

# **The Crystal World**

**photography, anthropology and the practice of time travel**

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## **Introduction**

*Father Balthus took Sander's arm. "In this forest we see the final celebration of the Eucharist of Christ's body. Here everything is transfigured and illuminated, joined together in the last marriage of space and time."*

J.G. Ballard, *The Crystal World*

In drawing parallels between the works of J.G. Ballard and the anthropological practice of photography, this piece seeks to explore the ways that the photograph mirrors the world (in the form of the post-'60s networked society) and the media culture in which we participate. It is also an intention to explore Ballard's premonitions about technology-driven, media-saturated society, and to question the notions of future shock and unimodernism in relation to the time-trapping nature of the photograph.

Ballard's writing is almost synaesthetic in quality, principally concerned with invoking the senses, particularly that of vision. It's as if his work is a form of textual photography, both in the presentation of the visual and in the manner in which it freezes time. Many of his novels are thought to have been germinated from his childhood experiences in wartime Shanghai and subsequent internment in a Japanese prison camp; the dystopian visions that feature in his early works are generally acknowledged to have been forged during this period<sup>1</sup>. Ballard can be seen to be straddling time, looking backwards to write about the future and he would, later, take this temporal predilection a step further; 'Empire of The Sun' is a fictionalised account of this period of war and imprisonment - history recast.

This essay, like the third of his apocalyptic trilogy<sup>2</sup> of novels, is entitled 'The Crystal World'. The story takes place in a universe where time is ceasing to exist; plants become crystalline self-parodies and animals transform into bejewelled statues, eventually ceasing all movement. Finally, the waters of the river become sluggish and stop, encased in a crystal shroud; time is running out of creation and space will soon exist in a state of an ever present now. The trajectory of 'The Crystal World' proceeds towards a state that parallels

the effect of the photograph, as described by Roland Barthes (1993 [1980]), when he captioned Alexander Gardner's picture of the unsuccessful assassin, Lewis Payne, with the phrase 'he is dead and he is going to die' (p.95). The image traps a fraction of a second, forever frozen, and projects it toward a future of captured moments.

## **(Time) Travel Photography**

*The thing the Time Traveller held in his hand was a glittering metallic framework, scarcely larger than a small clock, and very delicately made. There was ivory in it, and some transparent crystalline substance.*

H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*

If this quote from Wells (1898) invokes an image of a camera as it actually describes a model of a time machine, Ballard's travels into his own history, sometimes repeatedly, can be considered as analogous to the role of the photographic, ethnographic record. The frozen-time of the subject is contrasted with the modernity of the researcher, as in the case of 'The Crystal World', where Ballard wrote literally about this ever-present now. Other works resulted from his explorations of memory and subsequent re-imagining. The title of 'Empire of The Sun', for instance, refers directly to the nuclear explosion, seen by 'Jim' at the end of the book (which utilises a similar dynamic structure to Steichen's '*Family of Man*' exhibition of 1955<sup>3</sup>). In reality he never saw the blast or the mushroom cloud, but time and the past are, for Ballard, a source of imagery that he utilises to imagine the ever-present now and the projected future; this fictionalisation of his past parallels the staging of subjects in ethnographic photography to create an edited, performed history.

In his proto-cyberpunk novel 'Crash' humans are incorporated into mechanistic processes. Photography, similarly, is incorporated directly into the work, and Baudrillard (1994 [1980]) writes that '[I]n Crash, another dimension is inseparable from the confused ones of technology and of sex... it is that of the

photograph and of cinema. The shining and saturated surface of traffic and of the accident is without depth, but it is always doubled in Vaughan's camera lens.' (p.116). Photography transforms the subject into a component in a system of machine production, mirroring the themes of the book and revealing the underlying critique of society that is embedded in the event of the car crash or, in Latourian terms, the act of camera-work <sup>4</sup>.

## **A Moment Forever Frozen**

*The photograph is an antidote to clocks, and a remedy for the infectious diseases of the timetable...*

*The photograph is a fraction of a second, sentenced to life.*

Shuddhabrata Sengupta, *The Photograph Reconsidered*

According to Walter Benjamin (1931), the mechanical reproduction of the photograph interrupts the continual flow of images that are normally perceived and a moment is created; stillness from incessant movement. McLuhan (1964) states that '[i]t is one of the peculiar characteristics of the photo that it isolates single moments in time.' (p.204), and that 'the effect of speeding up temporal sequence is to abolish time, much as the telegraph and cable abolish space.' (p. 213). In a more recent context, Google Earth creates a photographic freeze-frame of the surface of the planet in time; the dynamic is rendered static and the oceans are textured with waves that do not move. If one attempts to travel down a road using Google Street View, multiple visions of the same vehicles or people can be seen as the photographic simulation fails to be temporally consistent with the world that it is modelling.

These characteristics, the loss of the flow of time and, as a result, the presentation of the perpetual now rather than a series of linear moments, are especially relevant to the case of anthropology. As Clifford (1986) writes, "'Cultures" do not hold still for their portraits. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion' (p.10). The photograph as ethnographic evidence has its value cast into doubt when this loss of meaningful time is considered, and the implicit idea that a photograph is an all-

encompassing, accurate record can be called into question by the implication that this exclusion and simplification necessarily results in a loss of holistic truth. In the context of the ethnographic field note, the photograph has to be considered an imperfect artefact; if 'The Other' lives forever in a photographically frozen moment, a single quanta of crystallised time (as in Thomas Hodgkin's notion of the preservation of aboriginal populations<sup>5</sup>), the possibility for change is lost and chasms of difference may widen.

## **A Flattened Future of Captured Moments**

*It's as if a sequence of displaced but identical images of the same object were being produced by refraction through a prism, but with the element of time replacing the role of light.*

J.G. Ballard, *The Crystal World*

Photography, as has been discussed, alters the perception and relevance of the flow of time. In a way mirrored by the memory of J.G. Ballard, it allows for travel backwards to an earlier age, and in essence delivers all time passed as an ever present now. The powers of imagination and projection allow for this present to be targeted at the future and, when cultural, technological and scientific change is integrated into this projection, it may exhibit the characteristics described by Toffler (1970) as 'Future Shock'. He writes '[w]ithout time, change has no meaning. And without change, time would stop. Time can be conceived as the intervals during which events occur.' (p. 21). His concept is this: cultural acceleration causes change to occur more and more quickly as time proceeds. This results in a world of exponential alteration where the fad of today is the history of tomorrow. In this world, technologies (for example) that may have been prevalent for years, decades or centuries in the past or present, may be obsolete within months, weeks or days in the future. While discussing his ideas, Toffler attempts to clarify what time is in human terms, and how it may be usefully applied to the measurement of such accelerating events. As he speaks of events however, in the context of the photograph, a more precise definition may be required. A moment may be an event, but a single photograph, without the benefit of a larger temporal perspective, may only capture a

partial event (in the sense of a meaningful occurrence in the context of human perception). In anthropological terms, an interaction or event may consist of many moments, and capturing a moment will only ever result in a partial recording.

Other theories recently voiced put the modern, networked society on a similar plane, whereby the ever-present-now of photography can be described, in the larger context, as unimodernism. Lunenfeld (2011) writes that '[p]hotography affected the human understanding of everything from truth value, to the fluidity of time.' (p. 47) when describing his idea of the unimodern, and believes that '[o]ur moment is unimodern in the sense that it makes modernism in all its variants *universal* via networks and broadcasts, *uniform* in their effect... and *unitary* in terms of their existing as strings of code.' (p. 39-40). Fundamental to his theory is the concept that 'by the start of the twenty-first century, a uniform, temporally melded popular culture now exists that no longer needs stratification by decades.' (p.47)

At first this seems contradictory to Toffler's concept of the ever more fragmented series of subcultures that the future will present us with but, under closer examination, it can be seen to be a description of the same thing; a networked culture with a flat hierarchy of many nodes, all of which are temporally equivalent. What unimodernism and future shock both describe is a world of moments, all equivalent in structural terms. Photography offers the possibility of equal access to all of history in the form of a simulation, mirroring the ideas in the earlier Baudrillard quote referring to photography in 'Crash', which continues '[n]o more temporal depth either – just like the past, the future ceases to exist in turn.' (1994 [1980] p.117). Time is not only frozen but is permanently in the present and, in many ways, this concept of networked modernity means that all 'cultures' are now in an equivalent state. Perhaps Appadurai's notion of the global mediascape<sup>6</sup> has removed the differences that photographic practice within anthropology once highlighted. As Stimson (2006) stated, perhaps it acts as 'a release from the tension of otherness.' (p.93)

## **The Open-Air Cinema**

*We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind... For the writer in particular it is less and less necessary for him to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality.*

J.G. Ballard, *Crash* (Introduction)

The staging of photographic scenes, both explicitly in the anthropometric studies performed by J.H. Lamprey in the 1870's<sup>7</sup> and in the sense of A.C. Haddon's 're-enactment' pictures<sup>8</sup>, asks questions of the role of the photographic image in the practice of anthropology and, if anything, contributes to the slippage of linear time that photography brings about. The preservationist mentality of the ethnologist serves only to capture a snap-shot at a particular time, which is then seen as an eternal exemplar of type. The re-enactment on the other hand, moves an event forward to a period whereby it exists only because it is being photographed; the observer affects the experiment.

The factor of performance by the subjects for the photographer must also be considered; as Lang (1898) said, 'Man... cannot be secluded from disturbing influences, and watched, like the materials of a chemical experiment in a laboratory.' Photography will generate some form of performance if it is itself openly performed and, as a result, arguments can be made that the photographic record, rather than being a simulation, is in fact a simulacrum of history, performed by the subject and edited by the photographer. Berger (1972) writes that 'photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights... the photographer's way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject.' (p.10). The implied truth of the photograph then can act as a deception; though the image is undoubtedly 'true' in a way, there is also the necessity to realise that it was only true 'then', and in the sense that the scene has, by some method, been created.

## **Memento Mori**

*The dream worlds, synthetic landscapes and plasticity of visual forms invented by the writer of fantasy are external equivalents of the inner world of the psyche, and because these symbols take their impetus from the most formative and confused periods of our lives they are often time-sculptures of terrifying ambiguity. This zone I think of as "inner space", the internal landscape of tomorrow that is a transmuted image of the past.*

J.G. Ballard, *Time, Memory and Inner Space*

Photography is more prevalent in the world than at any time in history, partly due to the digitisation of the process and partly because of the impact of the camera-phone, but the ability of the photograph to freeze time has not been diluted as a result of this. More than ever, the past and the present have become eternal and universal, and the future will merely be, in photographic terms as in of much of J.G. Ballard's work, a modulation of the ever present now.

Ballard, throughout his career, acted as a node between eras of history, evoking the past and creatively processing it to conjure the future. He himself said, in an interview entitled 'Theatre of Cruelty' that '[a]rt is the principal way in which the human mind has tried to remake the world in a way that makes sense. The carefully edited, slow-motion, action replay of a rugby tackle, a car crash or a sex act has more significance than the original event. Thanks to virtual reality, we will soon be moving into a world where a heightened super-reality will consist entirely of action replays, and reality will therefore be all the more rich and meaningful. Art exists because reality is neither real nor significant.' This echoes the Baudrillardian notion of the hyperreal<sup>9</sup>, a topic that is more relevant to the act of photography in the post-Photoshop world, but has always been present, conflicting with the concept of the accurate and truthful record. At best, the photograph is an index or, as Hastrup (1992) has argued, a 'souvenir'; all it can convey is that something happened and it appeared as in the image, but no motivation or meaning can be inferred or



verified. The *when* of this *something* also seems to lack importance when it is considered as a period in a flexible history – it may be enacted, re-enacted or performed; it is a simulacrum.

In his final four novels<sup>10</sup>, written between 1996 and 2006, J. G. Ballard started to look with the same acuity at the present that surrounded him, though he continued to use the same methodology and utilised his own, earlier temporal experiments as a part of this mission. After years spent travelling in time he had, at the end, arrived in the present. Perhaps the practise of anthropological photography has now reached the same nexus with time and, as Pinney (2010) writes, 'to understand the ways in which this entangled practice has itself transformed that domain that many of us used to call "culture". ' The 'there/then – here/now' of Roland Barthes has become simply the Latourian network, the unimodern here/now, and the anthropologists lens should be concerned not with freezing time, but with recording the perpetual performance that is the hyperreal present.

## Notes

- 1) The source of Ballard's material has been posited by many sources, including:  
<http://reason.com/archives/2009/06/19/death-of-a-dystopian>  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/8007331.stm>  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/mar/04/fiction.film>
- 2) Ballard's 'apocalyptic trilogy' consists of the novels 'The Drowned World', 'The Drought' and 'The Crystal World'.
- 3) Steichen curated the 1955 'Family of Man' exhibition at MOMA, which consisted of 500 black and white photographs of people, and culminated in a large, backlit image of the Bikini Atoll nuclear test explosion, closely mirroring the dynamic structure of the Ballard novel 'Empire of The Sun'.
- 4) Latour's notion of the quasi-object leads to the formulation of photography as a 'nature-culture-hybrid of the human and the camera/technical process, thus 'camera-work'.
- 5) See Pinney (2011) p.21
- 6) See Appadurai (1996) p.35
- 7) See Pinney (2011) p.28
- 8) See Pinney (2011) p.84
- 9) See Baudrillard (1994 [1980]) p.1
- 10) Ballard's last four novels were 'Cocaine Nights', 'Super Cannes', 'Millennium People' and 'Kingdom Come'.

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