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ARTICLE

'The Problem of This Trash Society': Anthropogenic Waste and the Neoliberal City in *Super-Cannes, Millennium People and Kingdom Come*

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This essay examines the role of waste objects in J.G. Ballard's critique of neoliberalism in *Super-Cannes*, *Millennium People* and *Kingdom Come*.¹ It focuses on the ways in which waste matter resists the reader's—and characters'—gaze, obstructs the flow of capital, and/or enlivens them to the eerie underside of the streamlined systems that make up the societies in these texts. To approach these questions, I combine historical materialist, Structural anthropological, and New Materialist approaches to waste. Waste, I argue, requires a multi-dimensional framework that takes into account the interrelation of socio-economic, psycho-pathological and tribal ramifications as well as an understanding of its relationship to the natural world. It is ultimately more fruitful to examine Ballard's waste objects both as allegories and as elements enmeshed in a wider framework (one that often eludes the imperialist aspirations of the human beings involved) than to choose one interpretative mode over the other. It allows us to consider the extent to which both the plotlines of Ballard's novels and the ideas they put forth are contingent upon not only the circulation of objects between people—their 'social life', as Appadurai would term it—but their interrelation with the environment of which they are a part. In his exploration of capital, power, and the built environment, Ballard seizes upon the fact that matter—both manufactured and natural—exists even when we are not looking at it, and that this life beyond the social has significant repercussions.

Keywords: waste; anthropocene; capitalocene; neoliberalism; J.G. Ballard; New Materialism; historical materialism; discard studies

¹ Ballard, 2003: 67.

In the opening chapters of J.G. Ballard's *Super-Cannes* (2000), a character articulates the disquieting neoliberal credo of Eden-Olympia, the business park at the novel's centre. According to Eden-Olympia's founders, corporations have the potential to relieve citizens of the burden of determining what is ethical or moral:

A giant multinational like Fuji or General Motors sets its own morality. The company defines the rules that govern how you treat your spouse, where you educate your children, the sensible limits to stock-market investment. The bank decides how big a mortgage you can handle, the right amount of health insurance to buy. There are no more moral decisions than there are on a new superhighway. Unless you own a Ferrari, pressing the accelerator is not a moral decision. Ford and Fiat and Toyota have engineered in a sensible response curve. We can rely on their judgment, and that leaves us free to get on with the rest of our lives (2000: 8).

According to this view, society is akin to an automobile whose capacity for doing damage has effectively been 'designed out': an efficient machine-state, whose citizens are free to do as they choose, but only because the choices at their disposal are already circumscribed. A conglomeration of powerful private interests shapes social codes, supplanting the old world order of nation-states and removing all activities or views deemed 'surplus'. The psychopathological ramifications of such social reorganization form the thematic backdrop of all three of Ballard's post-millennial novels. These similarly envision an extreme version of neoliberalism, or what one character in *Millennium People* (2003) refers to as the 'trash society' of 'hypermarkets and gated communities' left over from the late twentieth century (67). In each of these texts we find what Michel Foucault describes, in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, as 'a state under supervision of the market rather than a market supervised by the state' involving the 'economization of the social field' (1988: 116, 242).² The streamlined built environments of these novels in turn exemplify

² While *Cocaine Nights* (1997) certainly fits the template described here, I exclude it from this study due to its premillennial publication date.

what Douglas Spencer terms the 'architecture of neoliberalism': they seek, that is, to produce pliable, unreflective subjects, while rendering waste of all forms useful and invisible (2016: 8).

This essay examines Ballard's critique of neoliberalism in his last three novels—*Super-Cannes*, *Millennium People*, and *Kingdom Come* (2006)—through attention to the myriad waste forms that threaten to obstruct the flow of capital and goods, and to pollute what are otherwise friction-free environments. Manufactured waste, biological excretions, and what Zygmunt Bauman terms 'human waste'—refugees, economic migrants, and the unemployed, all of whom are both products of capitalist modernity and necessary to its functioning (2004: 5)—are integral to both the plot and wider thematic concerns of these novels precisely due to their disruptiveness. Where the architecture of neoliberalism, as Spencer describes it, seeks to produce subjects who are 'flexibly amenable to being channelled along certain pathways, but uninterested in, even incapable of, critical reflection upon [their] milieu' (2016: 4), Ballard's waste objects awaken these subjects, and interrupt the flow of production. Crucially, Ballard suggests that inanimate waste matter has a greater potential to undermine neoliberalism and its environs than human beings themselves.³

All of Ballard's novels, of course, can be seen to explore the frightening consequences of what Jason Moore terms the 'Capitalocene'—a conceptual framework that highlights capitalism as the main instigator of environmental disaster and social disarray in its reliance on the exploitation of natural resources and cheap labour (2015 and 2016). Moreover, if we agree with Zalasiewicz, who dates the beginning of the Anthropocene to 1945, Ballard's *oeuvre* spans, and serves as a record of, the era's first five decades.⁴ The parallels between the human-capital-environment nexus and Ballard's work can be found in the very term 'Ballardian', which gained entry into the

³ I owe a debt of gratitude to the two peer reviewers whose insightful suggestions helped me clarify the argument and expand certain points throughout this paper.

⁴ Ballard's career spanned from the early 1950s (his first short story, 'Prima Belladonna', was published in the December 1956 issue of *Science Fantasy*), to 2008. While the beginning of the Anthropocene is still a matter of debate, and Moore places it in the sixteenth century (2016: 115), scientists following Zalasiewicz have recently converged on 1945/1960, based on the unambiguous impact that the 'Great Acceleration' has had on the earth (Hamilton *et al*, 2015: 1).

Collins English Dictionary in 2005, and which refers not only to his novels, but, more generally, to 'dystopian modernity, bleak man-made landscapes and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments' (Sellars, 2005). My contention, however, is that the manifestation of these ideas has differed across the decades, becoming more explicit in his postmillennial texts. This is partly due to their longer length (between 280–380 pages, twice the length of his first novels), and their greater reliance on realism, which arguably allows for the more explicit expression of political ideas. But it is also due to transformations in the organisation of capital (and world powers) over the course of his career, and to which his work responds: where Ballard's 1960s climate novels expressed anthropogenic climate anxieties that had yet to gain mainstream attention or full scientific validation, and his 1970s urban disaster novels imagined the fusion of modernist architecture with a still-nascent neoliberalism, these last novels are effectively responding to the 'coming true' of his early speculative visions. The millennial and postmillennial landscapes, in other words, require more explicit criticisms.

Towards a theory of anthropogenic Ballardian waste

Waste—as I have argued elsewhere—provides an apt lens through which to understand all of Ballard's work (Dini, 2016).⁵ Surplus humans and material remnants serve in his texts as plot devices and background 'props' as well as instigators to the questions he is posing about the relationship between capitalism, technology, and social organisation. My definition of waste here builds on previous work, where I defined it as a process or temporal state rather than a fixed category (Dini, 2016: 3–4). Following Arjun Appadurai's expansion of the historical materialist definition of commodities (1986: 3–63), I argued that waste is 'a stage in the lifecycle of a thing', whose status is governed by social factors including but not limited to its perceived market value (Dini, 2016: 6). In what follows, I complement that definition with two others: a structuralist anthropological approach that views waste as a metaphor for otherness,

⁵ For recent work on waste in Ballard, see Viney, 2007; O'Hara in Baxter and Wymer, 2012: 105–21; Baxter, 2008: 94–106; and Gasiorek, 2005: 26–55 (in relation to 'Venus Smiles' and *The Drought*), 56–100 (in relation to *Crash*), 101–140 (*Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*).

and a New Materialist approach, which instead emphasises waste's agential potential and interconnection to other material forms, and thus involves examining it literally.

The anthropological approach, pioneered by Mary Douglas, assumes waste to be part of a wider system of codification involving the separation of things (and people) into the categories of pure/impure; acceptable/unacceptable. For Douglas, waste is 'matter out of place'—a sign of disorder and a threat to social norms (2002 [1966]: 202). Bauman's conceptualisation of 'human waste', mentioned above, draws on this approach. New Materialism by contrast argues for a less anthropocentric assessment that acknowledges waste's embeddedness in ecological networks. New Materialists such as Bennett (2010), Ingold (2011) and Alaimo (2014) build on Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory, which proposes that all non-human entities are capable of influencing and participating in events (1993). The meaningful distinction is not between things that are alive or dead, or between people and objects, but between entities capable of instigating an action ('actants') and those that are not. Of particular note is Ingold's conceptualisation of the world as a 'meshwork of interwoven lines' that invites astonishment:

in a world of becoming [...] even the ordinary, the mundane or the intuitive gives cause for astonishment – the kind of astonishment that comes from treasuring every moment, as if, in that moment, we were encountering the world for the first time, sensing its pulse, marvelling at its beauty, and wondering how such a world is possible (2011: 63).

For scholars of literature, Ingold's words will recall the Romantic and Surrealist credos, which similarly relied on approaching the world with new eyes—and whose influence on Ballard's work is well-documented (Stephenson, 1991; Gasiorek, 2006; Baxter, 2009), rendering it particularly apt for our purposes. Likewise, while the anthropological and New Materialist approaches might appear at odds with each other, my contention is that they are in fact most useful when combined. Ballard's articulations of waste require a multi-dimensional framework that takes into account its socio-economic, psycho-pathological and tribal implications as well as its relationship to,

and capacity to affect change within, the natural world. Examining Ballard's waste objects both as allegories, and as elements enmeshed in a wider framework that often eludes the imperialist aspirations of the human beings involved, is ultimately more fruitful than choosing one interpretative mode over the other. In his exploration of capital, power, and the built environment, Ballard highlights an important tension between the human source of postmillennial waste matter (its anthropogenic nature) and the (potentially disruptive) agency such waste matter retains long after humans have abandoned it. In what follows, we will examine the neutralisation of waste in *Super-Cannes*, followed by specific instances in *Millennium People* and *Kingdom Come* in which waste matter succeeds in resisting the reader's—and characters'—gaze, obstructing the flow of capital, and/or disrupting the totalising system(s) from which it has been expelled.

Super-Cannes

Nature, as the new millennium dictated, was giving way [...] to the tax shelter and the corporate car park (356)

Super-Cannes opens in the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting at Eden-Olympia committed by one of the corporation's employees, David Greenwood, and follows narrator Paul Sinclair, whose wife Jane has been hired by Eden-Olympia to replace Greenwood, as he slowly uncovers the reasons behind the massacre. In this section, I examine two aspects of this context: the role of 'others', or human waste, and the dual role of excrement, as both a metaphor for pollutant others, and a resource for the strengthening of the corporate body.

Eden-Olympia and Super-Cannes, the wealthy enclave nearby, are located near Sophia-Antipolis, the (real-life) tech hub on the French Riviera, which Sinclair describes as 'Europe's Silicon Valley' (5)—a description Ballard himself echoes in the novel's Foreword (n.p.). The offices designed to 'feel like a home' (15) in turn recall Google's concept of the 'office as playground,' whereby the best way to improve productivity is to inject work with (company-approved) 'fun' (Hamen, 2011: 64). Beyond these efficiency-savings however, the functioning of Eden-Olympia's world relies on

the exploitation of members of the migrant community in the nearby industrial town of La Bocca, who clean the homes and offices of Super-Cannes and Eden-Olympia. In their repeated figuration as disposable and polluting—'bird shit on the sleeve' (19) for example—these migrant workers exemplify what Susan Morrison terms the 'embodied metaphor' that is human waste (2015: 98). Morrison quotes Martha C. Nussbaum's assertion that '[t]hroughout history [...] sliminess, bad smell, stickiness, decay, foulness' have been repeatedly 'projected onto groups by reference to whom privileged groups seek to define their superior human status': thus the 'lesser' are 'imagined as tainted by the dirt of the body' (2001: 347; qtd. in Morrison, 2015: 99). It is likewise no coincidence that the migrants are cleaners: as Douglas notes, the lower social orders are also 'those required to perform social functions equivalent to the excretory functions of the body' (1975: 102; qtd. in Morrison, 2015: 99). The very name 'Eden-Olympia', which combines the Christian and Greek/pagan names for paradise, further reflects this ideology of purity and efficiency, from which all 'otherness' must be removed. The exploitation of the 'human waste' in Ballard's text, however, extends to their very bodies. For these 'others' are in fact resources in and of themselves to be consumed, violated, and expelled.⁶ A refuge for orphaned children 'abandoned by their north African and pied-noir families' (26) is revealed to be part of a paedophile ring providing young prostitutes to Eden-Olympia's wealthiest. The treatment of prostitutes here recalls Simone de Beauvoir's assertion, in *The Second Sex*—paraphrasing St. Thomas Aquinas—that 'prostitutes are to the city what sewers are to a palace' (1953: 115). The body politic requires such elements to maintain its smooth functioning—the regular 'expelling' of sexual frustrations into the disposable vessel of the prostitute enables the worker-citizen to go about his business, and fulfil his social role. But the migrants' treatment can also be seen to (darkly) parody the system of outsourcing on which globalization depends. Ballard essentially marries colonial subjugation, the contemporary business practice of outsourcing and

⁶ Baxter further notes that as 'foreign elements' to Eden-Olympia, the migrant labourers are 'waste products designed for expulsion' (2008: 102–03); Beaumont in turn argues that 'these people exist in a limbo in relation to the social system that bears power over them: they are outside, beyond, and yet essential to it, simultaneously parasitized and predated on by it' (2015: 98).

precarious labour, and ancient notions of scapegoating. This is attested by the regular attacks to which members of the Arab community are subjected in an effort to appease the violent impulses and boredom of Eden-Olympia's employees. Indeed, the term employed to describe the attacks is telling: as their organiser explains, *ratis-sages*, French for cleaning/clearing, derives from the practices of the French Army during the Algerian War (210). Ballard's brave new tech world is thus shown to rely on ancient practices of social cleansing and othering aimed at rendering it invincible.

This brings us, in turn, to the novel's anxious treatment of temporality, as evidenced by Paul's thoughts while contemplating the landscape:

I began to count the pools, each player of turquoise late last behind how walls of the villas with their screens of saccades and bougainvillea. 10,000 years in the future, long after the Côte d'Azur had been abandoned, the first explorers would puzzle over these empty pits, with their corroded frescoes of tritons and stylised fish, inexplicably hauled up the mountainsides like aquatic sundials or the altars of a bizarre religion devised by a race of visionary geometers (7).

Since—or rather, *if*—all things end up as waste, the question becomes how we interpret those remains. In *Waste: A Philosophy of Things*, Will Viney eloquently describes the different ways in which ruins are codified in the cultural imagination. Ruins are safeguarded and granted heritage status, or even imagined in advance, when monuments are still new, in an effort to guarantee posterity to the ideology or people they represented (Viney, 2014: 153–76). The Romantics' fascination with (new) ruins, and Albert Speer's architectural projects for buildings designed to collapse, which would leave ruins that testified to the grandeur of the Third Reich, exemplified this ethos (Viney, 2014: 168).

Ballard however soon makes clear Eden-Olympia's intention to entirely circumvent the issue of posterity, which lends irony to Paul's contemplation of the swimming pool. Various described as 'an experiment in how to hot-house the future' (15), and an 'ideas laboratory for the new millennium' (16), Eden-Olympia intends

to be the city to outlast all cities, solving the problems of job satisfaction, peaceful coexistence (within the community, that is), and source reduction before *these even present themselves*, thus guaranteeing its own infinitude. This ideology of efficiency extends to the prolongation of life itself. Thus the business park hosts a vast medical lab devoted to eradicating disease and increasing productivity. By using employees' medical data in the development of new forms of preventative care—what is commonly known, today, as the application of 'Big Data' to healthcare—the medical researchers aim to produce physically invincible workers, or at the very least minimise the time ailing workers spend in the operating room before they are fit to work once more. Thus Jane quips: 'You can sell your British Aerospace shares, buy me a new diamond choker and have a heart attack at the same time...' (16). In such a context, the question of ruins—or the posterity of swimming pools—becomes moot. Not only has waste in the form of idle time or disease been eradicated but the prospect of failure itself has been designed out.

This ethos is further highlighted in the novel's multiple references to human excretions and litter. In *Culture and Waste*, Gay Hawkins argues: 'In cultures that pride themselves on being technologically "advanced", catching a glimpse of the brute physicality of waste signals a kind of failure' (2003: 1).⁷ Thus 'the hint of shit in a public space doesn't just call the self into question, but technologies of governance, *faith in infrastructure*' (Hawkins, 2003: 40, emphasis in original). *Super-Cannes* echoes this: 'There are things Eden-Olympia can't cope with—the key that breaks in the lock, the toilet that backs up [...] Eden-Olympia can fight off a billion-dollar takeover bid, but a little dog shit on the shoe leaves it helpless' (378). Likewise, Susan Morrison's meditation on the relationship between faeces, urine, and notions of the corruptible body (2015: 88) are apparent in a (very funny!) scene in which Paul's new paramour attempts to coax his dormant penis into action by urinating on him, encouraging him to explore the 'taboo coast' of dirty desires—to which Paul's response is a weak, "Frances, please—no shit" (231). To this extent, waste is the ultimate tool for both

⁷ For a discussion of the relationship between waste disposal and the body politic, see also LaPorte, 2000 and Morrison, 2015: 75–83.

private perversions and public subversion. This is further attested by a character's quip that the reasons Paul 'ha[sn't] seen a single cigarette stub or bubble-gum pat' is because in Eden-Olympia that would be 'unthinkable. There are no pinecones to trip you, no bird shit on your car. At Eden-Olympia even nature knows her place' (83). Littering, animal excretions and the natural world itself are thus grouped together and categorised as criminal. The gendering of the latter is also significant: nature is not just a wild thing to be contained, but a *woman* requiring domestication. Like the sexual exploitation of the young daughters of migrant workers, the exploitation of the earth is seen as a necessity: the managing of fallible, impure (female) bodies (to be sold to white older men) and the containing of an unruly feminine nature exist in tandem, underlining the fact that the mechanised neoliberal credo of Eden-Olympia is also inherently patriarchal.

Unsurprisingly then, Paul's own investigations ultimately follow the trail of waste matter that exceeds these strict ordering practices. Evidence of David Greenwood's place of death is found in the drainage pipes on the roof of one of Eden-Olympia's office buildings (207), while the object at the novel's heart is a zebra-patterned mini-dress Paul finds at the orphanage (151–52), and which Frances later claims to have fished out of a rubbish bin in La Bocca (234). At the level of metaphor, the dress is at once a vehicle for the desires of Eden-Olympia's paedophiles, a clue pointing Paul towards these practices, and a vehicle for Paul's own sexual fantasies. The dress embodies at once the exploitation of the 'contingent others' Eden-Olympia is so keen to hide; the equation of sexuality, pathology and dirt; and the *reliance* of even the 'cleanest' system on the circulation and expulsion of putrid matter.

Such reliance is further manifest in Ballard's dual framing of excrement as both an obstruction to the smooth working of this neoliberal empire and a component vital to its functioning. While telling Paul about the innovations in preventative care that she and her team are exploring, Jane reveals her colleague's, Professor Kalman, enthusiasm for faecal smears. 'He hates the idea of all that used toilet paper going to waste. The greatest diagnostic tool in the world is literally being flushed down the lavatory' (68). Testing stool samples for irregularities in the microbial flora of the digestive tract, she argues, 'would help us see anything suspicious well in advance'

(68). Aside from the eugenicist framing of illness in criminal terms ('something suspicious'), what stands out here is the way in which the faecal smear, if implemented, would effectively neutralise the disruptive qualities of excrement discussed above. The utility of the faecal smear, like that of faecal microbiota transplants (which involve introducing faecal bacteria from a healthy individual into the gut of patients with intestinal disorders), is seen by New Materialists as indicative of waste's 'liveliness'. Just as the faecal transplant helps treat disease, the faecal smear holds clues to potential health risks.⁸ In this particular context, the proposed smear endows that which humans are socialised to find repulsive with a valuable function. But as well as stripping faeces of their potential to shock or disgust, the smear would incorporate them into the project of producing perfect (productive) bodies. This proposed putting-to-use of faeces to keep employees' bodies in good health is the physical counterpart to the condoning of violence, by the heads of Eden-Olympia, against the bodies of immigrant workers deemed disposable. In both instances, the reader witnesses the neutralization of the potential threat waste poses. The repugnant qualities of faeces, like the destructive potential of violence, are made integral to the system itself.

Because it is not in Ballard's style to provide the reader with a clear 'sense of an ending', *Super-Cannes* leaves unclear whether Paul's unmasking of the organisers of the different *ratissages* will ultimately lead to the fall of Eden-Olympia itself. But the last lines of the novel, which Ballard gives over to waste, suggest as much. As Paul drives away, intent upon finishing off the heads of the paedophile ring, he contemplates 'The beaches beside the coastal road [...] littered with forgotten film magazines and empty bottles of suntan cream, the debris of a dream washed ashore among the driftwood' (391). It would appear that Eden-Olympia is, after all,

⁸ For a discussion of faecal implants with regards to discard studies, see Reno, 2014. Reno challenges Douglasian analyses of waste as 'matter out of place', reading excrement not as a sign of disorder, but as 'a temporary set of things in between forms of life' (Reno, 2014: 18)—a definition that resembles my own contention that waste is better understood as a 'process' or a 'stage that can pass' (Dini, 2016: 6).

on its way to becoming waste—and, more importantly, that the presence of effluvia it has sought to render invisible will be as important to its fall as Paul and his co-conspirators.

Millennium People

'Twenty-seven pounds worth of damage? What did you do—upset a litter-bin?' (54)

Ballard's penultimate novel brings us back to the UK, to Chelsea Marina, a fictitious gated community of South–West London. Where waste in Eden-Olympia and Super-Cannes is excised, it proliferates in Chelsea Marina—whose very name nostalgically evokes a sea that is now polluted. Here, waste forms part of its residents' revolt against the constraints of bourgeois life. Indeed, this revolution of the 'new proletariat' of middle class professionals, a concept that is reiterated throughout the novel (16, 67, 167, 195), is explicitly framed in terms of waste and its disposal. Thus, protagonist David Markham describes the revolutionaries as 'ha[ving] quietly discarded their world as if putting out their rubbish for collection' (6). When Chelsea Marina is set on fire in the final pages, he observes: 'Scraps of charred paper were falling from the air and I picked an ashy fragment of a credit card slip from my sleeve. Weinstein receipts, medical bills and share certificates filter down from the sky, inventories of middle-class life come to an end' (264). The waste objects here are both a physical trace of and counter *to* the workings of what Bauman terms 'liquid modernity' (2007)—that is, they are both physical evidence of the circulation of intangible goods, and a material counter to an economic milieu based on such circulation. This is true for the waste produced by both factions of the revolt. One, led by paediatrician David Gould, seeks to cause unrest through meaningless acts of violence such as the Heathrow bomb that killed Markham's ex-wife Laura. The other, led by film studies lecturer Kay Churchill, is instead intent on dismantling the class system through targeted attacks on the architecture of neoliberalism. In both instances, joining the revolt involves abandoning the world of liquid capital, exemplified by Eden-Olympia, and engaging, instead, with the material remnants that it seeks to obscure. Markham first joins one group, then the other, before abandoning both when they each fail.

As Sebastian Groes has noted, *Millennium People* is an overt criticism of 'New Labour's perpetuation of Thatcherite neoliberal economy and politics with undertones of fascism' (2011: 87). The critique of neoliberalism here however is far more playful than in *Super-Cannes*, and the subversive quality of the multiplying waste forms depicted is almost joyous. In one of the novel's funniest scenes, Markham accompanies Kay as she conducts a faux door-to-door survey intended to reveal, through questions about personal and domestic hygiene, the participants' willingness to join the revolution:

'People are rather obsessed with germs. Most of them harmless [...] [H]ow often would you say your lavatories are cleaned?'

'I've no idea. Every day, I hope.'

'Would you consider having them cleaned every three days? [...] How do you feel about the prevalence of toilet taboos among the professional middle-class?'

'Toilet taboos? Are you working for a lavatory paper firm?'

'We are mapping social change.' Kay spoke soothingly. 'Personal grooming lies at the heart of people sense of what they are. Would your family consider washing less often? [...] Would you bathe less frequently? Natural body odour is an important means of communication, especially within families. You'd have time to relax, play with your children, adopt a freer life-style...' (87–88).

For Kay, teaching the middle classes to be less squeamish about waste is an important component of dismantling bourgeois society itself: in quintessentially Douglasian fashion, she recognises that 'the middle class have to be kept under control [...]. Not with guns and warlocks, but with social codes. The right way to have sex, treat your wife, flirt at tennis parties or start an affair' (89). As Brian Thill notes, popular culture's idealisation of the spotless household—inherently impossible to achieve—is one further indication of 'just how pervasively consumer culture has enmeshed its aesthetic into ancient notions of cleanliness and pollution' (2016: 72). This is further highlighted in Kay's comedic inquiries into another homeowner's feelings about

'Spray-On Mud' (a product invented on the spot by her). The 'synthetic liquid mud conveniently packed in an aerosol can,' she tells him, is 'an effective way of impressing people in the office car park on Monday mornings. A quick spray on the wheels and your colleagues will think of rolls pergolas and thatched cottages' (94). She later tells David that it would be 'the product of our age' (94) if it existed—a commodified imitation of waste that serves as a marker of one's status as the owner of a country home. In these pages, Ballard beautifully conveys the relationship between the so-called 'new proletariat' to their waste—and that the only waste consumer culture abides is fake waste one has to buy.

Millennium People also gestures, however, to the cryptic quality of waste and its liveliness, anticipating the outright radicalism of waste in *Kingdom Come*. Ballard equates waste's cryptic qualities with subversive potential from the outset. In the novel's opening pages, Markham, who is a corporate psychologist, attempts and fails to get the measure of the possessions the revolutionaries have discarded:

The skip was filled with books, tennis rackets, children's toys and a pair of chartered skis. Beside a school blazer with sports piping was an almost new worsted suit, the daytime uniform of a middle ranking executive, lying among the debris like the discarded fatigues of a soldier who had thrown down his rifle and taken to the hills. The suit seemed strangely vulnerable, an abandoned flag of an entire civilisation, and I hoped that one of the Home Secretary's aides would point it out to him. I tried to think of an answer if I was asked to comment. As a member of the Adler Institute, which specialised in industrial relations and the psychology of the workplace, I was nominally an expert on the emotional life of the office and mental problems of middle managers. But the suit was difficult to explain away (8).

Note, here, the description of the discarded suit as 'vulnerable'—an anthropomorphism that also emphasises the object's status as a relic in the making, an artefact of a soon-to-be extinct world order. And note, too, the ambiguous emphasis on the suit's illegibility. The irony of course is that by dint of his very credentials, the per-

son best placed to understand the story behind the object's abandonment (the psychologist) is unable to imagine it. Once more, waste serves to underscore Ballard's overarching preoccupation with the dulling effect of the productivist paradigm on the imagination, which is left unable to imagine an alternative to the status quo, as indeed affirmed by the revolution's eventual failure. At the same time, the capacity to withstand scrutiny endows the waste object with greater power to disrupt than the revolutionaries themselves, for whom there is ultimately no way out of the system that produced them.

Indeed, the self's ultimate defenselessness in such a context is highlighted in a disquieting scene in which Markham drives through the outskirts of the King's Road:

The headlights picked their way through a maze of turnings, driving us past shop windows filled with kitchen units and bedroom suites, office furniture and bathroom fittings, tableaux of a second city ready to replace the London that burned behind us (128).

The passage underscores the extent to which the neoliberal city—embodied, here, in one of London's most affluent areas—does not exist in the service of people so much as capital, and goods. The grandeur of the products in these stores—as anyone who has walked through this lifeless area of South West London can attest—overshadows the people who look at them, while their purpose is less to furnish the homes of their eventual owners than to signal wealth, and the disposability of anyone who cannot afford them. Ballard's vision of shiny commodities waiting to participate in the regeneration of a just-defeated ideal haunts in its outright erasing of human subjects. The neoliberal city's power ultimately relies not on human beings, but on objects and buildings that effectively serve as tribal totems.

One such symbol of neoliberalism, for the revolutionaries, is Tate Modern, whose design Markham likens to the aesthetic championed by the fascist architect Albert Speer—a building whose entrance ramp is 'wide enough to take a parade of tanks' and where '[p]ower, of kilowatt hours or messianic gospel, glower[s] from the remote

walls' (180–81). Another is the Millennium Wheel. The revolutionaries view their destruction as a means to counter the totalising effects of neoliberal ideology. But more interesting than the intent is the actual material effect of such efforts:

The last smoke rose from the rubble of the NFT, and the moraine of ash that had given up its dream [...] The millennium wheel hung motionless beside County Hall, its gondolas blackened by the smoke, a swan that had shed its plumage. A silent crowd lined the embankment and stared across the slack water, as if waiting for the Wheel to turn, a machine from a painting by Bosch, grinding out time and death (141).

Smoke rises, the air is full of debris, and passerbys look on, unsure how to interpret a cityscape whose previously familiar elements have been rendered unrecognisable. The terror attack on the South Bank re-imbues these physical structures with what the New Materialist Jane Bennett terms the 'thingliness' that objects lose through commodification—their role, that is, as 'vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects see them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics' (2010: 5). While the humans who planted the bomb set the conflagration in motion, the immediate aftermath becomes a dance between different forms of inanimate matter as it settles onto and into the landscape. Stripped of their status as symbols of postmillennial London, the National Film Theatre, Millennium Wheel and County Hall become 'vital matter' once more. Ballard's text thus invites us—if however briefly—to imagine a world of matter freed from capitalist valuation or nationalist symbolism.

Kingdom Come

'We worship barcodes' (263)

Ballard's last novel transports the reader out of the city, to Brooklands, a fictional suburb of London 'between Weybridge and Woking' (4),⁹ to which one arrives after

⁹ In a 2006 interview with James Norton, Ballard described the setting as 'an area that most inner Lon-

traversing a desolate 'geography of sensory deprivation, a zone of dual carriageways and petrol stations, business parks and signposts to Heathrow, disused farmland filled with butane tanks, warehouses clad in exotic metal sheeting' (6). Narrator Richard Pearson, a recently unemployed advertising executive, is here to investigate his father's death in a mass-shooting in the Metro-Centre—a shopping mall inspired by the Bentall Centre in Kingston-upon-Thames, which Ballard famously despised. In an interview published to coincide with the book's publication, he noted how '[the consumers] seem to be moving through a kind of commercial dream space and vague signals float through their brains'.¹⁰ While similar to the two novels just discussed at the level of plot, *Kingdom Come* differs in its overt exploration of the liveliness and staying power of both commodities and waste, which frequently appear to possess more agency than the human subjects who have bought or discarded them.

Such a reading is amplified by Ballard's descriptions, throughout the novel, of the suburbs as a by-product or excretion of London proper that now threatens the civic body from which it was expelled. Groes relates this characterization of the suburb as waste to Edward Soja's concept of the 'postmetropolis' (2000)— a geography characterised by the absorption of traditional categories such as 'satellite town' and 'suburb' into a 'new form of urban spatiality, the city region' (Groes, 2011: 76). The postmetropolis is characterised by 'economic restructuring that reshapes the physical environment; globalisation that affects money, work and culture; the simultaneous processes of decentralisation and centralisation of urban space' and 'the fragmentation and polarisation of the city that influences social discourse' (Groes, 2011: 77). The homogeneity of the city region impedes its citizens from identifying with their specific locale, and thus risks engendering a return to tribalism (Groes, 2011: 77). This is alluded to in the very name of the shopping mall, 'Metro-Centre': in the absence of any other meaningful place, the shopping mall here functions as the metaphorical 'centre of the metropolis', to which a tribe of shoppers flocks instead

doners are unaware of [...], a sort of un-centred area where there are no civic values, where people are only interested in new patio doors, a new timeshare in the Algarve, another car.'

¹⁰ Interview, as cited in Holliday, 2010.

of the town council, chapel, or other cultural hub. The novel's plot centres around the conflicts ensuing from this reconfiguration. Pearson in fact discovers a struggle between a group of nostalgic middle-class luminaries intent on closing down the Metro-Centre by fostering racist attacks that will attract the authorities, and the founders of the Metro-Centre, who hope to incorporate those same racist sentiments into a provocative advertising campaign that will increase sales by tightly binding the values of football, nationalism and consumerism. The Metro-Centre eventually enlists Pearson, who has spent a lifetime 'trivializing the whole of life into the clichés of a TV commercial' (17), and who they see as a 'suburban Dr Goebbels' (263) to create this campaign, placing the TV celebrity David Cruise at its centre. The last quarter of the novel takes place in the barricaded mall, where Cruise's men have sought to start their own republic.

Scholars have examined the ramifications of Ballard's equation of consumerism with a kind of 'soft fascism' at length.¹¹ What remains under-discussed however is the relationship between what Mike Holliday terms consumerism's 'colonization' of the imagination and the mutation of politics into mere 'emotion and advertising' (2010: no pag.)—and the actual material remnants of this reorganization, which Ballard endows with radical potential. The agential potential of consumer waste stems directly from Brooklands' fetishisation of commodities, and its devaluation of human beings:

Every citizen of Brooklands, every resident within sight of the M25, was constantly trading the contents of house and home, replacing the same cars and cameras, the same ceramic hobs and fitted bathrooms. Nothing was being swapped for nothing (64).

As in *Super-Cannes* and *Millennium People*, the social economy here relies on violence: the 'gigantic boredom' underlying the 'frantic turnover' of goods (64) is relieved through acts of violence against racial minorities, which are in turn framed as 'an exercise of consumer choice' (12). More specifically, the status of migrant as

¹¹ See in particular: Tew, 2008: 107–99; Paddy, 2015: 245–84, 285–336; Baxter, 2016: 141–55; and Noys, 2007 (see c. Ostrowidzki, 2009).

unwanted commodity or waste is explicitly contrasted with consumer goods deemed desirable, forming part of a broader project involving the outright inversion of subject-object relations. The physicality of consumer goods is emphasised just as the migrant others are rendered less visible or killed outright, while they accrue social status as the migrants are stripped of it. That it is the human itself that is being removed—laid to waste—here is illustrated at various points, but is most apparent in Pearson's reiteration that the ultimate aim of consumerism is not to inculcate desire to *possess* commodities (which, as the quote above has already shown, are 'nothing'), but to *become* them: 'We wanted to be like these consumer durables, and they in turn wanted us to emulate them: in many ways, we wanted to be them...' (235; ellipsis in original). By the end of the novel, the supporters of the Metro-Centre's occupation have 'marked barcodes on the back of their hands, trying to resemble the consumer goods they most admire' (268), in what amounts to the devaluation of the human dimension of the consumer, and a literalization of reification. For these human-commodity hybrids are the counterpart to the novel's surplus humans—the immigrants deemed 'other' due to their reluctance to consume. In this way, the novel goes one step further than *Super-Cannes* or *Millennium People*: escaping relegation to the status of human waste in Brooklands requires the physical expression of allegiance to the commodity itself.

This is perhaps most aptly expressed in a horrifying scene, towards the novel's end, involving Pearson's discovery of a dead body among the 'debris of beer cans and cigarette packets' on the shores of the Metro-Centre's artificial lake:

The lumpy parcel, crudely lashed with rope and duct tape, drifted towards me [...] As I stepped forward, about to kick it back into the water, the undertow turned it onto its side. A figure with human features lay trussed inside a small carpet [...] A wave washed over the figure, dispersing the glaze of oil and dirt [...] I recognized the blanched face of the Pakistani barrister (236).

The devaluation of the migrant other is embodied here both in the anonymity of the body, and in its physical indistinguishability from trash—it was 'hard to identify in

all that ash' (277), a character later notes—which results in Pearson's initial impulse to 'kick it back' into the morass of debris already in the water. The marking of the migrant other as dirt is diametrically opposed to, but consistent with, the white shoppers' self-branding with barcodes—the two effectively exist at opposite ends of the same ideological continuum.

But if the world of *Kingdom Come* values objects above people, it is equally noteworthy that opposition to this system of valuation repeatedly manifests itself through descriptions of radical waste. Thus, for example, Pearson wades amongst the 'sweet wrappers, cigarette papers and cola cans, the debris of an amiable plague' (81) littering the local school parking lot on the way to meeting with the head teacher, Mr. Sangster, who champions consumerism's optimism and progressiveness. The 'redemptive ideology' of consumerism, as Sangster describes it, is undermined once more as Pearson 'walk[s] away, strolling through the sweet wrappers drifting across the path, through the cola cans and cigarette packets and condom sachets' (86).

It is likewise notable that the only truly subversive character in the novel—Duncan Christie, the man accused of being the Metro-Centre shooter—traffics in used goods. This activity is explicitly framed as both disruptive to the economy of the Metro-Centre—which relies on the desirability of new items—and its community spirit, which is to say, the collective *faith* in consumerism as a binding ideology. We see this in the description of these goods:

Lined up along the kerb was a selection of kitchen appliances—a spin-dryer, two refrigerators, a trio of washing machines and a microwave oven. None was new, and rust leaked from their hoses. They were the familiar furniture of every kitchen in Brooklands, but there was something surrealist about their presence that unsettled the small crowd (89).

A seasoned reader of Ballard will find echoes here of the disquieting waste objects that populated his early fiction, from *High-Rise* (1975), in which dryers and dishwashers appear both strange and wonderful once stripped of their original function, to 'The Ultimate City' (1976), in which the remaining citizens of an industrial city abandoned in

favour of a new ecologically-sound metropolis construct sacred towers out of old washing machines and dryers. These used goods are embodiments of the Freudian uncanny: 'the familiar made strange', or, according to Schelling's definition (which Freud cites), "that which should have been hidden but has come to life" (1955 [1919]: 228–65). Notably, "come to life" is sometimes translated from the original German as "made visible"—an equally apt articulation of the scene Ballard describes. For waste serves, here, as a visible counter to its pristine surroundings, as well as a kind of moral opprobrium in physical form to the ideology espoused by the Metro-Centre. At the same time, the reference to Surrealism—whose influence can be seen throughout Ballard's work, and whose founders viewed discarded commodities as a means to oppose the homogenizing tendencies of capitalism—underscores the radicalism of Christie's enterprise.¹²

Ballard in turn amplifies the scene's absurdity by highlighting the distance between Christie and the retail complex whose parking lot he is occupying through a series of humorous interactions with passing shoppers. First, an indignant elderly female shopper approaches, admonishing Christie for being 'in the wrong place', and asking him if he wants a 'refund'—it is unclear for what—before asking her bewildered husband 'what department is that?' (90). He does not know, and to her first question, Christie quips that he 'do[esn't] want a refund, [he] want[s] retribution.' The misunderstandings reveal the near automatism of Brooklands' inhabitants, for whom the world essentially exists in reference to the retail complex. Christie himself comments upon this absurdity:

I come here every Saturday, sooner or later, somebody asks, 'How much?' 'Free,' I say. They're stunned, they react as if I'm trying to steal them. That's capitalism for you. Nothing can be free. The idea makes them sick, they want to call the police, leave messages for their accountants. They feel unworthy, convinced they've sinned. They have to rush off and buy something just to get their breath back (91–92).

¹² For a near-exhaustive account of Surrealism's influence on Ballard, see Baxter, 2009. For an account of the role of waste objects in Surrealism, see Leslie in Dart *et al*, 2010: 233–54, and Dini, 2016: 33–66.

This apparently ridiculous assemblage of discarded objects thus has a powerful subversive function, destabilising the very sense of identity of those who look upon it. It is likewise the closest the novel comes to ridding matter of its anthropogenic associations and allowing it to just be. To the 'fleeting impressions, an illusion of meaning floating over a sea of undefined emotions' (100) offered by TV personality David Cruise on the shopping channel, Duncan Christie—whose very name suggests he is the inverse of this TV persona—offers an alternate, grittier vision of deracinated matter stripped of price or reference points, requiring active contemplation and imagination to be understood.

Whether waste can, in fact, successfully oppose the Metro-Centre is left open to question—but what is significant is Ballard's suggestion that it would be *more likely* to do so than the various grassroots movements and government efforts mentioned throughout the novel. To be clear: I am not suggesting that Ballard anthropomorphises waste, or grants it magical or romantic qualities, but rather that he identifies the capacity for litter (81, 86, 223); polluted water (221); spoiled food (232–33, 267); and other forms of decaying matter to, as Bennett would say, 'produce effects dramatic and subtle' (2010: 6). Here the most promising counter to fascism is not social protest, but faulty technology, waste, and the germs waste breeds. This agential potential is best expressed in a scene in which Pearson sits on the artificial beach of the artificial lake 'outside' the Holiday Inn housed within the Metro-Centre:

I reached down to an empty beer can at my feet, and tossed it into a nearby waste bin. Beyond a three-foot radius of my chair, the beach was littered with bottles and empty food cartons. The water never moved, but a scum of cigarette butts and plastic wrappers formed a tide line. At least for the moment, consumerism had beached itself on this filthy sand (223).

It is both humorous and apt that this momentary stay against consumerism—to parody Robert Frost's famous description of poetry—should occur in the midst of the debris-strewn, enclosed, artificial replica of a natural landscape owned by an international hotel chain. The pause itself is reminiscent of what Walter Benjamin termed *Jetztzeit*, or 'here and now time', a moment pregnant with revolutionary potential

in its interruption of homogeneous, mechanised, progress (2007: 262). The radicalism of this moment, in which 'thinking stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions', and instead offers a 'revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past' (264–65), is similar to that of waste, which Benjamin saw as a physical marker of capitalism's self-delusion. In Ballard's text, these beached remnants similarly participate in an enforced pause, providing a physical obstruction that demands contemplation. Ballard suggests that, in a world colonised by corporations, in which the natural landscape has been replaced by artificial imitations, successful dissidence is less likely to stem from human activity than from unruly matter and vibrant waste—an idea that is profoundly optimistic and pessimistic in equal measure.

The strange and estranging waste objects, human excretions, and disused spaces just discussed are vital components of the Ballardian imagination that bear closer scrutiny, and that invite analyses beyond the purely semiotic, allegorical or psychoanalytical. Adopting a more pluralistic approach allows us to understand Ballard's effluvia, particularly in his late texts, both metaphorically, as a corrective to the smooth running of neoliberalism and its built environments and a counter to the ideology of consumerism, and literally, as matter endowed with agential potential due to its specific physical properties. Ballard suggests that the waste matter we are socialised to view as both inanimate and worthless is, in fact, the best positioned to challenge neo-imperialism and, paradoxically, to counter the effects of the Anthropocene era. In their discomfiting illegibility, sticky messiness, comical absurdity, and refusal to leave quietly, these surplus entities disrupt the worlds from which they have been expelled far better than any human could.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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