



Exhibition «J. G. Ballard. An Autopsy of the New Millennium»
22/07/2008 - 02/11/2008

In the raw

For a long time he was consigned to the ranks of science fiction. Afterwards, Spielberg brought him out of the shadows by making a film of his novel *Empire of the Sun*. Nevertheless, these forays, made through indirect means, are usually highly misleading. James Graham Ballard is part of the classical literary family whose talents the British Empire spread throughout the world and which drew on its colonial experiences to find the necessary energy to tackle the creative adventure. These are the origins, but from this point Ballard becomes a strange writer who transforms that experience in a very different way to other writers from the same background. Indeed, *Empire of the Sun* is his only work that fits in, more or less, with the canon. This is why it should come as no surprise that it is the book that has brought him the greatest recognition.

However, Ballard isn't only *Empire of the Sun*, notwithstanding that it is his most explicitly autobiographical work. Ballard is, first and foremost, a way of looking at the world and is able to penetrate, with a premonitory acuity, the squalid face of change, the sinister side of history, from a persistent reading of the logic of events. His settings are often the places of everyday life that seem the most banal, but his gaze is like a scalpel that peels away everything the skin conceals. The raw flesh: this could be the meaning of Ballardian writing. And his metaphorical, often surrealistic, displays are nothing more than ways of trying to say something that isn't ready to be understood, because we are at a time when this something is being formed and built.

It has been said that Ballard is a writer of negative utopias. This isn't true. Utopias are in fact mental constructs which have nowhere to place themselves. Ballard's world is reality: the reality of today and the reality of tomorrow, which are inseparable, particularly in an elastic tense we could call the present continuous. There is nothing in Ballard that isn't anchored to the reality of today, and in this regard his literature is a literature of the present, or, if you prefer, current writing. He describes the mental and sensorial conditions of our present – in which fiction is the natural medium and literature has to strive to create a reality – which a human condition emerges from, shifting between the experience of limits and the banality of the masses. What can this particular Ballardian gaze be ascribed to? Jordi Costa is quite right in his explanation with its psychoanalytical slant: it is the gaze of a child who got lost too soon.

Ballard is a fundamentally urban writer focusing on the contemporary urbanity in which the “urbs” often absorbs “civitas” to lead us to the emergence of chaos in *Crash* or *High-Rise*. Above all, his is a gaze marked by a state of mind: the lucidity of one who refuses to reap the consolations humankind constructs for itself, of one who refuses to divert attention from the piles of bodies, wreckage and frustrations humans generate, of one who, in the end, is always able to find the viewpoint that illuminates, unexpectedly, the perception of the situation. Ballard isn't a pessimist. He is a conscious hyperrealist. And his presumed strangeness stems from difficulties in empathising with his gaze. There are readers who don the Ballardian reading glasses straightaway and others who only see a blur. And there's almost nothing we can do about it. Ballard's gaze is like Christian grace: you either have it or you don't.

Be that as it may, the CCCB is putting Ballard centre stage to provide a different view of a world in which the real forces – the ones that weave together normativity and experience – aren't always



Prologues by Josep Ramoneda to the CCCB's catalogues

patently obvious. During the preparation of the exhibition I was able to enter into correspondence with the author. After his initial willingness, he gradually shifted to voice his reservations – which were always expressed with British elegance – as if, as the project began to take shape, he felt a growing need to distance himself from it. He would probably prefer it if other people told the story so as to avoid being trapped within it, in order to look, with a Ballardian gaze, at this particular story about his work, without having contaminated it beforehand. Or to put to the test our ability to don the Ballardian reading glasses and not see darkness. Sadly, his illness has worsened over the past few months and the last thing I heard is that he won't be able to come to the exhibition. We'll probably never know how Ballard views this exercise in Ballardoscopy.