

***Re-entry Into the Heart of Darkness:  
J. G. Ballard's Sci-Fi Retelling of Conrad's Novella***

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**Abstract**

British science fiction writer J. G. Ballard seemed to have been under the strong influence of Joseph Conrad's novella set in Africa, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in the early 1960s, even though he intentionally blurred when he had first read it and how much he had owed his literary inspiration to it. One of the crucial texts proving Conrad's influence on Ballard is the latter's 1963 short story entitled "A Question of Re-entry." In this story set in the Amazon Rainforest, as its title indicates, Ballard seeks to "re-enter" *Heart of Darkness* by borrowing its framework and updates Conrad's legacies from postcolonial and planetary perspectives. Here, UN Investigator Connolly is on the patrol launch with Captain Pereira, an officer of the Native Protection Missions in Brazil, searching for the lost astronaut, Colonel Spender, who went missing with his spacecraft after his successful flight to the Moon five years ago. Then, during his investigation in the jungle, Connolly meets Ryker, a Kurtzian character from Europe who rules the native tribe by deceiving them with the power of science and technology. Although critics have already regarded this story as Ballard's Sci-fi parody of *Heart of Darkness*, they never deeply discuss his exploration of Conradian topics, from the depravity of Western civilization to the oppression of Indigenous people living in the Global South. In this sense, the current paper examines the political aspect of Ballard's science fiction by analyzing how he reinterprets Conrad's masterpiece in his own work.

Keywords: J. G. Ballard, Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Postcolonialism, Science Fiction

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## 1. Introduction

In 1963, according to his autobiography, British science fiction writer J. G. Ballard had lunch with Victor Gollancz, an influential tycoon of the publishing industry of the time. After praising his first important novel, *The Drowned World* (1962), however, Gollancz sarcastically told him that he had “stole[n] it all from [Joseph] Conrad” (Ballard 2014b: 91). Although the novelist himself firmly declares that he had “never read anything by Conrad” before writing the novel (192), not only Gollancz but also various critics have compared Ballard’s works to Conrad’s 1899 novella, *Heart of Darkness* (John Baxter 2011: 117). As a matter of fact, in addition to Michael Delville, Sebastian Groes, Jeannette Baxter, and Andrzej Gasiorek who have sought to interpret *The Drowned World* in relation to *Heart of Darkness* (Delville 1998: 8; Groes 2008: 85; Jeannette Baxter 2016: 40–41; Gasiorek 2005: 30–31), David Ian Paddy reveals how the impressive opening scenes of Ballard’s fourth novel, *The Crystal World* (1966), resemble those of Conrad’s novella set in Congo (Paddy 2015: 70).<sup>1</sup>

Despite his denial of reading Conrad and being influenced by *Heart of Darkness* in his early years,<sup>2</sup> Ballard admits in his autobiography that he “soon made up for” it (Ballard 2014b: 192). In 1992, talking about his fantasy novel set in Central Africa, *The Day of Creation* (1987), Ballard certainly said that he had not been able to “forget” Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* while writing it (Ballard 2014a: 268). Stressing the originality of his work in which the protagonist has a magical power to create a river, Ballard continues to argue that “it is impossible to write a novel just about a river without people automatically thinking of Conrad” (268).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, as Gasiorek puts it, there can also be an echo of Conrad’s text in Ballard’s later novel *Super-Cannes* (2000) (Gsiorek 2005: 193). And his 2003 work, *Millennium People*, has a chapter entitled “The Heart of Darkness.”

Although Ballard intentionally blurred when he had first read Conrad and how much he had owed his literary inspiration to Conrad’s legacies, one can at least claim that he seemed to have been under the strong influence of *Heart of Darkness*, even in the early 1960s. One of the crucial texts that may support this hypothesis is Ballard’s 1963 short story, “A Question of Re-entry,” in which he seems to respond to Conrad’s view of European colonialism by overtly borrowing the framework of *Heart of Darkness*. Although several critics, such as Paddy, Umberto Rossi, and D. Harlan Wilson, have already regarded this story as Ballard’s Sci-fi parody of *Heart of Darkness* (Paddy 2015: 194; Rossi 2009: 110; Wilson 2017: 183–84), they never deeply discuss his exploration of Conradian topics from the depravity of Western civilization to the oppression of Indigenous people living in the Global South. Hence, the current paper examines the postcolonial — and even planetary — aspect of Ballard’s

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<sup>1</sup> Paddy also analyzes Ballard’s first published story “The Violent Noon” (1951), claiming that it “ends with the bitter taste of institutional corruption so familiar to readers of Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene, as well as George Orwell’s writings on Burma” (Paddy 2012: 183).

In an interview in 1976, Ballard also comments as follows: “It’s been said that I was influenced by Joseph Conrad. . . [ . . . ] but when the critics wrote that, I had still never read anything by Conrad” (Ballard 2014a: 101).

<sup>2</sup> Ballard also states as follows: “If the phone rings, it’ll be probably by Joseph Conrad, saying ‘Mr Ballard, you stole it all from me.’ But to be fair to myself, Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* is not in the least bit interested in the river” (Ballard 2014a 268). This shows how strongly Ballard was haunted by Gollancz’s sarcastic comment on *The Drowned World* in 1963.

<sup>3</sup> Paddy regards this short story as one of Ballard’s “post-NASA stories,” including *Hello America* (1981). He argues that they are “not only pieces about a decline in space missions” but “also narratives about the decline of America” (Paddy 2015: 194).

science fiction by analyzing how he reinterprets and updates Conrad's masterpiece in his underrated story, "A Question of Re-entry."

## **2. *Heart of Darkness* and "A Question of Re-entry"**

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* portrays the young protagonist Marlow's voyage to the Congo River to meet Kurtz, a charismatic ivory trader sent by a Belgian company to the heart of the African jungle. The novella is set in the Congo Free State under the oppressive rule of Belgian King Leopold II, even though their names are not mentioned in the text. Kurtz is an attractive but deprived character who is worshiped as a demigod by the African natives. To borrow Cedric Watts's expression, "Kurtz is a modern Faust, who has sold his soul for power and gratification" (Watts 1996: 47). Kurtz violently rules the African tribe by utilizing his "power to charm or frighten" them (Conrad 2008: 155). In this sense, Kurtz's figure may reflect the tyranny of King Leopold II. Moreover, his dark charisma reminds people of the genealogy of literary villains — including William Shakespeare's Richard III, Milton's Lucifer, Emily Brontë's Heathcliff, and Fyodor Dostoevsky's Stavrogin — and anticipates the actual dictators in the twentieth century, from Adolf Hitler to autocratic African leaders.

In this context, what is interesting is the fact that several vital writers after World War II have attempted to adapt Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* into so-called dictator fiction. For instance, George Steiner, relocating the setting from Congo to South America, tells a story about Jewish Nazi hunters searching for Hitler hiding in the Conradian jungle in his novel *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* (1979). Besides, V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979) and Giles Foden's *The Last King of Scotland* (1998) satirize African dictators, such as Mobutu Sese Seko (Zaire) and Idi Amin (Uganda), by skillfully borrowing the motifs and frameworks from *Heart of Darkness*. In these works, Kurtz's characterization is thus transformed into horrible dictators. In this way, even though *Heart of Darkness* has sometimes drawn criticism since its publication, the most famous of which being from Nigerian author Chinua Achebe who called Conrad a racist (Achebe 2010: 12), the novella has never lost its appeal to several postwar writers.

Nevertheless, in his Sci-fi retelling of Conrad's novella, Ballard does not depict any dictators, politicians, or military leaders. In his short story, "A Question of Re-entry," UN Investigator Connolly is on the patrol launch with Captain Pereira, an officer of the Native Protection Missions in Brazil, searching for the lost astronaut, Colonel Francis Spender, who went missing with his spacecraft after his successful flight to the Moon five years ago. Connolly's mission is to find the astronaut who is said to have crashed "somewhere on the South American land-mass along a line linking Lake Maracaibo with Brasilia" (Ballard 2010: 439) and deny "the unofficial view" circulated by "certain of the UN Space Department agencies" that Spender "failed to select the correct attitude for re-entry" and that his capsule was "vaporized on the final descent" (439). Though Ballard's story is set in the Amazon Rainforest and thus has nothing to do with colonized Africa, its opening scene is based upon Conrad's depiction of Marlow's voyage on the Congo River. "All day they had moved steadily upstream," Ballard describes, "occasionally pausing to raise the propeller and cut away the knots of weed, and by 3 O'clock had covered some seventy-five miles" (435). Then, Ballard also depicts the forest that "followed its course" and "the aerial canopy shutting off the sunlight and cloaking the water along the banks with a black velvet sheen" (435).

In this way, despite his use of Sci-fi motifs, such as space journey and moon landing, Ballard's short story is mainly about Connolly's mission to discover Colonel Spender and his

spacecraft in the rainforest in Brazil, which reminds readers of Conrad's Marlow in search for Kurtz who is dying in the heart of Africa. In addition to such similarity in plot structure, Ballard's references to cannibalism might also be based on *Heart of Darkness*, in which one of the Blacks hired by the expedition party asks Marlow to catch a native guy from another tribe so that he can eat him (Conrad 2008: 144). Likewise, in Ballard's story, Connolly asks Captain Pereira whether the Indians are cannibalistic or not (Ballard 2010: 441). However, Captain Pereira answers him that cannibalism is "a rare practice" on the South American continent, uncomfortably asking Connolly not to "despite the Indians" (442). In the latter part of the story, he also explains that they are "not cannibal in the dietary sense of the term" (451). They only eat their dead "as a means of conserving the loss and to perpetuate the corporeal identity of the departed" (452).

### 3. Kurtz and Ryker

As Wilson summarizes in his book, Connolly, in Ballard's short story, "partakes in a terrestrial, psychological, and symbolic journey analogous to Marlow's" in *Heart of Darkness* (Wilson 2017: 36). However, whereas Marlow finally meets Kurtz dying in the deep jungle, Connolly cannot find the lost astronaut, who never actually appears in the story. However, during his investigation in the jungle, Connolly meets Ryker, a Kurtzean character from Europe who "seems to have maneuvered himself into a position of authority with the tribe" (Ballard 2010: 437). Like Kurtz, Ryker, described as "the Rajah" (443) and "the last of a race of true individualists retreating before the barbed-wire fences and regimentation of 20th-century life" (438), has ruled the Indians for twelve years. Ballard writes about Ryker's background as follows:

He [Connolly] had heard something in Brasilia of this strange figure, sometime journalist and a man of action, the self-proclaimed world citizen who at the age of forty-two, after a life spent venting his spleen on civilization and its gimcrack gods, had suddenly disappeared into the Amazonas and taken up residence with one of the aboriginal tribes. (438)

Connolly, on the other hand, wonders why the Indians meekly obey Ryker, even though they do not believe "in his strength of personality or primitive kingship" (448). According to Connolly's impression, they seem to be simply restricted "by a grudging acceptance that for the time being at any rate, Ryker possessed the whip hand over them" (448).

Despite his isolated life as "the Rajah" after dropping out of civilized society, Ryker collects clocks in his bungalow. However, what puzzles Connolly the most is the fact that one of Ryker's alarm clocks in his room "was telling the right time to within ten seconds" (447), which raises some important questions: How can he know the exact time, and why should he need to know it? Connolly, nonetheless, eventually solves these questions when he happens to find a paperback entitled "ECHO III: CONSOLIDATED TABLES OF CELESTIAL TRAVERSES, 1965-1980" in Ryker's room (454), by which one can calculate the exact time as well as "the elevations and compass bearings for sightings of the Echo III satellite" launched several years earlier (454). This thin book, in other words, is the secret not only to Ryker's accurate clock but also to his "casual, off-hand authority over the Indians" (448). "Armed with nothing more than a set of tables and a reliable clock," as Ballard writes, Ryker "could virtually pinpoint the appearance of the satellite at the first second of its visible traverse" (455). Ryker's power over the Indians, therefore, is "confirmed by his ability to control the time and place of its arrival" (455).

Connolly thus exposes Ryker's trick to be awed as a prophet by cunningly deceiving the "tribe with a strong cargo cult" (457). Hence, Colonel Spender's capsule falling from the sky might have strengthened their worship of Ryker. Significantly, such artfulness of Ryker shrewdly controlling the tribe by the power of modern science and technology is what distinguishes him from Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, who rules the Africans mainly by his dark charisma, his gift of rhetoric, and violence. Although Ryker is, unlike Kurtz, neither a tyrant nor a dictatorial figure, he seeks to colonize the natives more skillfully and indirectly. Pretending to be a straggler from modern civilization or a hermit who refuses Western materialism and a consumer society founded upon scientific ways of thinking, this man rather deceives and controls the innocent tribe in South America by making full use of the very technology and science that he enjoyed from the West. In this sense, Ryker's deceit in Ballard's story may be linked to the theme of "lie" that appears in the final scene of Conrad's novella, in which Marlow decides not to tell the truth about Kurtz's last words — he died shouting "The horror, the horror" (Conrad 2008: 178) — to his fiancé. However, unlike Marlow's thoughtful fabrication, which tells her that Kurtz called her name before his death (186), Ryker's lie in Ballard's fiction is a mere trick to maintain his superiority over the tribe by taking advantage of their innocence. Hence, in "A Question of Re-entry," Ryker's act of lying may reflect Ballard's critical view of the Western civilization recolonizing the Global South.

In this short story that explores the inner abyss of humanity, as its very title indicates, Ballard seeks to "re-enter" *Heart of Darkness* and updates Conrad's legacies from postcolonial and planetary perspectives. Here, the plot's background in which the United Nations launched Colonel Spender's rocket to the Moon may suggest the fictional situation where humans plan to colonize the Moon, probably for future migration.<sup>4</sup> This huge project was promoted regardless of "some half-dozen fatal attempts" and at least three "luckless pilots" are still "orbiting the Moon in their dead ships" (Ballard 2010: 436). Hence, according to Connolly's statement that emphasizes the significance of his mission, "Colonel Francis Spender, by accepting the immense risks of the flight to and from the Moon, was owed the absolute discharge of any assistance that could be given him" (436). Assuming this is a planetary project for humankind promoted not by individual countries but by the UN, in that case, it can be said that the Brazilian natives in the Amazon Rainforest are excluded from such a category of "humans." They are left behind, and their lives have nothing to do with the civilization's ambitious project to develop space.

Certainly, Ballard's depiction of such a gap between those who are civilized and the innocent Indians is problematic when he emphasizes the savageness of the latter by writing that they may have eaten the astronaut as a holy god fallen from the sky at the end of the story (453). However, in general, finding and appreciating Conrad's political criticism of modern European civilization shown in *Heart of Darkness*, Ballard intends to push it forward to expand the possibility of this classic novella. In Ballard's Sci-fi retelling of Conrad's book,

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<sup>4</sup> In his 1962 essay entitled "Which Way to Inner Space?," Ballard famously claims that "science fiction should turn its back on space, on interstellar travel, extraterrestrial life forms, galactic wars and the overlap of these ideas that spreads across the margins of nine-tenths of magazine s-f." He also writes, "The biggest developments of the immediate future will take place, not on the Moon or Mars, but on Earth, and its inner space, not outer, that needs to be explored" (Ballard 1997: 197). From this perspective, it can be argued that "A Question of Re-entry," Ballard's piece published a year later, seems to demonstrate the writer's own literary manifesto.

the first person who realizes Ryker's trick is not Connolly but a son of the witch doctor (455), which may imply that not all the natives are blind supporters of Ryker. Moreover, Ballard's critical stance on his Kurtzean character, Ryker, is quite overt. After highlighting that "the Indians were at equilibrium with their environment," Ballard also writes: "Ryker had upset that equilibrium, and by using the Echo satellite had brought the 20th century and its psychopathic projections into the heart of the Amazonian deep, transforming Indians into a community of superstitious and materialistic sightseers, their whole culture oriented around the mythical god of the puppet star" (458).

#### **4. Conclusion**

As critics like Watts remark, "Kurz's charismatic depravity" in *Heart of Darkness* anticipated Hitler and the Holocaust in the twentieth century (Watts 1996: 50). Moreover, as writers like Naipaul and Foden have demonstrated in their novels dealing with African dictators, such as Mobutu and Amin, Conrad's work can also be reinterpreted in the historical context where the world saw the advent of tyranny and autocracy in postcolonial nations. However, although it is set in Brazil, Ballard's short fiction, written in the middle of the process of African decolonization in the early 1960s, perfectly anticipates a different aspect of the future situation where Western civilization — indirectly but cunningly — recolonizes the people in the so-called "peripheral" areas of the world by making use of science and technology.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Ballard's retelling of *Heart of Darkness* may indicate that his Sci-fi exploration of the enigmatic abyss of human nature is not far from Conrad's cynical views of humanity and Western civilization.

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