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Constructing Ballardian Landscapes: From Shanghai to Shepperton

Abstract

A peculiar type of landscape dominates much of James Graham Ballard's fiction: a shallow and abandoned environment characterised by an ominous sense of disconnectedness. With his formative years spent in Shanghai, in an artificially reconstructed English landscape, Ballard's idea of England and Englishness was later confronted with the "real" England upon his return. From thereon landscapes were marked by artificiality, which, as will be argued, accounts for the lingering sense of disconnectedness between the protagonists in his works of fiction and the landscapes they inhabit. Drawing on Tim Ingold's dwelling perspective on landscapes, this paper will trace the particular link that exists between Ballard's personal experiences with English landscapes and the fictionalised environments in his work, arguing that these characters are presented as enduring the absence of what Martin Heidegger referred to as "dwelling." Without the possibility of dwelling, these protagonists are cast into the role of internal émigrés in whatever environment they find themselves in.

Keywords: James Graham Ballard, Tim Ingold, Martin Heidegger, landscape, dwelling, phenomenology

Jeff Malpas in his introduction to *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* uses the example of the intimate connection Aboriginal Australians have with their land to highlight the importance of rootedness when defining one's sense of self:

> In traditional terms, then, for an Aboriginal person to be removed from that country to which he or she belongs is for them to be deprived of their very substance, and in past times such removal – particularly when it involved imprisonment – frequently led to sickness and death. (Malpas 2004: 3)

If this "substance" is taken to mean self-identity, or the recognition of one's self, then indeed its loss as a result of having been relocated speaks to the existential connection that can exist between people and their environment. What is more, as will be discussed further, the idea of being intertwined with

a particular environment to the point where it begins to constitute the bedrock of one's sense of self touches on the very meaning of landscape. A similar event occurred in J.G. Ballard's biography, that is, the experience of being removed from one's country and how that experience, recorded in his interviews and autobiographical writing, created a substrate from which emerged fiction that was able to capture the idea of estrangement from one's surrounding environment. This sense of estrangement is reflected in his fictional depictions of landscapes, their aesthetics as well as the effect or lack thereof on the protagonists.

This article will develop the particular link that exists between Ballard's personal experiences with "English" landscapes and the fictionalized (artificial) environments in his work in an effort to explain how this disconnectedness can be regarded as resulting from the absence of what Martin Heidegger ([1959] 2001) referred to as "dwelling". Without the possibility of dwelling, Ballard's protagonists, both fictional and autobiographical, are cast into the role of "internal émigrés". Without the possibility of dwelling, the idea of landscape is also called into question. Ballard's work, both his fiction and non-fiction, thus provides a provocative springboard to think about the interdependence of landscape and those who inhabit it, while also laying bare the constituent features of landscape as an aesthetic and cultural category. The intention here is not to offer a taxonomy of Ballardian landscapes, nor is it to apply a particular theoretical perspective from the domain of landscape studies – it is rather to use Ballardian landscapes as a means of problematizing the ways of thinking about landscape in general.

When surveying Ballard's long and varied literary career, one is struck by recurring landscapes, which have become so prevalent and recognizable that the adjective "Ballardian" has been added to the Collins Dictionary to represent anything

> resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in the works of J. G. Ballard, especially dystopian modernity, bleak artificial landscapes, and the psychological effects of technological, social, or environmental developments[1].

These bleak artificial landscapes are of particular interest, especially since the distinction between artificial and real is at best ambiguous in his work. Whatever genre or literary mode of expression, whether autobiographical, science fiction, or experimental, Ballard has turned his unique brand of landscapes into an instantly recognizable fixture of his style. His novels and short stories abound in drained swimming pools, abandoned aircraft hangars, urban and natural disaster zones, gated communities, various liminal spaces representing a superficial and abandoned environment characterized by an ominous sense of disconnectedness, in itself becoming a running theme throughout much of his literary output.

In order to get a better foothold in the conceptual framework of landscape theory, it is necessary to take a step back and look at some of the issues at stake. John Wylie (2007) in his study of landscape criticism begins by outlining some fundamental tensions that frame the discussion on landscape: proximity/distance, observation/inhabitation, eye/land, and culture and nature. In other words, delineating the concept of landscape is conditional on the role assigned to the observing subject in relation to the environment, with the degree of one's involvement determining the understanding of landscape we are dealing with. Ultimately, these tensions illustrate a broader dualism in our approach to landscape: between what Tim Ingold (2000) terms the building approach (perspectival) and the dwelling (phenomenological) approach. Wylie reduces this distinction to the following questions: "Is landscape a scene we are looking *at*, or a world we are living *in*? Is landscape all around us or just in front

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1   [At:] https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/ballardian [date of access: 13.04.2025].

of us? Do we observe or inhabit landscape?" (Wylie 2007: 4). Although this question is framed as an either/or question, these two approaches do not have to be mutually exclusive; they can be seen as merely representing different ways of conceptualizing the idea of landscape. Each has their set of assumptions and requirements regarding the positioning and level of entanglement of the observing subject.

Not only is the role of the observing subject an issue in landscape criticism, but landscape itself raises issues as a spatial construct. Many of the phenomenological studies of landscape coincided with the so-called "spatial turn" in cultural and literary studies. With focus shifting from considerations of time and temporality to those of spatiality and its connection with structures of power, space came to be regarded as no longer a neutral and universal container where human activities took place but as itself participating in those activities. This turn towards viewing space as an actant rather than a passive container is described by Christopher Tilley, who in *A Phenomenology of Landscape* claims that "[t]he alternative view starts from regarding space as a medium rather than a container for action, something that is involved in action and cannot be divorced from it" (Tilley 1994: 10). Space and human activity are inextricably bound, creating meaning in tandem rather than existing as separate entities. Such spaces are "meaningfully constituted in relation to human agency and activity" (*ibidem*). This idea is indebted to one of the key figures in spatial theory, Henri Lefebvre ([1974] 1991), who in *The Production of Space* reasserted the active role of space, arguing that space is never neutral and empty but is an active force in shaping societies and culture. As the concept of space underwent a conceptual overhaul, the concept of landscape also benefited from these new theories.

This alternative phenomenological approach to landscape is championed by archeologists Tim Ingold (2000) and Christopher Tilley (1994), who stress the importance of embodiment as opposed to the detached perspectival view rooted in the Cartesian subject/object dualism, whereby landscape is seen from afar by a gazing spectator. It is in this vein that Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels in *Iconography of Landscape* define landscape as "a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings" (Cosgrove, Daniels 1988: 1). For them landscape is an objective reality that is "out there" subject to our empirical analysis. The phenomenological approach takes issue with the *a priori* subject/object separation and, consequently, moves away from a strictly discursive rendition of landscape. Ingold, in opposition to Cosgrove's view, states the following:

> I do not share this view. To the contrary, I reject the division between inner and outer worlds – respectively of mind and matter, meaning and substance – upon which such distinction rests. The landscape, I hold, is not a picture in the imagination, surveyed by the mind's eye, nor however is it an alien and formless substrate awaiting the imposition of human order. (Ingold 2000: 191)

In short, the phenomenological perspective invites us to view landscapes not as isolated from the perceiving subject, but as integral to the experience of that subject. The phenomenological perspective can be differentiated from the perspectival perspective based on the position of the subject in relation to his or her environment – a subject in the world, enmeshed, and one that is a self-contained individual confronting a world "out there."

Ballard's work stages the tension between these two seemingly opposing views. On the one hand, his landscapes lend themselves well to a perspectival Marxist reading, which would stress the complicity of various landscapes with the evolving capitalist system and with the formation of the identity and values of its inhabitants. The perfectly designed closed-off gated communities and high-rises we find in his work underscore class structure, commercialization and commodification as integral features of the presented

landscapes. The phenomenological approach, on the other hand, shifts the focus from a critique of capitalism's spatial organization to an exploration of how these environments are experienced – how they shape perception and subjectivity. In Ballard's case, however, this approach points to the impossibility of landscape in general. The degree of inhabitation necessary to successfully define landscape in the phenomenological sense is simply absent in Ballard's novels, where protagonists are presented as existing in their environments without actually "dwelling" in them. This aspect of dwelling will be expanded upon at a later stage.

Ballard admits that his preoccupation with the effects of the physical environment on one's sense of identity has its origin in his childhood, which is why his non-fiction can be seen as offering important insight into his aesthetics. His numerous interviews, autobiography, memoir, and semi-autobiographical novels at length detail his boyhood experience of WWII as a British subject born in Shanghai in 1930. Thirteen years later, he along with his family and other British expats found themselves interned in the Lunghua internment camp (which had the innocuous name of Lunghua Civilian Assembly Centre). This experience provides the material for his semi-autobiographical *Empire of the Sun* (1984), perhaps his most popular novel, on account of it being adapted into a movie in 1987 directed by Steven Spielberg with the screenplay written by Tom Stoppard. After the war, Ballard's family decided to return to England, which for the 16-year-old Ballard was to be his first visit to his home country. Though raised English, upon his return, he was struck at how unfamiliar and foreign his home country is to him. In his autobiographical *Miracles of Life*, Ballard explains the transition from Shanghai to England in the following manner:

> In Shanghai the fantastic, which for most people lies inside their heads, lay all around me, and I think now that my main effort as a boy was to find the real in all this make-believe. In some ways I went on doing this when I came to England after the war, a world that was almost too real. As a writer I've treated England as if it were a strange fiction, and my task has been to elicit the truth, [...]. (Ballard 2014: 34–35)

Ballard often emphasized the fictionality of his surroundings. In "First Impressions of London" he recalls how his move from Shanghai to London further exposed the fictional, literary sources of his image of England:

> My image of London was formed during my Shanghai childhood in the 1930s as I listened to my parents' generation talk nostalgically of West End shows, the bright lights of Piccadilly, Noel Coward and Gertie Lawrence, reinforced by a Peter Pan and Christopher Robin image of a London that consisted entirely of Knightsbridge and Kensington, where 1 per cent of the population was working-class and everyone else was a barrister or stockbroker. When I actually arrived in 1946 I found a London that looked like Bucharest with a hangover – heaps of rubble, an exhausted ferret-like people defeated by war and still deluded by Churchillian rhetoric, hobbling around a wasteland of poverty, ration books and grotesque social division. (Ballard 1997: 185)

The Shanghai of his childhood was a cosmopolitan patchwork of cultures and influences: Chinese, American, British, among many others. His upbringing was among the British expat community, which in proper colonial fashion attempted to rebuild English life in China not only physically by reconstructing an English architectural landscape but ideologically as well by instilling in the children growing up there a sense of Britishness. This was carried out by means of children's literature, English entertainment, a proper English school, all serving the purpose of manufacturing the 'fantasy' of Britishness.

All this came to an end when the Empire of Japan invaded Shanghai. The experience of having his life uprooted and replaced by the internment camp destroyed his grand narratives about England and Englishness or at least exposed these concepts as constructs, imagined landscapes, and his return to England, where he confronted the original (real) Englishness, conclusively shattered any remnant of idealism he might have nurtured. David Ian Paddy describes the moment of disenchantment that occurred when Ballard realized that the London he had imagined in his mind as the prototype of his Shanghai landscapes bore little resemblance to the real London.

> Ballard underwent the surreal experience of the colonial child who came home to the empire's heart, the source of his Shanghai landscape, yet a place which was not his home; a Baudrillardian experience of the encounter with the copy's original, which must, because it has been experience secondarily, be regarded as a copy, not an original. (Paddy 2015: 18)

If the original turns out to be a copy, then any conception of the real is undermined. "Artificial" and "real" had already been tentative categories for Ballard before moving to England on account of his experience of wartime destruction. Bearing witness to the whole edifice of Western architecture and culture crumbling under Japanese aggression revealed how fickle our sense reality actually is. Speaking of his childhood experiences of war, Ballard himself claimed: "Reality, I was fast learning, was little more than a stage set whose actors and scenery could vanish overnight" (Ballard 1997: 288). As a result, Ballard "frames his entire writing strategy as an effort to expose England and Englishness as mere stage sets, as ready to collapse as the stage sets in Shanghai" (Paddy 2015: 19–20). This accounts for a kind of postmodern indeterminacy in these unanchored landscapes. Constructed, transferred, reconstructed – English landscapes were meant to help preserve the cultural identity of the British expats living in Shanghai, but bearing witness to how easily and quickly they all disintegrated disabused Ballard of any illusions he might have had concerning their permanence.

Eventually, Ballard settled in Shepperton, an unassuming suburb of London, where he lived out the rest of his life in a semi-detached house. Oddly enough, he took a liking to Shepperton because its landscape, especially the architecture of the houses, reminded him of Shanghai. In the end, therefore, it would seem that he found himself living in a copy of a copy of something that perhaps had never existed. Another fact about Shepperton that lends a certain dose of irony to the whole situation, given Ballard's predilection for testing the boundaries between reality and fiction, is that it is home to Shepperton Studios, film studios that have been in use since the 1930s.

Though he spent the rest of his life in England, Ballard was still haunted by the unfamiliarity and strangeness of its landscapes. In an interview with Will Self, he admitted to his lack of interest in the English landscape as such, offering the following explanation:

> …there is still an underlying strangeness for me about the English landscape and there is even about this little town of Shepperton where I have lived for thirty-four years. If you settle in a country after a certain age, after your early teens, then it will always seem slightly strange. In any case this has probably been a good thing, it has urged me to look beyond Little England for the source of what interested me as a writer. (Ballard 2014: 301)

Ballard regarded the post-war British literary scene as too provincial, too concerned with outdated notions of class and empire and too lost in the past to be able to grasp the importance of current cultural and technological changes. This propelled him to become a more cosmopolitan writer, incorporating various countries into his fiction, never limiting himself to a British perspective. His unwillingness to

limit himself to any one genre or style may explain why he ventured towards experimental fiction and new wave science fiction, in effect alienating himself from mainstream science fiction but falling short of gaining due recognition by the literary establishment. Regardless of the genre or style of narrative, his sense of disillusionment and displacement with regard to the superficially familiar English landscape impinged itself onto his fiction, which is why the landscapes we find in Ballard's novels and short stories, whether English, Spanish or French, provide very little in the way of security and a sense of home for their protagonists. These are placeless, anonymous and weightless landscapes always outside the protagonist who exists alongside them without ever being able to inhabit them. A cursory glance at some examples of these spaces will help to illustrate these placeless places.

The eponymous high rise in his 1975 novel is a case in point. Inspired by Erno Goldfinger's Balfron Tower and Trellick Tower, both representative of a Brutalist solution to the post-war housing shortage, the high-rise is initially described as a kind of enclave for "[a] new social type, . . . a cool, unemotional personality impervious to the psychological pressures of high-rise life, with minimal needs for privacy, who thrived like an advanced species of machine in the neutral atmosphere" (Ballard 2012: 46). Ballard emphasizes the particular type of person drawn to this environment. It is someone who no longer requires or is able to maintain emotional connection with his surroundings, someone who is, therefore, cut off from their surroundings. Describing this environment, Ballard states that "[p]art of its appeal lay all too clearly in the fact that this was an environment built, not for man, but for man's absence" (Ballard 2012: 34). Here, Ballard's landscape is physically enclosed yet emotionally and socially empty. Despite being a home to thousands, the high-rise provides no true sense of belonging. Detachment and disconnection are further emphasized by the placement of this high-rise. The newly erected structures overlook the London cityscape from afar, providing its inhabitants a view of the city without actually being a part of it. The inhabitants were not only disconnected from the outside world, but also disconnected within the high-rise itself, which is divided into separate social strata, with each group vying for dominance amid the escalating chaos. The building, designed as a utopian vision of the future, instead embodies Ballard's idea of placeless, weightless environments that fail to offer security.

In *Super-Cannes* (2000), Ballard relocates his vision of dystopian modernity to the south of France, where a high-tech corporate business park becomes an idyllic setting promising a hyper-efficient and fulfilling way of life. The isolated Eden-Olympia is yet another example of an artificially created landscape that serves as a backdrop to institutionalized violence, moral corruption, and emotional detachment. Ballard describes Eden-Olympia as "machine above all for thinking in", which is an obvious homage to Le Corbusier's description of his now infamous buildings as "a machine for living in". Instead of providing security and stability, Eden-Olympia functions as a sterile, dehumanizing space, which works to erode societal norms. Like the high-rise, it is a controlled, artificial landscape that paradoxically intensifies its residents' disconnection from reality, transforming it into an arena for psychological and moral collapse.

Estrella de Mar, the Spanish leisure community for the wealthy, depicted in *Cocaine Nights* (1996), provides yet another example of an artificial enclave that is superficially welcoming but ultimately alienating. Instead of fostering a sense of home and belonging, it functions as a kind of psychological void. The landscape, beneath its veneer of seductive beauty, is hollow, trapping the residents in a cycle of moral corruption. In *Running Wild* ([1988 2018]), Ballard depicts an exclusive, heavily surveilled English gated community called Pangbourne Village. Similarly to *Cocaine Nights* (1996), the landscape here is also artificial and sterile. All of these utopian enclaves, which have been meticulously designed for total

comfort and safety, paradoxically create the conditions for their own destruction by bringing about an overwhelming sense of detachment and strangeness among the inhabitants. Similarly, Ballard's *Crash* ([1973] 1995) depicts real and recognizable locations, such as the suburbs around Heathrow Airport with their network of motorways and all-night cafes, but these spaces are transformed into something uncanny and estranged. Although they belong to the familiar geography of modern urban life, they feel detached from any sense of home or community: "looking closely at this silent terrain, I realized that the entire zone which defined the landscape of my life was bounded by a continuous artificial horizon" (Ballard [1973] 1995: 53). The artificial horizon suggests a sense of entrapment, as if the characters are confined within a technological dystopia that has eroded traditional human connection.

What all these places seem to have in common is how disconnected the inhabitants are from their surroundings, how the various manufactured landscapes, though aesthetically pleasing and well designed, offer very little in the way of dwelling. The concept of dwelling requires some elaboration. The term entered philosophical discussions by way of Martin Heidegger's (1951) essay "Building Dwelling Thinking", which posed the following question: "what is it to dwell?". This question was part of a larger project of comparing the contemporary way of life with an imagined past dwelling. He goes on to enumerate examples of architecture – highways, market halls, dams, offices, factories, and even residential buildings – which indeed provide shelter, but not dwelling. "Today's houses may even be well planned, easy to keep, attractively cheap, open to air, light and sun, but do the houses in themselves hold any guarantee that *dwelling* occurs in them?" (Heidegger [1959] 2001: 144). As Adam Sharr notes, Heidegger's choice of words highlights the technocratic aspects of contemporary architecture that are at odds with the possibility of dwelling. Words like "well planned", "easy to keep", "attractively cheap", and "residential", in his view, "emphasize production systems over the priorities of human inhabitation" (Sharr 2007: 39). With priorities such as these, modern architecture, exemplified by Le Corbusier's modernist urbanism, is representative of a technocratic approach to housing, which precludes the possibility of dwelling. Tristan Tzara's voiced similar criticism when he claimed that modern architecture is "the complete negation of the image of the dwelling" (*qtd*. Vidler 1996: 150). As a counterexample to modern architecture, Heidegger presents his depiction of a farmhouse in the Black Forest.

> Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things, ordered the house. It placed the farm on the wind-sheltered mountain slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. It gave it the wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and which, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter nights. It did not forget the altar corner behind the community table; it made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of childbed and the ‚tree of the dead' - for that is what they call a coffin there: the Totenbaum – and in this way it is designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time. A craft which, itself sprung from dwelling, still uses its tools and frames as things, built the farmhouse. (Heidegger [1959] 2001: 157)

Part of the land for over 200 years, open to the sky, rooted in the earth, open to divinities and mortals, and furnished with the work of craftsmen – it represents the ideal of dwelling, which also imparts a sense of permanence otherwise lost in the kind of technocratic and urbanized landscapes we so often encounter in Ballard's work. David Spurr in *Architecture and Literature* states that dwelling is "that idealized conception

of space that promises rootedness, permanence, and a womblike removal from the experience of modernity" (Spurr 2012: 52–53).

Heidegger's rather lyrical and idealized concept of dwelling, despite its nostalgic and somewhat mystical undertones, has gained significant traction in phenomenological approaches to landscape. According to Tim Ingold (2000), dwelling must be understood as the ultimate mode of inhabitation, requiring an active subject enmeshed in the environment rather than a passive observer, as assumed by the building perspective. From a phenomenological standpoint, landscapes are no longer static cultural frames or mere "ways of seeing," nor are they inert material surfaces. Instead, as John Wylie suggests, "landscape becomes the ongoing practice and process of dwelling" (Wylie 2007: 162). For Ingold, the very existence of landscape is contingent on dwelling. If that is the case, and if, as Ingold writes, "landscape is the world as it is known to those who dwell therein" (Ingold 2000: 193) and given the "fundamental *indissolubility* of the connections between persons and landscape" (Ingold 2000: 55), what happens when these connections have in fact been dissolved? If landscape is inherently dependent on dwelling, then by this definition, Ballard's landscapes are not landscapes at all – at least not in the phenomenological sense. His protagonists do not inhabit their environments in the way that Heidegger's notion of *being-in-the-world* requires; rather, they exist alongside their surroundings, disconnected and estranged. This distinction is particularly revealing when comparing Ballard's fiction and his semi-autobiographical novels, particularly *Empire of the Sun* ([1984] 2005), where the protagonist, young Jim, is deeply embedded in a landscape rich with cultural and symbolic significance. His identity, memories, and interests are shaped by the meanings inscribed onto the world around him – his dwelling is both spatial and existential. By contrast, Ballard's purely fictional work presents the opposite of dwelling: barren, impersonal spaces severed from their protagonists. These landscapes remain external and indifferent, failing to provide a sense of home, belonging, or continuity. Architecture in these fictional settings is reduced to mere props – temporary, interchangeable, and ultimately inconsequential. At a moment's notice, these structures can be dismantled, reinforcing the notion that Ballard's characters are not truly in the world but rather adrift within it.

The realization that the environment is ontologically reducible to a prop, as described in Ballard autobiographical work, is reflected in the kind of spaces we encounter in his fiction and their relationship with the protagonists. The contention of this article has been that the two ways of approaching one's environment, the perspectival and phenomenological, are exemplified by Ballard's pre- and post-war approach. On the one hand, we have a standard progression from child-like naiveté to disillusionment, but there is also something else at stake. This shift in perspective can be traced in Ballard's biographical experience of relocation. It is not just that his internment, and subsequent relocation to England uprooted Ballard from an environment that he had considered his home, but the whole concept of home seems to have been uprooted along with him. All this precluded the possibility of any kind of dwelling in the future for him as well as for his characters. The vacant, ghostly aspects of his landscapes are a literary testament to what Jeff Malpas (2004) described as the effect of Aboriginal people being removed from their country, from the landscapes in which they have dwelled, which as it turns out is tantamount to them being deprived of their substance.

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