

**SELLARS, SIMON; O'HARA, DAN (ORG.). EXTREME METAPHORS: SELECTED INTERVIEWS WITH J. G. BALLARD, 1967-2008. LONDON: FOURTH ESTATE, 2012. 510 P.**

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“Fiction is a branch of neurology: the scenarios of nerve and blood vessel are the written mythologies of memory and desire,” wrote J. G. Ballard (1930-2009), a man who, since his beginnings in science fiction magazines in the 1950s, has painted the postwar world as a disaster area. Within his unique, idiosyncratic blend of surrealism and science fiction lays a kernel of trauma: memories of his wartime experience in a POW camp outside Shanghai, displaced into strange and indelible Ballardian images of drained swimming pools, deserted paddy fields, and a fascination with airports and aircraft. Arguably, Ballard’s project of elucidating our changing attitudes and transformation of our landscape by mass media and consumerism in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is tied to a process of cultural and personal remembrance. The disaster in Ballard’s fiction has already occurred, and attempts to grasp the implications of the atomic age for better or worse—the dropping of the bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as he recounts in his autobiography *Miracles of Life* (2008, the title refers to his three children) saved him from being executed by the Japanese at the end of the war. After his induction into the mainstream in the mid-1980s with the publication of the prized *Empire of the Sun* (1984) and its subsequent film adaptation by Steven Spielberg (1987), it is easy to forget that for almost three decades, his experiences in the Second World War appeared only as metaphors in his writing, events that, as he often said, took him a long time to forget, and an even longer time to remember. The young Ballard was kept by the Japanese after Pearl Harbor for three years in Lunghua Internment Camp outside Shanghai, an experience fictionalized in *Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women* (1991), and recounted in a number of non-fiction pieces along the years (the most notable being “From Shanghai to Shepperton” and “The End of my War”) and in *Miracles of Life*.

For years critics have tried to pigeonhole Ballard into a genre,<sup>1</sup> but as Will Self has noted, after Ballard’s death “there was a widespread acknowledgement that English letters had lost probably its most original and important post-war writer”. In recent years Ballard has become a guru of sorts for the new information age, revered by cult figures such as Bruce Sterling and William Gibson, but more often quoted than read. *Extreme Metaphors: Selected Interviews with J. G. Ballard, 1967-2008* (Fourth Estate, 2012)

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<sup>1</sup> For a theoretical discussion of the uneasy placement of Ballard as a science fiction author, see Roger Luckhurst’s *The Angle between Two Walls* (Nova York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997).

is the latest addition to the Ballardian canon. A hefty volume, collecting forty years of interviews given to the press, that, according to the introduction by Simon Sellars (who edited the volume along with Dan O'Hara), would consist "a second sun" in the Ballardian galaxy, "an enormous parallel body of speculation, philosophy, critical inquiry and imaginative flights of fancy that comments critically on his writing, often explains it and, sometimes, extends or goes beyond it".<sup>2</sup> The interviews collected here do attest to Ballard's constant self-mythologizing—he is often contradictory and pretentious, but never boring—and touch on familiar subjects for readers of his fiction. They cannot, however, be called a laboratory to test ideas, as Sellars suggests in his introduction. He even goes so far as to claim that he once believed that the "interview format" as used by Ballard is superior to his novels. Made evident by the number of interviews in this collection is how repetitive Ballard could be, how he could deftly avoid deviating from the boilerplate (many phrases, including the titular "extreme metaphors" are repeated throughout the book). In this sense, he does succeed in authoring the "interview format" to solidify the mythology of his own persona. It takes, therefore, a shrewd interviewer (Carol Orr, V. Vale, Thomas Frick, Will Self, Toby Litt) to be able to ask Ballard the right questions and make him open up. When he does, these interviews can indeed be just as stimulating as Ballard's fictional creations, presenting his unique view of the world with clever insights, poetic turns of phrase, and a sardonic humor. It is baffling, however, that some of these interviews, for reasons undisclosed, are abridged. Thankfully, the editors include much-needed contextualizations before each interview, but there is no explanation for the shortening of out-of-print pieces, such as the V. Vale or the David Pringle and Louis Goddard interviews.

Some shining moments pop up here and there, comments or pieces of information that allow the reader to see Ballard under a new light, elucidating his writing process, exposing his taste in art and film, his political views, and perhaps more interestingly, the importance of his war experiences to his writing. The Frick interview, published in the *Paris Review* in the 1980s, for instance, details how Ballard weaves "documentary material" into his own fiction—a foremost concern for anyone interested in the writer's complex intermingling of fiction and reality, not to mention his self-mythology—in the form of a "transcript of a secret tape recording" Ballard made of his girlfriend "in a rage" making its way into his novel *Concrete Island*.<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, he even tellingly suggests that the Blakean nightmare *The Unlimited Dream Company*, a surrealistic novel about a pilot who crashes into the Thames and physically transforms the humdrum town of Shepperton and its inhabitants into chimeras, can be read as a parable of his own life: "I fell to Earth there 30 years ago and got to work transforming the modest little town into this exotic pagan universe. I wait hopefully every day for the scenarios laid down in the book to come to pass."<sup>4</sup>

The importance of this volume is not to be understated—it is a significant addition to readers of Ballard, a far more illuminating book than the mean-spirited biography

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<sup>2</sup> *Extreme Metaphors*, p. xiv.

<sup>3</sup> SELLARS; O'HARA. *Extreme Metaphors*, p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> SELLARS; O'HARA. *Extreme Metaphors*, p. 266.

*The Inner Man* by John Baxter, published in 2011. While Baxter painted Ballard as a bully, giving no real insight to the man, *Extreme Metaphors* gives us ample opportunity to admire and ponder at the puzzle that is Ballard.



#### REFERÊNCIAS

SELLARS, Simon; O'HARA, Dan (Orgs.) *Extreme Metaphors: Selected Interviews with J.G. Ballard, 1967-2008*. Londres: Fourth Estate, 2012. 510 p.

