CHAPTER 5

Jarry, Joyce and the Apocalyptic Intertextuality of
The Atrocity Exhibition

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Abstract

This chapter investigates The Atrocity Exhibition, a novel that shows Ballard’s writing in its most experimental form. The chapter analyses the tendency of the text to work through a literary landscape of intertextuality, moving away from conventional narrative mimesis. Such apocalyptic intertextuality involves the reader in encounters with a directly acknowledged precursor such as Surrealist Alfred Jarry, with the extreme assortments of material in the collections of “Terminal Documents” that occur through the text and in a reassessment of his complex relationship with one-time “wordmaster” James Joyce.

Keywords


The landscape of The Atrocity Exhibition is as much an intertextual as it is a physical landscape and it is characterized by an apocalyptic intertextuality whose experimental range takes in literary and popular cultures, visual art works, cinema, advertising, architecture, media and magazine journalism, government reports and science. Surrealism in the mode of mad science is regularly acknowledged in criticism, in Ballard’s work itself and in Ballard’s notes, as the book’s way of trying to make sense of the madness of the contemporary world. The transforming, modular subjectivity of its “bizarre jigsaw” (AE 130) protagonist, variously named Travis, Talbot and so on, the T-figure, and his “disquieting” experiments, personal relationships and their surveillance by Dr Nathan and Catherine Austin, make up the more traditional narrative core of the text.1 Yet that narrative thread becomes more complex and opaque,

1 Luckhurst (73–117) and Baxter (59–98) provide two of the strongest critical readings of the text whilst inevitably leaving much of its material still to be explored.
and as it does the reader is increasingly likely to attempt to understand its
world through its intertextual frames. By exploring one thread of this intertextuality we can revisit aspects of Ballard's relationship with an acknowledged early twentieth-century avant-garde precursor. Alongside such acknowledged points of reference in the text itself, I argue here, we can discern a complex and ambiguous relationship with Ballard's one-time “wordmaster” James Joyce, who, though not explicitly acknowledged as a direct source in the text or notes, sits behind its experimental trajectories in significant ways.

The final section of *The Atrocity Exhibition* illustrates an example of its intertextuality, explicitly reworking a source text from Ballard's favourite territory of the early twentieth-century avant-garde, one that is itself quite pointedly apocalyptic in its Surrealist inversion of Biblical text. This is “The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race” (*AE* 171–3) which is a direct recasting of the outrageous Surrealist prose work by Alfred Jarry, “The Crucifixion Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race.” In the context of *The Atrocity Exhibition* as a whole, Ballard's final chapter may be understood as one of many bizarre attempts to understand the absurdity of the Kennedy assassination, to “kill Kennedy again but in a way that makes sense” (*AE* 50), in this case in an absurd juxtaposition with the absurdity of accelerated motor-car culture and that of the media circus of the presidential “race.” In something like traditional plot terms, it seems to originate more specifically from the mysterious student Koester in the “University of Death” section who plots scenarios of Talbot's death. He refers to what he calls “Jarry's piece of happy anti-clericalism” (*AE* 29) in conversation with Catherine Austin and Dr Nathan observes Koester’s “optimized auto-fatality, conceived by the driver as some kind of bizarre crucifixion” gesturing towards the title of a Dali picture in describing it as “Christ crucified on the sodomized body of his own mother” (*AE* 31). Yet by the final chapters, the attempts of most readers to hold on to the detailed threads of a conventional T-figure plot will have been challenged or effectively replaced by a sense of the obtrusive and unsettling impact of the intertextual exercise itself as the short story fragments are set adrift from the semblances of conventional narrative material that remain only in synoptic headlines in the final sections.

Those readers who accept the invitation to explore Jarry's original, will find a fine example of his avant-garde pseudo-science of “pataphysics” which explicitly proposed to account for the irrationality of the world through deliberately irrational ideas. Ballard quite probably knew it from its publication in English in Roger Shattuck and Simon Taylor's *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*,

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2 This is the phrase used by Ballard in the self-authored December 1956 *New Worlds* profile of his work discussed below.