would be noon, the shadows contained within the blocks, the heat reflected off the concrete floor” (2010a, 601). Traven then bids goodbye to the nuclear test sites of Eniwetok, Los Alamos, Hiroshima, and Alamogordo. Each time, in “a flicker of light”, each of the blocks, “like a counter on an abacus [...] is plucked away”, creating in his mind “a small interval of neutral space” (2010a, 601). This “megathlon farewell” (2010a, 601) is an act of fixing the protagonist’s signature, a deliberate act of forgetting but also of remembrance, as indicated in the earlier story “The Voices of Time” (1962), in which he tries to achieve the same thing, and realizes that “systematically forgetting everything was exactly the same as remembering it, a cataloguing in reverse, sorting out all the books in the mental library and putting them back in their right places upside down” (2010b, 178).

At times, the physical description of the island is eerily parallel to a text version of Salvador Dalí’s 1954 *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*, the painter’s reworking of his famous 1931 painting. Here, we see the famous melting clocks from the earlier painting now breaking apart into rectangular blocks, floating and separating in space. These blocks appear almost like atomic particles, suggesting time itself is being torn apart at a subatomic level. The shadow of the atom bomb and quantum mechanics loomed large for Dalí in the 1950s, as he sought to display the structural underpinnings of matter. Traven’s blocks have a similar visual effect.

More importantly, the way Traven encounters these blocks is through a death-ritual, by experiencing a kind of living death on the island. The blocks, in their rigidity and repetition, become like tomb markers or mausoleums, but paradoxically alive with psychic energy. They are crucial to understanding life and

death in Ballard, since death for Ballard is not the absence of life, but rather a new kind of *inner space* where death and life become strangely interchangeable. The blocks are tombs that generate psychic life, markers of annihilation that produce new forms of consciousness. In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, the geometry of death (crash sites, weapons testing grounds, assassination angles) becomes inseparable from sexual and psychological vitality. *Crash* takes this notion even further: the geometric forms of vehicles become both coffins and wombs, death-machines that generate new forms of life and sexuality.

Finally, Traven finds the corpse of a Japanese man in a crevice with whom he imagines having a conversation. Traven has second thoughts about killing a fly — the only other living being in the entirety of the island — buzzing around the corpse's face. The Japanese corpse, who he has named Dr. Yasuda, beckons Traven to "pursue a philosophy of acceptance" that involves losing himself in the world of "quantal flux" of the blocks and to finally kill the fly (2010a, 603–4). Traven is skeptical about Yasuda's argument that the wife and son that he seeks "are fixed in our minds forever"; and about killing the fly — Traven quips "That's not an end, or a beginning,"— but, finally and "hopelessly," kills it (2010a, 604). The story ends with Traven positioning Yasuda's corpse, like a guard, in a point in between his bunker and the blocks. The "seated figure of the dead archangel" (2010a, 604) guards him from death, but this is not a promise of immortality, since Traven is already in a kind of death-state on the atoll. Instead, the 'dead archangel' seems to be protecting Traven from the full realization or finality of death. Yasuda becomes a mediating figure between different states of death and life, much like Vaughan in *Crash* — also called an archangel (1973, 198) —, whose status as 'archangel' suggests he is an intermediary figure between states of existence.⁴ In *The Unlimited*

⁴ Archangels are conventionally thought of as messengers between divine and human realms.

Dream Company, Blake's true antagonist is Stark, who wants nothing more than to recover Blake's own dead body from the crashed aircraft. The confrontation with his former self would result in the final confirmation of his state (already dead), a threshold that Blake both desires and fears to cross.

Elaborate Defense Mechanisms Against Death

What we see in Ballard's fiction, notably in characters such as Vaughan, Blake, and Traven, is precisely these intellectualized, aestheticized, and, more importantly, deluded attempts to rob death — this opaque state of complete alterity — of its inscrutability, and thus injecting it with narcissistic meaning. We see these characters attempting to transform death from an unknowable external force into a personally crafted narrative where they remain the central consciousness and controlling agent. Whether through Vaughan's pseudo-scientific documentation of car crashes, Blake's messianic fantasies of flight, or Traven's obsessive arrangements of concrete blocks, each character tries to convert death's fundamental otherness into a private mythology where they imagine themselves as both orchestrator and central agent of their own annihilation. It is as if the suicidal megalomaniacs and their psychopathic obsessions are presented, briefly, as alternatives to death, but which are ultimately doomed to fail. These characters are like the 'dead archangel,' staving off the end for a brief moment, promising transcendence. These intervals are, however, like the 'posthumous fantasy': only a brief illusion. Death will naturally come for every single Ballard protagonist, no matter how enlightened they feel in the moments of their narration, most often

Tellingly, whenever the term 'archangel' is used in *The Unlimited Dream Company* it is in reference to Blake himself.

taking place after the main plot events but before their (ultimate) deaths.⁵

Throughout *The Unlimited Dream Company*, Blake is constantly essaying different models for his merging with every living creature in Shepperton, from bestiality and cannibalism to absorbing them into his own body and lifting others into the sky. At every turn, however, there is the unbearable, cumulative sense of excess of matter that block him from achieving his goal to the end. As with the memories in "The Terminal Beach", he needs to divest himself from these blockages to achieve liberation. In *The Unlimited Dream Company*, those are the townspeople and the seven witnesses to his crash. In fact, Blake only interacts in any meaningful way with the same seven, whom he calls his 'family', each of them representing a cardinal point in a familial structure: father, mother, sister, brother, etc., who need to be overcome. There is the desire to dissolve boundaries between bodies, but at the same time, Blake's consciousness and megalomania have to be preserved, feeding into his inflated view of himself as an all-powerful pagan deity, ready to devour everyone in Shepperton and soon the entire world: "I knew that I had defeated the unseen forces who had kept me here, frightened of the unlimited powers I had discovered in myself. I was the first living creature to escape death, to rise above mortality to become a god" (Ballard 1979, 186). Soon, however, after his 'marriage' to Miriam St Cloud, he is shot down by Stark and bereft of his powers. To be reborn, he needs to be 'cured' of his delusions of grandeur and move towards some form of altruism:

I was born again from the lowest of the creatures, from the amoeba dividing in the meadow ponds, from the hydra and spirogyra. I was spawned by amphibians in the creek beside

⁵ Take for instance, the memorable first lines of *Crash* and *High-Rise*: "Vaughan died yesterday in his last car-crash" (Ballard 1973, 7); "Later, as he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr. Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous three months" (Ballard 2006, 7).

the meadow, and in the river as a dogfish from the body of my mother shark. I was dropped by the pregnant deer onto the deep grass of the meadow. I emerged from the warm cloaca of birds. I was born by a thousand births from the flesh of every living thing in the forest, the father of myself. I became my own child. (1979, 213)

This passage shows Blake oscillating between two opposing but related fantasies: total incorporation (devouring/absorbing everything) and total regression/dissolution (being reborn from 'the lowest of creatures'). While it appears to be about dissolution of the self into nature ('born by a thousand births'), it actually reinforces Blake's narcissistic fantasy: he becomes 'the father of myself,' 'my own child.'

If in "The Terminal Beach" and *The Atrocity Exhibition* the protagonists are responding to a clear identifiable trauma and are looking for a way to make their suffering make sense, in *The Unlimited Dream Company*, Blake is able to achieve some form of cure by offering healing and liberation for others. The final release will only be achieved in the conditions of the clinic, the actual town clinic where he had healed the sick before. In the earlier texts the protagonists' attempts at a 'cure' are essentially solipsistic, with private mythologies that do not offer healing to anyone else, only attempts to make personal trauma intelligible through increasingly elaborate systems of private meaning. Maitland, the protagonist of *Concrete Island*, represents perhaps the apex of this narcissistic response to trauma. His 'kingdom' on the traffic island is built through the exploitation of Proctor and Jane — the island's inhabitants —, turning them into props in his personal psychodrama, whereas Blake's healing of others is not just incidental to his own transformation, but becomes the very mechanism of it. The chapter titled "I Give Myself Away" is particularly telling, as it suggests a movement away from the narcissistic containment of earlier Ballard protagonists toward a kind of dissolution of the self through care for others. However, things might not be that

simple, as Blake never seems to release himself from the ultimate delusion: that true transcendence, dissolution of the self and complete merger with the world and others is even possible.

The Unlimited Dream Company ends with a deluded Blake, hoping for a 'next time' when he would be reunited with Miriam so he can finally fulfill his vision:

This time we would merge with the trees and the flowers, with the dust and the stones, with the whole of the mineral world, happily dissolving ourselves in the sea of light that formed the universe, itself reborn from the souls of the living who have happily returned themselves to its heart. Already I saw us rising into the air—fathers, mothers, and their children—our ascending flights swaying across the surface of the earth, benign tornados hanging from the canopy of the universe, celebrating the last marriage of the animate and inanimate, of the living and the dead. (1979, 238)

This atomized dissolution, becoming one with the natural world and taking flight, powered by 'marriage of the animate and inanimate, of the living and the dead,' is the 'way out' promised by Blake's destructive drives. The language of universal communion ('fathers, mothers, and their children') and cosmic unity ('marriage of the animate and inanimate') actually mask what is still essentially a private apocalypse. Blake's 'we' remains theoretical, projected into a perpetually deferred 'next time.' While Blake's healing powers and desire to 'give himself away' appear to offer an alternative to the exploitation and violence of characters like Maitland, the underlying structure remains similar: a solitary consciousness trying to master death through elaborate fantasies of transcendence. As Gasiorek interprets the novel's proposed utopia, it is "not [...] political at all; it hints at no programme of change within this world but rather envisages a mystical transformation that will take it into another ontological order altogether" (2005, 138), one that remains inaccessible even to Blake. The 'benign tornados hanging from the canopy of the universe' echo the violent transformations of earlier Ballard works. Even this apparently life-affirming vision is still powered by the destructive drive to dissolve

boundaries between the living and the dead, animate and inanimate, and is fundamentally about annihilation, however poetically described.

Conclusion

The Unlimited Dream Company marks two radical shifts in Ballard's work: first, it abandons the technological landscapes of his previous novels (the highways of *Crash* and *Concrete Island*, the brutalist architecture of *High-Rise*) for an explicitly organic space where Blake's transformative powers work through natural rather than technological means. Second, unlike previous Ballard protagonists who remain trapped in solipsistic technological-psychological systems, Blake turns toward others in his quest for transcendence, attempting cure through healing and communion rather than exploitation, even if this attempted altruism ultimately remains entangled with his megalomaniacal delusions. When tracing a progression from "The Terminal Beach" all the way to *The Unlimited Dream Company*, we see that Ballard's preoccupation with the space between life and death is not simply a recurring motif but a central preoccupation for much of his work. In Ballard, death is not an endpoint but a transformative threshold.

Ballard's shift from technological to organic imagery represents a continued exploration of the same liminal space from different angles. The 'acid pastoral' of *The Unlimited Dream Company* is not a rejection of the technological sublime found in *Crash*, for instance, but its natural counterpart, both novels exploring how consciousness might transcend its limitations through this moment of suspension between life and death. This reading allows us to see Ballard not simply as the 'Seer of Shepperton,' the chronicler of future catastrophe, or the cartographer of technological dystopia, but as a writer fundamentally concerned with the transformative potential of consciousness at the threshold between states of being. Furthermore, he is concerned with profound liminality that

traverses multiple conceptual boundaries: life and death, science fiction and fantasy, reality and imagination, cure and psychopathy, health and pathology. Ballard unveils the exuberant potentiality hidden within the seemingly dead and dull suburban landscape — a quiet exterior that barely contains the overwhelming, uncontrollable life force bubbling just beneath the surface. Tracing this progression reveals how consistently Ballard worked to map this interstitial territory, each text offering another perspective on how consciousness might attempt this figurative transcendence through its encounter with death.

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