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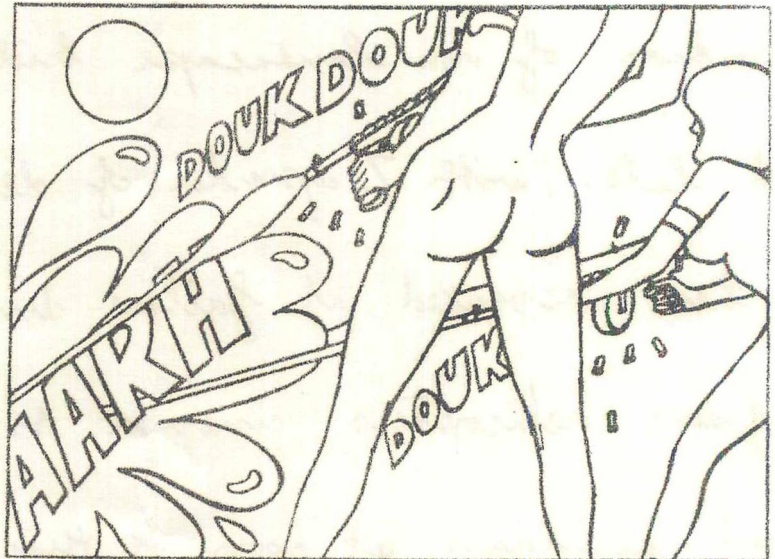
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# THE ATROCITY EXHIBITION

J. G. BALLARD



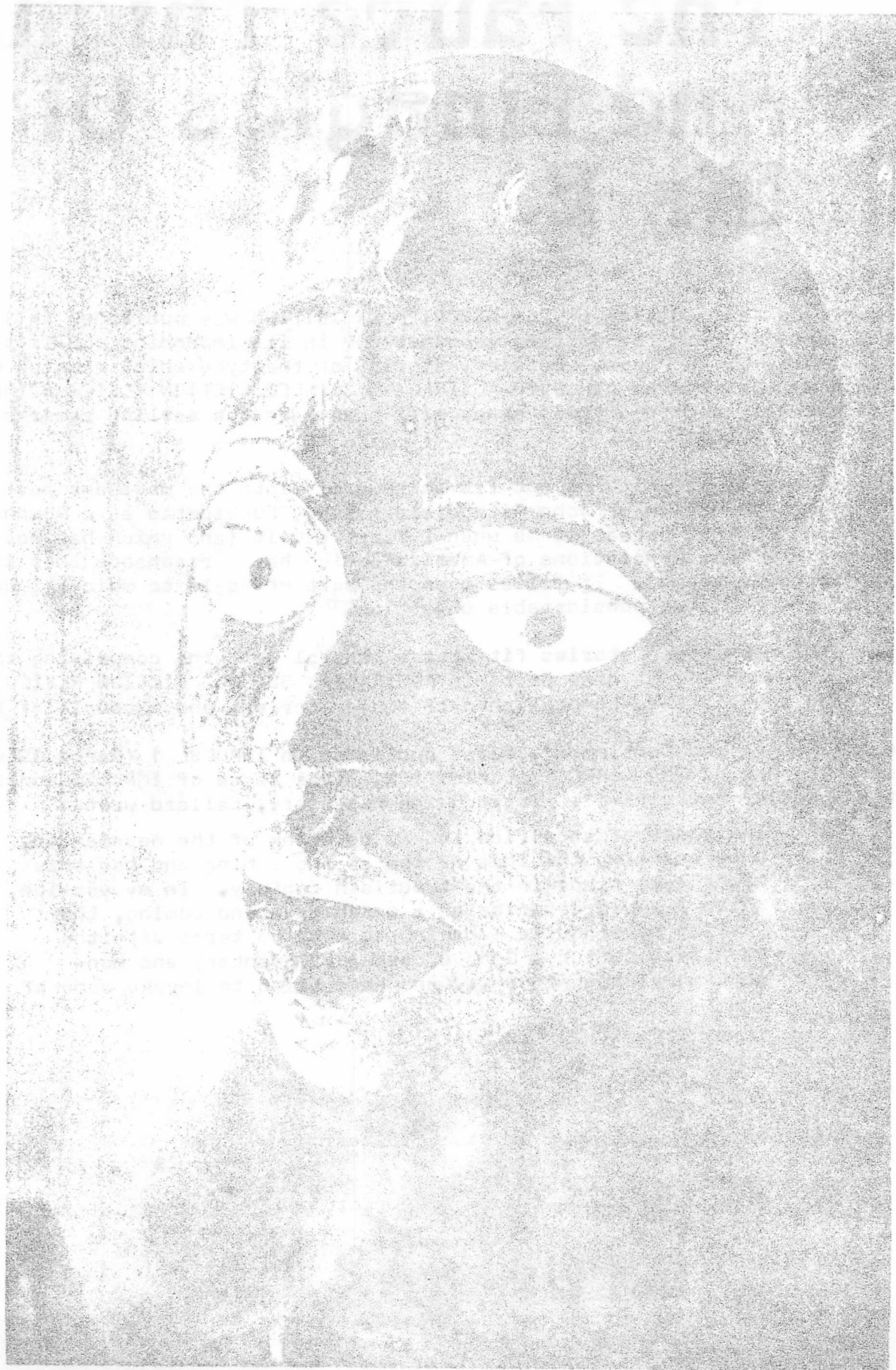
Jonathan Cape  
Thirty Bedford Square London

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SF COMMENTARY is published by Bruce Gillespie, GPO Box 5195AA, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, AUSTRALIA, and is available for letters of comment, contributions, or traded magazines. Also @ \$3 for 9. There are also an incredible number of international financial deals only understood by Bruce Gillespie.

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This combined edition is perpetrated by John Foyster: address all complaints & ticking parcels to B.R. Gillespie at his GPO Box.



# The Fauve Thighs And Finagles Of Mr. B.

Although the Cape edition of THE ATROCITY EXHIBITION was published in 1970 I can find a justification for writing about it now in its impending publication by, when I last heard, Grove Press. Earlier, stories of the type which make up the bulk of the book were discussed by me in AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW 8 (March 1967), but as not all readers of this essay will have seen the earlier remarks I may repeat some of them here.

There are two items which do not fit so securely into the dominant pattern. These are 'The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race' which did not appeal to me when I first saw it (and which has not improved with age) and 'The Generations of America' which has a resonance that is unavoidable (or so it seems to me). It relies upon the sort of style to which, I understood, J.G. Ballard had some considerable objection.

The remaining thirteen stories fit into a general pattern, comprising that 'broader canvas' of which Lee Harding wrote in AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW 1 when describing the first-to-be-published of these stories, and a couple of spin-offs.

'You and Me and the Continuum', first published in IMPULSE 1 (March 1966) is printed towards the end of THE ATROCITY EXHIBITION. That issue of IMPULSE contained stories on the theme of 'sacrifice'. Introducing his story, Ballard wrote:

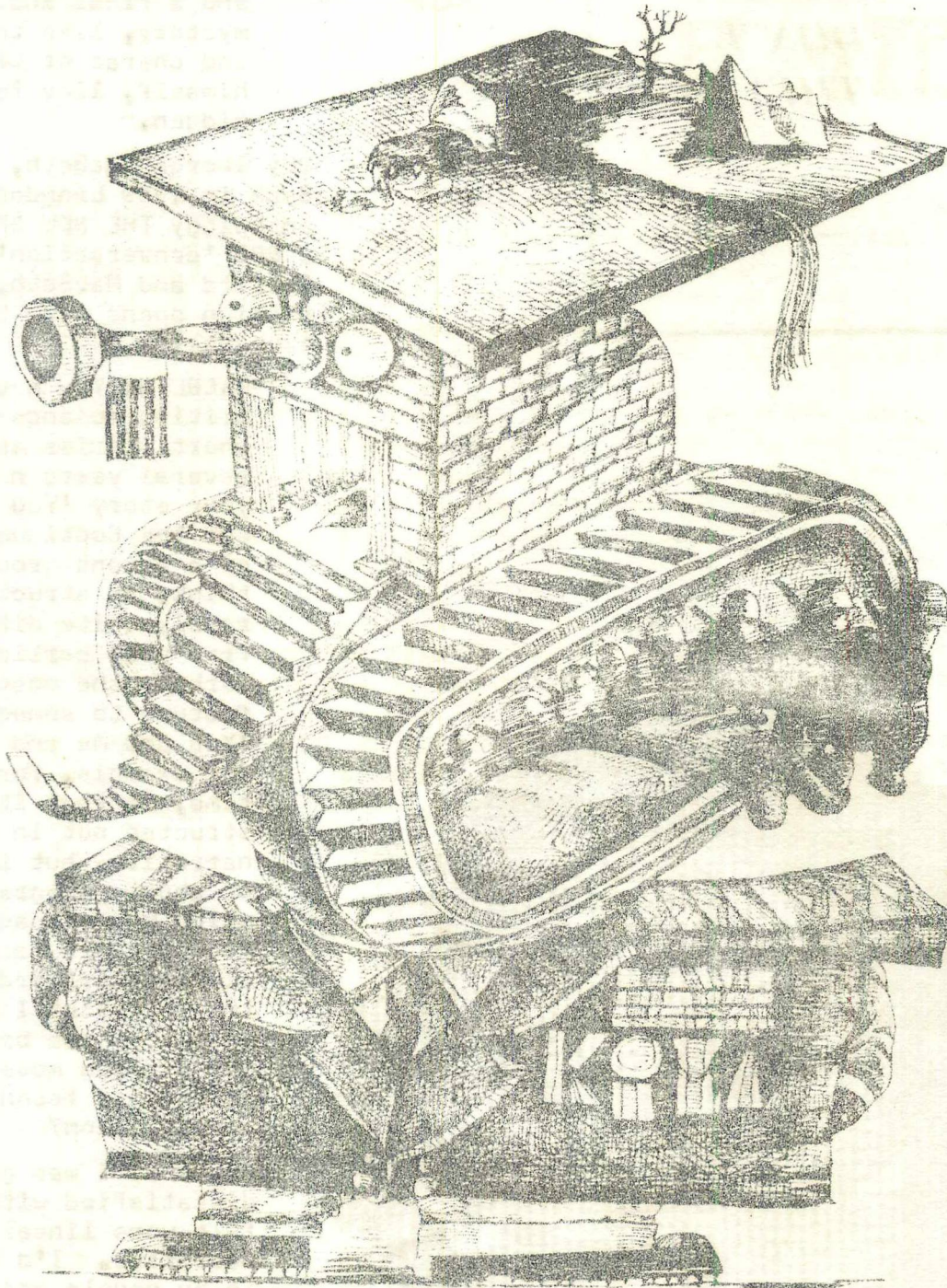
"The theme of sacrifice led me to think of the Messiah or, more exactly, the idea of the second coming and how this might take place in the twentieth century. In my version, which I would describe as a botched second coming, the Messiah never quite managing to come to terms with the twentieth century, I have used a fragmentary and non-sequential technique ... and have tried to invoke some of





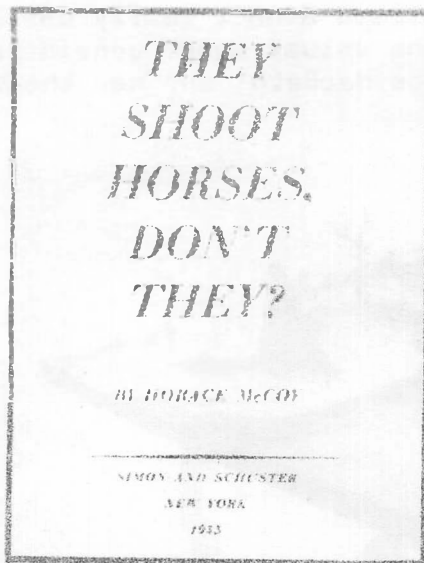
the images that a twentieth century Messiah might see.  
You'll notice that the entries are alphabetised."

The entries are indeed alphabetised, a device Ballard didn't really use again until 'The Beach Murders' (NEW WORLDS 189 and not in the volume under consideration), where it is subtitled 'an entertainment for George MacBeth' and has the following introduction:



"Readers hoping to solve the mystery of the Beach Murders - involving a Romanoff Princess, a CIA agent, two of his Russian counterparts, and an American limbo dancer - may care to approach it in the form of the card game with which Quimby, the absconding State Department cipher chief, amused himself in his hideaway on the Costa del



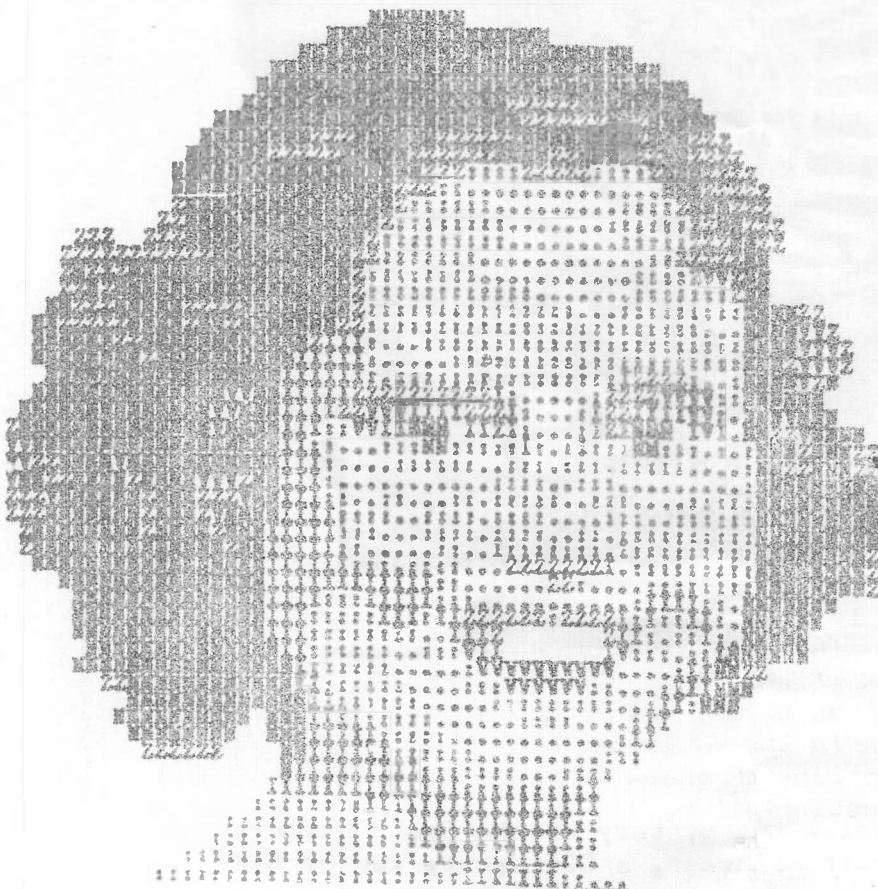


Sol. The principal clues have therefore been alphabetised. The correct key might well be a familiar phrase, e.g. PLAYMATE OF THE MONTH, or meaningless, e.g. qwertyuiop ... etc. Obviously any number of solutions is possible, and a final answer to the mystery, like the motives and character of Quimby himself, lies forever hidden."

Why George MacBeth, one wonders? Back in 1969 Langdon Jones's anthology THE NEW SF contained a BBC 'conversation' between Ballard and MacBeth. The printed section opens with the following exchange:

"MACBETH: You have been writing science fiction short stories and novels several years now, but your story 'You and Me and the Continuum' is one of a recent group which, I think, in structure are really quite different from your earlier ones. Perhaps the most striking feature to someone reading 'You and Me and the Continuum' for example, for the first time, is that it is constructed not in continuous narrative, but in a sequence of short paragraphs, each of which has a heading - in fact they're arranged in alphabetical order. But the key point I think is that they are broken up. Why did you move on to using this technique of construction?

"BALLARD: I was getting dissatisfied with what I felt were linear systems of narrative. I'd been using in my novels and in most of my short stories a conventional kind of linear narrative, but I found that the action and events of the novels in particular were breaking down as I wrote them, that the characterisation, the sequences of events, were beginning to crystallise





out into a series of shorter and shorter images and situations. This ties in very much with what I feel about the whole role of science fiction as a speculative form of fiction. For me, science fiction is above all a prospective form of narrative fiction; it is concerned with seeing the present in terms of the immediate future rather than the past."

But all the same, why 'an entertainment for George MacBeth'?

In AMBIT, during 1965, George MacBeth published a story titled 'The Ski Murders', with the following introduction:

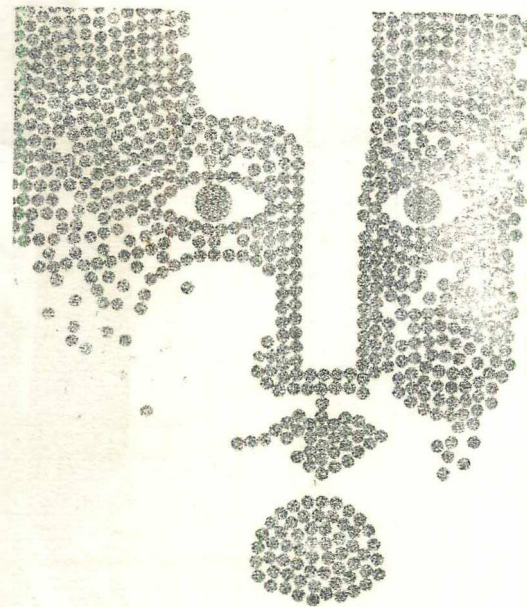
"Consultants of this encyclopaedia-poem may find it convenient to work according to some arbitrary or appropriate programme dictated by a sequence of letters. These could either be meaningless, e.g. PZTE RFGN QQLX? or (perhaps better) grammatical phrases or sentences, e.g. "WHO'S FOR TENNIS?" Naturally, one may want to apply the rule of one consultation one letter, so that in the example given the programme will be WHO'S FR TENI? A full reading of the encyclopaedia is not necessary to appreciate the main elements of the story, nor will complete acquaintance with the entries entirely solve the mystery. The ski murders remain the enigma they always were."

MacBeth's story, consisting of alphabetical entries, contains so popular a feature of the later Ballard series as the Sikorski helicopter (a Russian Sikorski, John Bangsund).

The enigma remaining is actually why MacBeth avoids discussing, in the BBC programme, the differing results of using the same technique in SF ('You and Me and the Continuum') and non-SF ('The Ski Murders'). The ways of the wholly rolers of science fiction are indeed strange.

The BBC conversation contains a great deal of material useful for the reader of THE ATROCITY EXHIBITION, some more of which will be quoted below.

My review of four of the stories in this collection ('You and Me and the Continuum', 'The Assassination Weapon', 'You: Coma: Marilyn Monroe' and 'The Atrocity Exhibition') drew attention to the re-appearance of the same characters in the separate stories: the review traced the actions of these main characters (Karen Novotny, Dr. Austin/Austen, Dr. Nathan, Tallis/Travis/Traven) through the four stories. It is interesting to note that the character named Dr. Lancaster in the magazine version of 'The Assassination Weapon' (in NEW WORLDS 161) has been renamed Dr. Nathan in the hardback to conform



4  
MINUTES  
33  
SECONDS  
OF  
SHEER  
SILENCE



with the other stories. This obvious change suggested some modifications had been made in the transfer to hardback, and the following are some of the changes which came to my attention.

Firstly, a characteristic of these stories of Ballard's is the 'composite portrait'. One example and Ballard's response are given in the BBC conversation:

"Kodachrome. Captain Kirby, MI5, studied the prints. They showed: (1) a thick-set man in an Air Force jacket, unshaven face half-hidden by the dented hat-peak; (2) a transverse section through the spinal level T-12; (3) a crayon self-portrait by David Feary, seven-year-old schizophrenic at the Belmont Asylum, Sutton; (4) radio-spectra from the quasar CTA 102; (5) an antero-posterior radiograph of a skull, estimated capacity 1,500 c.c.; (6) spectro-heliogram of the sun taken with the K line of calcium; (7) left and right hand-prints showing massive scarring between second and third metacarpel bones. To Dr. Nathan he said: 'And all these make up one picture?'

BALLARD: Exactly. They make up a composite portrait of this man's identity. In this story I was examining the particular role that a twentieth-century Messiah might take, in the context of mid-twentieth-century life, and I feel that he would reappear in a whole series of aspects and relationships, touching an enormous range of events; that he wouldn't have a single identity, in the sense that Jesus had - he would have a whole multiplex of contacts with various points."



The portrait is printed unchanged in THE ATROCITY EXHIBITION.

In THE ASSASSINATION WEAPON there is one change:

NW161: (5) photograph taken at noon, August 6, 1945, of the sand-sea, Quattara Depression, Libya;

TAE : (5) Photograph taken at noon, August 7, 1945, of the sand-sea, Qattara Depression;

This merely brings it into the form used elsewhere (e.g. in 'The Atrocity Exhibition'.).

In the title story the changes are greater:

NW166: (1) Contour map of underground bunkers, RSG 4, Berkshire;

TAE : (1) Spectroheliogram of the sun;\*

NW166: (3) Pyramidal Cell cross-section, Rudolf Hoess, commandant of Auschwitz;

TAE : (3) Transverse section through a Pre-Cambrian Trilobite;\*

NW166: (5) Photograph taken at noon, August 7, 1945, of the sand-sea, Qattara Depression;

TAE : (5) Photograph taken at noon, August 7, 1945, of the sand-sea, Qattara Depression, Egypt;\*

NW166: (6) Reproduction of Salvador Dali's "The Great Masturbator";

TAE : (6) Reproduction of Max Ernst's "Garden Airplane Traps";\*

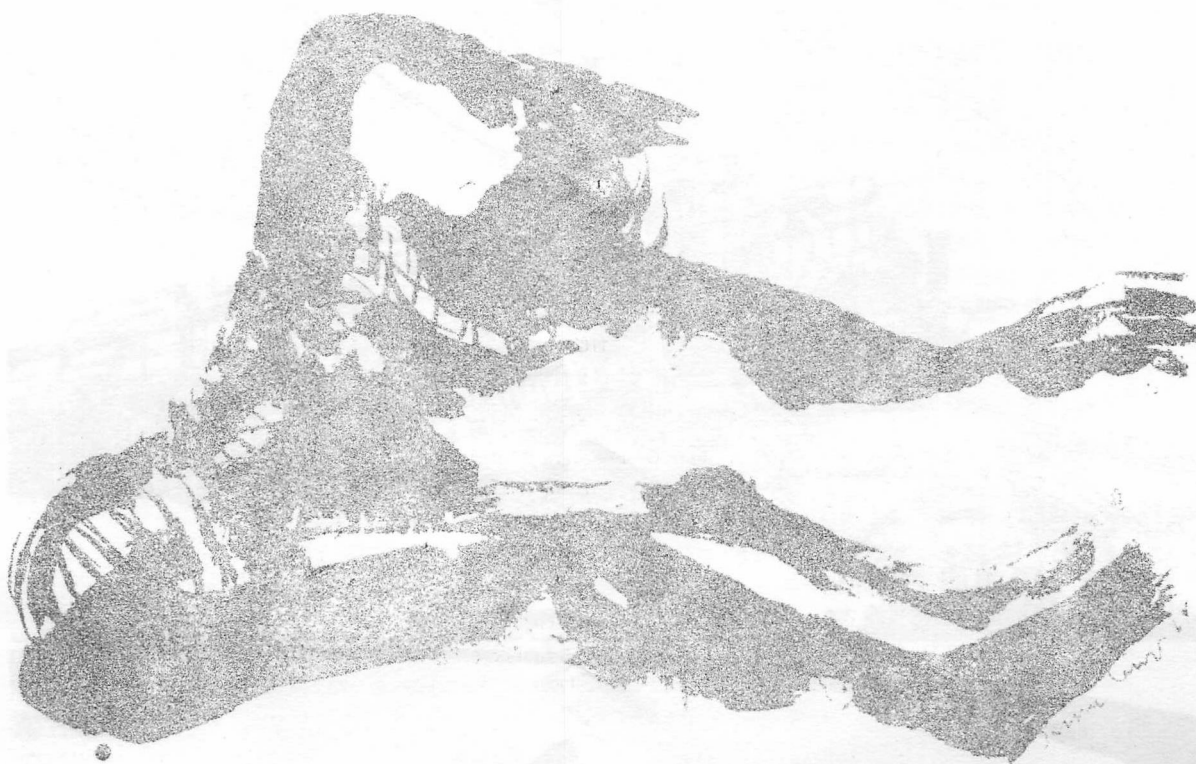
NW166: (7) Fusing sequences for "Big Boy" and "Fat Boy", Hiroshima and Nagasaki A-bombs;

TAE : (7) Fusing sequences for "Little Boy" and "Fat Boy", Hiroshima and Nagasaki A-bombs;\*

All of these changes (falling into two obvious groups) were made very soon after the initial publication: the asterisked version is that appearing in ENCOUNTER, March 1967.

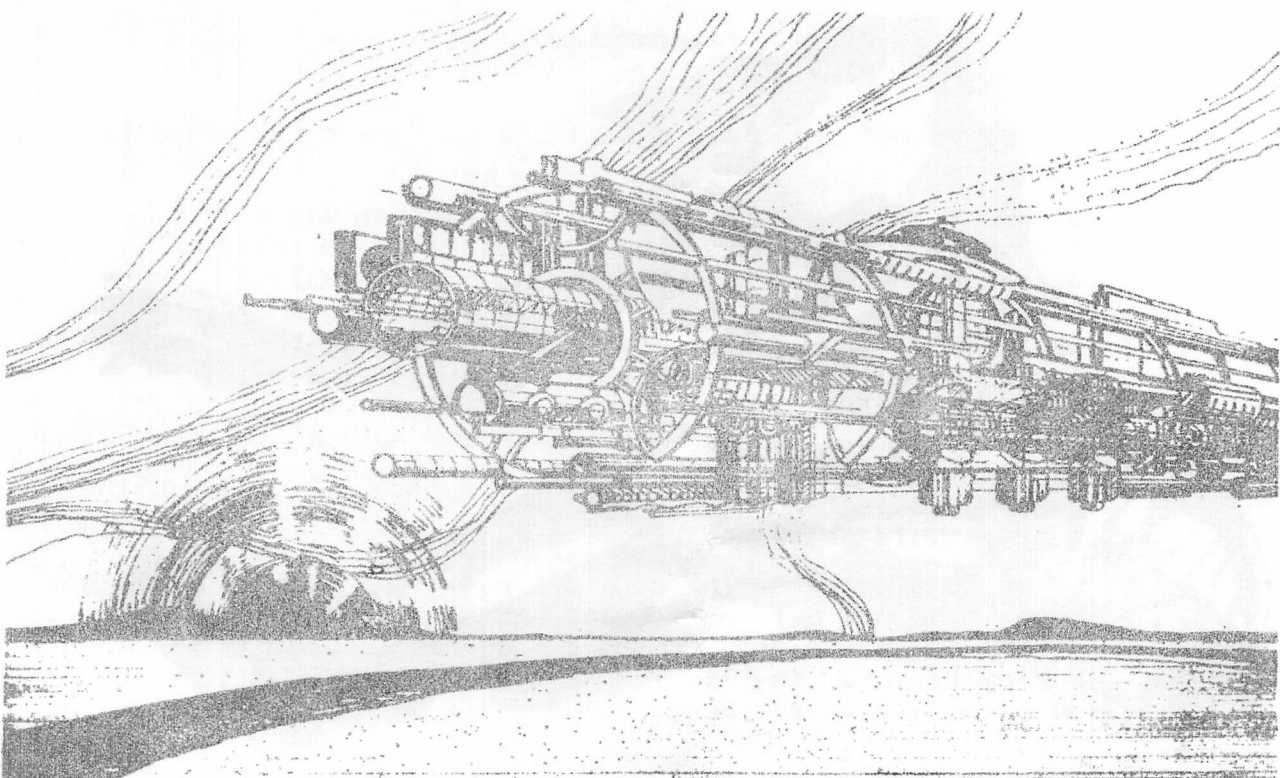
There have been other, greater changes. In "The Assassination Weapon" the following introductory paragraph has been dropped.

"An attempt to conceive the 'false' deaths of J.F. Kennedy, Lee Harvey Oswald and Malcolm X in terms of the notional

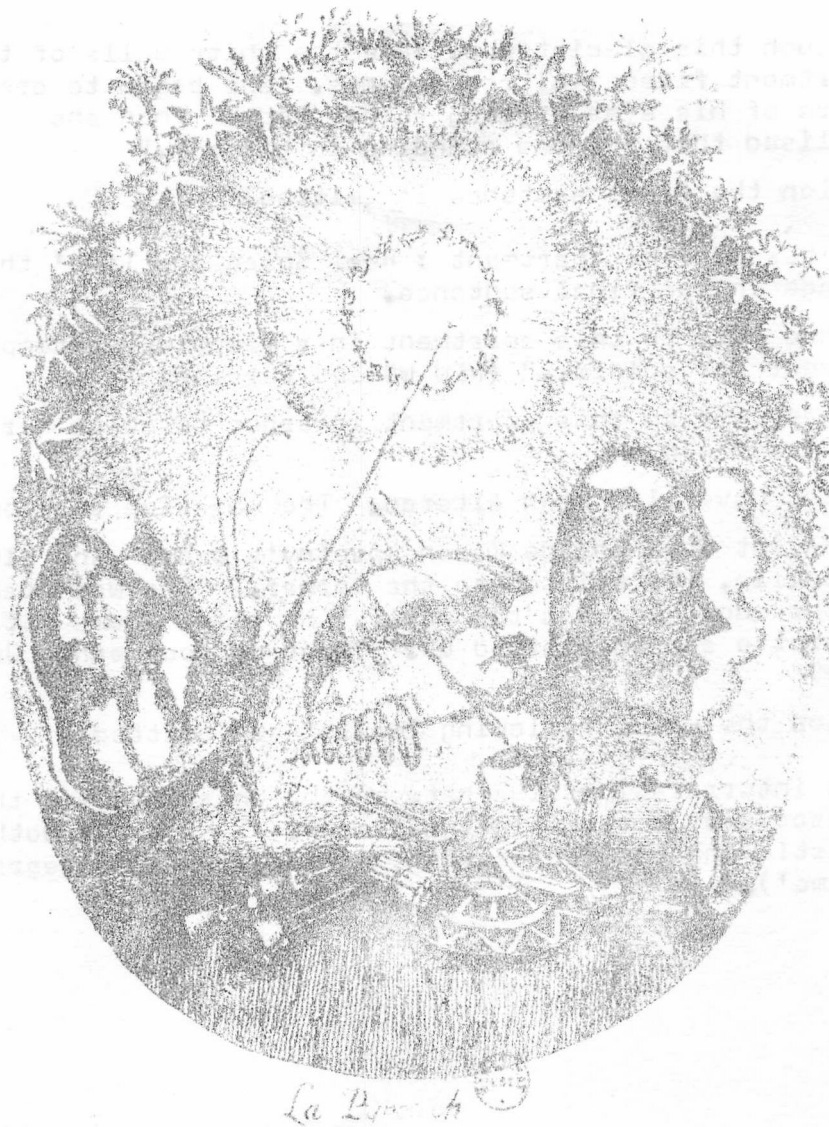




character of a psychotic patient in the Belmont Asylum,







assumed to have died by his own hand in the role of a former H-bomber pilot."

In "You: Coma: Marilyn Monroe" a similar paragraph, perhaps not written by Ballard, has been dropped.

"He thinks of Max Ernst, Marilyn Monroe and the woman in the apartment; he conceives the "false" space and time of the apartment; he visits the deserted planetarium; he sees Coma, the psychiatrist and the dancer; his impressions of Africa; he meditates on the persistence of the beach, the individual as an aspect of landscape; he witnesses the assumption of the sand-dune; he conceives the "real" space and time of the apartment; he kills the woman when she occludes the interval between the "false" and "real"; he sees Marilyn Monroe, epiphany of this death; he leaves with Coma."

The first paragraph of this condensed novel has also been modified. A change from "awoke" to "woke" need not detain us long, but the modification at the end of the paragraph is more significant. Karen Novotny has awakened to find Tallis sitting beside the bed, silent. The magazine version (NEW WORLDS 163, June 1966) concludes the first paragraph as follows:

"Through this glaciated silence the white walls of the apartment fixed arbitrary planes. She began to dress, aware of his eyes staring at her body. Then she realised that she was standing in his way."

In the book version the final sentence is omitted.

In the paragraph headed 'The Apartment : Real Space and Time' there has been a considerable change in the final sentence.

"He had come to this apartment in a misguided attempt to prevent her suicide." (NEW WORLDS version)

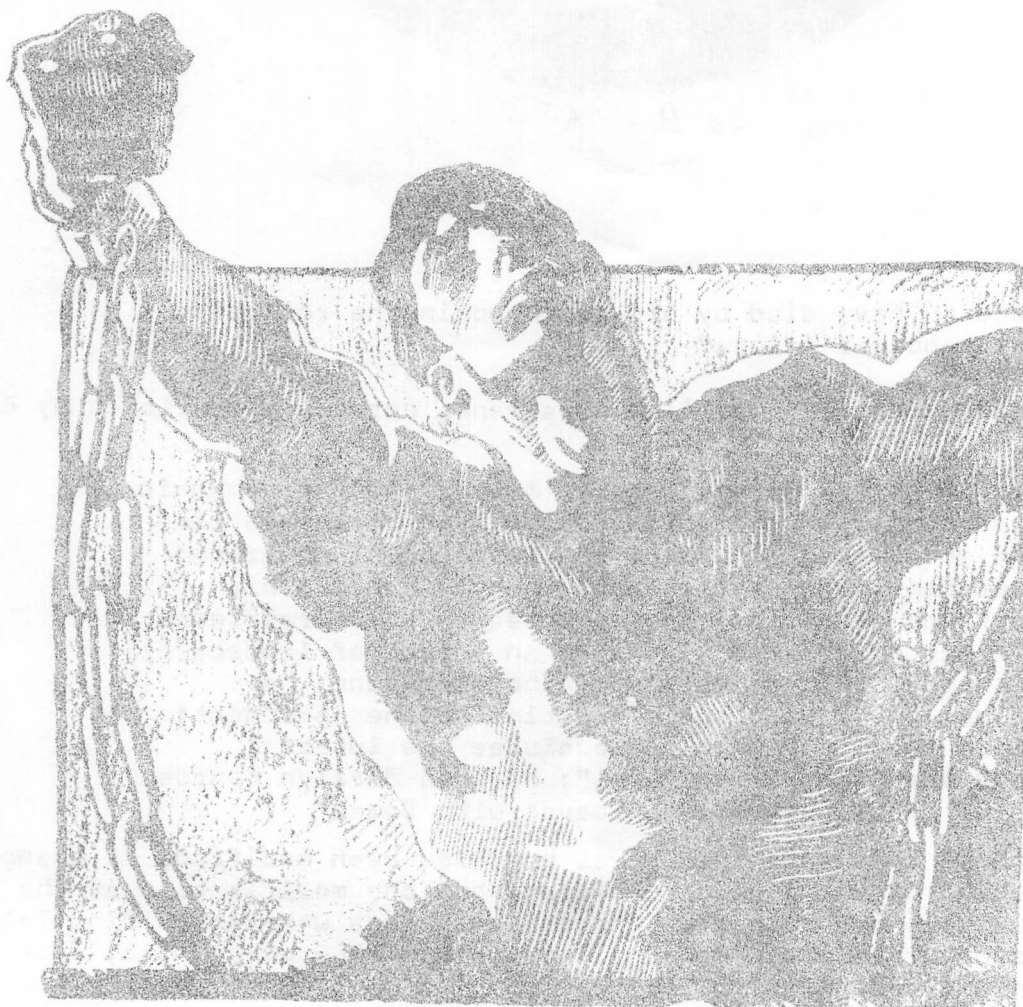
"He had come to this apartment in order to solve her suicide."  
(Book version)

The final sentences have also been altered. The magazine version reads:

"Coma sat down beside Karen Novotny's body. She glanced at Tallis, who pointed to the corner. "She was standing in the angle between the walls," he said. Coma lit a cigarette and then stood up. "What do you mean? Over here?"

In the book version the words following 'walls' are omitted.

Given the complex interrelationships between the characters and the stories, none of the changes described above is insignificant. I have not bothered to list any of the many stylistic changes (three, for example, in the paragraph 'The Apartment: Real Space and Time').





"The Death Module" (NEW WORLDS 173, July 1967) has been retitled "Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown" for the book version. The third paragraph in the story is subtitled 'The University of Death' and here is the magazine version:



"These erotic films, over which presided the mutilated figure of Ralph Nader, were screened above Dr. Nathan's head as he moved along the lines of smashed cars. Illuminated by the arc-lights, the rushes of the test collisions played on to the walls of the Neurology wing defined the sexual ambiguities of the abandoned motorcade. As he stepped over the metering coils this apotheosis of Ralph Nader, successor of Kant and Hume, quantified the disasters of time and space he had seen in the failure of the isolation tests, and in the fire deaths of Cape Kennedy."

In the book version 'smashed' is replaced by 'crashed' in the first sentence, and the second sentence reads:

"Illuminated by the arc-lights, the rushes of the test collisions defined the sexual ambiguities of the abandoned motorcade."

There is no third sentence.

There is also some modification in the 'The Karen Novotny Experience' paragraph. This paragraph reverses the excerpt quoted above from "You: Coma: Marilyn Monroe" in that this time Karen Novotny is watching Trabert. The two final sentences of the magazine version read:

"In the planes of her body, in the contours of her breasts and thighs, he seemed to mimetise all his dreams and obsessions, with Ralph Nader, Oswald and Minkowski space-time. In many ways, she reflected as she sprayed the Guerlain heliotrope at her armpits, he seemed totally unaware of her own identity."

The book version stops at 'obsessions'.

As a final example, the paragraph 'The Soft Quasars' appears in the magazine version as follows:

"Pre-uterine Claims - Kline.

"Young Virgin auto-sodomised by her own chastity" - Coma.

Time-zones: Ralph Nader, Claude Eatherly, Abraham Zapruder, replicators of the dream - Xero."

The last five words are omitted in the book version, creating a curious imbalance.

These are the major changes apparent at a swift glance. In general, they



seem to belie Ballard's earlier claim (NEW WORLDS 167): "I regard each of them as a separate novel." But Ballard had changed his mind on this matter not long after writing that. In the conversation with George MacBeth we find the following exchange:

"MACBETH:....In fact it sometimes seems, as I've read these, that one could almost translate bits of one into bits of the other. They seem, in certain sense, not four independent stories but four fragments of a kind of sequence. Are you aware of them relating, and do you have in your mind further ones which you will write, such that, taken as a group, they will shed extra light on each other?

BALLARD: Yes, I think they're all chapters in a much longer narrative that is evolving at its own pace. I don't think it's evolving in a sequential sense, in the sense that the events of, say, Moby Dick evolve one after another; they're evolving in an apparently random sense, but all the images relate to one another, and I hope when more stories have been written they will reinforce one another and produce something larger than the sum of their parts."

Whether the changes made in the progression from the magazine version to the Cape edition were made to increase the 'reinforcement' or for purely stylistic reasons remains a matter for speculation: but it will be worth while to compare the Cape edition with the Grove edition to see whether there have been further afterthoughts: I expect that this will not have been the case, and that the only changes will be translations into American.

The main sequence of stories in this volume consists of those mentioned above plus "The University of Death", "The Great American Nude", "The Summer Cannibals" and "Tolerances of the Human Face". "The Summer Cannibals", although not fitting completely into this set, is certainly part of it rather than a part of the set making up the remaining stories - "Plan for the Assassination of Jacqueline Kennedy", "Love and Napalm: Export U.S.A.", "Crash!" and "Why I want to Fuck Ronald Reagan", all of which are fairly straightforward spin-off from the basic group of stories. Perhaps the relationship with the majority is rather like that of "The Terminal Beach" to the first four stories (as discussed by me in ASFR 8: note also in the BBC conversation the following exchange: "MacBeth: ... Now the turning point, it seemed to me, was perhaps a story of yours called The Terminal Beach, which seemed to be midway between your older stories and your new ones. Ballard: Yes, there I made my conscious attempt at narrative in which the events of the story were quantified







in the sense that they were isolated from the remainder of the narrative and then examined from a number of angles." ). The second group of stories can safely be discussed separately.

The nine major stories are bound together by the character of the Christ of the Botched Second Coming (variously Travis, Talbot, Tallis, Traven, Trabert, Talbert and Travers), although he is unnamed in the (chronologically) first of the series, "You and Me and the Continuum". These nine stories are also bound together by other characters, who appear in all or some of them, and by events and objects.

Let us therefore examine this group of stories as a whole.

(continued on next rock)

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Illustrations used in this issue of SFC/30E previously appeared in ARK, DU, EL DORNO EMPLUMADO, FIRE!, FROM THE CRASH TO THE BLITZ 1929-1939, GRAPHIC ART OF THE 18th CENTURY and LES AVENTURES DE JOELLE.  
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