

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Ballard and Ballardur: Reading the Intertextual and the Architectural in *Concrete Island*

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**Abstract:**

*Concrete Island's* ([1974] 1994) complex intertextuality invites its readers to see the protagonist Robert Maitland as a kind of Robinson Crusoe of the Kafkaesque contemporary environment. Such an interpretation can be further developed by invoking other non-literary intertextual references, including an intriguing reference in the novel to the architecture of the Mediterranean leisure complex La Grande Motte, designed by Ballard's near namesake Jean Ballardur. This connection, striking in itself, reinforces and extends recent claims that the work is in dialogue with contemporary debates concerning architecture, especially that of leisure spaces. The following article frames this dialogue by using the work of Walter Benjamin on modernity, in which the architectural is said to be experienced both through aesthetic contemplation and in a state of distraction through habitual use and embodied familiarity. The approach provides the reader with a language with which to decode the novel's themes and highlights the significance of its surreal tactile and bodily imagery as it explores Maitland's responses to his surreal predicament on the island through such intertextual parallels.

**Keywords:** intertextuality, La Grande Motte, Walter Benjamin, architecture, embodiment.

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### Crusoe of the Kafkaesque: *Concrete Island's* Intertextuality

The first book alluded to in J.G. Ballard's 1974 novel *Concrete Island* (1994) is *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe [1719] 1998), Daniel Defoe's tale about an Englishman who survives on a desert island for thirty years after being shipwrecked in the Caribbean. Defoe's novel is named shortly after Ballard's unfortunate protagonist, the architect Robert Maitland, crashes into his own otherworldly island and finds himself apparently unable either to escape from it or to communicate with anyone in the outside world. In an attempt to confront his predicament, Maitland talks to himself, saying, 'Maitland, poor man, you're marooned here like Crusoe – If you don't look out you'll be beached here for ever...' (Ballard 1994: 32). Ballard develops the allusion in his introduction to the novel, paying tribute to *Robinson Crusoe's* pervasiveness as an influence and offering a fascinating account of it as an analogy for his own book. To achieve this, he finds in Defoe such themes as 'the challenge of returning to our more primitive natures', the need to 'transform [the island's] anonymous terrain into an extension of our own minds' and, even more strikingly, the 'subliminal fear' of the urban dweller in the 'pavements we tread everyday' (5-7).

In these glosses, especially the last, we can see the extent to which the striking contemporaneity of Ballard's concerns shapes his reading of the earlier novel. Defoe's island terrain becomes at once a metaphor for the mind as perceived by modern psychology and a representation of the urban experience of contemporary everyday life. Such a version of Defoe contains more than meets the eye, suggesting the unacknowledged intermediary influence of such modernist writers as James Joyce, whose work is often cited by Ballard as an early influence (see for instance Ballard 1996: 181). Joyce had hailed *Robinson Crusoe* as 'the English *Odyssey*' and thus an important influence on his own modernist odyssey of the inner mental life and of the modern urban environment in *Ulysses* (Joyce 2000: 163). As I will try to show, these concerns in Ballard can also be set alongside those of contemporary theorists of the urban, such as Henri Lefebvre and Walter Benjamin.

Critics of *Concrete Island*, many of whom give it quite sustained attention, note that, as Roger Luckhurst puts it, 'Crusoe parallels are evident' (1997: 137). For psychoanalytic readers of Ballard such as Samuel Francis, it is Crusoe's isolation that is the significant point of connection, the novel's true island being its 'inner space' (2011: 121-3). Some also connect the Crusoe parallels to other intertextual frames, Luckhurst himself noting the close correspondence between Maitland and the island's other inhabitants Jane and Proctor with Shakespeare's Prospero, Miranda and Caliban from *The Tempest* (Luckhurst 1997: 137). Proctor becomes a reworking of the Caliban figure when Maitland teaches him how to speak and write in Chapter 20, a connection that is confirmed by the knowledge that the figure had previously been invoked by Ballard by name in *The Atrocity Exhibition* ([1970] 1993: 10). Whilst *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Tempest* are linked as texts examining island psychology or the isolated situation, for Philip Tew (2008: 114), they also represent the colonial situation and are to be understood in terms of it. Maitland needs to 'dominate' the other characters to survive.

Sebastian Groes, however, in acknowledging Maitland as a ‘postmodern Crusoe in [Rem Koolhaas’s] junk-city’, links this to the Dantean dimension which he finds in the mid-seventies ‘urban disaster trilogy’ of *Crash* ([1973] 2008), *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* ([1975] 2000), drawing a further analogy between *Concrete Island* and Beckett’s ‘Act Without Words I’ (Groes 2012: 127). An approach through this group of intertexts seems congruent with the interpretation of the book’s Crusoeism through the work of an author whom Ballard repeatedly invokes as an influence: Franz Kafka (Ballard 1996: 146). Maitland’s crash swiftly turns into a surreal experience,<sup>1</sup> that of an entrapment from which he cannot seem to escape, either because of his injuries, a delirium resulting from them, or else because of the symbolic physical characteristics of the embankments that surround him and his nightmarish failure to get his shouted or written messages back across to the outside world, out of whose logic and even ‘reality’ he is said to have ‘suddenly exited’ (Ballard 1994: 24). In these respects, the world of *Concrete Island* seems very close to that of Kafka, an author whom Ballard once claimed as ‘far more important than James Joyce’, though the two were clearly both very important to him (Ballard 1996: 146). Various particular Kafka stories might be invoked to support this connection, including, as Jeannette Baxter has suggested, ‘The Burrow’ (Kafka 2005).<sup>2</sup> Lying as it does beneath the motorway superstructures that bound the island, the ‘underground’ landscape of Ballard’s novel is another such underground labyrinthine burrow.

One feature of the Kafka story, which would confirm its significance for Ballard, is that Kafka’s protagonist has built his own self-entrapping labyrinth. Maitland’s surreal traffic island is described as a ‘terminal delusion’ (Ballard 1994: 83), a mental world that may be of his own creation and one whose concrete landscape of Second World War air-raid shelter and abandoned cinema ‘was becoming an exact model of his head’ (69). However, at times Maitland seems the more Crusoe-like in that his agency after the initial crash is partly conceived as an attempted engagement with an external as much as an internal environment, with or without the implication that this may be a form of colonialism on his part. Indeed, Maitland’s sojourn on the island seems as much a healing and empowering process as an entrapping one. Whilst it does not immediately allow him to escape from the island, it at least allows him gradually to habituate himself to its environment or even ultimately to ‘establish his dominion over it’ (176), though the extent to which this very desire may be part of a Kafka-like delusion or expressionist symbolism, in which the boundary between the external and the internal is blurred, remains deliberately unclear.

Reading the novel intertextually in these ways allows us to think of Maitland as a Crusoe of the Kafkaesque world. He gradually habituates himself to the strangeness of his situation on the traffic island, especially after his meeting with Jane Sheppard, the ‘red-haired young woman in a camouflage-patterned combat jacket’ (77), who is ‘good-looking in an almost wilfully tatty way’ (81) and who takes him into the virtualised world of the abandoned cinema and her basement room, where a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers poster hangs on the wall (80-1). In her company he changes from hoping that she will call for the ambulance which will rescue him from the island towards a state where he thinks he might want to stay:

Far from wanting this girl to help him escape from the island he was using her for motives he had never before accepted, his need to be freed from his past, from his childhood, his wife and friends, with all their affections and demands, and to rove forever within the empty city of his own mind. (142)

The repeatedly mentioned Astaire and Rogers poster (85, 90, 91) itself invites intertextual connections with the cinema, suggesting contrasts between screen romance and reality and possibly alluding to an illusionary or delusionary sub-text in the novel, since Maitland is unsure whether it offers part of a shared objective reality or else a personal memory, whether a promise of the future or else a regression to the past. As a reference to the cinema's most famous dance partners, the poster resonates with a range of bodily experiences in the novel, many of which arise as a result of the physical injuries sustained in Maitland's crash and his habituation to the new situation in which he finds himself and the other characters with whom he shares the island. Ballard encodes such bodily resonances through intertextual references which extend beyond literary to cinematic and, as I will demonstrate shortly, architectural texts.

These resonances are taken up in the account of the relationship with Jane Shepherd which follows in terms of dance. When they get drunk and have a party, Jane 'dance[s] around him [...] wearing the tart's outfit of the previous night' and goading the injured Maitland to 'do a one-legged dance' (134). 'I'm not dancing around this flat I'm shuffling', she shouts at the injured Maitland or to some other man on the telephone later on (165). Layers of meaning in the physical relationship between Maitland, Jane and the physically strong Proctor are developed to underline this bodily theme. Maitland's increasing desire to stay on the island eases his resentment of Jane's ability to leave and he repeats his thought that he will have to develop ways of persuading her to stay (162). The dance or 'shuffle' (itself the name for one form of contemporary dance) is contrasted with the circus acrobatics of which Proctor is capable (though which ultimately lead to his self-destruction), and both are significant aspects of the novel's treatment of the relation of the physical body to space.

Focusing on the critically neglected theme of embodiment in *Concrete Island* – and more broadly on the relationship between bodies and the spaces they inhabit – facilitates a broader reconsideration of the space of the island itself. The 'concrete island' landscape seems at first anything other than concrete, being repeatedly characterised by references to the long grass. However, Maitland's habituation to his situation involves a gradual discovery of its built, if partly abandoned, elements, and nowhere is this communicated more clearly than through Jane's abandoned cinema. In this respect due credit needs to be given to the recent readings of the novel by Joanne Murray (Murray 2013, 2014). Her emphasis is closely focussed on the concrete aspects of the island, seeing the novel as part of a critique of the New Brutalist architecture that recurs in Ballard's work and as an anticipation of *High-Rise*. Her work opens a range of important connections between Ballard and debates within architecture during the twentieth century; it also invites us to explore the figure of the architect as character in Ballard's novel in greater depth, and to draw out further specific architectural references in Ballard's text that her essay leaves

relatively unexamined. As shall be seen, these intertexts add yet more complexity to the novel's representation of embodiment.

Reading *Concrete Island* through its literary intertextualities further encourages our attending to the allusive encounters with architecture and the architectural that occur in the text. Maitland himself is, of course, an architect by profession, that characteristic distinguishing him from an earlier incarnation of a character with the same name in Ballard's first novel *The Wind from Nowhere* (1967), who was also described as driving around West London and was also thirty-five years old, though he was employed as a medical researcher at the Middlesex Hospital. The switch of profession is more than incidental. The re-incarnation of Maitland as an architect re-configures the discussions of architecture, making them more prominent and perhaps also differently focussed. As Murray shows, this focus includes a discussion of the New Brutalism which seems directly relevant to the rapid expansion of the motorway systems in England at the time.

However, less obviously, it also suggests that the novel is in dialogue with the discussion of post-war Mediterranean leisure architecture that can be found in Henri Lefebvre's *Towards an Architecture of Enjoyment* (Lefebvre 2014), in which the new architectures and landscapes of leisure that were a feature of the more affluent western societies after the Second World War are a source of fascination and ambivalence. In one sense Lefebvre considered these landscapes to offer opportunities for freedom from the intensifying encroachments of work and profit on everyday life, but on the other hand they represented in themselves another level of such encroachment and exploitation. Both areas of critique may be approached in terms of Walter Benjamin's deeply embedded notions of the architectural, in which bodily habituation is identified as an important aspect of the relation of the modern subject to the built environment. Such a bodily aspect is the more strongly felt in *Concrete Island*, since the Maitland figure retains from his earlier incarnation as 'medical researcher' in *The Wind from Nowhere* a wife and lover who are medics and a concern with the physical body. Such a concern – to which, as I have suggested, the Astaire-Rogers allusion begins to point – becomes increasingly significant in its own right in the novel's language. To establish the connection between this concern with the body and with the architectural Benjamin's ideas are extremely valuable and, once again, we can pursue its trace in the novel through an attention to the intertextual.

### **Ballard and Ballardur: Architecture as Intertext**

After the crash at the start of the novel, as Maitland conducts his meticulous 'inventory' of his wounded body and the remaining crash debris, he notices 'a half-empty tube of sun lotion, memento of a holiday he had taken at La Grande Motte with Dr Helen Fairfax' (Ballard 1994: 14). This small detail invites both his and the reader's curiosity. It alerts the reader to the emotional tangles of his busy sex life as his thoughts apparently slip into a strange gap between the two halves of his double life, allowing him to speculate that 'he had almost wilfully devised the crash, perhaps as some bizarre kind of rationalization' (9). That he should recall the location of the recent holiday is hardly remarkable in itself but in naming this specific location, Maitland reveals his and Ballard's

own awareness of contemporary architecture and its controversies. The allusion is repeated later in the novel, when Maitland recalls that his parents had taken a house in the Camargue for their last summer together, and he is reminded again of his holiday with his mistress: 'It was no coincidence that they had gone straight to La Grande Motte, the futuristic resort complex on the coast a few miles away' (65). Maitland recalls that Helen 'quietly hated the hard affectless architecture', though he speculates that his wife Catherine 'would have liked the ziggurat hotels and apartment houses, and the vast, empty parking lots laid down by the planners years before any tourist would arrive to park their cars, like a city abandoned in advance of itself' (65). Ballard here codes Maitland's wife and mistress in terms of their architectural tastes, with Helen cast as the more traditionally romantic of the two and his wife as the more comfortable with modernist style. The remarkable phrase 'like a city abandoned in advance of itself' resonates as a typically Ballardian critique of the urban landscapes of modernity, of architectural 'brutalism' and, here specifically, of the new world of leisure complexes, in which, according to Ballard's depiction of them from *Vermilion Sands* (1971) to *Super-Cannes* (2000), utopian and dystopian possibilities could quickly become confused.

Whilst the memory allows Ballard to expose levels of Maitland's personal psychology which he may unconsciously wish to escape, it also gives him a specific point of entry into postmodern cultural debates about architecture among which the discussion of New Brutalism considered by Murray figures large. La Grande Motte is a remarkable, *avant-garde*-styled architectural development on the French Mediterranean coast near Montpellier which might indeed inspire either a traditionalist critique of its postmodern affectlessness or a sense of excitement at its modernity and courage, and perhaps a mixture of both. It dominates a stretch of Languedoc coastline and is a popular summer resort. As *Miracles of Life* reveals (Ballard 2008: 230-4), Ballard was a frequent holiday visitor to this part of the South of France, especially with his partner Clare Walsh after the death of his wife in 1964. His interest in the development is made clear in the declaration, 'I believe in La Grande Motte', which appeared as one of the statements in the literary credo 'What I Believe', first published in French in Daniel Riche's *Science Fiction* magazine in 1984 and subsequently re-printed in the *Re/Search* Ballard special issue (Ballard 1984: 176). The architect of La Grande Motte, Jean Ballardur, has a name that uncannily resembles Ballard's own, though, as far as I have been able to ascertain, Ballard nowhere names the architect in print and the extent to which he knew any more of his work remains somewhat unclear. Indeed, the extent to which Ballardur remains a point of reference in specialist Anglophone architectural circles is a little uncertain. Research for more information about him in the Architectural Association archive, for example, threw up no items except adjacent references in the catalogue to novels by Ballard himself. He is, however, a fascinating figure, and Ballard's declaration of 'belief' in his most famous work commands our attention, especially since Ballard's own influence on architectural debate is increasingly recognised. In 2007-2008, for instance, London's Bartlett School offered a course entitled '*Crash: Architectures of the Near Future*' taught by Nic Clear which fed into a special issue of the journal *Architectural Design* (Clear 2006-7) and a 2010 London Consortium discussion (cf Ballardian 2010). More recently, the British Pavilion

at the 2014 Venice Biennale for Architecture, entitled 'A Clockwork Jerusalem', included a copy of *Concrete Island* as part of the display (*Contessanally* 2014).

The closest well-known British architectural style to Ballardur's may be the immediately recognisable institutional modernism of Denys Lasdun, whose Fitzwilliam College (1963), University of East Anglia campus (plan outlined 1963 and opened 1966), South Bank National Theatre (1976), and Institute of Education (1976) use somewhat similar pyramidal sectional structures. In Lasdun's buildings and such comparable works as the iconic Chamberlain, Powell and Bon structures on the campus of the University of Leeds, the material used is grey concrete which highlights the *béton brut* (raw concrete) which Le Corbusier recommended and which gave its name to the 'brutalist' style. However, these buildings have a somewhat different impact from the shimmering white surfaces of Ballardur's work. As well as his trade-mark pyramids, Ballardur's complex employed more curved forms than Lasdun's work, and his leisure resort differs from the public institutional function of the latter's work. Ballardur's use of the term 'ziggurat' invites the connection since that term is suggestive of Ballardur's pyramids but was also, for his English readers, something of a byword for the modernist style of the architecture in architectural debate.<sup>3</sup> 'The Ziggurat' became the familiar term for Lasdun's University of East Anglia work, which aroused some popular controversy at the time of its building and seems a likely immediate source of Ballardur's use of the term. Yet there may be something behind Ballardur's choice of Ballardur's La Grande Motte complex rather than these English institutional examples.

In 2010 a brief and comparatively rare recent discussion of Ballardur in English appeared beneath a full page photo of La Grande Motte in the *RIBA Journal*, describing the visual impact of the pyramids as having 'gone from sub-Niemeyer to super Gerry Anderson' (Elwall 2010: 70), though with little discussion of the lived experience of them. However well or little-known he may now be in Britain, Ballardur was a significant figure in French architecture and leaves a distinctive legacy both in architectural practice and in theory. The laudatory speech given by Roger Taillibert at his formal installation into the French Academie des Beaux Arts in 2000 argued that his reputation is ripe for revival (Taillibert 2000: 3). If the success of his having gained the financial backing of the De Gaulle government for the ambitious Grande Motte project were not enough evidence in itself of Ballardur's high mainstream political standing, more might be found in the fact that his cousin Edouard Ballardur was the French Prime Minister in 1993-5. La Grande Motte is praised by Taillibert and others for its use of the pyramid structure to maximise the number of balconies and exposure to the sun, merging the inside and the outside of the building, and for the urbanist integration of its bold visual style with such habitable amenities as parks and open spaces and proximity for residents to access the beach on foot.

Briefly trained by and clearly indebted to the modernist style of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, Ballardur wrote three articles in France's leading intellectual journal of the late 40s and 50s, *Les Temps Modernes*, edited by Jean-Paul Sartre, which help place his work within context. These are 'Le Dedans et le Dehors' ('The Inside and The Outside', 1949), 'Frank Lloyd Wright' (1956) and 'Urbanisme and Democratie' ('Urbanism and Democracy', 1955). The articles suggest possible broad connections with the concerns in

Ballard's fiction with the 'inner space' of human psychology and the landscapes of modern urban life. The first of them constructs an elegant contrast between the architecture of the classical French country house and the new domestic architecture of California, particularly that of Richard Neutra and Frank Lloyd Wright, in terms of the contrasting relative importance of the inside and outside in the two styles. For Ballardur, the classic house subordinates the outside to the inside:

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Il semble donc que le projet d'une demeure classique soit de soustraire ses habitants à la dialectique dedans-dehors, en rejetant le 'dehors' contingent hors de portée de leur regard. Le dehors immédiat, c'est-à-dire le jardin, y est traité comme un dedans. (Balladur 1949: 906)

[It seems then that the project of the classical dwelling was to remove its inhabitants from the inside-outside dialectic, recasting the contingent outside beyond the frame of their regard. The immediate outside, that is to say the garden, is treated as an interior.]

By contrast, for him, the Lloyd Wright house responds more directly to the bodily needs of the inhabitant and makes the interior space more responsive to the logic of the outside as it is, in its own terms, '*semble donc accepter le "dehors" tel qu'il est, de bonne foi?*' (Balladur 1949: 910). The American villas, he suggests, reintroduce contingency to the interior world ('*un projet de reintroduire la contingence dans le monde intérieur*' (910)) and this impacts on the bodily experience of the inhabitant for whom the experience of the interior environment is minimised and the experience of the outside is no longer 'in front' but 'all around' him:

L'homme se sent de nouveau renvoyé aux limites de son propre corps. Il se sent environné. (911)

[One is returned to the extents of one's own body. One feels 'environed'.]

Clearly the endorsement of the modernist domestic style Ballardur offers here contrasts with the deep concern with the built public environment and its failure to adequately negotiate the fractures between interiority and exteriority that frequently motivate Ballard's work and may suggest a reason for the statement of 'belief' quoted above. In Ballard's fiction as a whole architectural modernism shows itself in a critical context. The phrase in *Concrete Island* describing the empty car parks as 'a city abandoned in advance of itself' (Ballard 1994: 65) would seem to confirm that Maitland's response to La Grande Motte forms part of this critique, pre-figuring *High-Rise* in that the architectural utopia may never achieve its aim but that may obscure a deeper ambivalence in Ballard's position which was also present in the French debates around Ballardur in the 1950s.

In the contemporary pages of *Le Temps Modernes* connections are drawn between the perception of French Colonialism in the Mediterranean and the imposition of modernist architectural developments at the time of the Algerian revolution leading to

independence in 1962. In 1975, a year after the publication of *Concrete Island*, La Grande Motte became the subject of *L'Homme de sable* (Joubert 1975), a satirical attack by regionalist Languedoc-Camargue novelist Jean Joubert, representing the complex as a colonialist imposition on the environment of the Languedoc. Yet the comparative elegance of Ballardur's forms and materials and the admirable focus on the bodily experience of the inhabitant in his articles may speak to another emerging philosophy discussed in the pages of *Les Temps Modernes* in 1955: that of the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, in which the bodily experience has a central role and may suggest aspects of what may have encouraged Ballard to see a more sympathetic dimension in his work.

Balladur's work then arises from a fascinating matrix of discussions about the politics of the architectural which parallel those emerging in Ballard's fiction, in relation to the experiential dimensions of built leisure environments and their potential social psychology or psychopathology. Ballardur's work poses questions about modernity and the *avant-garde*, the aspirations and potential failures of its projects. The extent to which the modernist built environment is a genuine response to positive human-sized needs and desires or the extent to which it may be seen as a prosthetic extension of our psychopathologies becomes quickly central to much of Ballard's fiction and, at the same time, as the resonantly enthusiastic statement of 'belief' in La Grande Motte may suggest, an ambivalence remains.

### **The Architectural and Embodiment**

In *Concrete Island* the references to La Grande Motte form a part of an architectural debate whose terms are set out from the start in the contrast between, on the one hand, the 'Westway interchange' (Ballard 1994: 7) and motorway 'overpass' with its 'massive concrete pillars' (12), and, on the other, the 'waist-high' grass, 'nettles' and other rusting car wrecks on the strange interstitial island onto which Maitland crashes. The embankment, 'vertical concrete walls' (33) and perimeter fence are repeatedly described in a way that emphasizes Maitland's entrapment, and the island landscape, with the ever-present noise and danger of the motorway, is the narrative's main concern as his first attempt to escape ends up in further injury. Readers might expect the motorway to be associated with work and the island with leisure. Instead, the apparent conflation of this hostile motorway landscape with the leisure architecture of Ballardur in Maitland's mind invites us to question leisure utopias as well as work spaces and underscores the possibility that Maitland's island itself may offer an escape both from the nightmare round of traffic as he gradually habituates himself to it, and also from the potential entrapments of the modern leisure space. Yet the process of Maitland's gradual accommodation to his surroundings is located in what is to some extent an 'outside' space surrounded by an 'inside' which Ballard intriguingly represents through embodied experience.

It is through recycling resources rather than exploiting them for innovation that Maitland proceeds.<sup>4</sup> Through cannibalising the Jaguar car for a crutch (its brand name succinctly conjoining the mechanical and the jungle animal), he gradually becomes more aware of the landscape of abandoned shelters and breakers' yards, noting the traces of

Edwardian and Victorian buildings beneath and contemplating that to harness the 'limited resources' of the island 'now seemed a more important role than escaping' (26). Among the concrete shelters he discovers Proctor's 'abandoned beggar's hovel' (76) and the abandoned cinema where Jane Shepherd has her 'shabby room' which nonetheless 't[akes] on all the style and comfort of a riverside suite at the Savoy' (80). Many such features of the text are architecturally marked, none more so than the 'small shack' or 'pavilion of rust' which, tiring of schemes to trick Proctor into effecting his escape, Maitland gets him to build out of 'the discarded sections of car bodies' (162). 'He's done a good job' Jane comments when the pavilion is completed, 'At least as good as most of the speculative building that's going up these days. I can see that you are a real architect' (163). Like Maitland's wife and mistress, then, she too is coded by the novel in terms of an architectural taste. In her comment the architecture is at once contrasted to the 'speculative building' of modernity and yet is clearly itself of a modern rather than in any sense traditional style, suggesting at once a post-industrial or recycled version of Crusoe's found-object style of island survival shelter and glimpsing a more sustainable version of the perversely eroticised junk-yard dystopia which Ballard envisages in *Crash*. Though forbiddingly metallic and precariously improvisational, this architecture seems hospitable in its responsiveness to its immediately surrounding environment and it is there Maitland experiences his 'mood of quiet exaltation' at the close, having made the island his own, begun to regain physical health and strength and now having it almost within his own power to escape the island or remain on it at will.

It might, therefore, be in terms of a deeper concept of the 'architectural' and not just through its discussion of specific architects and styles of architecture that these intertexts of *Concrete Island* communicate most profoundly to the reader. I refer here to the architectural as it is defined in the foundational modernist analysis of Walter Benjamin, in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction' ([1936] 1973), so well-known for its critical account of the visual arts, the cinema, photography and writing in modern society. In this essay Benjamin defines modern architecture as emblematic of the way that art in the age of the mass is no longer contemplated and revered from an aesthetic distance but experienced in a state of distraction: 'Architecture', he writes, 'has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction' (241). He explains the antiquity of architecture and the human need for shelter, suggesting that:

buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception – or rather by touch or sight. Such attention cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. [...T]he tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation. (Benjamin 1973: 241)

In this precise Benjaminian sense the architectural may serve as a term for the way in which the modern subject habituates itself to the built environment of modernity in a state of distraction and habit and also uses senses other than the visual (notably the tactile) to orient itself. In Benjaminian terms a crisis of modernity might be said to occur when these two modes of sensual appropriation fall apart, mirroring the collapse between the individual and the collective experience of space in the modern world. This, or something like it, is the process more fully explored by Ballard in *High-Rise*, where the utopian all-purpose leisured building becomes a war zone. Its very material – concrete – is in the later novel identified as part of ‘an architecture designed for war’ and the building that forms the novel’s subject is (most interestingly for Benjaminian approach) specifically said to have been designed for the ‘individual’, not the ‘collective’ (Ballard 2000: 36).

Maitland too is in the literal sense an individual rather than a collective. Indeed, as Tew argues (2008: 114), his situation may reflect the traumatic situation of the bourgeois individual expressing a collective experience. In this respect there is much that contrasts as well as resonates with Benjamin’s account. Yet in interpreting his Crusoe-esque and architectural manner of habituating himself to his environment by ‘tactile appropriation’ we can find interesting parallels. Whereas his relation to the circulating traffic on the motorway beyond the island is achieved through visual contemplation, his habituation to the island itself is achieved through an experience of the bodily to which his wounds and crutch, the various struggles with entrapment and the sexual encounter with Jane informed by Astaire, Rogers and dance, and his Prospero-like battle for control of Proctor, all contribute.

The body, which can be approached through the distracted tactile modernity that Benjamin defines as the experience of the architectural, meanwhile provides one of the most intellectually challenging passages of the text. Here Maitland is coming to terms with the pain of his injuries through a process of psychological distancing, displacement or distraction that takes a fascinating and rather surrealistic turn worth quoting at length:

As he tottered about, Maitland found himself losing interest in his own body and in the pain that inflamed his leg. He began to shuck off sections of his body [...] Identifying the island with himself, he gazed at the cars in the breaker’s yard, at the wire-mesh fence, and the concrete caisson behind him. These places of pain and ordeal were now confused with pieces of his body. He gestured towards them, trying to make a circuit of the island so that he could leave these sections of himself where they belonged. He would leave his right leg at the point of his crash, his bruised hands impaled on the steel fence. He would place his chest where he had sat against the concrete wall. At each point a small ritual would signify the transfer of obligation from himself to the island.

He spoke aloud, a priest officiating at the eucharist of his own body.  
‘I am the island.’ (Ballard 1994: 71)

This most fascinating image seems to offer itself for extended interpretation. As well as resembling a psychotherapeutic practice in which the mind can train itself to cope with

pain, it captures the extremity and strangeness of Maitland's experience as he merges his identity into that of the island. By the time Maitland recalls the experience towards the end of the novel as a 'magical therapy' (156) it has apparently come to replace his desire for domination with the desire for a kind of bodily merging and distribution of selfhood in the otherness of the physical space. The passage suggests many things, including the strange mergers of bodies and motorcar parts that obsess Ballard in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, the symbolic body of Christian ritual, the body as strangely recast in modernist and surrealist visual representations and as it is conceived in the famous mirror stage of Lacanian psychoanalysis: that is, in the process of disintegration and reintegration of the self (Lacan 2001). Reading the passage in terms of Benjamin's account of the architectural makes the claim 'I am the island' an especially appropriate symbolic state of distraction to be experienced by a character who is an architect. Perhaps Maitland even anticipates the more negative figure of Anthony Royal in *High-Rise*, who still more directly becomes the victim of the environment he has created. More particularly in the intertextual language of the novel, Maitland's Crusoe-like habituation to the Kafka-esque world he inhabits is symbolically expressed in a language of the body.

Maitland's traumatic sense of the integration of his 'I' and the island in the concluding phrase of this important passage 'I am the island' (Ballard 1994: 71), which is repeated towards the close of the novel (156), is strongly suggestive of a process of habituation becoming complete. Yet these body images might in other respects anticipate the more disturbing images of symbolic disintegration in *High-Rise*, which directly relate to the experience of modern architecture when Laing recalls his medical studies, during which 'The steady amputation of limbs and thorax, head and abdomen, by teams of students which would reduce each cadaver by term's end to a clutch of bones and a body tag, was exactly matched to the erosion of the world around the high-rise' (Ballard 2000: 36). In both texts bodily disintegration is mapped onto a distracting architecture of modernity which contains elements of adventure and possibility but also of dystopian nightmare.

What I have called Maitland's Crusoeism of the Kafkaesque certainly contains both these possibilities: his gradual habituation to his environment on the one hand leads him to extreme acts of domination and on the other towards a symbolic integration of selfhood and alterity through the bodily or tactile that at once suggests Walter Benjamin and new architectural forms which attempt to steer a course between the excesses of modernist colonial utopianism and its others. The play of Ballard's literary intertextualities in *Concrete Island* allows us to articulate without overdetermining his vision as a Crusoeism of the Kafkaesque, expanding beyond the literary to include reference to the architecture of the Mediterranean leisure complex La Grande Motte of his namesake Jean Ballardur, opening extratextual discussions of modernity and leisure architecture, and of the architectural as experienced distractedly in modernity that inform the extensive body imagery of the work. Such references deepen and expand our reading of the text without defusing its structural ambiguities, leaving us at the close with Maitland planning his escape and return to the reality he has 'exited' just as he arrives at a condition where he may not neither need nor want to escape from the island after all.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of the relationship between Ballard and Surrealism, see Jeannette Baxter's (2016) contribution to this special issue.

<sup>2</sup> Baxter proposed this in her paper delivered at "Archiving the Future: J.G. Ballard's Concrete Island Forty Years On" at the University of York July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> It would seem unnecessarily pedantic to object that the Ziggurats themselves were stepped pyramids from Mesopotamia from 400 BC whereas Ballardur's pyramids are more precisely modelled on the pre-Columbian Teotihuacan pyramids of Mexico dating from around 250 AD.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of Maitland's use of 'recycling' in order to survive on the island, see Craig Martin's (2016) contribution to this special issue.

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