CHAPTER 3

Zones of Non-time: Residues of Iconic Events in Ballard’s Fiction

Catherine McKenna

Abstract

When he died in 2009, J.G. Ballard left a private library collection in his estate. The items held in this collection form a landscape of influence and inspiration for Ballard’s work, particularly the writing from the creative period which resulted in texts such as “The Terminal Beach,” Crash, Concrete Island and The Atrocity Exhibition. The collection contains many items which fit the description Ballard coined of “invisible literature,” and this essay examines two such items in that collection which deal with the cultural landscape of the twentieth century: the iconic events of the advent of the atomic bomb and the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The representation of the physical and psychological impact of these traumatic events in Ballard’s work is explored, along with a discussion of Ballard’s interrogation of rigid narratives of historical discourse.

Keywords


When J.G. Ballard died in 2009, he left a collection of manuscripts and a private library collection in his home. The manuscript collection was donated to the British Library in 2010, leaving his personal library in the private hands of his estate, where it remains. This collection was catalogued from 2011 to 2012, and represents a relatively small collection of 565 items taken largely from Ballard’s study, where he wrote. The main genres represented within the collection are Art, Literature, History and Cultural Studies, Science, Film and Television and Architecture, with a large collection of maps also present.¹

¹ Ballard’s library collection and its contents remain the copyright of the J.G. Ballard Estate. The items in this essay are discussed with the very kind permission of the estate.
When examining this library collection, the items which are most striking are those which can be grouped under a title coined by Ballard himself, that of “invisible literature.” In many interviews and non-fiction writing throughout his career, Ballard spoke of his interest in invisible literature, which he defined as “scientific journals, technical manuals, pharmaceutical company brochures, think-tank internal documents, PR company position papers” (Fraser 94) and “the internal memoranda of TV company planning departments, sex manuals, U.S. government reports, medical textbooks” (R/S jgb 156). Ballard’s personal library collection contains many items which fit this description, in particular U.S. government reports, scientific journals, technical manuals and medical textbooks. This material is most clearly relevant to the period surrounding the production of texts such as “The Terminal Beach” (1964), The Atrocity Exhibition (1970), Crash (1973), and Concrete Island (1974), as well as “surgical fictions” such as “Princess Margaret’s Facelift” (1970), which were eventually included in editions of The Atrocity Exhibition. This chapter will explore two examples of Ballard’s invisible literature: Operation Crossroads (1946), the official pictorial record of the 1946 United States atom bomb tests on the Pacific Island of Bikini, and The Official Warren Commission Report on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy (1964), a U.S. Government report produced in the aftermath of the shooting of JFK.

In approaching research on any library collection, the mind is inevitably drawn to theories of collecting, curating, archiving and knowledge management or control. Whilst all books can been seen as archival in a sense, as “material substrate[s]” in Derrida’s terms (8), what is striking about the invisible literature in Ballard’s collection is that it includes items for which concepts of archiving, historical narrative and knowledge control are central. The two items on which this essay will focus are official government reports, concerned with the management of information surrounding iconic moments in history, and with the creation and control of the historical narrative of these events, constructing the landscape of collective memory. As Helen Freshwater has observed,

[The] interaction of the state, writing, and the archive not only demonstrates the importance of textual traces for the construction of identity and collective national memory, it also indicates the state’s methods of maintaining control of its subjects. (733)

Indeed, Ballard’s interest in invisible literature stems from a concern with the accessibility of knowledge and information; the manner in which knowledge is controlled and the creation of historical narratives. As Ballard asserts in