

## Research Article

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# Exploring, Photographing and Vacationing in J. G. Ballard's Airport Landscape

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**Abstract:** Landscape and architecture has played a major role in J. G. Ballard's writing, I have in particular been fascinated with the use of airports in his work. When attempting to hunt down and photograph J. G. Ballard's airport landscape police and security would disrupt my ability to take photographs meaning initial plans would be altered and I would turn my focus to the peripheries, spending time cut off from the infrastructure, dwelling in abandoned waste land and forgotten patches of wilderness. Inadvertently I would replay the roles of certain characters from Ballard's work, becoming marooned and learning to adapt to the landscape. Photographing these places would yield unusual results, images resembling a science fiction landscape, turning the realist properties of photography on its head. I would discover that the extreme nature of the airport landscape influences those who experience it, so when Ballard's work portrays the modern landscape he is also revealing the unseen psychology of the humans inhabiting it.

**Keywords:** psychogeography, contemporary, architecture, urban planning, photography, sprawl

On a project lasting over four years I have been obsessively walking, studying and photographing the airport landscape. The writing and ideas of J. G. Ballard can clearly be seen when out exploring these places and would come to heavily influence my experiences and the images I would make.

A key turning point in my interest was a visit to Marseilles. I decided to decline the luxury of a hotel room and the culture of a bustling historic city centre, and instead I walked through the night, exploring and taking photographs of the vast sprawl of Marseilles airport, its zone of influence covering approximately five square miles. On the first night of walking this strange, complex interzone, I found myself on the edge of a retail park at 3am, the unexpected appearance of a distant figure walking across an unlit car park made me realise that for the whole night I hadn't seen anyone on foot outside of a car. It felt like I had made a discovery, a new unexplored wilderness of freeways, car parks and industrial estates. I totally immersed myself, compulsively walking and sleeping rough, for three nights. It was hard to traverse on foot, crossing freeways, climbing fences and minor acts of trespass were essential for navigation. After that trip I would go exploring airports any opportunity I had, predominantly Heathrow but any international airport around the world would deliver that familiar landscape of extremes.

Investment and development in airports has been growing as air passenger numbers steadily increase, devouring more land and spreading its influence further into the surrounding landscape. Often built from scratch, these functional machines are set apart from the older city with space to grow, embracing all modern forms of transport, striving for speed and connectivity. Here every amenity is available making it possible to live a comfortable modern life in the airport zone without ever leaving.

J. G. Ballard has featured runways and airports in much of his writing, taking advantage of this complex terrain "designed for the next five minutes". His most famous novel *Crash*, (1973) was set around the motorways and dual carriageways of Heathrow, the landscape having a kind of intoxicating influence on its characters. When David Cronenberg decided to set the movie of *Crash*, (1996) in Toronto Ballard commended

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this choice, and in the past has said that in the novel he “did not want to evoke specific examples of place”. The outskirts of Toronto were perfect, they lacked any distinguishing features, the kind of blueprint found repeated on the edge of any city, complementing the detached narrative of the book. Inevitably this vague, indistinct, geography would also apply to my images, photos taken around the world would merge into one fictional airport city.



Figure 1.

In his essay *The Ultimate Departure Lounge*, (1997) Ballard writes

For the past 25 years I have lived in the Thames Valley town of Shepperton, a suburb not of London but of London airport. The catchment area of Heathrow extends for at least ten miles to its south and west, a zone of motorway intersections, dual carriageways, science parks, marinas and industrial estates, watched by police CCTV speed check cameras, a landscape that most people affect to loathe but which I regard as the most advanced and admirable in the British Isles, and a paradigm for the best the future offers us. I welcome the transience, alienation and discontinuities and its unashamed response to the pressures of speed, disposability and the instant impulse.

(Airport, p118, Photographers Gallery Institute, 1997)

The “transience, alienation and discontinuities” Ballard mentions are easy to observe. Discontinuities are apparent when it comes to ideas of time and history; creating a modern airport involves bulldozing all traces of history to give way to functionality and speed. It is a gateway to new time zones, there are moments of immense speed and power played out on the runway, but in contrast, perception of time can slow down in waiting rooms and departure lounges. Bordering these seemingly futuristic settings there will inevitably be a small patch of wilderness that over the years has been cut off and isolated by the growing infrastructure around it, and there will be the rivers, streams and wildlife that were there before the airport was built and that will possibly survive long after the airport crumbles and disappears. By avoiding everyday pedestrian and residential zones, and purposely disregarding the true function and innovative technology of the airport an explorer can immerse themselves into a truly alienating experience. This subjective form of travel, of only seeking out extreme settings, can reveal an unevenly distributed future, surreal locations that enable you to easily create photographs of a sci-fi landscape, where even the wildlife can seem alien.

When discussing Heathrow Hilton in an Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist Ballard said:

The Heathrow Hilton, designed by Michael Manser, is a masterpiece. It is my favourite building in London, and keeps alive the spirit of the 20th century's greatest architect, Le Corbusier. Beautifully proportioned, it resembles a cross between a brain surgery hospital and a space station. I am always supremely happy in its vast atrium, and I wait for the day when the whole of London resembles this future classic. Sitting in its atrium one becomes, briefly, a more advanced kind of human being. Within this remarkable building one feels no emotions and could never fall in love, or need to. I'd like everything to be like that. I'd like England to look as if everybody was getting ready to leave for Mars.

(2003 Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Becks Future Exhibition Catalogue)

My own perspective is not quite the bright sterile vision, perhaps because I am looking from the outside. My images are Martian red via sodium vapour, the trees are skeletal and bare from the long dark winter; here is the perspective of someone left behind while the future continues to crystallise without them. Outside of the automotive matrix, fed into only by slip-roads and tunnels, it is hard to gain entry.

At the start, my intentions were to explore and photograph the terminals and runways, the high-tech machines of glass, concrete and steel. Unfortunately, the presence of armed police, airport security and private security firms make it impossible to have free reign to shoot. This would often compel me to retreat into the deserted peripheries. Certain locations are cut off by infrastructure, inaccessible to humans, much like the traffic island that the character Maitland in *Concrete Island* (1974) finds himself marooned on. Maitland would eventually learn to thrive and dominate his new found realm which over time starts to resemble a map of his own psyche that he voluntarily chooses to retreat into. I would also need to learn to survive, purposefully marooning myself, developing stealth wild camping skills, learning to traverse the difficult terrain and vanishing into a dehumanised, automated world.

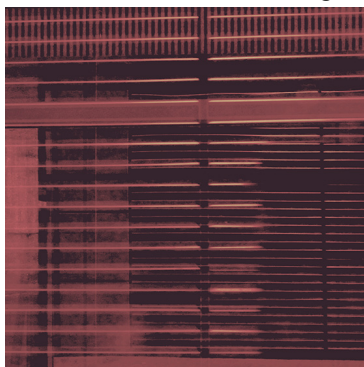


Figure 2.

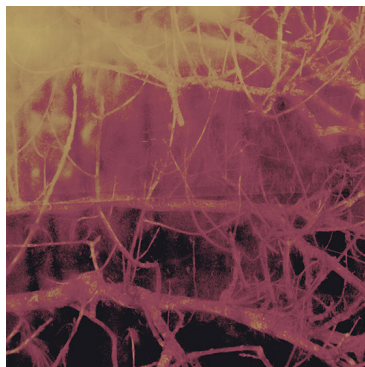


Figure 3.

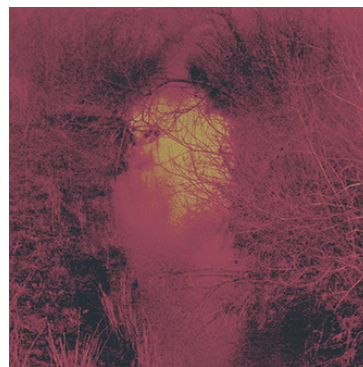


Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

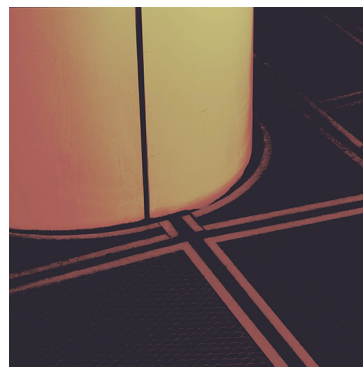


Figure 7.

The airport landscape can launch us away from our organic past, but the human mind still holds an intrinsic desire to be surrounded by nature, even a patch of wild grass next to a diverted stream can satisfy this need. Airports tend to be built out in the countryside inevitably meaning there are areas where technology borders nature, in these marginal ecosystems I am frequently reminded of the post-apocalyptic landscape

of swamps, tropical fauna and reptiles in *The Drowned World* (1962). In the novel, Triassic-like conditions bring on primitive subconscious memories. As the characters devolve, they instinctively move towards the sun, despite inevitable death. The natural patches of land by the airport can appear as an ancient, deserted wilderness, but it does not escape the influence of the airport. Closer inspection reveals that swamps are in fact balancing ponds and reservoirs, rivers have been re-routed and the vegetation appears to be mutating under sodium vapour. It looks like the technological and the biological have merged into a new kind of wilderness, trees and lampposts are the same, soil is mixed with roadside dust made of finely ground concrete and glass. Here there are no humans, it is often just you and the wildlife, perfect conditions to take long exposure photographs through the night without being disturbed.

In *Ultimate Departure Lounge* Ballard's fascination in the airport landscape is evident, describing his appreciation for places that many people have negative feelings towards.

In addition to the airport itself, I value the benevolent social and architectural influence that a huge transit facility like Heathrow casts on the urban landscape around it. I have learned to like the intricate network of perimeter roads, the car rental offices, air freight depots and travel clinics, the light industrial and motel architecture that unvaryingly surrounds every major airport in the world, together they constitute the reality of our lives, rather than some mythical domain of village greens, cathedral closes and manorial vistas.

(Airport, p118, Photographers Gallery Institute, 1997)

Here Ballard helps illustrate why we should not ignore these places as it truly reflects who we are as modern humans and the direction that we are headed. It does appear that in the future, airports and commercial air travel will continue to grow, possibly even to an interplanetary scale, however as often happens in the past it could also be superseded by another form of travel or our digital lifestyles will end the need to travel or even go outdoors. If so this vast infrastructure will become obsolete, waiting to be recycled, repurposed or possibly left to slowly degrade, only of interest to a new kind of tourist, urban explorers with a fetish for abandonment and decay, coming solely to witness the vast inanimate monuments to the jet age. Maybe only then will we appreciate what a major accomplishment this was and to what extent it shaped our lives.



Figure 8.

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