

J.G. Ballard's 'The Drowned World' (1962): Psycho-Geographical Cli-Fi

Jim Clarke

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Abstract:

This article examines JG Ballard's influential novel, *The Drowned World* (1962). Ballard's novel has often been proposed as either the first expression of climate change in fiction, or else as a weighty precursor to cli-fi as it is currently understood. However, when Ballard wrote the novel, one of four early fictions in which he posits a planet-wide environmental catastrophe, the understanding that climate change could have an anthropogenic component was not common. Ballard's novel plays with the established pulp format of catastrophe fiction while also introducing his concept of 'inner space', the psychological landscape which drives his protagonists through devolving biospheres and declining climates. Ballard's novel reveals how humans react to climate disaster when, crucially, it is not their fault.

The Drowned World, JG Ballard.

Jim Clarke.

In 1962, James Ballard was attempting to forge a career as a writer. The editor of a chemistry journal, and a former medical student and air force pilot, he was desperate to parlay his limited success as a short story writer of science fiction into a career which could support his young family. During a two-week holiday, he wrote *The Wind From Nowhere*, a potboiler in the style of catastrophe fiction then current in British science fiction. Looking back on this period from a decade on, fellow science fiction writer Brian Aldiss dismissed this sub-genre as the 'cosy catastrophe'. In these novels, an apocalyptic event triggers the end of civilisation, which somehow proves a boon for the protagonist, who is now free from civilizational constraints to act as he chooses, leading to an unlikely comfortable existence despite it all.

Ballard's protagonist, the doctor Donald Maitland, is no exception. Released from his failing marriage by his wife's death by hurricane, Maitland embarks on an heroic attempt to preserve collapsing buildings in London. As the winds build inexplicably, humans gather in tunnels and bunkers fearing the end. Somehow, also inexplicably, the winds begin to die down just as Maitland's own death seems assured.

Ballard dismissed the novel in later life as a "piece of hackwork", and disowned it, anointing *The Drowned World* as his first 'real' novel. Though *The Wind From Nowhere* is shockingly standard fare compared to Ballard's other work, nevertheless it is not possible to consider the impact of *The Drowned World*, nor what Ballard was trying to achieve, without some consideration of this first, lost climate change novel. It reveals Ballard operating from *within* the existing cosy catastrophe paradigm, a mode which Aldiss largely attributes to John Wyndham. Clearly, Ballard did not feel that this sub-genre quite fitted his own concerns as a writer, which were focused on what he saw as a shift from 'outer space' to 'inner space' in science fiction. Nevertheless, he persevered, generating the four 'elemental' novels in which the world's climate is destroyed by wind, flood, drought and crystallisation in turn.

Ballard is considered one of the foremost practitioners of the 'New Wave' of science fiction, a movement which emerged in response to the countercultural politics and postmodernist literary stylistics of the 1960s. For Ballard, there was a pressing need for the genre to move beyond hoary old stories of space heroes saving damsels while shooting aliens with laser guns. Ballard characterised this shift in focus from outer space to 'inner space', which he defined as "an imaginary realm in which on the one hand the outer world of reality, and on the other the inner world of the

mind meet and merge.”¹ All of Ballard’s early ‘elemental’ novels, especially *The Drowned World*, are firmly located as much in this ‘interzone’ between thought and external reality as they are in realist landscapes, no matter how well drawn or constructed.

For Ballard, “Earth is the only truly alien planet”, and he strives in all of his elemental novels to render this planet utterly alien, revolting against the life which infests it, especially human life. This requires a repurposing of familiar landscapes. In *The Drowned World*, London becomes a lagoon, its tower blocks and famous sights now shadows shimmering far beneath the still tropical waters. What is additionally alienating for readers in the Anthropocene era is the lack of responsibility. There is no blood guilt on humanity’s hands, as this climate catastrophe is not the result of human interference in atmospheric carbon levels. Unspecified solar storms are responsible, but in Ballard’s disaster novels, the reasons for disaster are much less important than how people react to them.

Scientists exist, and go through the motions of measuring, calibrating, reporting. But there is none of the sense of scientist as hero or messiah one sometimes encounters in later cli-fi, such as that written by Kim Stanley Robinson or Paolo Bacigalupi. Nor is there any sense of Gaia’s revenge. James Lovelock’s Gaian hypothesis emerged over a decade later, and in any case, Kerans, the protagonist of *The Drowned World*, is wise enough to project forwards, meaning backwards in the distorted psychotemporality of the novel, to realise what is actually taking place:

“The genealogical tree of mankind was systematically pruning itself, apparently moving backwards in time, and a point might ultimately be reached where a second Adam and Eve found themselves alone in a new Eden.”²

The Biblical flood is but one of many subtexts and allusions littering the novel. Also prominent to those familiar with Ballard’s life story or his autobiography *Empire of the Sun* is the flooding of Shanghai in his youth. As an interned prisoner of war in colonial Shanghai, the teenage Jim Ballard was struck by the flooded paddy fields which separated his camp from the occupied city in which he had formerly lived, a city which itself often saw the streets drowned in silt-laden water after floods. With reference to this memory of Shanghai under water, Ballard asked in his essay ‘Time, Memory and Inner Space’, “How far do the landscapes of one’s childhood, as much as its emotional experiences, provide an inescapable background to all one’s imaginative writing?”³ The answer, as far as *The Drowned World* is concerned, is very far indeed.

All the practical trappings of climate fiction – the flooded cities, exotic flora and fauna thriving in human-abandoned locales, struggling human settlements in previously remote outcrops – remain intact, or rather, are initiated in *The Drowned World*. Yet everything is suffused with what Freud called the *unheimliche*, or the uncanny. Ballard’s own interest in surrealist art comes to the fore in this novel as he expresses aspects of both the environment and what it is doing to its inhabitants via the staging and presentation of famous surrealist artworks, particularly those by Max Ernst.

This uncanniness is sustained in his later two ‘elemental’ novels, but what is particular to *The Drowned World* is the medium of destruction. Images of skyscrapers peeking above floodwater have become ubiquitous, even clichéd, in the presentation of anthropogenic climate change in fiction, but they commence here, in Ballard’s psychogeographical study of devolution. For to be submerged in

¹ Ballard, J.G. “1968 Munich Round Up Interview”, *Munich Round Up* 100, 1968. Repr. in *Extreme Metaphors*, eds. Simon Sellars and Dan O’Hara, (London: HarperCollins, 2012), 10-13.

² Ballard, J.G., *The Drowned World* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012, orig. pub. 1962). p. 23.

³ Ballard, J.G., “Time, Memory and Inner Space”, in Ballard, J.G., *A User’s Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews*, (New York: Picador, 1996), 199.

water is also to be returned to the womb, with its latent possibility of radical rebirth. As the planet returns to the Triassic period, mankind too, in keeping with Ballard's principle of inner space, begins to devolve to an earlier stage of evolution.

This all stands disconcertingly in the context of what is, on the surface, a realist novel. Ballard's narrative unfolds in the third person, with extensive passages of description and dialogue whose uncanny components are all the more striking for being embedded in a realist context. The criticisms of Ballard's characterisation, which dogged him throughout his career, begin with *The Drowned World*, whose characters seem either opaque or else perplexingly motivated. This constant oscillation between, on the one hand, a phantasmagoric landscape rendered realistic, and the psychic states of the protagonists emerging in surrealist modes on the other, is one of the reasons why readers can find its characters difficult to grasp.

Kerans, along with his boss Colonel Riggs and his nemesis the looter Strangman, is a figure lifted from the boy's own stories of the early 20th century pulp fictions, but the simple morality of such narratives are carefully subverted by Ballard. Strangman's venal desire for wealth, which he pursues by draining the lagoon to better access its submerged riches, is read by the authorities as an act of restitution of the lost order, and hence is welcomed. By contrast, Kerans's reflooding of the lagoon is not the destructive act it seems but a redemptive one, made in honour of his colleague Bodkins' desire to leave the past in the past, but also out of a conviction that one must adapt to the new paradigm rather than fight it fruitlessly.

Ballard's novel explains what happens when climate change happens to us. Shorn of blood-guilt or collective responsibility for the disaster, Ballard unveils how some people will attempt futilely to fight it, some will attempt just as futilely to carry on as if nothing had changed, some will seek to exploit it to personal benefit, and some will simply aim to survive. It is this latter motivation which most interests Ballard, as it leads both to the passive resignation of Beatrice and the radical individualism of Kerans. Even in the face of the apocalypse, Ballard argues, our own personal reactions are the most important component of existence.

The Drowned World is a complex novel which harmonises with a range of literary and cultural allusions in order to convey the idea that inner space is a legitimate topic for literature. Its relationship to earlier SF, pulp fiction, the Bible, surrealist art and the culture industry are all carefully nuanced to this end. This means that, for a novel featuring climate change, it says curiously little about climate change. Ballard's allegedly prophetic capacity is present in the text, in the images of urban landscapes submerged under steaming lagoons which now haunt so many cli-fi visions. But equally, those images are a commentary on the Shanghai of his childhood, and by extension, on the relationship between empire and colony. Like other linear relationships, such as time, evolution, or scientific progress, it is put into reverse by the catastrophe. In *The Drowned World*, the imperial hubs are sunken into decline. What little life there is exists on the margins.

It is easy to derive despair from *The Drowned World*. Ballard's closing image of a man walking to his death in the heat is not one inclined to optimism, despite the clear Adamic parallels Ballard superimposes upon Kerans. Ballard's vision of a destroyed world is not one that can be repaired, restored or rebooted. Science, it is clear, will not save us from ourselves, and indeed may actively hinder us from understanding the circumstances we find ourselves in.

Despite its downbeat note, the novel was an immediate hit, and led Ballard to write his remaining two 'elemental' novels before embarking on a post-SF career with *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, which were both notably more experimental and transgressive texts. In these novels and later ones,

Ballard build upon the surrealistic uncanniness of the everyday thrown into a horrific context which he had first constructed in *The Drowned World*.

Yet Ballard's novel can still educate us about climate change. Though it eschews anthropogenism in favour of what David Paddy calls "a primitive id-like nature taking its revenge on London"⁴, it forces us to confront climate change in terms of impact rather than cause. In a world where, as Harlan Ellison notes, "[w]hat remains of civilization is fractured at best, and the birth rate has declined to a terminal degree"⁵, it does not matter who is to blame so much as what, if anything, may be salvaged from the submerged ruins. Unlike more contemporary approaches to the topic, such as Kim Stanley Robinson's *Science in the Capital* trilogy (2004-7), Ballard has little to say about systematic or institutional approaches to addressing climate disaster. Instead, he zooms in on the individual response. Climate change affects us on the level of the individual, and Ballard forces us to consider the effects of global warming as a "neuronic odyssey", a journey that will take us far from the comforts of home into a dangerous, even fatal, exploration of the self.

Like its sister novel *The Crystal World*, Ballard's first 'proper' novel offers no sentimentality about our ravaged earth. Both novels reject simple expressions of loss of the past as opportunity costs. Critically, it does not matter in either novel how the catastrophe came about. Blame is not important and does not address the future, however limited or disastrous it may be. All we have is the inner space we inhabit, and like Kerans we can seek a paradise in a submerged hell if we so choose.

Additional Reading

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After London, or Wild England, Richard Jefferies, Cassell and Company, London, 1885.

⁴ *The Empires of J.G. Ballard*, David Ian Paddy, Gylphi Press, 2015, p. 52.

⁵ *J.G. Ballard*, D. Harlan Ellison, University of Illinois Press, Urbana IL, 2017, p. 60.