

# JG Ballard's Cocaine Nights: A Time-Space Configured Society

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## Abstract:

J. G Ballard is a name that changed the direction of science fiction from outer space to inner space. He says the true alien planet is the Earth. A novelist, short story writer, and an essayist Ballard, associated himself with the New Wave movement in science fiction. He writes about bleak man-made landscapes, the effects of technology on the human psyche as well as apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic novels. His works tend to focus on themes like dystopia, social decay, and dehumanization. He keeps time and space at the center of the fictional world of his novels and due to his literary distinctiveness his kind of fictional works have earned the epithet: 'Ballardian'. His novels bring up ecological imbalanced landscapes caused by the technological advances while also dealing with the constructed Spatio-temporalities in the contemporary western world and present how they affect the lives of people in the post-modern world regulated by capitalistic economy. In the present paper, a study is made on J G Ballard's novel *Cocaine Nights* (1996) that explores the construction of a time-space configured society (Beckman 273) in the contemporary western urban. It speaks about how time and space are designed for comfort of man while bringing about the dark realities behind the veneer of such comforts and luxuries. It is a visionary work about realities, kinds of which are organized and regulated by the contemporary western capitalists. The novel fictionalizes the complexities of the social setup. It is contextual and relevant in the light of the increasing technologization and construction of time and space and man's yielding to this design. Through this novel, J.G. Ballard projects the future which is going to take place on this earth soon and shows how man's activities are overtly and covertly constructed, regulated, and managed by the capitalists.

Keywords: Time, Space, Boredom, Leisure, Capitalism, and Crime

In the history of science fiction (New Wave movement) and British literature, J. G Ballard occupies a significant place. J.G. Ballard has changed the direction of science fiction from outer space to inner space. He writes about the bleakness of man-made landscapes and the effects of technology on the human psyche. His works deal with the contemporary western landscapes. Regarding the place of eminence

of the writer in the history of contemporary literature, Iain Sinclair says, "In the pantheon of writers of the late 20th century I think he'd be right at the top." *The Wind from Nowhere* (1961), *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Burning World* (1964), and *The Crystal World* (1966) : his initial works have dealt with natural disasters as their subject while his works written in his mid-career deal with the effects of technology on man -as in *Crash* (1973), *Concrete Island* (1974), and *High Rise* (1975). Novels written by him latter are concerned with urbanization, gated communities and constructed realities- as in *Cocaine Nights* (1996), *Super-Cannes* (2000), *Millennium People* (2003), and *Kingdom Come* (2006).

David Harvey delivering a lecture on the concept of space states that "it is very difficult to speak without invoking the concept time" (Harvey 127). According to him "different societies produce qualitatively different conceptions of space and time [therefore] ... each social formation constructs objective conceptions of space and time sufficient unto its own needs and purposes of material social reproduction and organizes its material practices in accordance with those conceptions" (qtd. in Zieleniec Ch. 4). So there are multiple Spatio-temporalities existed in the world. Then, how does a particular Spatio-temporality get determined? Harvey explains that "it is very closely bound up with the power structures and social relations, particular modes of production and consumption, existing in a given society. Therefore the determination of what is space and what is time is not politically neutral but is politically embedded in a certain structure of power relations" (127). Thus we can say that the particular time-space is determined by the political and economic system of that society.

Architecture also plays a key role in the determination of a specific Spatio-temporality. In the words of Knabb “architecture is the simplest means of articulating time and space, of modulating reality and engendering dreams. It is a matter not only of plastic articulation and modulation expressing an ephemeral beauty but of a modulation producing influences in accordance with the eternal spectrum of human desires and the progress in fulfilling them” (3). The capitalists design the architecture keeping in mind the needs and desires of the inhabitants. Thus the needs and desires of the inhabitants externalized through architecture.

In 1983, Ballard stated “the sort of architectural spaces we inhabit are enormously important — they are powerful. If every member of the human race were to vanish, our successors from another planet could reconstitute the psychology of the people on this planet from its architecture” (Vale 44). ‘Space’ has a special concern in J G Ballard works; the space referred here is both external and internal. His works confront the potentiality of space within the contemporary landscape, articulating complex relationships between the external environment and the individual. The outer space is the reflection of the inner psyche of the man. In the novel *Cocaine Nights*, the space is designed to abolish time. The novel comes under the latter category of J G Ballard career.

Andrzej Gasiorek points out that “the last four novels of J G Ballard mark a shift from the collapse of social systems explored in Ballard’s earlier texts to a depiction of the implications of the success of social systems. This is a completely different type of dystopia — the nightmare of the ultimate success of capitalism” (20) — or, as Jeanette Baxter puts it “the alliance of neo-fascism and global capitalism across a shifting contemporary Europe” (386). Instead of dystopian wastelands and natural disasters, these later novels are set in spaces of perfection. All human needs, Gasiorek notes, “have been anticipated, and the entire social mechanism has been calibrated to minimize friction and disturbance” (21).

The space and time of the novel ‘*Cocaine Nights*’ are specially constructed to accommodate the wealthy and retired people of Europe. This space is being constructed as a prison for the rich. All of them are beneficiaries of global capitalism, they nonetheless appear as victims to its Spatio-temporal logic. The territory of the rich in Estrella de Mar in *Cocaine Nights* is described as a place of unreality and surface, an “affectless realm” (Ballard 35) where the miles of white cement erase memory and abolishes time (34). Similarly, the nearby Costa sol complex builds its inhabitants into “prisons” disguised as luxury condos designed for people to do nothing (220, 213). They sit in their “capsules” where the shadows on the walls become a “substitute for thought” (215). This is a limbo for those who can afford it, a place where the redundancy of time and movement is built into the structure of existence. Space not only serves as a container for passive life but seems to be endowed with more life than the waiting “like the armatures of the human beings who would occupy them that evening” (215). If the patient waiting for the beach furniture symbolizes the total subsumption of agency of the residents of Estrella de Mar and Costa sol through the perfection of leisure.

The protagonist of the novel Charles Prentice is a travel writer by profession. He is informed that his brother Franck Prentice is arrested by the police for his role in a fire, at a place in Estrella de Mar in Costa del Sol, that has killed five people. Further, he is informed that his brother has confessed his guilt. Shocked by the information and feeling that his brother can never commit such a crime, he wants to visit Costa del Sol. He feels that his brother might have confessed his crime to save someone. Charles visits Club Nautico, the sports club in Estrella de Mar to which Frank was the secretary and tries to gather information by meeting various people with a view to unravel the actualities behind the murders. As days pass by, he realizes the setting of the Estrella de Mar has a mystery of its own; he wants to unearth the hitherto unknown facts about it for which he becomes a member of that society. What he discovers is that it is

a leisure society, where human needs leading to a happy and trouble-free life are fulfilled in advance. All the members are so benumbed by the comforts provided by the capitalists that their original humanity ceases to exist.

Charles Prentice as a travel writer immediately recognizes the architecture of the place. He notices: “The cubist apartments and terraced houses resembled Arcosanti’s, their architecture dedicated to the abolition of time, as befitted the aging population of the retirement havens and an even wider world waiting to be old” (Ballard 26), and soon he makes a mental picture for his next article “the memory-erasing white architecture; the enforced leisure that fossilized the nervous system” (Ballard 27). This lays down a very crucial hint to what is to follow in the story and how the architecture of these places is reconstructed ideologically by the residents. When Prentice infers that in Estrella de Mar, there is an “apparent absence of any social structure; the timelessness of a world beyond boredom, with no past, no future and a diminishing present” (Ballard 35), we find the meaning-making process of the architecture compliments it perfectly well.

Through his research, Charles finds that the Estrella de Mar was constructed in 1970 to attract and accommodate the rich Europeans. The place is not designed to attract tourists but to accommodate the permanent settlers from Europe. He realizes that this place has more attraction than what he “had guessed when Frank first arrived to manage the Club Nautico.” (Ballard 29). Bobby Crawford describes the features of the Estrella de Mar like this “It’s a fortified medieval city. This is Goldfinger’s defensible space raised to an almost planetary intensity - security guards, tele-surveillance, no entrance except through the main gates, the whole complex closed to outsiders. It’s a grim thought, but you’re looking at the future” (Ballard 203).

The residents of Costa del Sol are an expatriate

community of Europe who wants to lead a comfortable and luxurious life after their retirement. They want to alienate themselves from the rest of the world. The alienation is high that even though “The sea’s only two hundred yards away but none of the villas looks out on to the beach. Space is totally internalized” (Ballard 203). Dr. Sanger explains that What Charles sees here is a ‘leisure society.’ According to Henri Lefebvre time and space are constructed in conjunction with political and economic demands (Beckman 278). In this novel, we can observe that space and time are constructed according to the demands of the economic system. Here man is completely subsumed to this economic and political system.

As the protagonist begins his investigation of the fire at the Hollinger house and thus his ethnographic study of the Costa del Sol, he quickly realizes that what has materialized on the Spanish coast is a fully developed leisure society, in which work is almost absent. The novel repeatedly emphasizes that as such, the Costa del Sol may well be an embodiment of the future of Europe, a kind of “prototype” for a “leisure-dominated future” (Ballard 187, 35). As the charismatic Bobby Crawford explains to Prentice that “Our governments are preparing for a future without work [...]. Leisure societies lie ahead of us, like those you see on this coast. People will still work – or, rather, some people will work, but only for a decade of their lives. They will retire in their late thirties, with fifty years of idleness in front of them” (Ballard 180).

The excessive leisure results in boredom. If we are unable, manage our time properly that can cause frustration, boredom. Boredom is “numbness to the appeal of all things.” It causes time to either halt or slow down. When we are bored, it seems as if we need to seek a “distraction,” something to “take/get” us out of this state of being. When we fail to find that “distraction” we fall or remain in that state of boredom, which is timeless. Boredom constitutes timelessness, a sort of mock timelessness and that can lead to

vandalism, transgressive behaviors, ill-health, and so on. Richard G. Krauss cited the case of Puerto Rico in 1967 to explain how people may find fun in transgressive behaviors born out of leisure. He quotes a nun who had witnessed the crime scenes and says: “They were doing it out of the sport, you know, not maliciously. They were laughing like: ‘Isn’t this great fun, getting something for free’” (227). A converse of the same is presented to us through Bobby Crawford who believes that people’s life in Costa Sol Complex is stagnant (as it was in Estrella de Mar as well before his arrival) and crimes are the only way to bring the residential area back to life.

The novel speaks about how time and space in Estrella de Mar are designed for comfort of man while also bringing about the dark realities behind the veneer of such comforts and luxuries. The capitalists designed this resort to lead a life without work and time i.e., excessive leisure. This excessive leisure resulted in perpetual boredom. They are living like aliens on this earth; they don’t have any relation to the rest of the world. They are numbed to the activities around them. To awake them from this perpetual boredom, we need the distraction. Here in this novel *Cocaine Nights*, we have this distraction in the form of transgressive behavior. Bobby Crawford is the man who is trying to wake people from this boredom through violence and transgressive behavior.

Again the time-space configured Costa del Sol Complex helps Crawford in carrying out his plans. To his advantage, he is a tennis coach of the club Nautico, and he maintains good relations with the owner of the Club Nautico Elizabeth Shand. He made friends with Frank Prentice earlier then manger and now with Charles Prentice. So Crawford has the freedom to access all the areas of the residential complex. The fortified walls ensure that no other disciplinary forces entered the premises, and the security measures were completely dependent upon the individual telesurveillance cameras maintained by each member at his/her flats. The burglaries, rape attempts, fire

accidents, and thefts done by Crawford often went unreported to the external world, as it happened in Estrella de Mar as well. The main purpose of all these activities is to bring the residents together, and Crawford succeeded tremendously and started organizing these kinds of events regularly. Soon, the transgressive nature of Crawford started reflecting in the residents; theft, burglary, pornography, drugs, etc. became an integral part of their quotidian. Chris Jenks, who has researched crime, explains how crime works in a leisure community; “They like it, they take pleasure in it, they pass their time through it, they may acquire mastery in it, they may exercise choice through it, find fulfillment through it, it may be exciting and distracting – it might constitute a leisure pursuit not the exercise of labor power” (290).

Before these activities and organized events, Costa del Sol is looking like a lifeless world. From the rest of the progress followed, as Chris Jenks puts it, “we might profitably view crime as a sustaining mode of leisure” (289). Charles realizes the nature of crime and observes that “residencia costa sol had come to life” (214). Residents start to take pleasure in the organized events such as theft, burglary, rape, pornography, drugs, and fire.

At the end of the novel, we learn that the fire at the Hollinger Mansion is not started by any individual nor is it propelled by any personal grudge on the Hollinger’s. Rather, it is a plan to ensure that “No one lay around watching television; they come out from their luxury condos and calmed their nerves by spending money” (Ballard 277). The Hollinger’s Mansion is “one of the oldest properties at Estrella de Mar, its timbers and roof joists dried like biscuit by a hundred summers” (Ballard 26), and the legacy and reach it has in the minds of the people provides Elizabeth Shand and her business a mileage that is multiple times stronger than what all of Bobby Crawford’s petty crimes combined gave. Time-space configuration, hence, becomes a powerful metaphor for both capitalism and crime in the novel. Thus, we are shown an ultimate time-space configured society,

where capitalism constructs the world beyond time, work, and unending leisure that leads boredom again the same capitalists organize events of crime to wake the residents from boredom. Here the subject is completely subsumed to the logic of the capitalists. Each resident of the Costa del Sol becomes part of the organized crime, “where everyone is criminal and no one is aware of the fact” (Ballard 260).

Here the protagonist, Charles Prentice is an outsider. He came to Estrella de Mar to prove the innocence of his brother. But he becomes victim to the Spatio-temporal logic and becomes a member of the society. Eventually, he participates in all the organized crime events. He, instead of feeling alienated in society, takes up the job offered by Crawford and happily follows the life in Costa del Sol. If at all there was a voice of protest that was of Dr. Sanger, which was weak and feeble that it hardly made any difference. The only person who brought about some change was Bobby Crawford. He could not stand the stagnant life lived by the leisure societies in Estrella de Mar and Residencia Costa Sol. So he tried to develop a counter-culture of crime, transgressive behavior, drugs, and pornography.

To conclude, J G Ballard’s novel *Cocaine Nights* is about a time-space configured society where everything is organized and constructed, even the human subject also,- by the capitalists to gain more profits.

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