

**Robert Bond and Jenny Bavidge, eds. *City Visions: The Work of***

***Iain Sinclair.***

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**Jeannette Baxter. *J G Ballard's Surrealist Imagination:***

***Spectacular Authorship.***

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### **City Visions: The Work of Iain Sinclair**

It is perhaps surprising that Iain Sinclair has courted less academic attention than might be expected from a writer of his stature. His circular excursions of the written word, rewoven into the circuitous labyrinth of London's urban fabric, his insistent intertextual frameworks and syntactic ambiguity seem to beg, at the least, a type of speculative literary criticism. Yet, as *City Visions'* editors, Robert Bond and Jenny Bavidge, propose, perhaps Sinclair's critical absence is a result of the peculiar tension his body of work engenders – tension between genres, between film, poetry and literature, between critical and commercial success and obscure, small-press inaccessibility, all of which he straddles. For Bond and Bavidge, "the multidiscursive and multi-encyclopaedic range of his sources and references ...

has made it difficult for commentators ... to grasp the scope, and identities, of Sinclair's various colliding projects" (2). However, it is in this fluidity that the various contributors to *City Visions*, which collects papers given at the University of Greenwich's 2004 conference of the same name, find a way in. According to the editors: "Sinclair suggest[s] that the river could teach us a way of interacting with urban history and culture – a fluid imagination-work, as it were ... as playful, democratic and formless as nature itself: as organic, grounded and experimental as the city could continue to be" (8). Accordingly, *City Visions* is far away from opaque literary theory, typified by Ben Watson, who admits to being stung by, and then colluding with, "Sinclair's scorn for the patronising academic 'overview' [that] burn[s] occult insignia on the back of [my] neck" (82).

The anthology has four sections with titles that give an indication of the focus: Contexts, Culture and Critique, Connections, and Space. "Resistance" is a recurring concept, embodied, it is claimed, in Sinclair's micro-detail. Because there are no real narrative arcs in his writing, the overarching critical strategy on display involves deep excavation of the mechanics of discourse. Kirstin Seale suggests that Sinclair "alienates the reader through use of digressive narrative, which, in its Blakean insistence on cyclical shapes, resists the linear structure of rational imagination" (105). Robert Hampson charts connections between Sinclair's mapping of urban space, intertwined with the latterly reborn psychogeography movement, and Sinclair's sense of evasion of the all-consuming gaze of late capitalism: "The 'fresh' relations of collage coincide with visions of a transformed city" (113). David James skilfully picks apart Sinclair's "cryogenic narrative" logic (a "bolting together of clauses," like cryogenic suspension), where the artificiality of prose language is attacked, and reordered, to counter the "violence" it wreaks upon "felt experience," resulting in what Sinclair in *Dining on Stones* describes as the "futility of fixing the present moment, instead of experiencing it" (157).

Indeed, "dispensing with the sub-clause," to use Hampson's term, comes to have macroscopic significance, paratactical resistance that might well be a "fidelity to the writer's unconscious" (88), as Watson asserts regarding the dissent in Sinclair's early poetry. Brian Baker, too, holds that "it is in fact the poetry that is vital to an understanding of Sinclair's writing practice" (133), an experimental freezone where many of Sinclair's core obsessions are developed.

I was disappointed by the lack of interest in Sinclair's film work with Chris Petit, a long, fruitful and ongoing partnership. Although the films are mentioned sporadically throughout *City Visions*, only Esther Leslie's essay on *London Orbital* (the Petit/Sinclair film of Sinclair's book) applies any kind

of weighty critique. Yet while her analysis is perceptive, dubbing the filmmakers' interest in image overload and recovery as an "aesthetics of refuse" (*refuse* as both garbage and resistance), she misses a trick by failing to mention the overarching influence of J G Ballard, such an acknowledged influence on the film he may as well be credited as the third director.

David Cunningham rectifies this, albeit referring only to Sinclair's written work. While many commentators tend to simplify the Ballard/Sinclair symbiosis, smelting it down to an effortless story of compatible writers, Cunningham deftly challenges that assertion by exposing the Ballardian influence as the grit in Sinclair's work, a productive f(r)iction that allows Sinclair to revivify Ballard's archetypal non-place: "re-plac[ing] the fictional spaces of Ballard's novels through what is described as a tenuous act of re-enchantment ... as if the lexical variety and richness of [Sinclair's prose] might overcome the emptiness that it confronts" (142).

All up, this is a very impressive collection (despite the niggling problem of multiple typos that renders some footnotes unintelligible). It meets Sinclair's work on its own terms, becoming state-of-the-art literary theory that is intelligent and deep, but never anything less than playful, engaging and revelatory.

### **J G Ballard's Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship**

In contrast to Sinclair, Ballard has been very well served by academia. *J G Ballard's Surrealist Imagination* represents the fifth book-length, critical analysis of his work (alongside numerous essays) and the second by Jeannette Baxter, who also edited Continuum's collection of essays, *J G Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (2009). One wonders what Ballard himself might have made of it all. In 1991, he penned a wonderfully distemperate letter to *Science Fiction Studies*, in which he denounced the critical consciousness surrounding SF (a genre he is strongly associated with) as "bourgeoisification in the form of an over-professionalized academia with nowhere to take its girlfriend for a bottle of wine and a dance."<sup>1</sup>

What more can be said about his work? Quite a bit, according to Baxter, especially regarding his highly developed visual sensibility. The work of surrealist artists, Dalí especially, corroborated his decision to invert the standard tropes of science fiction in the 1960s, to explore inner rather than outer space, using the language of dreams to remap the reality of a burgeoning, mass-mediated consciousness – a parallel excavation of McLuhan's global village. Yet, as Baxter points out, while "surreal" and "surrealist" have become standard terms for reviewers and critics when describing

Ballard's work ... remarkably, no sustained analysis of the extent and order of Ballard's Surrealism exists" (1).

While this may be true – “surrealist,” like “dystopian,” undeniably forms part of the clichéd critical lexicon surrounding Ballard's material – I don't agree that it is “remarkable” that a sustained analysis doesn't exist (if by “sustained” Baxter means “book-length”). After all, how many authors have entire volumes devoted to a single element of their work? In *J G Ballard's Surrealist Imagination*, this becomes problematic in that, over the course of Baxter's 237 pages, the thesis sometimes stretches thinly. For example, discussing Ballard's novel *The Crystal World* (1966), she asserts that it offers a “critique of emergent US Neo-Imperialism within ‘decolonised’ Africa” (39). *The Crystal World* clearly draws on Surrealist technique, resulting in some of the most striking and uncanny imagery of Ballard's career. But to suggest it has an extratextual political, postcolonial dimension seems more a result of Baxter adapting the novel to her critical framework, which avowedly aims to explore the “historical, political [and] visual dimensions” of Ballard's Surrealism, rather than simply the “aesthetic (and purely) textual aspects” (13).

All the same, the book is commendable in its desire to parse the entirety of Ballard's output: not just his novels, but also the numerous interviews he gave, his journalism, his short stories and particularly his graphic art. This imbues Baxter's analysis with considerable depth, typified by her discussion of Ballard's 1970 experimental novel, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, which returns the *Atrocity* chapters to their original sources as standalone “condensed novels,” often accompanied by collages, in Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds* magazine.

*J G Ballard's Surrealist Imagination* is recommended to those already familiar with Ballard's work, and who want to examine his influences in more detail. Otherwise, the dense, single-subject approach and the equally dense writing, tightly compacted with substantial academic language, might not be the best entry point to Ballard's work. Unfortunately, like *City Visions*, major typos plague it, surprisingly, given how long Ashgate has taken to release it. According to Baxter's endnotes, the manuscript was finished in 2006, highlighting the perils of academic publishing, which can be slow to match the pace of the outside world. The book misses out on Ballard's last novel, *Kingdom Come* (2006), and his autobiography, *Miracles of Life* (2008), omissions that immediately date any overview of Ballard published in 2009. The former would have slotted in well – according to Baxter's prerequisites, it is blackly funny (she adroitly teases out the sly humour in the rest of Ballard's work, locating it as an index of the Surrealist influence), political and highly visual – while the latter offers extended in-

sights into the sway of Surrealism in his life.

An inherent problem is the bibliography, which, as in most academic appraisals of Ballard, suffers from predictability (at least in the material on the writer), a feedback loop that references a select few, visible publications. This becomes apparent when Baxter discusses Jean Baudrillard's article on Ballard's *Crash*, reheating the same vehement reactions to Baudrillard's reading that were levelled within academia back in 1991. Recently, there have been some productive re-readings of the Ba(udri)llardian symbiosis online in both blog and non-mainstream academic formats. These would surely have enhanced Baxter's research in that they share her admirable central ideal: to rejuvenate the ossified critical shorthand that so often marks readings of Ballard's work.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> J G Ballard, "A Response to the Invitation to Respond," *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 18, no. 55 (1991) 329.