

## A belated Elegy in a Corporate Graveyard, along with some musings on invisible literature...

### Memo Mori

by Mark Dery

Long before the premature End of the World As We Know It and the resultant Death (not again!) of Irony, the SF novelist and master ironist J.G. Ballard predicted (with tongue only partly in cheek) that “one day in the near future anthologies of 20th century inter-office memos” would one day be “as treasured as the correspondence of Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot.” [1]

Ballard is a constant reader of what he calls “invisible literature” – the paper trail of the Information Age, which comprises “market research reports, pharmaceutical company house magazines, the promotional copy for a new high-energy breakfast food, journals such as *Psychological Abstracts* and the Italian automobile magazine *Style Auto*, the internal memoranda of TV company planning departments, sex manuals, [and] medical textbooks such as the extraordinary *Crash Injuries*.” [2]

Of course, Ballard’s inventory is hardly exhaustive. To his mental library, we might add press releases, chain letters, religious tracts, self-help books, psychological tests (such as the *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Index*), government publications (for example, the *Warren*, *Meese*, and *Starr* reports), lunatic-fringe manifestoes (*Industrial Society and Its Future* by the Unabomber, *S.C.U.M.* by Valerie Solanas), trial transcripts, cockpit voice recordings, technical manuals, mail-order catalogues, mission statements, and annual reports. In the decades since Ballard coined the term, around 1970, the flood of invisible lit has swollen to biblical proportions, gushing through the burst bulkheads of our lives in the form of faxes, spam, blog, and personal e-mail, not to mention the old-fashioned dead-tree stuff.

For Ballard, the literary productions of executives, scientific researchers, and the stage managers of consumer psychology (advertisers, marketers, public-relations firms), properly read, are an inexhaustible fund of insights and inspiration, perfectly attuned to the neuroses and psychoses of everyday life in the 21st century – unlike the mainstream novel, still suffering from a humanist hangover that blinds it to our increasingly posthuman reality of designer babies and intelligent interfaces, computers that run on bacteria and heart valves made of engineered tissue. Like DeLillo and Pynchon, Ballard reads the literary output of corporate America as a collective dream journal, extracting from its eerie banalities and arcane data the true mythology of the 21st century. *Crash Injuries*, the *Warren Report*, and the *Hollywood Yellow Pages* are his *Kraft-Ebbing*, his *Interpretation of Dreams*, his *Man and His Symbols* – and his *Great American Novels*, too. As for traditional fiction, well, “the great majority of English and American novelists have nothing of interest to say whatever, and an hour spent in not reading them is an hour gained forever.” [3] Hence, his arch prediction that,

when the electronic cottage and the free-agent economy make the corporate office obsolete, the prosaic communications of today's companies will become precious things, transformed by their obsolescence from memos into mementos.

"[W]hen the last corporate headquarters has been torn down," is how he puts it, but that's just a blind; his future tense, borrowed from the prop room of pulp SF, is purely ironic. In truth, Ballard is using the elevation of inter-office memos to literary status to make the argument, equal parts Warhol and Duchamp, that the individual voice is giving way to the collective hum of the corporate hive (see Warhol's use of hired hands to do the gruntwork of actually making his art, or his famous confession that he wanted to be a robot; see also Duchamp's use of mechanical drawing and professional signpainters to expunge all traces of "the artist's hand" from his work). Ever the wag, Ballard is also saying that scientific journals, industry studies, government white papers – hell, even advertising copy – offer a more relevant vocabulary for delving the depths of our info-blitzed, hyper-mediated psyches than the serious novels beloved of the *New York Review of Books* crowd, an assertion calculated to give Dame Sontag a fit of the vapors.

But Ballard's "one day in the near future" has arrived ahead of schedule, on the wings of a horror unimaginable to him or anyone, burying his prediction under an irony heavy as death. The corporate HQ isn't an archaeological site just yet, but the world's best-known office complex, the World Trade Center, has been reduced to a smoldering hellpit, and the inter-office memos of its former occupants, many of them now dead, have been filed under a mountain of debris or scattered to the winds.

A snowfall of them joined the choking white grit already blanketing Liberty Plaza, near the debris field that was the WTC. In a photo in the September 23 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, waves of paper lap at twisted metal, drunkenly leaning trees, and J. Seward Johnson Jr.'s superrealist sculpture of a corporate footsoldier, *Double Check* (1982). [4] The pall of lunar dust – soot, pulverized concrete, and god knows what – lends the scene a ghastly beauty. It resonates at the same aesthetic frequency as those hauntingly poetic human shadows frozen on Hiroshima walls by the atomic flashbulb. And like those indelible shadows, some of these papers may be all that remains of some blue-, pink-, or white-collar Twin Tower worker who will never be found.

That thought is never far from the minds of *Times* writers Jane Fritsch and David Rohde, whose story "Trade Center's Past In a Sad Paper Trail" is an exercise in forensic trashpicking, sleuthing out the fates of the WTC workers whose lives entwine with the "mangled, singed and occasionally pristine" papers blown out of the building and lofted, in some cases, on the southeasterly wind that carried them as far as Brooklyn. [5] The reporters find the year-old resume of someone who wanted a job at a firm with offices in the Trade Center (she didn't get the job, a twist of fate that now seems portentous); the credit union statement of a man who worked on the north tower's 88th floor (he made it down); the cell-phone bill of a woman whose number, when called, triggers a recording that says her voicemailbox is full, an everyday message that suddenly sounds chilling.

Intimations of mortality came to rest at the novelist Jonathan Lethem's feet, as well. On Henry Street, in Brooklyn, he watched "crisped papers.twinkling to the

ground,” among them a computer printout with the coded I.D. “7WTC 034” and the name “Kirshenbaum, Joan.” The document admonishes, “For any report change complete this section and return to ops support, data centre.” Lethem adds, “Joan Kirshenbaum, if you’re reading this, I’ve got your scrap of paper.” [6] Lethem is whistling past the graveyard, but the wry note he’s reaching for turns sour when we remember that Joan Kirshenbaum may not be reading this, Joan Kirshenbaum may not be reading anything, Joan Kirshenbaum may never read anything again. To someone, somewhere, Lethem’s found object may be all that’s left of somebody they love: the inter-office memo as ashes in an urn.

Indeed, some New Yorkers seemed not to know what to do with the melancholy fallout of crumpled, charred or burning documents. Throw them out? Save them as pieces of history or morbid souvenirs? Enshrine them in some sort of secular reliquary? To the writer Kurt Andersen, who lives in Brooklyn, the papers that drift down, into his backyard, seem like “instant archaeological objects retroactively charged with meaning, too sad and strange to keep but too sad and strange to throw away.” [7]

Why not preserve them in a memorial anthology, to be read well into the 21st century, “as treasured as the correspondence of Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot”? Then again, if they ever build a museum to the tragedy of the Twin Towers, perhaps the papers that fell from the sky could be sent aloft again, freed to flap and flutter like disembodied things in a giant, multistory version of one of those Plexiglas columns that you see in science museums, where a jet of air keeps a ball afloat. In the mind’s eye, at least, there’s a mute poetry to the image of all those papers arcing up, up, into the clouds, across the East River, over Governors Island, and down, into Brooklyn. Somehow, it seems like an elegy, more eloquent than words. It reminds me of the sweet, sublimely sad little pirouette of the plastic bag in the movie-within-a-movie in *American Beauty*. Only a minute in length, that slow-motion dance of a scrap of trash, brought to life by a gust of wind, said things about the emptiness that gnaws around the edges of our lives, lives that are over in an eyeblink, and the fleeting glimpses we catch, in the least likely places, of the sublime.

Alan Ball, who wrote the screenplay to *American Beauty*, based that scene on a memory. One Sunday in spring, in the early ‘90s, he was walking, alone, through Manhattan’s deserted financial district. “It was a beautiful day,” he told an interviewer, “very still, kind of overcast, and the light had that perfect, kind of flat quality.” [8] Suddenly, he noticed “this plastic bag in the wind, this white plastic bag. And it circled me, it literally circled me, like, 10 or 15 times. And after about the third or fourth time I felt very, um, I started to feel weird. I really did feel like I was in the presence of something.” [9] That he was standing in front of the World Trade Center at the time is one of the uncanny coincidences that mean everything – and nothing. Like life itself.

[This essay originally appeared, in shorter form, as my “Invisible Lit” column in the Winter 2001 issue of *Bookforum*]

## Endnotes

- 1) J.G. Ballard, *A User's Guide to the Millennium* (New York: Picador USA, 1996), p. 76.
- 2) J.G. Ballard, quoted in J.G. Ballard: *Re/Search 8/9*, ed. Vale, Andrea Juno (San Francisco: Re/Search Publishing, 1984), p. 156.
- 3) J.G. Ballard, quoted in J.G. Ballard: *Re/Search 8/9*, ed. Vale, Andrea Juno (San Francisco: Re/Search Publishing, 1984), p. 156.
- 4) Jeff Mermelstein, "Windows on the World," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 23, 2001, pps. 64-65.
- 5) Jane Fritsch and David Rohde, "Trade Center's Past In a Sad Paper Trail," *The New York Times*, September 14, 2001, p. A1.
- 6) Jonathan Lethem, "9 Failures of the Imagination," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 23, 2001, p. 62. Happily, Joan Kirshenbaum is alive and well, as Lethem informed me by e-mail. "Because of the clue you inadvertently reproduced in your piece – "7WTC" – I wrote my piece knowing that Joan Kirshenbaum would have had to be sensationally unlucky to die that day," he wrote. "WTC# Seven didn't collapse until five o'clock p.m. In fact, she's been in touch, and her scrap of paper is back in her possession. I think she's making a collage with it."
- 7) Kurt Andersen, "Fallout," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 23, 2001, p. 78.
- 8) Quentin Curtis, "The Man Behind American Beauty," *The Age*, February 3, 2000.
- 9) Russ Spencer, Salon, "In a Culture of Detritus, American Beauty Screenwriter Alan Ball Discovers Heartbreaking Beauty in Garbage," March 25, 2000.