

## Speeding to the Doldrums: Stalled Futures and the Disappearance of Tomorrow in “The Dead Astronaut”

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### Abstract

This chapter discusses how J.G. Ballard’s short story “The Dead Astronaut” is fixated on a melancholic and alienated future that never arrived. The narrative is, literally, a disaster story, containing astral traces of a dead or absent future. In Ballard’s tale the protagonist’s return to this stalled future is premised on the absence or impossibility of a primal scene to return to: the future is inaccessible and has yet to happen. Instead of productively mourning one particular version of the future (which might then provoke further futures), the story melancholically reiterates a stalled, traumatic process of *nachträglichkeit* or “coming after.” What, the chapter asks, does Ballard’s story tell us about our impulsion or compulsion towards the future? Is the text the narrative of an interminable post-modern stasis, of “dialectics at a standstill”? Or does it allegorise what happens in the commodification of the future?

### Keywords

J. G. Ballard; short fiction; science fiction; future; melancholy; repetition; trauma; alienation; *nachträglichkeit*; critical theory; Marxism; Freud.

“Does the future still have a future?”

(Ballard, *UGM* 192)

Projecting unrealized versions of what may happen next, whether positive or negative, defines science fiction. The genre is preoccupied with imagining possible

worlds or alternative futures. However, the narrative content of science fiction will never, regardless of its complexity or ambition, simply take the form of a forecast.

Speculative fiction does not appear as news from nowhere. The production of ideas and stories about possible futures always arises from historically specific contexts. Any image of the future will appear within a dynamic aesthetic, social, political and historical environment that both allows and restricts imaginative possibilities. This is the case even when the imagination is being pushed to the limits of what can (currently) be imagined.

Examining the limits of speculative creativity raises questions about causality. What makes us imagine the future this way rather than that? What stops us imagining something different?<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, alternative conceptions of the future always implicitly indicate what the present is, and is not, imaginatively capable of. As Franco Berardi notes in his book *After the Future*: “The future is not a natural dimension of the mind. It is a modality of projection and imagination, a feature of expectation and attention, and its modalities and features change with the changing of cultures” (28).

J. G. Ballard’s writing was preoccupied with the future: the future as a psychological dystopia, as a place already decaying, as a place stalled and inaccessible.<sup>2</sup> Such themes are obviously apparent in a text like *The Atrocity*

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Fredric Jameson’s discussion of temporal and historical development in his essay “The Barrier of Time” in *Archaeologies of the Future* (85-106).

<sup>2</sup> For a fascinating examination of how Ballard’s exploration of time can be read in relation to psychological disturbance in the stories “News from the Sun” (CSS2 531-568), “Memories of the Space Age” (CSS2 569-601) and “Myths of the Near Future” (CSS2 602-634), see Mike Holliday’s “Ballard and the Vicissitudes of Time.”

*Exhibition* (1970) with Ballard noting how in late capitalist modernity we are “[d]esperate for the new, but disappointed with anything but the familiar” leading us to constantly “recolonize past and future” (*AE* 88). Reading “The Dead Astronaut,” published two years earlier than *The Atrocity Exhibition*, it is possible to see how and why Ballard’s exploration of the future leads not to a programmatic forecast, but to an ambivalent re-calibration of what the process of futurological speculation, *in itself*, actually means in an historical era where there seems to be no future, or where the future is simply more of the same.<sup>3</sup>

Ballard’s short story can be read for multiple symptoms of the nature of time in modernity. Here, though, we can consider two key signs or tropes about time and the future. Firstly, it’s possible to examine how the story is structurally premised on trauma and that this trauma is something that happens in the background history of the narrative that forever alters how things happen in the future. Secondly, as a result of this event or non-event, both historical development and narrative development in the text becomes trapped or circular. Modernity as a better future, a place of coherent resolution, stability, definitive closure and meaning, the dream of a certain liberal, bourgeois society, doesn’t happen. Instead past events keep repeating in the present.

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<sup>3</sup> For an intriguing, radically different reading of “The Dead Astronaut” (offering an ultimately more optimistic, post-humanist/Deleuzian account of the conclusion of the narrative, informed in part by Donna Haraway’s work on science fiction) see Melanie Rosen Brown’s “Dead Astronauts, Cyborgs, and the Cape Canaveral Fiction of J.G. Ballard: A Posthuman Analysis.” Also of importance in the secondary literature on Ballard’s “Cape Canaveral” fictions is Umberto Rossi’s “A Little Something About Dead Astronauts,” which deals with a number of Ballard’s short stories that all figure the death of astronauts.

In psychoanalytic terms, we could say that the story is like a patient undergoing therapy, who is encouraged to work through what happened to them in order to move on, but is unable to achieve that outcome. Essentially the patient and the story are stuck.

As a result, Ballard's fiction can be read as an account of what we will call late capitalist modernity's melancholic (as opposed to mourned) and ensnared relationship to the future. The wider, critical significance of this melancholia is that it indicates an exhaustion with a certain type of speculative imagination, an exhaustion within modernity that, at one level, haunts any prospective vision of the future. This is something that Mark Fisher describes when he writes that "the slow cancellation of the future has been accompanied by a deflation of expectations" (25). Ballard's fictions meditate and focus on cultural, social, chronological and psychological forms of collapse and fatigue. His work, therefore, acts as an exemplary challenge to Berardi's claim that "exhaustion plays no role in the imagination of modernity" (44).

### **1968 and all that**

The historical context for Ballard's story is significant. "The Dead Astronaut" was first published in May 1968. The text itself first appeared in the May edition of *Playboy* (Ballard, *Playboy* 118). The previous year, the oil embargo hinted at the coming energy crisis and shifts in how industrialized, western economies operated were also apparent. There was, for example, a decline in employment in manufacturing industries in the United Kingdom, presaging the dialectic of de-industrialization, globalization and the growth of service sector employment. More specifically pertinent to the story, Apollo 1, which was planned as the first manned

flight of the Apollo programme, caught fire on the launch-pad killing all three of the crew.

The story appears, then, in a wider historical context of change, where the possibility for another type of future was palpable and real.<sup>4</sup> One of the most striking historical disjunctions of Ballard's story is that, whilst it was written a year before the actual Apollo 11 moon landing, the story imagines the future as already played out and exhausted. The historical nature of that future, what actually happened next, was, therefore, actually much more ambivalent. Retrospectively, we might say that the kind of historical change actually occurring was the development of our world, a place of neo-liberal capitalism, of disaffected individualism, technological alienation and globalized consumerism. This world is the place that Ballard's subsequent writing invariably focuses on.

"The Dead Astronaut" itself describes how the two protagonists, ex-NASA employees Judith and Phillip (with Phillip the narrator of the story), await the return to earth of a dead astronaut, Robert Hamilton, who was killed soon after launching into space 20 years before the incidents in the story. The protagonists were there at the launch and the death of Hamilton and they are there at the return of the spacecraft

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting the connection Fredric Jameson makes between Ballard's lost protagonists, devastated landscapes and stories of disrupted history. Jameson has suggested that the main historical, ideological key for reading these images and narratives in Ballard is the break-up of colonial empires and the development of post colonialism. See, for example, Jameson's comments in his essay "Journey Into Fear": "[It] does not seem out of place to interpret the immense eschatological *jouissance* of the greatest of modern apocalyptic writers, J.G. Ballard, as the expression of his experience of the end of the British Empire in the Second World War" (199).

and the dead body, providing the narrative structure for the story.<sup>5</sup> The story also maps onto a more intimate aspect of the characters' story. Judith became obsessed by Hamilton, prior to his departure, and his death coincided with Judith's miscarriage. The story closes with the revelation that Hamilton was, in fact, the father of the child. The figure of Hamilton is, therefore, critical both to opening up and to closing down futures. These incidents demarcate and define Judith's character and explain why she becomes frozen in time, such that she would "stare at the bedroom clock, as if waiting for something to happen" (CSS2 263).

The story merges the collapse of the character's psychological state with the landscape in that the decaying mental status of the characters is reflected in the physical landscape of the deserted wasteland. The Florida launch site that Judith and Phillip return to has become the graveyard for the damaged satellites and rockets that have fallen back to earth. Phillip and Judith go to the deserted wasteland when they hear that Hamilton is about to return to earth, in order to lay to rest the ghostly presence the astronaut has assumed in their lives. The conclusion of the story comes when, having reached Hamilton's crashed unit and recovered the remains, the

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<sup>5</sup> The orbiting spacecraft of the dead astronaut(s) function, in a way, as traditional astrological symbols or stars in that they fulfill the role of predicting the future ("[...] their capsules [...] revolve through the night sky like the stars of a new constellation [...] the figure of this dead astronaut circling the sky above us re-emerged in her mind as an obsession with time" (CSS2 262-263). With the return to earth of the dead astronaut and the disappearance of the star, time and the future stop thereby heralding, literally, a disaster. This very specific sense of the word disaster draws out the etymology of the term and its link to the Latin roots concerning the negation of a star, *astrum*, and the sense that the sight of a failing comet was a bad omen.

protagonists start to suffer from radiation sickness, revealing that the spacecraft was in fact carrying atomic weapons, with the dead astronaut infecting the protagonists with his own version of technological death.

The narrative pattern that emerges is one of repetition, circularity and decay. Judith and Phillip's personal experience of loss of the unborn child is linked to the wider loss of the technologically advanced future and the failure of the space program. In both cases, the advent of a new period in time or history is marked by death or failure, with the narrative literally suspended between two deaths. And in terms of Ballard's story, what looks like the start of something new turns out to be a repetition and an inability to move on. The stilling or halting of the progression of time generates repetition and trauma for the protagonists.

### **Again, do it again**

Repetition is not, of course, inherently sterile or negative. In one sense, repetition does indeed do good. In psychoanalysis, revisiting the past is essential for the person undergoing treatment as they learn to cope with living in the present. Freud, in his account of treating the wolf man, Sergei Pankeyev, invents a concept and narrative form to create meaning out of traumatic symptoms that occurred in the past. Freud's theoretical form seems to provide an explanation for how something witnessed in the past reappears and repeats in the present. This concept seems to explain how the unconscious may preserve a specific experience, while its traumatic after-effects might only be realized by another later, but associated, event. Freud called this "*nachträglichkeit*" which is variously translated into English as "deferred action" or "retrospective determination" (45-46).

This theory of deferred action developed out of Freud's account of his analyses of the problem of sexuality in human development reveals that a small child might well not immediately understand the significance of a sexual encounter or witnessed event. They would instead only come to understand this experience when they themselves became sexually active in adulthood.<sup>6</sup> The reappearance or repetition of this past event would invariably occur, however, in a disconcerting or cryptic form, and failure to work through the source of the trauma would lead to being trapped in the past.

This process of "deferred action" can usefully serve as a way of describing the actions of the protagonists, but also the wider account of time that Ballard introduces. The repeated forms of death, the return to the "non place" of the ruined launch site, the fixation with and fear of technology can all be read as traumatic symptoms which, because they are only partially understood and comprehended at the time by the protagonists, lead to the suspension of time and meaning. The story therefore serves as a direct counter to Alfonso Cuarón's film *Gravity*, in which an astronaut's encounter with death (in this case stemming from the main character's distress resulting from the death of her child) ultimately leads to a healing process and re-birth. The closing scene shows Cuarón's astronaut reborn, hopeful and rejuvenated, emerging from the sea.

By contrast, "The Dead Astronaut" is a story based around a frustrated process of *nachträglichkeit*. The story sets up the need for a retrospective deciphering across a delay in time. This is both in the sense that, coming to the end of the story one needs

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<sup>6</sup> For further analysis and development of the concept of *nachträglichkeit* see the work of Jean Laplanche and, specifically in relation to temporality and trauma, Cathy Caruth's interview with Laplanche in the journal *Postmodern Culture*.



to re-read the text to overlay and triangulate interpretations because the implications of the account aren't immediately apparent, but also because the story's narrative is itself about delay.

In opposition to a conventional Freudian narrative resulting in a successful process of analysis, where the trauma is revisited and exorcized, Ballard's story erases its own primal scene. That is to say, as an attempt to revisit the grave of the future – the place where the space age died, the place where the characters' lives came to an end, the original starting point for the things that subsequently went wrong – the story is actually performative. The story is about an event that, in happening, alters how events themselves actually happen. That event isn't simply a chronological irregularity that can be examined via a therapeutic and linear process of retrospection. The character of the trauma alters the ability to move backwards and forwards in memory and time.

Ballard, addressing how time was disturbed by the trauma of the conjunction of death and space travel, asked in the *Atrocity Exhibition*:<sup>7</sup> “Why must we await, and fear, a disaster in space in order to understand our own time?” (*AE* 68). He answered:

All disasters – earthquakes, plane or car crashes – seem to reveal for a brief moment the secret formulae of the world around us, but a disaster in space rewrites the rules of the continuum itself. (*AE* 76)

The disturbance introduced by the failure of the space age, manifested in the story by the death of the astronaut, breaks any trajectory of progress. Time, instead of going forward and advancing, becomes fractured and turns back on itself. An inability to

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<sup>7</sup> Ballard here paraphrases and quotes the Chilean painter Roberto Matta in the catalogue notes for Matta's exhibition *Matta: Dis-Astronaute*.

access space literally effects time. In another of the so-called “Cape Canaveral” stories, *Myths of the Near Future*, the point is clearly made:

This space sickness – it’s really about time, not space, like all the Apollo flights. We think of it as a kind of madness, but in fact it may be a contingency plan laid down millions of years ago, a real space programme, a chance to escape into a world beyond time. (CSS2 625)

In “The Dead Astronaut,” the reader is led to imagine a narrative pattern based on a structure similar to the eternal return. However, the return point (the point of origin, access to the living/dead astronaut Hamilton) is never actually reached because, of course, it never happened. The story is a work of imaginative fiction and the future on which the text is predicated never existed. So, whilst there may have been retrospective factual justification for Ballard’s story, for example, in relation to atomic weapons,<sup>8</sup> the aporia that the story creates occurs primarily, or in the first instance, in the reader’s imagination. The external trauma becomes transferred, relocated in the imagination and subconscious. As a result, any process of Freudian retrospective determination as an interpretive or therapeutic tool is, in Ballard’s story, incomplete and un-completable because time stops flowing in any comprehensible way.

Conflating this issue in the story with the historical context of the text, Ballard suggested, in an interview from the early 1980s, that “in many ways, time didn’t exist

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<sup>8</sup> In 1958 NASA planned, in *Project 119 – A Study of Lunar Research Flights*, to detonate an atomic bomb on the moon (Reiffel, “The Defense Technical Information Center”). The project remained secret until the mid 1990s when Keay Davidson, who was researching a biography of Carl Sagan, came across references to the project Sagan had been involved in the research for Project 119.

in the sixties” but had become “a set of endlessly proliferating presents” (Ballard, “The Art of Fiction” 133-160). Ballard went on to qualify this by saying that “time returned in the seventies, but not a sense of the future. The hands of the clock now [went] nowhere” (Ballard, “The Art of Fiction” 155). Ballard’s general comment about the future might therefore recall the well-known British punk rock slogan of the 1970s from the Sex Pistols: “no future”.

This is not to say that, today, novelty ceases to exist. We might consider for example the endless, but immediately stale, stream of new mobile phones. Rather, as Ross Wolfe has noted, the “ceaseless proliferation of the new now presents itself as the eternal return of the same old, same old. Novelty today has become quotidian, if not wholly antique [...] History of late may be going nowhere, but it’s going nowhere faster” (Wolfe, “The Charnel-House: From Bauhaus to Beinhau”). This process of nihilistic acceleration, involving more of the same, only faster and more intensely, has taken many different forms as recent accounts of singularity and the debates around accelerationism can confirm.<sup>9</sup> In Ballard’s fiction, imagining the future via the

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<sup>9</sup> In a limited sense, technological singularity describes a prediction whereby the processing and computing power of artificial intelligence will exceed human intelligence and herald a post-human era via the fusion of the biological and technological. Accounts and predictions of this event can be found in the work of mathematicians, technologists and futurologists such as Ray Kurzweil and Vernor Vinge (“The Coming Technological Singularity”). Specific predications about dates for this event (Kurzweil has proposed that singularity will occur in the next 25 years) have, however, been described by writers such as Steven Shaviro as being based on “dubious premises.” Shaviro’s comments about singularity (“The Singularity is Here” Bould & Miéville 103-117) and the ever increasing role of technology in accounts of

disappearance of a space age that never really happened, is an engagement with a darker, deathly history with no future that is, paradoxically, the melancholic present. Which is precisely the problem: both Ballard's 'now' and future are melancholic.

### **The melancholia of now**

"The Dead Astronaut" takes melancholia as its subject and style. Referring to Freud again and his distinction between mourning and melancholia, one can say that if Ballard's story worked through the process of loss in accordance with the process of mourning, the result would have been a narrative about the successful resolution of the traumatic events it deals with closer to that of Cuarón's film. This is because, for Freud, mourning describes the difficult but fundamentally healthy way in which a person copes with loss via tradition, custom, culture and psychic wellbeing. Melancholia, by contrast, occurs when there is confusion about what, exactly, has been lost. According to Freud, in melancholia "the [missing] object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love" (244) a description which fits, almost too perfectly, both the inter-personal relations of the characters in Ballard's

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the future come, however, within the context of debates about Deleuzian post-humanism and accelerationism. Accelerationism has been developed from certain texts in Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari and other thinkers with the suggestion that in order to set in motion the conditions for a revolutionary change in society, heralding a profound revision of what the future could be, "capital should not be resisted but accelerated" (see Centre for Cultural Studies for an overview of the 2010 conference on accelerationism and Wolf for a recording of the proceedings). Ballard's writing has been deployed and used in the work of thinkers both associated with and critical of accelerationism (Brassier "The Catastrophe of Time" and MoMA PS1).

story, and also a wider social engagement with technology. Freud continued his definition, however, by claiming that, in melancholia, “one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss [...] has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost” such that “melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious” (244).

An inability to “think through” the trauma of absence results in the transference of loss into the unconscious, freezing progress. The result, in the story, is that the protagonists become stuck in time. Ballard’s characters are like Durer’s depressed, lethargic angel *Melancholia* (1514) or Walter Benjamin’s melancholic seraphim,<sup>10</sup> only now these heavenly angels need to be taken as symbols for the figure of the astronaut. Like Benjamin and Klee’s angel, Ballard’s protagonists suffer the effects of being caught in the winds of progress, trapped by death and destruction.

The un-resolvable cause of the melancholia of the story is the distress caused by an absent future that never materializes. For Berardi, writing from a Marxist perspective, the wider social and political source of this melancholia is the “rise of the myth of the future [which] is rooted in modern capitalism, in the experience of expansion of the economy and knowledge. The idea that the future will be better than the present is not a natural idea, but the imaginary effect of the peculiarity of the bourgeois production model” (22).

The future offered by this socio-economic imaginary, with which Ballard’s work is invariably fixated, has consistently failed to materialize and is, in fact, structurally unable to materialize since the defining motor of capitalism is an

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, writing in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, found the spirit of progress visualized in Paul Klee’s 1920 painting *Angelus Novus* (245-255).

insatiable desire to generate abstract value, profit and never-ending growth. It is the perennially absent future of capitalism, currently appearing as neo-liberalism, that is our present: a time which has been drained of any cultural imagination capable of reinventing the utopian as a viable alternative to an interminable now. As Theodor Adorno noted: “The future bows before the omnipotence of the present” (117).

This absent future was a tangible issue for Ballard: “There's something missing from the world that we all inhabit [...] We've lost our faith in the far future, and [...] we're living in a commodified world where everything has a price-tag. A world filled with dreams that money can buy, but dreams that soon pall” (Ballard & Self, 2006). The promise of a future defined by space travel offered no respite: “Looking back, we can see that far from extending forever into the future, the space age lasted for scarcely fifteen years: from Sputnik and Gagarin’s first flight in 1961 to the last Skylab mission in 1974” (*UGM* 224-25). As a consequence of the absence of any historical or cultural dynamic to offer anything different, boredom and psychopathology became necessary and fascinating: “[...] Being quite serious, the future may be boring. It’s possible that my children and yours will live in an eventless world, and that the faculty of imagination will die, or express itself solely in the realm of psychopathology” (Ballard, “The Art of Fiction” 155).

The result is that the utopian future exists as a negative possibility: we are aware of it because of its absence. The paradox is that this absence is imprinted into the social and technological imagination of capitalist modernity. This negation of the utopian impulse and its relocation in the social unconscious is the missing primal scene or drive at work in Ballard’s story:

Did the future arrive too soon, some time around the mid-century, the greatest era of modern science fiction? It has always struck me as remarkable that one

of the twentieth century's greatest achievements, Neil Armstrong's landing on the Moon, a triumph of courage and technology, should have had virtually no influence on the world at large. (*UGM* 192)

The absent future has no positive influence on the “world at large”; instead it demarcates an unthinkable zone in our technological, socio-political imaginary. Fredric Jameson, commenting more generally about science fiction, noted that “what is indeed authentic about it, as a mode of narrative and a form of knowledge, is not [...] its capacity to keep the future alive, even in imagination. On the contrary, its deepest vocation is over and over again to demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future” (288).

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