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## **J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*: A Nonhuman Utopia**

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**Abstract:** The paper explores J. G. Ballard's visionary 1962 novel *The Drowned World* as an example of a nonhuman utopia. Although written well before the conceptualization of the notion of the nonhuman turn, the novel embodies the philosophical ideas of such a turn as it challenges anthropocentric hierarchy and represents humans as disempowered and reactive, rather than proactive beings. *The Drowned World* imagines a world regressing into a prehistoric, pre-human state due to the Sun's extreme activity and radical warming in a process of entropy, as all human scientific and architectural achievements collapse in the face of the merciless sun and the advancing ocean. The urban space is turned into lagoons that resemble heterotopias, a space that accommodates the transitional phase in the process of imminent human extinction, which, paradoxically, is met with relief and embraced as utopian by the novel's protagonist.

**Keywords:** J. G. Ballard; *The Drowned World*; The Nonhuman Turn; Heterotopia; Entropy.

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### **1. Introduction:**

#### **Utopia, Dystopia and Entropy**

Both the reality and the imagined concept of a drowned or submerged city have been explored from various points of view – historical, archaeological, and literary. Whereas an actual submerged city is perceived as a key to understanding a certain aspect of human culture and history, like in the case of Pavlopetri in Greece<sup>1</sup>, imaginary drowned cities, like Plato's Atlantis or Poe's "The City in the Sea" (1845), are most typically seen as models of utopian/dystopian cities, which serve to probe the limits of the ethical. Even when they are sunk by forces of nature, such as earthquakes or floods, the drowning of fictional cities is imagined as a divine punishment for some sort of vice or a perceived breach of ethical values. Indeed, even the archetypal Biblical flooding of the world is a result of "the wickedness of man"<sup>2</sup>. Unlike most literary representations of flooded cities or civilizations, J. G. Ballard's novel *The Drowned World* (1962) rejects ethical speculations, depicting biological consequences of and psychological reactions to a purely natural phenomenon, devoid of value judgements, as full agency is ascribed

to the nonhuman world. The paper will thus show that the utopian/dystopian novel can be read from the perspective of the nonhuman turn, as Ballard's characters lack real agency, operating "just as non-humans would"<sup>3</sup>: by reacting and adapting to the circumstances caused by the global warming, rather than actively seeking to influence or reverse them. Their passivity, in the face of propulsive nonhuman life, contributes to their suspected ultimate demise, whereby a world without humans is seen as a form of primordial utopia: a place better for its lack of humans.

Despite the fact that life on the boiling Earth, as represented in the novel, may easily be seen as either utopian (for nonhumans, and non-mammals more specifically) or dystopian (for humans/mammals), Ballard abstains from using these terms and identifies the genre of his novel as "speculative fantasy . . . the more serious fringe of science fiction, [which] construct[s] a paradoxical universe where dream and reality become fused together"<sup>4</sup>. More importantly, in his interview with Travis Elborough, Ballard rejects the existence of "a moral purpose" to his fiction; for him, imaginative literature serves the purpose of reconnaissance, which he substantiates by describing himself "as a kind of investigator, a scout"<sup>5</sup>. To talk of utopian or dystopian societies, one must implement some form of value judgement in relation to whether a certain form of social organization is good or bad, that is, better or worse than the society known to the readers<sup>6</sup>, whereas Ballard imagines with an open mind. As many of his texts confirm, he is not constricted by social taboos or expectations, and is able to speculate unburdened by moral constraints, which prompts critics to view his

works as dystopian<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, Gordin et al. explain that utopian societies are ideal and planned, whereas dystopian societies represent either utopia that is gone wrong or one that functions merely for a specific group of class of people.<sup>8</sup> Ballard's novel, however, rejects both the notion of ethics and that of planning, since the decline of the human world is represented as a result of purely natural occurrences; it represents an *entropy* of the human civilization, which may very well cause feelings of dread or horror, but which evades the possibility of value judgements.

Indeed, the notion of entropy, whether as a technical term in thermodynamics, where it refers to a measure of a thermodynamic system's *disorder* that varies directly with any reversible change in heat in the system and inversely with the temperature of the system, or a more general term denoting a lack of order or predictability, a gradual decline into disorder, and/or a general trend of the universe toward death and disorder, characterizes the basic circumstances of the novel. The Earth has become an uncontrollable system due to rising temperatures, against which the humans have no remedy, and which alters the existing flora and fauna by eliminating the most complex organisms, that is, mammals, and fostering the development of tropical and subtropical plants and reptiles. And, although it may be assumed that such a situation would cause panic or direct action to reverse the situation, people are represented as not only as resigned observers of the situation but also *desirous* of their own annihilation, which opens up the possibility to talk about a nonhuman utopia.

## 2. Global Warming and the Failures of Science

According to Amnesty International, the burning of fossil fuels, modern agriculture, deforestation, and the change in land use increase the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, which subsequently increases the average temperature of our planet<sup>9</sup>. Thus, humans are recognised as both the culprits for the climate change and as potential redeemers of the situation. Yet, contrary to the current understanding of global warming and climate change as phenomena caused by human activity, Ballard's novel, set in the year 2145, imagines the rise of temperature as being caused by erratic solar activity and thus completely out of human hands. In the reality of *The Drowned World*, where the radical ecological change is caused by "geophysical upheavals" people are demoted to the role of spectators and sufferers: "A series of violent and prolonged solar storms lasting several years caused by a sudden instability in the Sun had . . . diminished the Earth's gravitational hold upon the outer layers of the ionosphere . . . depleting the Earth's barrier against the full impact of solar radiation. All over the world, mean temperatures rose by a few degrees each year."<sup>10</sup>

The rapid rise in temperature makes a momentous impact on the planet's biosphere, which endures mean temperatures of 130 °F (54.4 °C) in the former tropics, and of 100 °F (37.8 °C) in the former moderate regions of Europe and North America, whereas the Arctic Circle, now a subtropical zone, has an annual mean temperature of 85°F (29.44 °C)<sup>11</sup>. The only solution is massive migration toward the

Earth's poles: "Under the direction of the United Nations, the colonisation began of the Antarctic plateau and of the northern borders of the Canadian and Russian continents"<sup>12</sup>. Despite considerable scientific resources, which include mobile laboratories and testing stations, human know-how is represented as ineffective and hardly applicable in the extreme situation.

Namely, the "gigantic sun" is established as the only relevant, life-determining factor. It is not only a thermal and visual but also an acoustic force: it "thuds" and "booms" and the characters hear "the volcanic pounding" of its flares; it sends "dull glows pulsing across the lagoon"<sup>13</sup>. There is hardly any escape from the Sun, and its overwhelming influence conceptualizes it into a new sort of non-sentient divinity, senseless and therefore cruel: "the relentless power of the sun was plainly tangible. The blunt refracted rays drummed against his bare chest and shoulders . . . The solar disc was no longer a well-defined sphere, but a wide expanding ellipse that fanned out across the eastern horizon like a colossal fire-ball, its reflection turning the dead leaden surface of the lagoon into a brilliant copper shield"<sup>14</sup>.

It is precisely the omnipotence of Sun, and the human dependence on and helplessness against it that invite the reading of the novel within the context of the nonhuman turn. More specifically, it evokes the ontological insignificance of people on the one hand, and our dependence on technology on the other. By saying that "we have never been human", Richard Grusin, points to the human "indistinction from the nonhuman", that is our coexistence and collaboration with the nonhuman<sup>15</sup>, without which we would never have been able

to survive. Taking a more positive view of this fact, Andy Clark explains that, since the origination of language, humans have been “natural-born cyborgs”, because the thing that ostensibly sets humans off from the nonhumans, namely, human cognition, has always been reliant upon nonhuman technologies for success and progress.<sup>16</sup> In any case, both views unsettle the traditionally established notion of the superiority of the human. Still, Clark highlights that human co-dependence on various non-human technologies is an advantage that has made humanity’s dominance possible. Contrary to that, Ballard’s novel rejects the notion that the human ability to manipulate tools and think scientifically will make a significant difference in the face of a major natural upheaval, suggesting that science may have granted humanity a temporary advantage, but that ultimately nature is the principal authority. This attitude is not surprising since, as Booker contends, utopian literature exhibits “a great deal of suspicion of science and technology”<sup>17</sup>.

Indeed, the failure of science is visible throughout the novel, but most clearly it is exemplified by the protagonist, a 40-year-old marine biologist, Robert Kerans. His job is to record and map the changes in the flora caused by the warming, which he perceives to be futile: “little now remained to be done. The biological mapping had become a pointless game, the new flora following exactly the emergent lines anticipated twenty years earlier, and he was sure that no one at Camp Byrd in Northern Greenland bothered to file his reports, let alone read them”<sup>18</sup>. However specific and meticulous their research may have been, it has ultimately been made pointless by the advancing ocean and rising temperatures

because scientists are not able to make any difference: “Apparently the water-level is still rising; all the work we’ve done has been a total waste – as I’ve always maintained, incidentally. The American and Russian units are being recalled as well. Temperatures at the Equator are up to one hundred and eighty degrees now, going up steadily, and the rain belts are continuous as high as the twentieth parallel. There’s more silt too”<sup>19</sup>.

Scientists have become nothing more than chroniclers of decline, and they have ceased to be useful in any meaningful way; they move from one mobile testing station to another with no real purpose, and certainly with no hope of effecting any kind of change. Incidentally, Kerans refuses to live with the other scientists in the floating station, which highlights his rejection of his own profession and its function. Rather, he chooses to lodge in a hotel suite at the partially submerged Ritz as “the only (mammalian) occupant of the hotel”<sup>20</sup>. He willingly occupies the symbolic role of a tourist both because he travels from one part of Europe to the next and because he understands that his existence is transitory. He is merely an observer – an admirer, even – of the altering landscape. By isolating himself from his colleagues, he seems to have accepted both the failure of his profession and the inevitable demise of human civilization:

He had commandeered the Ritz the day after their arrival, eager to exchange his cramped cabin among the laboratory benches at the testing station for the huge, high-ceilinged staterooms of the deserted hotel. Already he accepted the lavish brocaded

furniture and the bronze art nouveau statuary in the corridor niches as a natural background to his existence, savouring the subtle atmosphere of melancholy that surrounded these last vestiges of a level of civilisation now virtually vanished forever<sup>21</sup>.

The vanishing of human civilization shows that the direction where the world is headed is reverse: toward a life with no humans or human artefacts.

### 3. Imagining A Return to the Palaeozoic<sup>22</sup>

With the rise of temperature, the Earth has embarked on a steady and irreversible process of regression into a primordial state, which was marked by high temperatures, extreme ultraviolet radiation from the Sun, and microscopic life<sup>23</sup>. The tendency to imagine and represent the journey toward decline and toward the past is well established in utopian tradition. According to Scholes and Rabkin, utopian thought frequently relies on the notion that an earlier time (in the world or in one's life) was better, which marks it with a sort of atavistic desire, "[b]ut science and atavism are enemies. Science allows no retreating in time, and insists on contemplating the consequences of actions"<sup>24</sup>. In his novel, however, Ballard rejects both science and any consideration of moral implications, and indulges in exploring solely these atavistic desires, which are for the most part marked by a kind of death drive:

I was interested in the notion of a flooded city as a sort of time machine – the way that climatic change, of a

dramatic kind, whether flooding or the creation of a desert, tapped long-buried memories of our earlier ancestry and perhaps a very different kind of psychology. When I was writing *The Drowned World* I think I was interested in the whole notion of going back to the primeval swamp, and also the idea of individual identity, something we prize enormously today but in fact it's very much a late artefact and you know there are more primitive forms of life.<sup>25</sup>

Although he does not say it in so many words, Ballard questions the role of humans on Earth as well as the nature of what it means to be human. On the one hand, he tries to imagine human inexistence, or, more specifically, the process of entropy which leads to the extinction of humanity. This process is represented as being entirely organic, completely beyond the control of humans, and therefore deeply unsettling. On the other hand, he scrutinizes human self-perception by representing people as helpless rather than superior beings. Thus, prior to the theoretical establishment of the nonhuman turn, Ballard imagines a disappearing humanity. He represents a world of both social regression and psychological devolution, and, simultaneously, of flourishing wildlife. Paradoxically, this eco-dystopia is simultaneously an eco-utopia, because not everything dies – as mammals go extinct other species flourish – and because the prospect of death is compelling and irresistible not only to the protagonist but also to other characters, like Beatrice Dahl and Lieutenant Hardman. They all long to return to the primal state, even if it means

their own annihilation: "The malaise had not been difficult to diagnose. Kerans recognised the same symptoms he had seen in himself, an accelerated entry into his own 'zone of transit'"<sup>26</sup>.

The "transit", so familiar to Kerans, refers both to the fact that, due to rapidly altering climate, the whole biosphere is evidently in a state of transition toward a prehistoric status and to the fact that people's consciousness changes in such a way that the eco-regression is viewed, if not with full acceptance, then certainly with no active opposition. The regression into Carboniferous- and Triassic-like environment is marked by an all-encompassing transformation into simpler and anachronistic forms of life:

Not only was the growth of all plant forms accelerated, but the higher levels of radioactivity increased the rate at which mutations occurred. The first freak botanical forms appeared, recalling the giant tree-ferns of the Carboniferous period, and there was a drastic upsurge of all lower plant and animal forms. The arrival of these distant forbears was overlaid by the second major geophysical upheaval.<sup>27</sup>

Scientists have noted the rapid extinction of complex organisms and the flourishing of prehistoric life-forms: "the reptiles had taken over the city. Once again they were the dominant form of life"<sup>28</sup>, testifying to a form of devolution, which was in process even before Kerans's birth:

The steady decline in mammalian fertility, and the growing ascendancy of amphibian and reptile forms best

adapted to an aquatic life in the lagoons and swamps, inverted the ecological balances, and by the time of Kerans' birth at Camp Byrd, a city of ten thousand in Northern Greenland, it was estimated that fewer than five million people were still living on the polar caps. The birth of a child had become a comparative rarity, and only one marriage in ten yielded any offspring<sup>29</sup>.

So, as plants and reptiles thrive, the human race becomes slowly extinct, confirming that the Earth is moving toward conditions that existed in pre-human history: "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"<sup>30</sup>. The reference to Adam and Eve, not as the two first but as the two last people, necessarily invites contemplation about both the divine creation and extinction of humanity, since the novel implies a decline toward the original state. It also highlights the turn from the discourse of science toward one of religion, both human-made and both erroneous.

Unlike the biblical anthropomorphic God, in the novel the Sun, or Nature in more general terms, occupies the place of a divinity. The Christian God, who creates human beings in His own image and views this creation as good<sup>31</sup>, is implicitly denounced as a flawed creation of equally flawed humans. It is not God who creates people, but the other way around. Thus, both humanity and its beliefs, particularly the one about eternal life, are represented as faulty, since life does not seem to be linear or to tend to perfection as the



doctrine alleges. Moreover, for Gnostics, human life is a drama of failure, and the divinity that purportedly created humans is an "incompetent craftsman"<sup>32</sup>. Both the cosmos and humans seem to be, as Jacques Lacarrière explains, failed creations<sup>33</sup>, and, in the words of Costica Bradatan, "our true condition: next-to-nothingness"<sup>34</sup>.

The rampant death rate and declining birth rate make it clear to the novel's protagonists that they are doomed; because the process of entropy is relentless, there is no other outcome but death and chaos. And whereas some of them, like Colonel Riggs, seem determined to survive, many exhibit signs of psychological entropy, a state that does not fully comply with similar known psychological or neurological diagnoses, such as depression or dementia. Rather, it is a form of resigned acceptance, and even welcoming, of the inevitable:

This growing isolation and self-containment, exhibited by the other members of the unit and from which only the buoyant Riggs seemed immune, reminded Kerans of the slackening metabolism and biological withdrawal of all animal forms about to undergo a major metamorphosis. Sometimes he wondered what zone of transit he himself was entering, sure that his own withdrawal was symptomatic not of a dormant schizophrenia, but of a careful preparation for a radically new environment, with its own internal landscape and logic, where old categories of thought would merely be an encumbrance.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, Bradatan suggests that "by embracing our cosmic insignificance, we

are true to ourselves"<sup>36</sup>. The increasing sequestration is a form of compliance with the utopian dreams, which the afflicted understand to be both an atavistic memory and a form of preparation for what inescapably awaits them – a return to the past and to extinction: "What are these nightmares you're having?" Beatrice shrugged. "Jungle dreams, Robert," she murmured ambiguously. "I'm learning my ABC again. Last night was the delta jungles." She gave him a bleak smile, then added with a touch of malicious humour: "Don't look so stern, you'll be dreaming them too, soon."<sup>37</sup>

Prompted by the dreamlike "archaic memories"<sup>38</sup>, the novel's characters become indifferent to life and other people, exhibiting "death instinct"<sup>39</sup>. Their behaviour echoes the Freudian death drive, which pushes a person to (self)destruction instead of to sustaining life; for them, "*the aim of all life is death*"<sup>40</sup>. More specifically, all humans, according to Freud, are instinctively driven toward a desire not to advance but to return to the "*old state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return*"<sup>41</sup>. By returning to death, and literally decomposing into inorganic particles, they seek a new life in the original, inorganic life, which preceded the life of the living beings<sup>42</sup>: "the most universal endeavour of all living substance – namely to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world"<sup>43</sup>. So, the sole desire of Ballard's characters, in particular Kerans and Lieutenant Hardman, is to move closer to the beckoning, even if deadly, Sun. Those who wish to defy the imminent death know that the only chance to escape, or rather postpone, it is to travel northward to the camps: "After a few nights you won't be frightened of the dreams, despite their

superficial horror. That's why Riggs has received orders for us to leave"<sup>44</sup>.

By way of illustration, Kerans's first "organic" memory<sup>45</sup> is one of the Earth from hundreds of millions years ago, hot, opaque from gas and populated by reptiles, which may likely be dinosaurs:

As the great sun drummed nearer, almost filling the sky itself, the dense vegetation along the limestone cliffs was flung back abruptly, to reveal the black and stone-grey heads of enormous Triassic lizards. . . . they began to roar together at the sun, the noise gradually mounting until it became indistinguishable from the volcanic pounding of the solar flares. Kerans felt, beating within him like his own pulse, the powerful mesmeric pull of the baying reptiles, and stepped out into the lake, whose waters now seemed an extension of his own bloodstream. As the dull pounding rose, he felt the barriers which divided his own cells from the surrounding medium dissolving, and he swam forwards, spreading outwards across the black thudding water<sup>46</sup>.

In addition to a memory of the past, that is, the Freudian *old life*, the dream is also a form of prophecy where Kerans imagines his own dissolution and merging with the ancient nature. By dying, he imagines being reborn in the form of a new, depersonalized life. So, from the perspective of the dreamer, that is, the *rememberer*, the ongoing regression is acceptable, even desirable, because the memories function as the catalysts of entropy; as Dr Bodkin explains to Kerans, the dreams have triggered the body's inherent impulse for dissolution:

That wasn't a true dream, Robert, but an ancient organic memory millions of years old. . . . The innate releasing mechanisms laid down in your cytoplasm millions of years ago have been awakened, the expanding sun and the rising temperature are driving you back down the spinal levels into the drowned seas submerged beneath the lowest layers of your unconscious, into the entirely new zone of the neuron-ic psyche. This is the lumbar transfer, total biopsychic recall. We really remember these swamps and lagoons<sup>47</sup>.

Freud maintains that people ultimately seek a return to the inorganic life, and Ballard's novel represents both this longing and the circumstances which presage the end of humanity and the imminent emergence of a nonhuman utopia. The devolution of living beings does not signify death for everyone, but only for the most complex organisms; as mammals disappear, the flora and non-mammalian fauna flourishes. These changes are accompanied by a transformation of the human habitation. Namely, besides auguring the extinction of humans, the novel also represents the entropy of human-made places and spaces, which give in to the advances of the thriving rainforest.

#### 4. The Entropy of Urban Space: Heterotopian Lagoons

The descriptions of changing landscapes in *The Drowned World* make it clear that, driving the inundated silt before them, the new seas have completely altered the shape and contours of the Earth's map:



The Mediterranean contracted into a system of inland lakes, the British Isles was linked again with northern France. The Middle West of the United States, filled by the Mississippi as it drained the Rocky Mountains, became an enormous gulf opening into the Hudson Bay, while the Caribbean Sea was transformed into a desert of silt and salt flats. Europe became a system of giant lagoons, centred on the principal low-lying cities, inundated by the silt carried southwards by the expanding rivers.<sup>48</sup>

Another consequence of the geological and maritime change is the downfall of the city, which was replaced by the lagoon. A product of Enlightenment<sup>49</sup>, the city as “the culmination of Western history, embodies a state of individual consciousness and reflects a complex plane of existence”<sup>50</sup>. Being so inextricably bound to the human way of life and thinking, the demise of the cities exerts a profound influence on humans who have constructed their identity in keeping with the dynamics of urban life; namely, the deterioration of urban space is reflected in the characters’ behaviour, more specifically, in the death instinct that drives them.

What used to be a superior way of life now disintegrates under the pressures of water, becomes covered by silt, algae, and plants, and inhabited by alligators, iguanas, bats, and basilisks. The cities are flooded, and are “like a reflection in a lake that has somehow lost its original”<sup>51</sup>. Even the cities that are not submerged no longer represent a safe place to live, as they are collapsing under the pressures of nature:

A few fortified cities defied the rising water-levels and the encroaching jungles, building elaborate sea-walls around their perimeters, but one by one these were breached. Only within the former Arctic and Antarctic Circles was life tolerable. The oblique incidence of the sun’s rays provided a shield against the more powerful radiation. Cities on higher ground in mountainous areas nearer the Equator had been abandoned, despite their cooler temperatures, because of the diminished atmospheric protection.<sup>52</sup>

The city’s insignificance is illustrated by the fact that the novel’s setting, London, the first modern metropolis<sup>53</sup> and the capital of what used to be the world’s greatest empire, represents a nameless location for the protagonist: “At the end of the month Colonel Riggs and his small holding unit would complete their survey of the city (had it once been Berlin, Paris or London?, Kerans asked himself) and set off northward, towing the testing station with them”<sup>54</sup>. Kerans has never lived in a real city as he had been born and had lived in the Arctic Circle until his thirties. There, new habitats, camps with “bracing disciplines”<sup>55</sup>, have been created for the human survivors whose “existence became completely nomadic”<sup>56</sup>, so, for him, urban space is a relic of the past: “Apart from a few older men such as Bodkin there was no one who remembered living in them”<sup>57</sup>. And even Bodkin, for whom “this city is the only home [he’s] ever known” is left with only “memories of memories”<sup>58</sup>.

Significantly, Kerans expresses no interest in learning more about the city, even though he is a scientist and inquisitiveness

should be one of his determining traits: “Curiously, though, despite the potent magic of the lagoon worlds and the drowned cities, he had never felt any interest in their contents, and never bothered to identify in which of the cities he was stationed”<sup>59</sup>. One could argue that, on the one hand, science is failing as a concept and a way of thinking, and therefore his scientific instincts are also poor. On the other hand, the reason in his lack of interest in the city could be found in the fact that as a biologist, Kerans is by definition interested in life, which no longer exists in the drowned city because it is “a nightmare world that’s dead and finished, . . . a corpse!”<sup>60</sup>. For him, life is elsewhere: “The vast swamps and jungles had been a fabulous laboratory, the submerged cities little more than elaborate pedestals”<sup>61</sup>.

The superimposition of nature over the urban space is both symbolic, in that the city has lost its purpose and only bears importance in Bodkin’s memories<sup>62</sup>, and literal, as the city is located below the lagoon. Moreover, the city’s architecture is covered by algae: “The big dome is still there, about twenty feet below water. It looks like an enormous shell, fucus growing all over it”<sup>63</sup>. The parts of the city that have not been claimed by the sea – the skyscrapers and tall buildings – are swallowed by the rainforest creating a series of wistful tableaux:

. . . the moss-covered surface of the hotel . . . In the early morning light a strange mournful beauty hung over the lagoon; the sombre green-black fronds of the gymnosperms, intruders from the Triassic past, and the half-submerged white-faced buildings of the 20th century still reflected

together in the dark mirror of the water, the two interlocking worlds apparently suspended at some junction in time<sup>64</sup>.

To highlight the negative – possibly dystopian – aspects of the urban environment, as opposed to the luscious eco-utopia in the making above and around the submerged city, Ballard combines elements of crime and violence with the submerged areas of former cities thanks to the looter Strangman and his crew. His bizarre mission is to steal and amass valuables from the sunken buildings (museums, theatres, churches), although the purpose of such an endeavour in a dying world seems incomprehensible<sup>65</sup>. Nevertheless, his criminal behaviour seems to be an echo of the past, since, historically, the rise of the city was linked with the increase in crime: “[t]he scale of the metropolis liberated the anonymous faces in the crowd from the supervision exercised in smaller communities, raising the spectre of criminality”<sup>66</sup>. The lagoon, practically a deserted place and therefore free from supervision, allows for the same type of behaviour. Here, the “saturnine”<sup>67</sup> and violent Strangman is unconstrained either by law or morals, and his deviance is given free reign.

This allows for an additional interpretation of the space of the lagoon: it is not just a dying urban location, but a kind of heterotopia. Specifically, in “Of Other Places”, Foucault speaks of heterotopias of deviation, inhabited by people whose behaviour digresses from the required norm<sup>68</sup>. Ballard constructs the lagoon as a place of deviation, not only because the people temporarily inhabiting the lagoon that was once London are put there

haphazardly but also because they digress from moral, psychological, and physiological standard: "most of the people still living on in the sinking cities were either psychopaths or suffering from malnutrition and radiation sickness"<sup>69</sup>. They suffer from various illnesses, are suicidal or exhibit criminal behaviour. Thus, the space of the former city is not a space of production, but of decay. Originally a human creation, the city was seen as a place where humanity thrives; lagoon, on the other hand, is not human-made and represents the city's counter-site. In an additional sense, the lagoon – even if only tangentially related to the city as a space that is superimposed on it – and people there confirm the idea that life without humans would also mean a life without violence and crime, highlighting the utopian aspect of both the novel and of life without humans.

In the lagoon, the urban and the natural clash and the refractions of their contact result in unsettling effects. Indeed, for Foucault, a heterotopia is "disturbing"; it is an imaginary place, constructed in language, which "dissolve[s] our myths"<sup>70</sup>. Ballard's lagoon represents a place that rejects the myth of superiority of urban life and of its grandeur and complexity, as well as the importance of an individual since every character in the novel is construed as transitory and insignificant in face of the inevitable regression to simpler forms. Walter Russell Mead explains that "[u]topia is a place where everything is good; dystopia is a place where everything is bad; heterotopia is where things are different — that is, a collection whose members have few or no intelligible connections with one another"<sup>71</sup>. Indeed, the characters in Ballard's story are people who are unrelated in

any way either to each other or to the space they temporarily inhabit; they represent a medley of people that have found themselves in a lagoon for various reasons, and are now forced to cooperate. Each of them is replaceable with any other person, and their personality is irrelevant, which makes their potential deaths less tragic. In fact, they seem to desire it.

So, whereas the city used to be a place of struggle for survival and improvement, the lagoon compels people to self-destruction. Both Kerans and Hardman see no other option but to give in to the siren call of the Sun:

"But why south?" Daley protested. "Once he leaves the channel there's nothing but solid jungle and open sea. The temperature is going up all the time—he'll *fry*." Riggs looked up at Kerans. "Sergeant Daley has a point, Doctor. Why should Hardman choose to travel south?" Looking out across the water again, Kerans replied in a flat voice: "Colonel, there isn't any other direction"<sup>72</sup>.

In a later conversation with Strangman, who warns them about the dangers of staying in the lagoon where the temperature will soon rise to 200 °F, Dr Bodkin reiterates their readiness to return to the Mesozoic Period: "we are part of the planet, a piece of the main, we too are returning. This is our zone of transit, here we are re-assimilating our own biological pasts"<sup>73</sup>. His response is an obvious echo of Freudian ideas about the death drive. In fact, talking of his own characters and their motives for staying, Ballard has suggested that "[t]hey realize that the uterine sea around

them, the dark womb of the ocean mother, is as much the graveyard of their own individuality as it is the source of their lives"<sup>74</sup>. The notion that there is no option but to surrender to death annuls decades' worth of attempts to save humanity by building new life in the Arctic Circle, and reveals such a struggle to simply be a deferral of the inevitable.

The fluid, changing nature of the lagoon, and its imminent disappearance due to the constant rise of the sea level, contributes to its heterotopian status, since, as per Foucault, heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time and function as heterochronies<sup>75</sup>. Once the sea level rises further, the lagoons will vanish completely, so their effects are manifested at this specific time created discursively in the novel. Moreover, by existing on and in the water, a lagoon is not easily "accessible like a public place"<sup>76</sup>, because in addition to having to observe a specific time of day to reach or move around the lagoon due to the relentless heat, one needs to have a boat and know how to navigate it. A life on water, in half submerged buildings, but even more so on floating stations and boats, represents for Foucault the ultimate heterotopia: "the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea"<sup>77</sup>.

Ultimately, Kerans follows Lieutenant Hardman in his search for unity with nature, a more compelling view of their search for death. When Kerans catches up with Hardman, he sees an emaciated figure, blackened by the sun's radiation. Hardman's eyes are covered in corneal cancers and he can only see the pulsing of the sun, which he follows unremittingly: "It's

gone again! Aa-aah! It's moving away from me! Help me up, soldier, we'll follow it. Now, before it goes for ever"<sup>78</sup>. Hardman's still living but already decomposing body is a graphic representation of Kerans's own abject destiny should he continue to follow the sun, yet he is undeterred:

Guided by his dreams, he was moving backwards through the emergent past, through a succession of ever stranger landscapes, centred upon the lagoon ... At times the circle of water was spectral and vibrant, at others slack and murky, the shore apparently formed of shale, like the dull metallic skin of a reptile. Yet again the soft beaches would glow invitingly with a glossy carmine sheen, the sky warm and limpid, the emptiness of the long stretches of sand total and absolute, filling him with an exquisite and tender anguish<sup>79</sup>.

The sublimity of the Sun is irresistible, as is the desire for death and the return to the original, *old* life. So, Kerans continues his "neuronic odyssey"<sup>80</sup> southward, even though he knows it means his doom, a complete unravelling of his own personal destiny, emblematic of the regression of humanity: "So he left the lagoon and entered the jungle again, within a few days was completely lost, following the lagoons southward through the increasing rain and heat, attacked by alligators and giant bats, a second Adam searching for the forgotten paradises of the reborn sun"<sup>81</sup>. A utopian return to paradise, that is, the prehistoric past, implies a reversal of the Christian story of creation, whereby Kerans, the second Adam, goes back to nothingness from which he was created.

## 5. Conclusion

J. G. Ballard's novel *The Drowned World* imagines the unravelling of human life on Earth as a consequence of a fully natural process of global warming. The characters in the novel have little agency. Their role as scientists or soldiers is perfunctory as they merely observe the irreversible ecological and biological change that unfolds before them. As nature flourishes in its Palaeozoic and Mesozoic manifestations, the modern human inventions, most notably the city, disintegrate as anachronistic phenomena. The rising sea levels, radiation, and the heat facilitate the entropy of the cityscape, which results in the appearance of lagoons.

The lagoon can be seen as a space of transition, a heterotopia that enables human deviation in the form of psychological and physiological regression, madness, and the desire for death. This new, degenerating reality is embraced by the protagonists, who view the dystopian reality of global warming, urban entropy, and human extinction as a prelude to a sort of nonhuman utopia, a return to the desirable primordial state in which there are no humans. Thus, in the constellation of the novel people, paradoxically, view their own imminent extinction and devolution as welcome.

Ballard's representation of a nonhuman utopia is radical in the sense that, from a human point of view, it proposes an imagining of the future without humans by re-imagining the pre-human past as a utopian, Edenic state. In a slow process of imminent entropy, all human feats disintegrate: science, culture, art and architecture, as well as the conventional perception of time, a human construct devised "in relation to [their] own physical needs", as humanity "enter[s] the world of total, neuronc time, where the massive intervals of the geological time-scale calibrated [their] existence. Here a million years was the shortest working unit, and problems of food and clothing became as irrelevant as they would have been to a Buddhist contemplative"<sup>82</sup>. A reference to Buddhism, a distinctly non-materialistic religion that strives towards nirvana by means of all forms of asceticism, also affirms the rejection of a materialist and anthropocentric Christian view of life, as the relentless power and pressure of nature disallow any notion of human superiority and negate permanence to human achievements. Nature, or the Sun specifically, asserts itself as the ultimate authority, already determining the future of the planet: a wet, hot, green, and human-free future.

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## NOTES

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