

Dossier: Escape

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2008

The misanthropic and dystopian speculative-fiction writer J.G. Ballard once mused that the two most important inventions of the Twentieth Century were the aircraft ejection seat and the birth-control pill.

He never explained what he meant by this, but I suspect that he was pointing out how technologies of escape have profoundly shaped the direction of this civilization's history. Both devices are used to limit the extent of the physical repercussions inherent in certain kinds of risky behavior—they're safety nets developed in the last century that let people get away with taking big, stupid chances, whether it is piloting a fighter plane deep into enemy territory or falling into bed with someone of the opposite sex who you never want to see again.

If you know that you can always escape, then you never really have to commit yourself completely, because in the back of your mind you know that there's a way out. Does knowing that there's always a way out liberate us from worry and fear enough to take bolder chances and soothe our jangled nerves? Or does it just give us an excuse to be more rash and irresponsible than we would have been otherwise?

As a kid on the cusp of adolescence, Ballard spent the final years of World War II in the Lunghua civilian internment camp in Japanese-occupied China (the first part of his semi-autobiographical novel series was dreadfully Spielbergized in 1987 as *The Empire of the Sun*.) It's hard not to imagine how this experience might have shaped his writing, as his most disquieting works—*The Atrocity Exhibition* (1969), *Crash* (1973), *Concrete Island* (1974), *High Rise* (1975), *Hello, America* (1981), *Rushing to Paradise* (1994), *Kingdom Come* (2006)—deal obsessively with grim, apocalyptic visions of violence, machines, disaster, alienated sex, medicalized bodies, trauma, disassociation, spectacle, and everyday nihilism. (All are recommended reading for our anarcho-primitivist readers.)

I think another important theme in his work is the impossibility of transcendence: his characters all make themselves deeply crazy by desperately trying to get somewhere else outside of themselves. Like a thirteen year-old boy living by his wits in a war refugee prison yard, these protagonists dream of an escape that is physical, but also psychological, emotional, & sensory. Ballard's central characters get so possessed by this need to rise above and go beyond that they create private mental states or subcultures or intentional communities to serve as launching pads to that somewhere else. At the same time, they become so frustrated and sick by their inability to get there that they don't see that they've already escaped to an intense and different place. In the very act of imagining an escape for themselves, they have already gotten away, even though they never recognize it.

Maybe it's the action of putting yourself in a position where you would need to use the ejection seat or the birth-control pill for escape that really qualifies as a form of escape already. Put another way, maybe finding yourself in a situation where you have to imagine a radical means for getting away is a clear sign that you're already gone.

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Upper Mississippi Paleozoic Plateau, 176th birthday of Lewis Carroll

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Fifth Estate #377, March 2008

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