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A STRANGE NEW HARMONY:  
A POSTHUMANIST UTOPIA  
IN J. G. BALLARD'S CRYSTAL WORLD

**A b s t r a c t.** J.G. Ballard's novel *The Crystal World* (1966) has been commonly read as a futuristic vision of an apocalypse—a dystopian ending of the human and biological universe precipitated by an unknown and lethal virus that causes climate disturbances and the ensuing crystallisation and freezing of biological life. Read over fifty years after its original publication, the novel seems increasingly less fantastic—given the evident climate change—and, perhaps paradoxically, less apocalyptic. The article analyses Ballard's novel as an example of posthumanist reflection, arguing that the changes it describes may be interpreted as less of an apocalypse and more of a strange new harmony emerging without the decision or influence of man. The resulting new configuration of power unites human beings with nature and establishes a radically different model of relations between man and universe which may be labelled as a posthumanist utopia.

**Key words:** nature; new harmony; post-humanism; utopia; J.G. Ballard.

INTRODUCTION

*The Crystal World* (1966), J. G. Ballard's fourth novel, belongs, together with *The Wind from Nowhere* (1962), *The Drowned World* (1962) and *The Drought* (1964/65), to the so-called “disaster quartet” (Brigg 43) comprising four novels that describe four kinds of apocalypse descending on the human world. As critics point out, these first four novels by Ballard form a consistent tetralogy organised by the elements: Lorenz J. Firsching observes that “each of the four [...] depicts present-day civilization being destroyed by one of the classical elements (by air, water, fire, and earth, respectively)” (297). This novelistic project, baffling at the time of its publication and classified

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as a strange sort of fantasy, is nowadays sometimes interpreted as a prophetic predecessor of cli-fi, i.e., fiction describing and warning about the disastrous consequences of climate change (cf. Clarke 7). As Clarke observes, “Ballard’s early novels [...] survey the process and aftermath of climatic devastation [...] [when] existence comes to be dominated and defined by the environment and its monothematic transformation” (7). Although, indeed, Ballard’s first four novels may be interpreted as set against cataclysmic climate change, labelling them cli-fi fiction is problematic. Ballard’s novels miss an essential element of the latter type of fiction, namely, human agency: in the tetralogy, changes of the climate are triggered by factors entirely beyond human control or even influence, such as solar activity or an unknown virus. No responsibility and no blame are put on human beings and their irresponsible or selfish behaviour; no accusation is suggested of blindly exploiting the Earth’s resources or devastating the planet. Thus, Ballard’s quartet lacks the constitutional element of cli-fi, that is, its warning against the irresponsible actions of the human race.

Interestingly, Ballard himself viewed the theme of the cycle quite differently; he insisted that it comprised three novels (he excluded the first one, *The Wind from Nowhere*) and that its underlying theme was time rather than climate change or the end of the world. He claimed that

In *The Drowned World* I deal with the past, and employ water as the central metaphor. In *The Drought* I deal with the future, taking sand as the central image. In *The Crystal World* I am concerned with the present, the symbol of which is the diamond or the precious stone which—so I believe—possesses a timeless structure. (Sellars and O’Hara 11)

This diversity of interpretations demonstrates, first of all, the ambiguous nature of the four novels. Far from being realistic, they pose a challenge for interpreters, clearly suggesting the necessity of a metaphorical or symbolic, rather than simply realistic reading, and yet equally clearly avoiding any straightforward clues as to the possible direction of such reading. They do seem to make reference neither to the present, nor to the (possible) future of mankind and the planet; instead, the novels may be treated as mental experiments testing in fiction various hypotheses of the ‘what if?’ character. Their speculative nature brings them somewhat close to utopias which, similarly, play the role of imaginary laboratories of (im)possible scenarios. Contradictory interpretations leave room for yet others, still less obvious and different ways of reading the texts. Most importantly, Ballard’s comment points to one salient feature of his tetralogy: its novels being metaphorical

images rather than futuristic descriptions or predictions. This essay argues that *The Crystal World*, far from being a more or less accurate prediction of climate change, or a realistic description of a physical process, invites its reader instead to rethink and redefine the concepts of nature and man, and that it does so in a truly posthumanist fashion.

*The Crystal World* is set in quasi-contemporary Cameroon, where a strange process seems to be taking place: a forest visited by the chief protagonist, Dr Edward Sanders, is gradually crystallizing into a diamond wood, and this process is accompanied by extreme freezing. Thus, the forest seems to be dying, and reports suggest that a similar process is affecting part of Florida (including Miami) and Pripet Marshes in the Soviet Union, slowly spreading out to other territories. The protagonists of the novel suspect that the crystallisation is a sort of infection spread by a virus; a comparison is made between it and leprosy, which Dr Sanders, as a physician specialising in the illness, treats and studies in a leprosarium in near-by Fort Isabelle. Captain Radek, responsible for closing off the affected area, comments that “the business here and [...] [Dr Sanders’s] speciality are very similar. In a way, one is the dark side of the other. I’m thinking of the silver scales of leprosy that give the disease its name” (Ballard 64). Yet, the comparison made between leprosy and crystallization does not lead to finding the latter’s cause: it is evidently unknown, and no blame is put on anyone; there is no suggestion of human or other blunder or evil action. The crystallisation simply starts, and operates with no visible initiative of human beings and independently of them. Similarly, equally unknown is the possible cure for the infection: there seems to be no way of preventing or stopping it; the only measure characters can take against it is to escape, with short-term protection provided by jewels that refract the light and temporarily slow down the freezing. Thus, keeping to the metaphorical rather than realistic strategy of interpreting Ballard’s novels, crystallisation may be read as symbolic of a slowly approaching death or stillness, of entropy, of the end of the world which starts to spread slowly over the globe.

## 1. GENRE

Thus sketched, the novel’s setting and plot may suggest its generic classification as a dystopia, since it describes the ultimate malfunctioning of a given community (in this case, Mont Royal). As the crystallisation spreads,

the city's inhabitants start to leave it, while those who remain freeze; the forest is taken over by lepers from the abandoned leprosarium who subsequently also freeze. The unexpected and unfathomable changes in nature thus result in the malfunctioning of the community and its gradual dissolution, affecting both its general social life and the lives of individuals and their mutual relationships. As Gregory Claeys observes in his study of the dystopia, the palpably worse world described in dystopian novels is usually a result of some kind of political, social or natural disaster; he notes that "the adjective *dystopian* implies fearful futures where chaos and ruin prevails" (Claeys 5). In Ballard's novel this dystopian malfunctioning reaches the extreme when the community virtually stops functioning and dissolves, immobilised and transfixed by the encroaching crystallisation. In contrast to Claeys's definition of dystopia, however, which emphasises that the misery and oppression are "a result of human action" (Claeys 290), in *The Crystal World* the process seems to be entirely natural, beyond human control and thus beyond human responsibility.

Thus, perhaps a better generic label for the novel is post-apocalyptic, or—more precisely—apocalyptic dystopia, as it points to the mechanisms operating behind the cataclysmic events described in the text. Ballard's novel describes the end of the world as the protagonists know it, the suspension or even slow annihilation of everything that used to define it and in this sense deserves the label 'apocalyptic'. Yet, the Apocalypse in its Biblical rather than colloquial sense is not only the ending; it is often also a new beginning, a redemption and rebirth. It is both linear (as it heads towards the end) and circular (as often, once it is over, the next cycle starts). Frank Kermode famously observes that the apocalyptic imagination and apocalyptic fictions are a means to provide a structure and direction to human existence and to divide it into meaningful phases of the past, present and future (Kermode ix). This linear structure, however, is intertwined with another one: the circular succession of 'worlds' which end and begin anew. The concept of the apocalypse, then, may be seen as both the ending and the new beginning, as an expression of the fear of closure but also of the possibility of redemption and hope.

It seems possible, then, to read Ballard's *Crystal World* as a post-apocalyptic (or even apocalyptic) novel in both of these senses. On the one hand, it dramatises the end of the world, the annihilation of known social structures, natural laws and living organisms. It explodes completely not only the way the society functions but more importantly, the way nature functions.

On the other, it heralds the beginning of a completely different new world, whose logic and nature seem hard to fathom. The most convincing theory explaining the crystallization is proposed by Dr Tatlin, who sees it as a sort of cancer process and describes it as

The Hubble effect [...] an actual proliferation of the sub-atomic identity of all matter. It's as if a sequence of displaced but identical images of the same object were being produced by refraction through a prism, but with the element of time replacing the role of light. (Ballard 66)

Later on, this theory is expanded and elaborated to describe the progressing crystallisation still more adequately. In a letter to his former employer, Dr Derain of the Fort Isabelle leper hospital, Dr Sanders explains that it is the overproduction of matter and the annihilation of time that is responsible for it; he argues that

Just as a super-saturated solution will discharge itself into a crystalline mass, so the super-saturation of matter [...] leads to its appearance in a parallel spatial matrix. As more and more time 'leaks' away, the process of super-saturation continues, the original atoms and molecules producing spatial replicas of themselves, substance without mass, in an attempt to increase their foot-hold upon existence. The process is theoretically without end, and it may be possible eventually for a single atom to produce an infinite number of duplicates of itself and so fill the entire universe. (Ballard 85)

This process of uncontrolled proliferation and over-saturation of matter with the simultaneous annihilation of time marks a profound change in the operation of natural laws, a major shift in the way the universe functions, whose practical consequences are disastrous to living organisms frozen and immobilised in crystallised, over-saturated forms. This change of a natural process results in an apocalypse of the natural world. Yet, in keeping with the ambivalent reading of the concept of the apocalypse, in Ballard's novel this change may be interpreted as bringing also a new beginning—a new order of things, a different one, seen only in vague and futuristic glimpses. It may be argued that this new order of things—a new harmony—though immobile, static and seemingly dead, is not necessarily dystopian. To the contrary, it may be seen as carrying with it a potentially clear positive impulse, introducing the element of hope not only of survival but of a new, possibly better future.

## 2. UTOPIA

Ballard's critics and commentators occasionally point to the latent possible utopian aspects of his 'disaster novels', locating them, however, not at the level of the represented world and the climate disasters described but at the level of the protagonists. Lorenz J. Firsching observes that

If crystallization, though connected to leprosy, is closely linked to the theme of death, it is also ambiguously linked to the theme of rebirth. Crystallization symbolises the psychic rebirth Sanders unconsciously longs for. After having a brief experience of the crystallization process [...] [he] elects to follow a seemingly suicidal course of action as a way to psychic rebirth. (306)

The protagonist of *The Crystal World* makes a similar decision to that of the character Kerans in Ballard's earlier novel *The Drowned World*, who similarly decides to abandon the hope of survival and embraces a change which may involve annihilation but may possibly bring a rebirth and a completely different way of being. Sanders—as it transpires from his letters and is visible in his decisions—undergoes a profound transformation from a down-to-earth pragmatic man, a scientist and a physician locked in a rational vision of the world, towards someone more open to experimentation, new notions and new challenges, ready to change both his views and his life completely when faced with a new, transfiguring experience.

In Ballard's later novel *Crash* the character Vaughan introduces the concept of a 'new psychology'—a new state of mind, a radically different attitude to action, seemingly irrational and bizarre—that the protagonists develop. The ending of *The Crystal World* in which Sanders willingly comes back to the freezing, crystallising forest may be interpreted rationally as a suicidal gesture, as what seems to await the protagonist there is an inevitable death. Yet, interpreted in the light of Ballard's concept of a 'new psychology', this ending may also be read as a gesture of psychological integration at a different, possibly higher level of personal development, a gesture of action rather than escape. Before being exposed to crystallisation, Sanders is troubled by ambivalence, having a dark side whose exact nature he himself does not understand. The exposure to the apocalypse brings to light his suppressed desires (e.g., his death wish) and reconciles the protagonist with himself. As Clarke observes, "Sanders actively chooses to embrace the climate, knowing that it will result in [his] death and the extinction of the entire species, since death is a necessary stage on the path to utopia" (17). Thus, the decision to expose oneself to the danger of annihila-

tion is not criticised as irrational—to the contrary, it may mark the character's development and maturity.

The connection between rebirth and utopia is emphasised by Clarke, who argues that the quest for utopia strongly underwrites both *Crystal World* and *The Drowned World* (Clarke 16). Thus defined, however, utopia seems to be construed as a personal process, an internal state of the protagonist and his own perfectibility. The evolution of Sanders, his understanding of the changed world and his position in it, is seen as a major development, a huge step towards the utopia of a new man. His decision to return to the forest and embrace possible annihilation may seem counter-intuitive and irrational, yet the novel defends it as the right way, if only by giving to this part of the novel the title “the illuminated man”. This phrase refers, literally, to the light pervading the crystal forest and illuminating it; more importantly, however, it draws attention to the revelation of the hitherto hidden truth about the character and the world. The personal illumination of the character, his self-development and reinvention as a (brave) new man are interpreted as necessary steps towards the utopia of a completely new, different future whose exact nature—and the human position within it—is as yet unknown. If compared, for instance, with the somewhat similar ending of Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, which likewise leaves its main protagonist to experience the annihilation of the known world, Ballard's novel may indeed strike one as optimistic. In contrast to Vonnegut's text, in which the freezing of the world marks the ultimate manifestation of human stupidity and confirms the profound absurdity of the world, *The Crystal World* seems to leave hope for the future—a different, unknown but possibly better future.

### 3. POSTHUMANISM

Yet, it seems debatable if personal development, rebirth and reintegration connected solely with the protagonist are sufficient grounds to classify the novel as utopian and to analyse it as an expression of utopianism. To the contrary, virtually all theories of utopianism emphasise its communal rather than purely personal nature and its social rather than chiefly psychological dimension (cf. Levitas xi; Sargent 3). The utopian underpinning of the novel seems, indeed, an important aspect of the text, yet I would argue that it may be located at another level of the work, not connected solely with the protagonist and his development. *The Crystal World* seems to offer a far more

radical vision of a better world—and a better (hu)man—which does not have to be limited to the personal, internal level only and may be extended to relationships among the characters themselves and to their interaction with the environment. Thus constructed, this vision of a new, better world transcends the boundaries of an individual and enters the realm of the social and the universal, making the claim for a utopian reading of the novel much more grounded.

The text itself suggests on numerous occasions that this emerging strange new world may indeed be perhaps a better world. One of the clues is the often emphasised breathtaking beauty of the crystallising forest and the crystallised plants and animals. The novel abounds in poetic descriptions not just of jewels and light (contrasted with the drab and darkish ‘realistic’ description of Cameroon) but also of animals and buildings, whose structures impress the characters with their subtlety of design. Dr Sanders thus perceives frozen and crystallised nature:

The dome-shaped lattice of crystal beams [...] reached from the rim of the forest like the buttresses of an immense cupola of diamond and glass. Embedded at various points were the almost motionless forms of birds with outstretched wings, golden orioles and scarlet macaws, shedding brilliant pools of light. The bands of colour moved through the forest, the reflections of the melting plumage enveloping them in endless concentric patterns. The overlapping arcs hung in the air like the votive window of a city of cathedrals. Everywhere around them Sanders could see countless smaller birds, butterflies and insects, joining their cruciform haloes to the coronation of the forest. (Ballard 162)

The descriptions of the crystallised forest emphasise its harmony, balance, colours and light; they insist on the otherworldly beauty of transfigured nature and its strange new harmony, perceived not as damage or ruin but as reconfiguration. Sanders writes in his letter about the “enchanted world” (Ballard 169), pointing to its perfection that is out of this world. The textual insistence on beauty and harmony suggests not an apocalyptic chaos and destruction but the emergence of a new, different order, incomprehensible at first but possibly better—if only because aesthetically much more attractive.

Secondly, the crystallising forest emits a strange gravitational pull—it almost literally sucks in all the more susceptible or sensitive characters. For Suzanne Clair, Ventress and Thorensen (the character who, allegedly, understands more), for the lepers who dance some ritual dance in the forest, and finally for Dr Sanders himself the charm of the forest proves irresistible:



they are all drawn into it, despite the freezing and immobilising that it entails. They seem to be the new humans, the pioneers ready to embrace the change and risk the jump into the unknown and beautiful. Interestingly, the forest seems unattractive to Max Clair and Louise Peret, the characters who stand for narrow-minded rationality and a down-to-earth attitude; they remain immune to the beauty and transfiguring potential of the crystallising nature and keep to their former habits and beliefs. The crystallisation, then, acts as a sort of litmus test dividing the characters into old and new and symbolically points to a moment of change, the opening of a potential new path which involves a complete reinvention of the world and the self but promises a new, possibly better world. As such, it may be interpreted as a sign of utopian potential.

Moreover, the novel makes a strong connection between the approaching new world and religious eschatology: it seems to suggest that the crystallisation may be interpreted as the final point of a religious quest, as the moment of the final reunion with God. In one of the last sections of the novel, Father Balthus, a somewhat rebellious priest who, like Sanders, embraces the forest and the crystallisation, observes firmly: "In this forest we see the final celebration of the Eucharist of Christ's body. Here everything is transfigured and illuminated, joined together in the last marriage of space and time" (Ballard 162). In religious terms, then, the crystallisation symbolises not so much death as resurrection, the awakening to a new, better life where there is no separation of space and time, man and God, or man and nature. As such, it may, once again, be interpreted as a possible utopian impulse rather than as hopeless annihilation.

Finally, the crystallisation brings the characters together and reunites them with nature: it treats them just like birds, trees or crocodiles, making them one of the elements of the universe that is freezing and stopping. Thus, the apocalypse of crystallisation provokes the relocation and redefinition of the status of the human and the merging of man and nature—and this merging brings peace and completion. The narrator thus describes the literal fusing of people with one another and with nature:

[Sanders] passed the half-crystallized bodies of men and women fused against the trunks of the trees, looking up at the refracted sun. Most of them were elderly couples seated together with their bodies fusing into one another as they merged with the trees and the jewelled undergrowth. (Ballard 164)

The description points to the restored unity of man and nature and the calm this state brings; in the crystallised forest there is literally no separation of man and beast. The sharp contrasts introduced at the beginning of the novel and constituting its architecture in the first part of the text—between dark and light, health and disease, civilisation and wilderness, the human and nature—are annihilated in the forest and merged into the ultimate beautiful unity.

This unity may be interpreted as posthumanist as it hints at the equality of man and nature without privileging the human in any way. Subjected to the process of crystallisation, the human becomes merely an element of nature, no less and no more special than other animate or inanimate creatures. Posthumanism—which in its critical version may be broadly understood as a reflection that displaces the human from his privileged position and revises the anthropocentric paradigm of thought and science—posits a more equal, ‘flattened’, as it were, relation between the human and nature. In Michael Hauskeller’s formulation posthumanism “refuses to see humans as a superior species in the natural order, ontologically distinct from animals on the one hand, and machines on the other [...] [and] insists that the boundaries between the human and non-human are rather fluent and in fact have always been so” (104). To Hauskeller, blurring the dividing line between the human and non-human is not a politically neutral postulate either: it entails the flattening of hierarchies and binary oppositions that privilege one side (human) only; as he observes, “at the heart of post-humanism is clearly a liberationist ideal: the hoped-for redistribution of difference and identity is ultimately a redistribution of power” (Hauskeller 23). The unity of human beings with others and with nature resulting from the process of crystallisation depicted in Ballard’s novel may then be interpreted optimistically as a step towards the creation of a better, more democratic and equal community of people and the world. What it entails, however, is the redefinition of the status of the human—no longer special, no longer privileged or superior. Crystallised and frozen like any other creature, immobile like inanimate and previously animate nature, the new human loses its unique status and merges with nature now more broadly understood.

Taken together, all these hints in the text—the beauty of crystallisation, its irresistible pull, its religious undertones and its posthumanist relocation and fusion of the human and nature—suggest the possibility of interpreting the novel less as an apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic dystopia and more as a glimpse of hope for a new, possibly utopian, harmony. This harmony is en-

visioned as hardly humanist or even human; its logic does not privilege (hu)man or even focus on him/her much. Thus, the novel invites one to re-think and possibly to redefine the very concept of utopia as not necessarily a human construct and perhaps not serving only human or human-centred communities.

#### 4. A POSTHUMANIST UTOPIA

Thus, Ballard's *Crystal World* may perhaps be read as a novel with a utopian potential, the utopian impulse being located both at the level of the characters and at that of the represented world. Yet, the utopian vision projected in it seems far removed from the traditional (post-Thomas More) project of a better human society. In contrast, it may perhaps more adequately be defined as a posthumanist utopia. The text projects a radical image of a world where the human is literally a part of nature, not divided from it by any claims of superiority or special position. Just like trees, birds and reptiles, man, too, crystallises and merges with the environment in the ultimate fusion of the animate and inanimate.

Moreover, the process of crystallisation brings not so much death (this word is carefully avoided in the novel) as a new form of existence and a new harmony. As Dr Sanders writes in his letter, "there is an immense reward to be found in that frozen forest. There the transfiguration of all living and inanimate forms occurs before our eyes, the gift of immortality a direct consequence of the surrender by each of us of our own physical and temporal identities" (Ballard 169). Rather than death, then, crystallisation is said to bring an immortality of perfect stasis, a new set of laws of nature, and, in consequence, entirely new, unthought-of modes of existence. Hence, it may be tentatively interpreted as utopian, as it heralds not merely a new but also a better world, cleansed of the maladies of the old one. It requires also a new (hu)man—a character brave and sensitive who can see and embrace the challenge of the change and who can accept its different status within the universe.

The new harmony liquidates the previous imbalance that privileged the human (especially the white male man depicted in the novel) and abolishes hierarchies that positioned him and his 'civilisation' over nature. In the text this harmony is visible in the suspension of archetypal contrasts between light and dark, nature and man, health and illness, civilisation and wilderness

which organise the structure of the first part of the novel and which at its end become blurred. One striking and emblematic manifestation of this blurring of contrasts and flattening of hierarchies is the central image of the diamond: at the beginning of the novel hidden underground and exploited, at its end literally coming to the surface and taking over the dominant position. The diamond and the human who exploited it literally become one, merging with each other in the process of crystallisation. Literally, then, the human being becomes a new (hu)man inhabiting a new world. The emergent new world is not so much a world without people as a world where people are merely a part of the universe like any other element. This world is constructed according to a different logic—a non-human logic where it is not only man who imposes rules and conditions. Rather—just like animals and plants—man is subject to stronger, more basic rules coming from nature broadly understood, and not even just animate nature. The central image of the novel—crystal—may be read as a symbol of this new order, geological rather than merely human.

Thus, Ballard's *Crystal World* does not have to be read only as a post-apocalyptic dystopian novel describing the ruins of a world destroyed by an unfathomable catastrophe. On the contrary, it may be interpreted as a text showing the possibility of a different world and a different human, much more radically utopian. It offers a glimpse of a world purified of the imperfections of the old one (significantly, Dr Sanders advocates sending lepers to the forest rather than treating them in a conventional way, suggesting that crystallisation is more effective than medicine in fighting the leprosy virus and preserving the lives of the sick). This new world is constructed according to a radically different logic: it rejects humanity, individuality, ego, privilege and even mobility; yet, it seems to offer a vision of a world unified and undivided, clean and beautiful, immortal in its perfect stability and harmony. Thus, *The Crystal World* may be read as a novel with utopian potential, projecting a posthumanist utopia of the ultimate, radical fusion of man and nature.

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NOWA DZIWNNA HARMONIA:  
POSTHUMANISTYCZNA UTOPIA W KRYSZTAŁOWYM ŚWIECIE J. G. BALLARDA

Streszczenie

Powieść J. G. Ballarda *Kryształowy świat* (1966) bywa odczytywana jako futurystyczna wizja apokalipsy—dystopijnego końca ludzkiego i biologicznego świata spowodowanego przez nieznaną a śmiertelny wirus przynoszący zmiany klimatyczne, na skutek których następuje krystalizacja i zamrożenie biologicznego życia. Ponad pięćdziesiąt lat po swojej publikacji powieść wydaje się jednak coraz mniej fantastyczna—biorąc pod uwagę ostatnie ewidentne anomalie klimatu—i, paradoksalnie, mniej apokaliptyczna. Artykuł analizuje ją jako przykład posthumanistycznej refleksji, dowodząc, iż opisywane w niej zmiany mogą być interpretowane nie tyle jako zagłada, ile jako nowy ład wyłaniający się bez udziału czy wpływu człowieka. Powstały w ten sposób nowy układ sił włącza człowieka w porządek natury i ustanawia radykalnie inny model stosunków człowiek—świat, który może być określony mianem posthumanistycznego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** przyroda, nowa harmonia, posthumanizm, utopia, J. G. Ballard.

