THE *MISE EN ABYME* IN *THE DROWNED WORLD* BY JAMES G. BALLARD

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 1960s, the New Wave of British science fiction sought to revitalise the genre by incorporating more contemporary themes (drugs, sex, criticism of consumerist society and the media) as well as new narrative and expressive formulas, with the aim of entering the mainstream. James G. Ballard was a forerunner of this trend thanks to a series of stories and experimental novels that embraced the worldviews of surrealism, situationism and nouveau roman. The *mise en abyme*, a recurring technique in this new body of work, was incorporated into the early novels by Ballard, a process which culminated with *The Drowned World*, in which the technique became highly complex. This article examines the three cases of *mise en abyme* in the novel, beginning with a theoretical discussion of this literary device, adding a certain Heideggerian approach related to the image of the world in art. The article then goes on to analyze in detail the paintings that operate as *mises en abyme* in the novel, classifying them and reflecting on their relationship with the work as a whole and the reader, as well as the significance in the renewing context of science fiction of the decade.

Keywords: Ballard, *mise en abyme*, *The Drowned World*, science fiction.

Resumen

A comienzos de los años sesenta, la *New Wave* de la ciencia ficción británica pretendió renovar el género incorporando nuevos temas acordes con la época (drogas, sexo, crítica a la sociedad de consumo y a los medios de comunicación) y nuevas fórmulas narrativas y expresivas con el objetivo de incorporarse a la literatura *mainstream*. James G. Ballard se situó a la cabeza de este movimiento con una serie de relatos y novelas experimentales que hacían suyos los postulados del surrealismo, el situacionismo y el *nouveau roman*. La *mise en abyme*, técnica recurrente en las nuevas narrativas, se incorporó a las primeras novelas ballardianas y especialmente a *The Drowned World*, en la que adquirió un alto grado de complejidad. Este artículo examina los tres casos de *mise en abyme* de esta novela, a partir de la discusión teórica sobre esta figura a la que se ha añadido un cierto enfoque heideggeriano relativo a la imagen del mundo en la obra artística. El artículo analiza pormenorizadamente las pinturas que operan como *mises en abyme* en la novela, las clasifica y reflexiona sobre su relación con el conjunto de la obra y frente al lector, así como su significación en el contexto renovador de la ciencia ficción de la década.

Palabras clave: Ballard, *mise en abyme*, *The Drowned World*, ciencia ficción.

1. Introduction

In the 1960s, the work of author James G. Ballard not only consolidated him as a writer of science fiction, but also, along with Michael Moorcock, a leading figure of the New Wave movement. New Wave writers such as these were committed to revitalising the genre, mainly through the magazine *New Worlds*. Moorcock and Ballard, accompanied by authors such as Brian Aldiss, John Brunner, Thomas M. Dish, Judith Merril and John Sladek, brought science fiction into the hedonistic and troubled atmosphere of the sixties, in which anxieties surrounding the Cold War, the Space Race, consumerism, psychedelic drugs, pop culture and sexual liberation were recurring themes. They regarded the era as acutely science-fictional, in which the future had become present, exciting and terrifying at the same time (Greenland 2012: 180-195). New Wave writers opted for an experimental style akin to postmodern fiction (McHale 2004: 59-72; Peregrina 2015) in reprising the avant-garde (Huyssen 2011: 10) and a desire to conflate elite and popular art, formalism and kitsch (Compagnon 1990: 112). In short, the movement espoused some of the hallmarks of the so-called second postmodernism: i) The affirmation, as values, of catastrophe, as non-programmed difference and nomadism, as an uncompromising voyage

through all territories, including the past, with no sense of the future; ii) A break with technological optimism; iii) The critique of the media; and iv) The blending of popular art with the modern tradition, without temporal, historical or hierarchical categories (Compagnon 1990: 163-166).

Between 1962 and 1966, Ballard published four novels[1] which, on the one hand, echoed post-war British dystopian and catastrophist sensibilities and, on the other, laid the foundations of a disturbing and Dionysian literary world of his own, which would reach its pinnacle in the following decade. First, these novels acted as an extension and counterpoint to the works of John Wyndham (Oramus 2016) in the context of Cold War paranoia —the natural or cosmic catastrophe as a transcript of the consequences of a nuclear conflict— and the crumbling of the British Empire (Hammond 2017: 50, 65, 116; and concerning Western civilisation in general, Oramus 2015). Second, Ballard's novels and short fiction of the 1960s are metaliterary exercises that critically update the genre from the aforementioned postmodern consciousness (Broderick 1995) that questions the being of the world, and in which disaster is a rhetorical resource that enables a vision of human nature with a characteristic ferocity that remains unsettling even today. In this way, catastrophe allows Ballard's passive and disoriented characters[2] to emerge from the inauthenticity, in the Heideggerian sense, of everyday life and embrace an existence marked by solitude, inner exploration and universal entropy as the axes of the recreation of the world[3]. Ballard forms what Fredric Jameson has called "an ideological myth of entropy, in which the historical collapse of the British empire is projected outwards, in an immense cosmic deceleration of the universe itself as well as its molecular components" (Jameson 2005: 321). Strangely, Jameson makes no reference in this analysis to inner space, an essential concept in Ballard's work of the time. For what is decisive in the Ballardian panorama brought about by disaster is not so much the allegorisation of the frustration of loss of empire as the savage liberation of inner space now fused with outer reality, opened up by catastrophe, in what amounts to a return to an Adamic world in which paradise and hell have lost their exclusive meaning. In this very personal way, Ballard enters the realm of thought which, in the second half of the twentieth century, makes disaster a dark, anti-Enlightenment epitome of modernity, where authenticity emerges in the post-catastrophic world, after the abolition of the past (Huyssen 2011: 53):

> Each one of those fantasies represents an arraignment of the finite, an attempt to dismantle the formal structure of time and space which the universe wraps around us at the moment we first achieve consciousness […] in the cataclysm story the science fiction writer joins Company with them [infant and madman], using his imagination to describe the infinite alternatives to reality which nature itself has proved incapable of inventing. The celebration of the possibilities of life is at the heart of science fiction. (Ballard 1997: 209)[4]

These differences from the preceding *disaster novels* were accompanied by a formal revolution that associated the New Wave with the historical avant-garde and the narrative techniques of the nouveau roman. According to Brian Aldiss, the connection between 1960s science fiction and the avant-garde was first forged when Penguin Books, following the idea of art editor Germano Facetti, launched a new collection of novels in the genre, using works by Max Ernst, Pablo Picasso, Roy Lewis, Yves Tanguy and Paul Klee, among others, to illustrate the covers (Aldiss 1973: 245-246).

Bearing these ideas in mind, in this paper I aim to address one of the most fruitful aspects of this convergence of sources in James G. Ballard's disaster novels: the *mise en abyme*. In adopting this technique, Ballard seemed to pursue the following objectives: i) To delve into the previously mentioned assumptions concerning the projection of the interior space onto fictional reality with surrealist painting; ii) To provide the story with a metafictional dimension that makes *The Drowned World* an acerbic commentary on the genre; and iii) To highlight the artificial and performative nature of catastrophe as a celebration of vital liberation that Ballard associates with science fiction. I hope to demonstrate that Ballard finds in the *mise en abyme* a subtle way of communicating with the reader by creating a metalepsis of discourse (Cohn 2012: 105-106) that allows the narrator to enter the diegetic world and break the illusion of reality (Genette 2004: 27). However, he does so tacitly by using surrealist paintings and without addressing the reader directly. Exposing the artificiality of diegesis, the Ballardian *mise en abyme* reveals the carnivalesque and liberating nature of catastrophe. In this way, the author breaks with both the pessimistic inclination of the genre and the conservative conception of the "cosy catastrophe", just as Aldiss describes John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids* (Aldiss 1973: 335).

2. Abyss in the Inner Space: A Theoretical Overview

The extensive body of theory around the *mise en abyme* reveals the complexity of the figure and the difficulty of establishing its meaning in a way that clarifies all the ambiguities attached to the term since Gide's intuitive description at the end of the nineteenth century. Gide pointed to a figure by which the subject of the play was transposed on the scale of the characters, and served as its frame (Snow 2016: 18). Its relation to heraldry allows us to consider the *mise en abyme* as a kind of emblem, in the sense that it exposes the deeper meaning and purpose of the work in iconic form.[5] In this way, the *mise en abyme* creates an instantaneous symbolic alliance between a passage inserted in the text frame —in the case of literature, the one which concerns us here— and the whole, in which the passage

provides the image that allows the reader to reflect on the work. At the same time, it interrogates the characters as to the reality and circumstances in which they are located, hence, perhaps, its value in the field of postmodern writing and its ontological dimension, establishing a link between two universes belonging to different levels of reality: "*Mise-en-abyme*, wherever it occurs, disturbs the orderly hierarchy of ontological levels —worlds within worlds— in effect short-circuiting the ontological structure, and thus foregrounding it" (McHale 2004: 14).

Contrasting with the heraldic metaphor, in 1977 Lucien Dällenbach proposed the metaphor of the mirror, defining *mise en abyme* as "any internal mirror in which the whole of the story is reflected by simple, repeated or specious reduplication" (Dällenbach 1991: 49). The *mise en abyme*, as a reflection, brings together in condensed form the whole or part of the work, according to a broad criterion of similarity, with the resulting ontological effects. However, it also becomes an authorial commentary or note that reveals the work's theme or some significant aspect. In this sense, the *mise en abyme* is, in my opinion, a figure of thought that forms a *hyponoia*, or a re-reading of the main text or framework by the author. Since he is an instance that guarantees the anomalous nature of *mise en abyme* concerning the work as a whole. This intentional dimension makes it a peculiar kind of narrative metalepsis (Genette 1989: 288-289) in that it can be considered an interference in the diegetic world by the author in the form of an allegorical commentary addressed to the reader. Thus, if for the characters it can be an *exemplum* of their fictional reality (Bal 1978: 120), for author and reader it is an allegory that, given its specular nature, turns the frame text into another; because if the *mise en abyme* is an icon that reveals the immediate meaning of the work, this, conversely, becomes an allegory that encloses or unfolds the hidden meaning revealed by the *mise en abyme*. Jean Ricardou rightly wonders the following: if *mise en abyme* reveals certain major aspects of fiction of which it is part, would not it be so because the plot has been constituted at the referential level according to its demands? In this case, the *mise en abyme* would be the matrix, and the macro-history the *mise en périphérie* of a micro-discourse (Ricardou 1990: 65). In some cases, the unfolding may offer a counterpoint or contradict the framing narrative, to the point of establishing an ironic or paradoxical relationship with it (Ricardou 1990: 83-85) as a form of the specious *mise en abyme* suggested by Dällenbach. Snow relates the *mise en abyme antithétique* to the antimimetic tendencies of the nouveau roman, a movement to which Ricardou mostly refers in his examination of the figure (Snow 2016: 49-50).

A particularly fitting case of *mise en abyme* is produced through an artistic work, which exists in the empirical world and is inserted into the fictional text. This is the case of *The Drowned World* and its metaphorical use of surrealist paintings.

This is an intermedial phenomenon in which the figure is broken down into a symbolic ekphrasis that juxtaposes the world of the artwork and the framing literary work, and the real world of the author and reader. But this symbolic link elaborates on an anomalous circumstance: an object from the real world also exists in the fictional world and has in this world, in addition to its own aesthetic value, the function of reflecting the world of the work and commenting on it in the empirical world of the author and reader, which brings them back to the world of the work, which is presented under a new guise. The work of art inserted into the text operates as a quotation, that is, a statement that, divorced from its original context, is repeated in the new one, but no longer as a statement but as a sign (Compagnon 2020: 85), and imposes on it a recognizable symbolic reading that excludes or defers others. This was the subject of discussion between Bal and Dällenbach. Bal considered that Dällenbach appealed to an external consciousness that directed the reading and imposed an interpretation, which would be an allegory. In Iddo Dickmann's view, the intent is to avoid the substantialism of those who are obsessed with this notion and intend to find it everywhere, subordinating the text to its substances, applying prior categories of similarity between the reflection and the reflected (Dickmann 2019: 17-18). In my view, this is an essential feature of the *mise en abyme*, which elevates it above the common quotation. Even in the case of a partial *mise en abyme* affecting a certain aspect of the story as Tena Morillo (2019: 483) points out, the commentary it imposes affects the text as a whole. In this case, I find that the metaphors of the heraldic shield and the mirror give way to a new metaphor: that of the Moebius strip in which the inner reality of the work is transformed without breaking the continuity with the outer reality and, on its return, back into it.[6]

It seems obvious, on the other hand, that the fact that the object operating as a reflection of fictional reality is presented as an artistic work (Dällenbach 1991: 88) is sustained only because author and reader —not necessarily the characters— share an idea of artistic representation that goes beyond the ornamental dimension of the object. An idea of art as an event must be shared for such a specular function to be possible. In this manner, the aesthetic comprehension of the artistic work enables it to be transformed into an object of experience and, furthermore, into an expression of human life. This globalising extension of the image is based, as Heidegger points out, on the way the thing appears as a system before the spectator (Heidegger 1998: 63-90). The systematic conception of the image of the world turns the artistic *mise en abyme* into an epistemological model insofar as it conceives of the world in its totality as a reflection. Therefore, if the reader understands the epistemological value, concerning the work as a whole, of the artistic piece located in the fictional reality, it is because he understands that the being of the entity is found in representability (Heidegger 1998: 73), which

is examined by the inner eye of the subject and compared with the external reality (Rorty 2001: 50-51). In this sense, I explained above the enunciative nature of the artistic work. When the reader compares the relation between the reality of the work and the artistic image that operates as *mise en abyme*, they do essentially the same as when they compare the images printed on the retina and the entities whose models are these images. At the same time, understanding becomes a mirror and an inner eye; in the same way, the image placed in an abyss unfolds before the reader into a mirror of the fictitious reality and an eye that examines and judges it. Now, the aesthetic dimension of the duplicated work of art —the literary text and the piece inserted in it— adds value to this epistemological approach insofar as it makes it possible to establish the relationship between both realities in the iconicity or symbolic value of both representations, based not on the reliable reflection, but on analogy, contradiction or irony by a systematic apprehension that justifies the explanation of apparently incompatible things (Gadamer 2001: 164-165). I argue that it is the symbolic capacity of the object inserted in the work that allows the process of semantic overload of the reflex to which Dällenbach alludes, by virtue of which the object functions on two levels: that of the narrative, where it continues to signify, the same as any other utterance; and that of the reflex, where it enters as an element of a meta-signification thanks to which the narrative can take itself as a subject, reflecting the utterance itself, the enunciation or the code (1991: 57-59).

From the moment that the *mise en abyme* operates as an instrument linking the author to the reader, but is totally or partially alien to the characters, who lack the distance (because they are within the fiction) to understand its nature, it becomes an ironic parable of sorts, since fiction reveals its frames, and shows its otherness in the face of unfathomable reality:

> As a second sign, in fact, the *mise en abyme* not only brings out the signifying intentions of the first (the story that conveys it), but also makes it clear that this (not) is (but) sign and that it proclaims as such any trope, albeit with a vigour increased a hundredfold by its size: I am literature; I, and the story that contains me. (Dällenbach 1991: 74)

The work speaks to the reader, thus breaking its fictional isolation. But it is this same ironic potential that makes the turn from the epistemological to the ontological possible by questioning fictional reality through the symbolic erasure of the work of art which, inserted in fiction, crosses it until it reaches the reader; and, therefore, that of the world of reference, insofar as it questions, by reproducing it, the epistemological system of the image of the world in its dual function of eye and mirror. Yet this is not always the case: sometimes the *mise en abyme* does not produce this ontological anxiety in the reader, but rather can operate as an

instrument that reveals the fictionality of the work, showing its codes and artifices, thus reinforcing the ontological difference between the empirical world and the fictional world. Parabasis generates a distance, it does not suppress it. In these cases, the breaking of the boundary between fiction and the author's world has the aforementioned satirical anti-idealistic character that questions the scope of mimesis (Alter 1975: 3-4, 11).

3. Multiple Reflections of Disaster: The Setting in the Abyss in *The Drowned World*

Mise en abyme was incorporated into the rhetorical uses of the New Wave as a fundamental element of the commitment to style advocated by Moorcock and Ballard (Greenland 2012: 166), in the search for an entropic text, voluntarily disorganised, which eluded structural unity by resorting to diverse dialects and approaching cubism in the representation of a reality formed by the juxtaposition of multiple planes. The problem was posed as a search for rhetorical strategies to make this contemporary science-fictional reality plausible. The *mise en abyme*, with its disruptive character of narrative continuity, its ontological ambiguity, and, sometimes, its intermedial nature, became a privileged instrument in the shaping of a style that allowed the re-reading of the science-fictional tradition to be incorporated, fusing it with the exploration of new roots in surrealism and psychoanalysis.

In her study on surrealism in the work of James G. Ballard, Jeannette Baxter (2008) has explained in depth how the British author assimilated the ethos of surrealism from the Situationism of the 1950s and 1960s. From the former, he adopted not only the psychoanalytical dimension as a way of exploring inner space, but also its political aspect, seeking to destabilise and discomfort the reader through the proclamation of the death of affection and the exhibition of its Dionysian consequences of sex, violence and annihilation; and, finally, the recreation of dreamlike landscapes in the post-apocalyptic world of his works, often expressed through avant-garde techniques such as collage, with the dual influence of Paolozzi and Burroughs. From Situationism, he took the concept of *derivé*, which expressed the constant change in the landscape that harasses the subject and forces them to interact actively with the environment, transforming it.

These elements enabled him to develop a landscape technique that foregrounded tormented and allegorical spaces in his apathetic and solipsistic characters. Ballard constructs variants of works by William Shakespeare, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Joseph Conrad and William Golding, which serve as foundations on which to deploy a vision of space that is problematic in its relationship with time from which the science-fictional component of these novels is derived. Ballard's *disaster*

novels are representations of the same assumption: global catastrophe. This generates natural and psychic forces that are as terrible as they are liberating, affecting the categories of time and space, as well as that of the human being in the physical realization of his inner space.[7]

Each of these novels deals with a specific time and focal element:[8] *The Drowned World*, the past and water; *The Drought*, the future and sand; *The Crystal World*, the present and glass (Wilson 2017: 61). If *The Drowned World* proposes a natural involution that returns the world to the Palaeocene, in what is a radical alternative to the already exhausted theme of time travel in science fiction, *The Drought* presents a desert world that is also a journey to a desolate and hellish future; finally, *The Crystal World* recreates a world in which the present is eternally crystallised as a consequence of an ambiguous space disaster.

The *Drowned World* was published by Penguin in 1965, with a cover reproducing Yves Tanguy's *Le Palais aux Rochers*, which foreshadowed the content of the work: disaster breaks down the boundaries between the physical and psychic worlds, generating landscapes that are a projection of the characters' mental state. Thus, Chapter 5, "Descent into the Deep Time", analyses dreams as organic memories of millions of years (2008: 74), recovered in the regression that affects the world and human beings:

> Just as the distinction between the latent and the manifest of the dream had ceased to be valid, so had any division between the real and the superreal in the external world. Phantoms slid imperceptibly from nightmare to reality and back again, the terrestrial and physic landscapes were now indistinguishable, as they had been Hiroshima and Auschwitz, Golgota and Gomorrah. (Ballard 2008: 73-74)

The use of surrealist painting as a representative icon for the physical and mental landscapes of the novel is effected by the double parallelism between exterior and interior space, on the one hand, and between these landscapes and those of the bleakest historical catastrophes, which, in turn, refer to the settings of surrealist painting, on the other. For Jeanette Baxter, *The Drowned World* is Ballard's most pictorial novel, a collage of surrealist images that takes the form of a palimpsest of visual geographies, among which *Europe after the Rain* (2008: 17-27) is decisive. Although Max Ernst's painting is not quoted in the novel, the description of London after the waters that had turned it into a lagoon have been pumped out undoubtedly evokes its landscape. Indeed, the list of painters cited in the novel includes Delvaux, Ernst and an anonymous painter "of the school of Tintoretto". The two surrealist painters appear in Chapter 2, "The Coming of the Iguanas": Kerans, the protagonist, discovers in the house of Beatrice Dahl, a typically Ballardian female character, two paintings by Delvaux and Ernst hanging opposite each other:

> Over the mantelpiece was a huge painting by the early 20th-century Surrealist, Delvaux, in which ashen-faced women danced naked to the waits with dandified skeletons in tuxedos against a spectral bone-like landscape. On another wall one of Max Ernst's self-devouring phantasmagoric jungles screamed silently to itself, like the sump of some insane unconscious. (Ballard 2008: 29)

Baxter claims that Delvaux's painting is *The Worried City* of 1941 (2008: 32). However, although the painting is reminiscent of *The Worried City*, I believe it is nothing more than an invented combination of recurring motifs of the Belgian painter: skeletons, naked women and dreamlike landscapes. Baxter's painting does not depict skeletons in formal dress dancing with women but does include other important elements that Ballard would have mentioned, such as the presence of an enigmatic figure dressed in black in the center of the composition and naked men in various poses. Baxter interprets Beatrice Dahl's painting following the episode narrated in chapters 10-12 of the novel, to which it undoubtedly has a *mise en abyme* relationship. Nevertheless, he follows a reverse order in his reading: he does not recognise in the events the elements of the painting but rather completes the description of the painting with those elements. Consequently, he makes an *a fortiori* interpretation of the painting by placing not contemplated elements in it in order to complete the concordance with these events. Thus, in her reading of Chapter 11, she identifies the character in black in Delvaux's real painting with Strangman, the aviator and pirate who imposes himself on the rest of the characters from his appearance in Chapter 7.[9] Strangman is another Ballardian archetype that Dominika Oramus interprets to be a variant of Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness* (Oramus 2015: 196).[10] The skeleton in Ballard's painting is a reflection of Strangman, but Strangman is not the embodiment of the character in black in *The Worried City*. For the painting described by Ballard is neither *The Worried City* nor any other painting by Delvaux that I have been able to identify. It is a picture painted by the Delvaux of this fictional world, not the real one. The significance of the painting as a *mise en abyme* is revealed in chapters 11 and 12, entitled "The Ballad of Mistah Bones" and "The Feast of Skulls" in which Kerans is tortured on Strangman's orders in a mock-up of Delvaux's fictional painting. This is a prospective particularising fictional *mise en abyme* (Dällenbach 1991: 76, 78, 120): it anticipates later events as part of an isotopy resulting from an exercise of condensation and displacement similar to dream processes (Dällenbach 1991: 75).

The painting, also an unidentifiable work by Max Ernst and which hangs in Beatrice Dah's flat, represents the future. Baxter (2008: 34-35) explains that the painting proleptically foreshadows the end of the novel: the southern jungles to which Kerans heads at the end and where he will die. Only the landscape survives, although the imprint of the protagonist's unconscious, the *inner space*, will

remain imprinted on it. It is a generalising *mise en abyme* that expands the meaning of the context to a level it would not reach on its own (Dällenbach 1991: 76). Contemplating the painting yields a first level of recognition:

> For a few moments, Kerans stared quietly at the dim yellow annulus of Ernst's sun glowering through the exotic vegetation, a curious feeling of memory and recognition signaling through his brain [...] the image of the archaic sun burned against his mind, illuminating the fleeting shadows that darted fitfully through its profoundest depths. (Ballard 2008: 29)

This recognition, despite its psychoanalytic formulation, is rooted in the aesthetic experience of the work of art as an experience.[11] But its full meaning is achieved in the last chapter of the novel, "The Paradises of the Sun", when Kerans enters the jungle on his way south. The reader then realises that Ernst's painting explains not only the protagonist's mental confusion but also the landscape resulting from the catastrophe. The work of art becomes the link between the individual and the world. Kerans does not recall the painting in this chapter, because his commentary is not addressed to him, but to the reader. In Heideggerian terms, the *mise en abyme* of the painting reflects the totality of the world once the internal and external dimensions have been placed on equal footing: the reader identifies the world with its representation.

It is a generalising and metatextual *mise en abyme*, which broadens the semantic framework of the work and reveals its code, "since it makes intelligible the way the story works [...] without copying the text that fits it" (Dällenbach 1991: 120): it reveals how the novel is an expression of the projection of *inner space* in a post-apocalyptic scenery. The painting fulfills the condition of the metatextual *mise en abyme*: its elements must be assumed by the text indubitably so that the reflection can serve as instructions for use, "so that the text can fulfil its task: to redo, as in a mirror, what its symmetrical reverse did before: to take the work for what it wishes to be taken for" (122). For this same reason, the painting is also a transcendental *mise en abyme* or *mise en abyme* of the code because it creates it, finalises it, founds it, unifies it and fixes for it, *a priori*, the conditions of possibility (123).[12] Ernst's painting thus meets the conditions set out by Dällenbach (123) for this figure: i) It does not point to the original metaphysical reality but regards it as a fiction that, within the text, acts as an origin: the post-apocalyptic physical landscape is at the origin of the destroyed consciousness of the character with whom it is confused; ii) This substitutive fiction is always both cause and effect of the writing that actualises it. Thus, the painting of the sun and jungle points to the material realization of inner space, which is the feature of catastrophe that really interests Ballard in his disaster novels; and iii) Metaphor and writing correspond in such a way that metaphor is the sublimated double of writing: the

novel behaves as the narratively unfolded *mise en abyme*, and the latter, in turn, as the non-narrative concentration of the text. Both depend on how the text establishes its relation to truth and the concept of mimesis, a condition that is accredited by Ballard's relation to surrealism and the nouveau roman and his move away from realism as a way of renewing the discourse of science fiction.

Ballard believed he found in this procedure a valid formula for representing inner space in those years of strong surrealist and psychoanalytic influence. Therefore, in his next novel, *The Drought*, he repeated the exact same strategy. As in *The Drowned World*, in Chapter 2, "Mementoes", he introduces a painting that will serve as a transcendental *mise en abyme*, although on this occasion it is a real painting, the photograph of which decorates the protagonist's house, *Jours de lenteur* by Yves Tanguy, and of which the following is said: "With its smooth, pebble-like objects, drained of all associations, suspended on a washed tidal floor, this painting had helped to free him from the tiresome repetitions of everyday life. The rounded milky forms were isolated on their ocean bed like the houseboat on the exposed bank of the river" (Ballard 2012: 24). And, as in *The Drowned World*, the last chapter is titled like the painting, *Jours de lenteur*, in which the ending is similar: the death of the protagonist in a landscape that is both the realization of his inner world and the material projection of Tanguy's painting.

The third *mise en abyme* in *The Drowned World* lacks the transcendental scope of Ernst's painting, but is interesting for its complexity of meaning and the dynamism of its relationship to the fictional reality of chapters 10 to 12 of the novel. It is the painting *The Marriage of Esther and King Xerxes* that Strangman has on his boat. The painting appears in Chapter 10, "Surprise Party". Strangman invites Kerans and Beatrice to his ship. The plunderer has carefully prepared a party in a setting that plays out his desire. Among the treasures he has plundered is the aforementioned painting:

> Its title was *The Marriage of Esther and King Xerxes*, but the pagan treatment and the local background of the Venetian lagoon and the Grand Canal palazzos coupled with the Quinquecento décor and costume, made it seem more like *The Marriage of Neptune and Minerva*, no doubt the moral Strangman intended to point out. King Xerxes, a wily, beak-nosed elderly Doge or Venetian Grand-Admiral, already seemed completely tamed by his demure, raven-haired Esther, who had a faint but none the less perceptible likeness to Beatrice. As he cast his eyes over the crowded spread of the canvas with its hundreds of wedding guests, Kerans suddenly saw another familiar profile — the face of Strangman among the hard cruel smiles of the Council of the Ten [...] The marriage ceremony was being celebrated aboard a galleon moored against the Dogo's Palace, and its elaborate rococo rigging seemed to merge into the Steel hawsers and bracing lines of the depot ship. (Ballard 2008: 118)

Ballard superimposes the biblical and mythological scenes in his fictional painting, tacitly alluding to the annual festival of the Sensa, which celebrates the alliance between the Republic of Venice and the sea, describing the galleon in the painting in terms that unmistakably identify it with the Bucintoro, the Republic's gold-covered galley used in that celebration. Ballard's imagined painting shares features of Tintoretto's *Esther before Ahasuerus*, Tiepolo's *Neptune Offering Gifts to Venice* and Canaletto's *The Bucintoro*, as well as various invented motifs.

In this *mise en abyme*, the characters are aware that the painting reflects them. Kerans explains the meaning of the painting and Strangman corroborates his interpretation: Beatrice must pacify the waters, just as Esther must pacify the Persian emperor and Venice must pacify the sea. However, Beatrice refuses to play that role (2008: 118), causing *The Marriage of Esther and King Xerxes* to be revealed not as a frustrated *mise en abyme* but as a misinterpreted *mise en abyme* by the male characters: the reflection occurs, but it is deceitful. In the first instance, Beatrice/Minerva/Esther symbolically removes the waters, but it is all an illusion, not a *mise en abyme* but a *mise en scene* by Strangman, with the careful preparation of the set, the dinner and the surprise effect of the descent of the waters of the lagoon. For in the *trompe l'oeil* prepared by Strangman, the water level drops, not because of Beatrice's magical presence, but because he makes the water pump to the astonishment of his guests. The darkness of the night erases Xerxes/Neptune, the false motifs of the allegory in *abyme*, from the painting, leaving Esther/Minerva and the Venetian counselor/Strangman, the real actors in the drama invented by Strangman, illuminated. Now the *mise en abyme* is realised with the true reflection of the actors in the play, or so it seems. The fading diegetic light of dusk has revealed the true meaning of the painting with regard to the balance of power of the characters in this chapter: Xerxes/Neptune, who in the following chapter will be identified with Kerans, is obscured by his passivity, and Beatrice/Minerva/Esther and Strangman/Venetian counselor, the real characters in conflict, are illuminated against the shadowy background of the painting.

In the second instance, the painting will show the reader its deeper meaning. The title of the following chapter, "The Feast of Skulls", contains a new reference to Delvaux. However, it is the fake Venetian painting that takes on new and unpredictable value as a *mise en abyme*. If in Chapter 10 Ballard had used the change of light in the diegetic temporality to highlight the characters in the painting that interested him at the time (the counselor and Esther, as transcripts of Strangman and Beatrice), now he recomposes the image, staging the other motif evoked in the painting: the submission of Neptune. Strangman's men disguise Kerans as Neptune and torture him in a carnivalesque procession that parodies the sea

god's submission to a city that has been stolen from him: "almost as if he [Kerans] were an abducted Neptune forced against his will to sanctify those sections of the drowned city which had been stolen from him by Strangman and reclaimed" (2008: 140). He is finally left in the sun to die. His resistance instils fear in the pirates, who see him as an incarnation of the god. This is an intuition that points to the change experienced by Kerans in the process from apocalyptic catastrophe to the frustrated but symbolic sacrifice that will liberate the inner space and redeem him as a new man after the global disaster. After a series of vicissitudes, Kerans returns to Strangman's ship and hides behind the painting. The two realities seem to merge: Strangman's lieutenant sees him but believes him to be one of the figures in the painting. From here, he will emerge as a man of action. Later, in chapter 14, "Grand Slam", he will flood the city again, as the Neptune released out of the painting. In this way, the Venetian painting that superimposed two images, the real one —Esther/Jerxes— and the evoked one —Minerva/Neptune— is also the bearer of two meanings with respect to the novel-frame: Neptune's submission to Minerva/Beatrice, which responds to Strangman's mixtification, as betrayed by the evening light; and, ironically, the revenge of Neptune/Kerans who recovers the city for the waters, while resolving its state of prostration and passivity by pushing it toward its final decision.

4. Conclusion

The Drowned World contains three different examples of *mise en abyme* based on pictorial works either invented or left ambiguous by the author. Each corresponds to a different type of *mise en abyme*, that is, the particularising fictional, the transcendental metatextual and the generalising fictional. In the latter, which concerns the "painting of the school of Tintoretto", Ballard incorporates a series of dynamising elements that develop the iconic relationship between painting and fictional reality. The images unfold in a series of deformed reflections that in their multiplicity fragment the narrative, breaking down the invisible wall between the artistic work and the world that frames it. Regarding the particularising fictional, the painting represents a biblical scene but evokes a mythological one, which is, in turn, a symbol of a Venetian festival. This multiplication of meaning affects the characters represented in it, favoring an initial interpretation that is not the one that will later be shown to the reader: the association of Beatrice with Esther and Minerva; and the waters of the lagoon that have flooded London with those of Venice. However, the diegetic light illuminates a relevant aspect: Strangman's intervention, which is a crossover between fictional (the painting) and real elements in the fictional world (the evening light). This commentary is beyond

the comprehension of the characters. Secondly, the *mise en abyme* of the painting breaks the boundary with the real world of the novel, with a character, Kerans, who seems to enter and leave the painting, assuming the physical incarnation of Neptune, a figure evoked but not represented in it. Ballard aims to show a fictional world that folds in on itself, with few links to the empirical world: the pictures are fictional and their operability in the fictional world comes at the expense of their relationship with the world of reference. Finally, this structure must be seen in the context of the revival of science fiction in the 1960s and the acceptance of generalised instruments by the nouveau roman, in an effort to endow the genre with a literary status of high literature.

Notes

1. *The Wind of Nowhere* (1962), *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Drought* (1964) and *The Crystal World* (1966). During this period he also published the following collections of short stories: *The Voices of Time* (1962), *Passport to Eternity* (1963), *The Terminal Beach* (1964) and *The Impossible Man* (1966), as well as articles and reviews in various publications.

2. Brian Aldiss has pointed out how Ballard broke with both the heroes of the pulp and adventure novels in the vein of Joseph Conrad by opting for protagonists without initiative or hope (Aldiss 1976: 42-44).

3. Thus we read the end of *The Drowned World*: "So he left the lagoon and entered the jungle again, within a few days was completely lost, following the lagoons southward through the increasing rain and heat, attacked by alligators and giant bats, a second Adam searching for the forgotten paradises of the reborn sun" (Ballard 2008: 175).

4. The text is from the 1977 article "Cataclysms and Dooms".

5. I concur with Mieke Bal's description of the *mise en abyme* as a kind of icon insofar as it appears as a discrete whole within the work in which it is inserted and to which it points, constituting an interruption or a temporary change in the discourse (Bal 1978: 124).

6. In a similar vein, Dickmann speaks of Klein's bottle to refer to the mutability of narrative levels of *mise en abyme* (Dickmann 2019: 33).

7. This is how he puts it in the first chapter of *The Drowned World*: "Sometimes he wondered what zone of transit he himself was entering, certain that his own withdrawal was symptomatic not of a dormant schizophrenia, but of a careful preparation for a radically new environment, with its own internal landscape and logic, where old categories of thought would merely be an encumbrance" (Ballard 2008: 14).

8. I leave aside the early and not very satisfactory *The Wind of Nowhere*. Ballard would later disown it.

9. However, it is clear that Strangman, who always wears white, neither fits the character in *The Worried City*, nor is he a skeleton, as Ballard describes him and as he is metaphorically referred to in Chapter 11 ("Mistah Bones").

10. Surprisingly, Ballard stated in an interview with James Goddard and David Pringle that at the time of writing *The Drowned World* he had not yet read Conrad (Goddard and Pringle 1976: 16). On the other hand, the character of the aviator is a constant in Ballard's work, always representing a powerful and enigmatic presence that attracts

and disturbs the protagonist (this is the case in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, and in the stories "News from the Sun", "One afternoon at Utah Beach" and "Low-Flyng Aircraft"), an unfolded alter ego that from the late 1970s onwards often merges with the protagonist (see *The Unlimited Dream Company* and the stories "Notes toward a mental breakdown", "Myths of the Near Future", "Memories of the Space Age", "The object of the attack" and "The Man who walked on the Moon").

11. The work of James G. Ballard is rooted in psychoanalysis. Critics have explained the meaning of catastrophe through a Jungian lens in their first novels: "The Modern division of the conscious and unconscious is explicitly seen in terms of catastrophe, for a suppression of the unconscious means its return in distorted forms" (Luckhurst, 1997: 52). Regarding *The Drowned World*, the author would confess in a 1971 interview: "I wanted to look at our racial memory, our whole biological inheritance, the fact that we're all several hundred million years old, as old as the biological kingdoms in our spines, in our brains, in our cellular structure". It is interesting to note that this confidence in the memory of the species is also present in other New Wave novels, such as *Hothouse* (1962) by Brian Aldiss. On the other hand, it is true that Ballard resorts to what he calls "intertextual landscapes" to reinforce the meaning of the characters' actions by exploring the psychological meaning of their geographies (Luckhurst, 1997: 54). Now, in the case of the works of art that articulate the *mise en abyme* in these novels, this procedure is only possible due to the particular consideration of the work of art as an aesthetic experience. For a broader discussion of Jung's theories in *The Drowned World*, see Francis (2011: 68-77).

12. Mieke Bal notes that this category is a variant of the fictional *mise en abyme*: since the object, the origin, and the end of the text and its writing are located outside the text, this object can only be fictionalised, that is, replaced by a diegesis that symbolises it. This fictionalisation maintains a circular relationship with the object of the fictional *mise en abyme* (Bal 1978: 122). Ballard maintains this relationship between the painting and the conclusion of the novel: painting and landscapes correspond. However, the explanation of this correspondence is only partially exposed; and it is surely necessary to know Ballard's texts on inner space and its relation to surrealist painting in order to grasp the full meaning of the figure.

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