Hyperreality and Consumer Society: J. G Ballard's *Kingdom Come*

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Abstract

Over the course of a literary career spanning over four decades, J.G. Ballard established himself as an important British contemporary writer. In his final novel, Kingdom Come *(2006), Ballard again expresses his disdain for the contemporary world, spinning a bleak story detailing the consumer society of a London suburb through the eyes of an unemployed account executive. Ballard provides a mystery embedded within the personal plot of the narrator who, faced with the murder of an estranged father, searches to find his killer and shed light upon his father's obscure life. Nevertheless the novel proves to be more than a race towards these revelations. Using the protagonist's entry and eventual settling into a London suburb to provide the reader with what often seems to be a sadistically self-conscious awareness of consumer society, Ballard explores the extremes of a consumerist culture through the lens of simulation theory. This article attempts to examine these extremes using Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and consumer society to propose that the heights of consumerist craze reached in* Kingdom Come *are a result of the dominance of hyperreality over reality.*

Keywords

Consumer Society, Hyperreality, Simulation, J.G. Ballard , *Kingdom Come*, Baudrillard

J. G Ballard's final novel, *Kingdom Come* (2006), is a dystopian narrative about contemporary times. Unlike many novels with a dystopian tone, *Kingdom Come* is not set in the future, functioning as a critique of the contemporary rather than a warning of its eventual consequences. As Scott Bradfield of the *New York Times* says, "For Ballard, […] the true horrors of our collective future don't concern what might happen hundreds of years from now in a spaceship; rather, they reverberate in the very ordinary now-ness of freeway overpasses, sports stadiums, high-rise apartment complexes and gated communities."[1] Indeed, *Kingdom Come* portrays a familiar world, making its ultimate descent into mayhem and destruction all the more disturbing. Despite its haunting familiarity and astute social critique, *Kingdom Come* was met with "lukewarm reviews and suggestions that the author was, perhaps, finally losing his touch."[2] Ursula K. Le Guin of the *Guardian* found the novel's narrator "so thoroughly unreliable that his story is difficult to follow and inconsistent sometimes to the point of self-destruction," despite his ability to write with "a specious brilliance."[3] Other critics praised individual aspects of the novel, calling it "packed with brilliant apercus," but deeming it "implausible and unsympathetic as a full-length novel."[4] The general reaction to *Kingdom Come* can be summed up well by

1 Scott Bradfield, "Mall Rats: J.G. Ballard's Final Novel, 'Kingdom Come,'" *The Observer*, last modified September 3, 2006, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/sep/03/fiction.jgballard.

2 Mike Holliday, "A Fascist State? Another Look at *Kingdom Come* and Consumerism," Ballardian.com, last modified July 7, 2010, http://www.ballardian.com/fascist-state-another-look-at-kingdom-come.

3 Ursula K Le Guin, "Revolution in the Aisles," *The Guardian*, last modified September 9, 2006, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/sep/09/fiction.shopping.

4 Phil Baker, "Here Come." The Observer, last modified September 3, 2006, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/sep/03/fiction.jgballard.

Phil Baker, who says, "*Kingdom Come* looks like a report on the state of modern Britain, but it's really a report on the state of J.G. Ballard's head, and the good news is that it's as fertile as ever."[5] Similarly, David Flusfeder assented that although "*Kingdom Come* isn't without flaws," these defects are less important than the fact that once again the reader finds themselves in "Ballard-land" where "his old archetypes (are) at war in a familiar-yet-strange terrain."[6] This, Flusfeder concludes, "should be compelling enough for any reader."[7] Therefore it appears that although the legendary author has continued to prove himself as a man of great insight, making *Kingdom Come* well worth reading, his final novel appears to have fallen short of the expectations of some critics.

As Baker's quote suggests, this disappointment with Ballard's last novel was not the result of a lack of ideas on the part of the author. Despite its shortcomings, *Kingdom Come* is a novel full of Ballard's exacerbated insights on the contemporary world, in particular, consumerism. Ballard not only sets out to criticize and examine consumerism and the power of its potential toward extreme events, but also to portray it as "a type of fascism."[8] Consumerism and fascism are, for Ballard, mutually nourishing. As Ballard says in a 2006 interview, "Consumerism creates huge unconscious needs that only fascism can satisfy" and, "Fascism is the form that consumerism takes when it opts for elective madness."[9] The "elective madness" of consumerism, according to Ballard, occurs in the "real England" of the M25 motorway towns where, "The old civic virtues have gone and we have a throwaway, disposable culture—which is prone to takeover."[10] In making *Kingdom Come*'s location the M25 motorway town of Brooklands, Ballard sets the scene for precisely this form of takeover. This allows Ballard to explore the "elective madness" of consumerism in a species that is "uniquely dangerous" in that "in its ordinary, everyday condition (it) is mad."[11] Hence in his final novel Ballard turns to what he views as "elective madness" - consumerism turned into fascism – in order to examine both the mechanics of consumerist culture and the potential of an inherently insane species within it.

J.G. Ballard begins *Kingdom Come* with the statement, "The suburbs dream of violence."[12] He then goes on to observe, "Asleep in their drowsy villas, sheltered by benevolent shopping malls, they wait patiently for the nightmares that will wake them to a more passionate world."[13] These opening lines not only create an expectation of brutality, but also point towards the suburbanites' unconscious discontentment as the cause. Likewise, the longing for "a more passionate world" indicates the suburbanites' subconscious awareness that the world they reside in is no longer a true reality, the implication being that it was in the past. This new reality could be identified by Jean Baudrillard as "hyperreality" or a replacement of "the real" resulting from the absolute

5 Baker, "Here Come."

6 Critical Eye, "Victims of Their Own Success," the *Guardian*, last modified September 16, 2006, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/sep/16/featuresreviews.guardianreview16.

7 Critical Eye, "Victims of Their Own Success."

8 Holliday, "A Fascist State?"

9 Marrianne Brace, "J.G. Ballard: The Comforts of Madness," *The Independent*, last modified on September 15, 2006, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/j-g-ballard-the-comforts-of-madness-415967.html.

10 Ben Austwick, "An Evening with J.G Ballard," Ballardian.com, last modified on September 20, 2006, http://www.ballardian.com/an-evening-with-jg-ballard.

11 Ben Austwick, "An Evening with J.G Ballard."

12 J.G. Ballard, *Kingdom Come* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 3.

13 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 3.

substitution of reality's components with symbols and signs.[14] This replacement has occurred as a result of the overwhelming focus on consumption rather than production in contemporary times. Such a shift in focus has had the outcome that human beings no longer interact so much with one another as with objects.[15] This novel relation between objects and consumers is at the heart of reality's replacement with the hyperreal, the domination of which makes simulation both impossible and the only possibility. In a world constructed of signs and symbols, *everything* is a simulation. However, this new state is a contradictory one since simulation implies a stable reality from which things can be simulated. This makes the statement "everything is a simulation" implausible. It is this implausibility which allows for the placating of the general population, who continue to function within the hyperreal with the comforting notion that they remain securely within reality.

Within the hyperreal many tricks are employed to fool the general population into believing that this state does not exist and that reality is as it has alwaysbeen. These strategies come into play once the image has passed through Baudrillard's four stages of sign order evolving from the difference between representation and simulation. This difference is the lack of reference in simulation still present in representation, where the image is still "a reflection of a profound reality," whether it is of a "good appearance," as in the first stage, or of "an evil appearance," as in the second stage.[16] In these first two stages there is still a dissimulation of existence, while in the last two stages there is only a dissimulation of nonexistence.[17] This essential characteristic of dissimulating that there is nothing creates a "panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential," similar to but greater than the "panic of production" which preceded the world's transformation to one constructed of symbols and signs. It is at this point that simulation appears as "a strategy of the real, of the neoreal and the hyperreal that everywhere is the double of a strategy of deterrence."[18] This strategy utilizes the imaginary as a diversion from the absence of the real, creating the illusion of its ongoing existence.

In order to illustrate this strategy, Baudrillard uses Disneyland as an example of a presentation of the imaginary which facilitates the general belief that the rest of the world continues to be real.[19] Although the first two phases of the image are no longer in effect here, Disneyland continues to try to present itself simply as a "false representation of reality."[20] Despite appearances, Disneyland is not merely a "false representation of reality," but a distraction from the fact that what lies beyond Disneyland is no longer the "real world" as conceived in the past. This "real world" has been replaced by the hyperreal, in which everything is a simulation. Through the use of seemingly obvious "false representations of reality," the world preserves its "reality principle," diverting from the disappearance of the real.[21]

In *Kingdom Come*, the most readily apparent representation of the imaginary as a diversion from the hyperreal is Brooklands' Metro-Centre. The Metro-Centre allows

14 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Glaser, Sheila Faria (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 6.

15 Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1998), 26.

16 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

17 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

18 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

19 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

20 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 10.

21 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 10.

for the people of the London suburb to go on living with the belief that their lives outside of the Metro-Centre continue to unfold in reality. While the Metro-Centre is the main diversion from the real's disappearance, it is worth noting that the hyperreality disguised as the reality of the suburb is also a diversion of the imaginary, functioning as such for the residents of London, who feel "vaguely uneasy whenever they leave the inner city and approach the suburban outlands."[22] This uneasiness results from the Londoners' feeling that they have left the concrete reality of London for a disturbing environment in which the residents live with the false belief that what they are experiencing is "real life." While the Metro-Centre assures the residents of the suburbs that their life outside of it is real, the suburbs do the same for the residents of London who, like those in the suburbs, refuse to acknowledge the replacement of the real with the hyperreal.

The London suburb of *Kingdom Come* epitomizes consumerism and the artificiality associated with it. Yet while this characterization is the central focus of the novel, the point that the suburb itself functions as an imaginary distraction is lost due to the powerful imagery of the suburb as a place totally possessed by consumerism. The protagonist Richard Pearson represents an intermediary between suburb and city, imaginary and hyperreality, and at times a figure on the cusp of becoming aware of the methods of determent occurring everywhere to sustain the illusion of the real's replacement by the hyperreal. Driving into Brooklands Pearson speculates on the dualistic and ungraspable nature of the suburbs, which people like himself like to believe are nothing more than "an invention of the advertising industry," yet thwart their supposed creators, "growing sleek and confident, the real centre of the nation."[23] In this passage Pearson displays his awareness of the suburbs' imaginary function for those living in London while revealing his insecurity in this belief. In citing the suburbs' resistance to the city and its transformation into "the real centre of the nation," Pearson indicates that while both suburb and city believe themselves to be real, both elude this classification through the perpetual illusion sustained by the circular relationship between suburb, city, and Metro-Centre.

Before Pearson's first visit to the Metro-Centre, he reflects, "Like all great shopping malls, the Metro-Centre smothered unease, defused its own threat and offered balm to the wary."[24] As a man versed in the world of advertising, Pearson is well aware of the strategies employed by shopping malls to cajole its visitors to spend not only more money, but also that most precious of commodities, time. By grouping the Metro-Centre into a category of "great shopping malls," Pearson pays peculiar homage to the facility while acknowledging that some kind of strategy is at work, and that the Metro-Centre belongs to a greater system of distraction. This system of distraction is first and foremost interested in maintaining the illusion of the continued existence of the real. The fact that the Metro-Centre, a seemingly obvious false representation of reality, must first subdue its visitors and "defuse its own threat" indicates that the distraction from the disappearance of the real must also distract from itself in order to perpetuate its own existence. In order to survive as a seemingly obvious false representation of reality the Metro-Centre must posit itself as one which, though obviously "fake," is still blatantly better than the "reality" outside of it because of its existence as external. Pearson notes the visitors about to enter the mall and reflects, "In a few moments they would be bathed in a light more healing than anything on offer from the sun" and that entering these "huge temples" would make them "young again, like children visiting the home of a new

22 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 4.

23 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 4.

24 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 37.

school-friend, a house that first seemed forbidding."[25] Here a sense of menace is coupled with one of novelty and, despite initial nervousness, a feeling of excited anticipation at encountering the unknown.

Paradoxically it is not the unknown the Metro-Centre wishes to portray itself as, but as the primordially familiar lost paradise. Pearson reflects that the miniature gardens of the Metro-Centre are, "each an Eden which promises an experience more meaningful than self-knowledge or eternal life."[26] The Metro-Centre invokes a sense of the irretrievably lost in an environment where everything can seemingly be gained and improved upon. In doing so the Metro-Centre gestures toward the real, inviting one to see it from an insurmountable distance and reject it on the basis that it is not worth retrieving. This creates an affirmation that what is available now is infinitely better and more valuable. Therefore, what the Metro-Centre offers its visitors is the seductive option of choice. This act once again recalls an irrecoverable paradise while providing an upgrade. In the new paradise of the Metro-Centre one is no longer thrown out, but welcomed for an indefinite stay.

The Metro-Centre references the real in order to evoke a sense of nostalgia that "assumes its full meaning" when "the real is no longer what it was."[27] The glimpse of the real is nothing more than a tactic to invoke nostalgia. This nostalgia steers the consumer toward a choice that is not his or her own, but presents itself as such. In truth, "the impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is of the same order as the impossibility of staging an illusion."[28] To illustrate this statement Baudrillard challenges his reader to try to create a "fake hold-up."[29]According to Baudrillard, such an attempt will ultimately fail due to the fact that the signs of the simulated fake hold-up will become inextricably interwoven with the signs of the real. Simply put, the boundaries between reality and simulation have been muddied, and in staging a simulation it is inevitable that signs of the real will intervene. In the example of the fake hold-up, signs of the real that could intervene include someone secretly armed panicking and shooting the fake criminal, a person experiencing enough anxiety to cause a physical reaction such as a heart attack, or many other elements which would immediately transform the simulation into something all too real. The residents of Brooklands and the patrons of the Metro-Centre live in such a complex hyerreality that they are unable to recognize this state even in the face of jarring elements of the real. Violence and death, signs of the real, are completely swallowed by hyperreality; making a rediscovery of the real an impossible task.

In addition to the obscurity between the boundaries of the real and the imaginary, the boundary between the third order in Baudrillard's theory, the symbolic, has also been made indistinct. The symbolic for Baudrillard, the order now ruling the world of signs and symbols, is "an act of exchange and a social relation" working to "put an end to the real, resolve the real, and put an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary."[30] In London, the suburbs are interpreted as imaginary in order to sustain the illusion that what lies beyond them is real. In the same way the Metro-Centre in the suburb of Brooklands exists to allow the residents of the suburb to go on believing that

25 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 37.

26 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 38.

27 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

28 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

29 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

30 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Grant, Iain Hamilton (London: Sage, 1994), 133.

their daily lives outside of the Metro-Centre are real rather than hyperreal. In both cases the symbolic is the dominating order, guaranteeing that, despite appearances, nothing is real, only hyperreal.

Just as the change in focus from production to consumption has changed the daily interactions of human beings, so it has changed who is worshipped and revered. In the modern age the hero is no longer one of production but of consumption, and everywhere those heroes of production are "giving away to biographies of heroes of consumption."[31] What is revered is no longer an ability to produce, but an ability to consume, hence the obsession with film and sports stars, which Baudrillarddisdainfully labels "great wastrels."[32] The world of *Kingdom Come* is ruled by these "great wastrels," heroes of consumption worshipped for their public displays of overindulgence as well as their consumption of objects, whose relation to their consumer is no longer one of "specific utility but to a set of objects in its total signification."[33] David Cruise, the Metro-Centre channel presenter, serves as a perfect example of Baudrillard's hero of consumption. Although all of the Metro-Centre's customers are heroes of consumption, Cruise is central, serving as both aglorified example and a leader telling the others what and when to consume. At the same time Cruise bridges the gap between the old world of production and the contemporary world of consumption by relating the two. During one of his shows Cruise defends consumerism as more than the purchasing of things. Cruise tells his viewers, "It's (the Metro-Centre) our main way of expressing our tribal values, of engaging with each other's hopes and ambitions."[34] Cruise relates the modern trend of consumerist culture to the ancient tribal ways, masking it as the contemporary continuation of past customs. Cruise goes on to detail the two "tribes" as the people like himself and the other consumers, - those relishing the services provided by the Metro-Centre and relying on "the high values and ideals maintained by the mall and its suppliers" - and those "on the other side" – immigrants whose "suppressed women-folk are internal exiles who never share the dignity and freedom to choose what we see in the consumer ideal."[35] In this one, well-worded sentence Cruise draws a distinctive line between the English citizens of Brooklands and its immigrants, creating a link between nationalism and shopping. Likewise, Cruise's statement justifies the shoppers' consumerism while giving it a seemingly profound meaning. In short, Cruise establishes that to be English is to be a consumer, and that to resist the Metro-Centre is to resist England. Burning with relentless and restless passion alongside the need to consume, nationalism plays an integral part in the consumer society of the Brooklands suburbs. This link between consumerism and nationalism allows the Brooklands suburbanites to feel like a part of the greater whole of the nation, creating a greater and more convincing terrain of the perceived real lying outside of the Metro-Centre.

While Cruise sets the stage with his speeches on the relationship between consumerism and nationalism, what really pushes everyone over the edge is the new advertising campaign that Pearson invents when he becomes involved professionally with Cruise and the Metro-Centre. After a chance early morning meeting and chat, Pearson decides to reinvent the TV presenter's image as well as how people feel and respond to the Metro-Centre. This meeting occurs after a bomb placed in Pearson's car

31 Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, 46.

32 Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 47.

33 Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 27.

34 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 78.

35 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 78.

goes off in one of the Metro-Centre's garages and a riot breaks out as a result. During this riot cars are burned, property is destroyed, and immigrants of all races are attacked and beaten. Pearson watches as, "A restless crowd several thousand strong surround the Metro-Centre;" he notes that the sports groups, soccer and hockey fans who join to riot have no animosity towards each other but he can "almost smell the anger, the coarse breath of a disturbed beast searching for an enemy."[36] The rioters find their enemy in the immigrants going innocently about their lives, and paired with the St. George t-shirts worn by many of the rioters, the post Metro-Centre attack riot becomes as much a part of the rioters' declaration of nationalistic pride as their consumerism.

The morning after the riot, Cruise and Pearson meet by chance and begin discussing the violent events of the previous night. Cruise asks Pearson what happened, to which Pearson replies that the riot was "an attempted putsch" or "palace revolution," the palace being the Metro-Centre and the intended revolutionary leader being Cruise.[37] Perhaps it is Pearson's belief in Cruise as a revolutionary leader that prompts him to take on the task of reinventing the TV presenter. Whether this decision was further supported by a desire to be associated with a powerful, influential figure, a genuine interest in changing the Metro-Centre and its effects for the better, or even an attempt to find a father figure after the loss of his own estranged father, the reader can only speculate. Whatever the reason for Pearson becoming involved with the Metro-Centre, his participation becomes a crucial catalyst towards the end of the Metro-Centre's function as an imaginary diversion and the extension of its influence to the hyperreality interpreted as reality beyond its walls.

After convincing Cruise that he's the perfect man for the "new politics" developing at the Metro-Centre, Pearson tells Cruise that there will no longer be a message and that they, along with slogans, should be avoided. The new politics show "no easy answers," allowing the viewers to decide what they want themselves, "steer(ing) them by sensing their mood."[38] Cruise, wary of these politics without a message, asks, "How do I control them, impose some kind of focus? The whole thing could start to go mad,"to which Pearson replies, "Madness is the key to everything. Small doses, applied when no-one is really looking."[39] These new politics, devoid of a message and clandestinely instilled with "small doses" of madness, don't seem to make much sense to Cruise, who's used to expounding slogans and messages which neatly wrap consumerism and nationalism into one interrelated package. Despite this, he goes along with it, eager to be successful and admired.

Cruise is reinvented from "the primped and rouged anchorman of afternoon television" to "the fugitive and haunted hero of a noir film" whose "chocolate tan had long faded," turning the presenter into one of the "desperate loners of trench coat movies, doomed men sleepwalking toward their tragic end."[40] Through Pearson's clever marketing skills, the Metro-Centre sales turnover rises and a "vast social experiment," designed partially by Pearson himself, is set into motion. As Pearson puts it, "The neglected people of the motorway towns had found a new pride and solidarity, a social cohesion that boosted prosperity and reduced crime."[41] Despite Pearson's initially

36 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 119.

37 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 141.

38 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 146.

39 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 146.

40 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 154.

41 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 152.

optimistic observations, things quickly begin to sour. During one of his TV presentations Cruise is shot on air, provoking police and army involvement and an attempt to close the Metro-Centre. This attempt is met by the consumers with an insane reaction of loyalty towards the shopping center. Soon the consumers' only objective becomes to "defend the dome."[42] With Cruise still badly injured inside, Tom Carradine, the Metro-Centre's public relations' manager, makes use of the consumers' loyalty toward the mall and rebels against the police attempting to close it. Carradine puts the Metro-Centre on lock-down, taking the shoppers inside as hostages. With its barricaded doors and throngs of devoted citizens the Metro-Centre becomes a republic, "a faith trapped inside its own temple."[43]

First as an imaginary diversion from the replacement of reality with hyperreality, later a confused fusion of the imaginary and supposed reality due to the propagation of consumerism as nationalism, and finally an example of hyperreality functioning at its most lethal, the Metro-Centre and the events unfolding around and inside of it deftly detail the complex workings of the symbolic order. The domination of the symbolic order in turn replaces reality with hyperreality, an occurrence unheeded by the suburban residents as a result of the system of distraction that they have created to blissfully and ignorantly submerge themselves within. In the final pages of *Kingdom Come,* the imaginary that was the Metro-Centre has been transformed into what is interpreted as reality. Despite the fact that in a world ruled by signs and symbols nothing is real but hyperreality, an illusion of reality is still powerfully maintained by imaginary diversions. While these diversions are usually artificial places of entertainment such as Disneyland or the Metro-Centre, in *Kingdom Come* this usual relationship is inverted, turning the Metro-Centre into the supposed reality and everything lying outside of it as an imaginary diversion. For the consumers of the Brooklands' Metro-Centre, the shopping mall has become more than a place of leisure and recreation. Through skillful marketing and the utilization of ideological techniques, the centre becomes a sacred place encompassing all of the values and morals of its shoppers. *Kingdom Come's* final chapters may read as shocking and implausible, but in a consumer society governed by signs and symbols such events may not be far from invading the hyperreality now governing the contemporary world. J.G. Ballard was certainly aware of such a possibility, recognizing that under consumerism and the subsequent deep boredom of contemporary life, nothing can be deemed impossible. Indeed, for Ballard, in a species for whom madness is an inherent trait, nothing can be truly inconceivable, not even a suburban community's desperate defense of a shopping centre. Each individual is equipped with his or her own characteristic madness, and for Ballard it doesn't take much to make it rise up and conquer.

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42 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*,212.

43 Ballard, *Kingdom Come*,218.

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