

JGB Beats Around The Bush... And Finds Hollywood

JGB Interview by V. Vale

From his home in Shepperton following the November 2, 2004, US Presidential elections, J.G. Ballard wonders over the phone with V. Vale if there is something fundamentally flawed about the American take on reality.

V. Vale: I wanted to get your “take” on the neo-cons and Bush, and your perspective on what happened with this election in November, 2004.

J.G. Ballard: I’m sure you and your readers have had an absolute Niagara of comment on the subject, so I don’t want to give anything but one European’s perspective on it. But there’s no doubt that most people over here on this side of the Atlantic were hoping for a Kerry victory. There’s something very frightening about Bush and the neo-con group. Donald Rumsfeld is quite a scary figure — putting it mildly.

V. Vale: One feels that Bush and his closest advisors are entirely driven by emotions. They’re no longer driven by a reasoned analysis of where the world is going, and what the U.S. response should be. They’re driven by this visceral need to express their anger — you know, their anger and, really, rage at the world. One feels, listening to people like Rumsfeld, Bush himself, and one or two of the others like Richard Perle, that the world is seen as an extremely hostile place.

J.G. Ballard: And moreover, they want it to be a hostile place. They need enemies who can be challenged and then destroyed. This is a kind of psychology that people in Europe are very familiar with, going back to the psychology of people like Hitler and his henchman, and then to Stalin and the whole paranoid stance that both the Nazi and the Soviet regimes had towards their enemies. If they didn’t have enemies, they would soon invent enemies. Because they’re absolutely hung up — and I suspect Bush and the neo-cons, to a surprising extent, in a great democracy like the U.S., are hung up on this need to hate and this need to destroy. And of course it’s frightening, because where will it end? Today Iraq, tomorrow Iran, and the day after, hmmm... maybe France, you know, because given their mindset, there will be no shortage of enemies. I think there’s nothing particularly extreme about saying this. I think it’s what people over here perceive of as part of the dangers of this situation. Nobody thinks there is a connection between the 9-11 attack and Saddam Hussein. There’s no connection at all — it’s quite the opposite. Hussein was running a secular regime. Bush and Rumsfeld have created a kind of unstable regime dominated by religious fanatics in Iraq, of the Khadafi kind they thought they were getting rid of! So it is unnerving. It leads us to question many other areas of the American world view. Is there something fundamentally flawed about the American take on reality? I say that as a lifelong admirer of the U.S., by the way. But it does seem to me that a lot of the formulas that govern American life — in particular its entertainment culture — have leaked out of, say, the Hollywood films and into political reality. That’s frightening. I’ve got a feeling that Americans, who have always been admired and always been liked for the most part, don’t take kindly to being disliked. Unlike, say, the British and French, who have been disliked since the year “dot.” The Americans don’t like being disliked; the reverberations of 9-11 are not going to go away. I’m sure there will be other attacks of a similar kind and they will keep the pot boiling.

V. Vale: Yes. And these days, the Bush Team seems to basically dictate press announcements to the press as “news,” and then the news media just gladly print them without any critical stance or analysis. Recently in the news there was the declaration: “Well, we think Iran has weapons of mass destruction.” Obviously Team Bush is gearing up for an attack on Iran.

J.G. Ballard: Well, it does look like that. What's worrying is that that will be an automatic response: "So, it's going to be Iran next." I can't imagine American ground forces are going to roll across the border, but I can see strategic bombing attacks designed to destabilize the present regime and knock out their nuclear research installations. But, the consequences would be disastrous for the world economy if the huge oil supplies locked up in the Middle East were interrupted. God knows what will happen.

V. Vale: We saw a preview of that in *Mad Max*, didn't we?

J.G. Ballard: Yes, absolutely. It's a worrying time because Bush seems to delight in the sort of mythological version of himself which he's created: the swaggering Texan who is supremely confident of his ability to stare down any mean guys who get in his way. Rumsfeld seems to come out of the same corner of the fairground. Some of the others, like Perle, whom we see a lot of on British television, and Wolfowitz whom we also see, are much more intellectual and they provide a smooth rationale. Something worries me. This goes back to the period of forty years ago when strategic planners in the Pentagon were heavily influenced by game theory, John Von Neumann and others. They seriously believed there was a window of opportunity that the U.S. should take while it still enjoyed nuclear supremacy. This was the time to strike, before the Soviet missile deployment would match the U.S.'s. From what one reads, serious thought was given to picking a fight with the Russians and then obliterating them! One sees something of the same mind-set at work today, and it's a little bit scary.

V. Vale: [laughs] To say the least. Wow. I'm very cautious of conspiracy theories because you can drive yourself crazy — you will never really know who killed JFK, for example. But at the same time I'm very interested in the underlying thinking that doesn't get publicized, like the game theory of John Von Neumann, who was the model for the title character in *Dr. Strangelove*. You don't hear much about that anymore, but that doesn't mean it didn't go away.

J.G. Ballard: I think it's come to the surface again, hasn't it? It's something I've argued for a long while. In my last novel, *Millennium People*, I was putting forth the proposition that nothing disconcerts people more than an apparently meaningless act. If a hostile act in particular has some sort of obvious point... if you're an anti-globalization protestor and you picket the offices of some multinational company, or even if you blow up their showroom windows, everybody understands — they may disapprove, but they understand. But on the other hand, a meaningless act really unsettles people for obvious reasons, because we look for logic. To some extent, the tragic events of 9-11 constitute a kind of meaningless act.

V. Vale: What do you mean?

J.G. Ballard: I haven't seen any convincing explanation of what Mohammed Atta and his fellow hijackers were trying to achieve. I mean, this is a spectacular blow against what we're told is — was — an American symbol: the twin World Trade Center towers...

V. Vale: The WTC was a spectacular symbol of American economic dominance over the world, I think.

J.G. Ballard: I don't think they were seen as such by the rest of the world. They were seen as two very tall buildings. I've never heard anyone refer to them. Now, the Empire State Building, and to some extent the Chrysler Building, had enormous symbolic value, which I remember back in the 1930s, soon after the Empire State Building opened for business. That stood for New York, and it stood for America. But I've never heard of the World Trade Center thought of in those terms. I've

never heard anyone in any television program, documentary, article or book refer to the World Trade Center towers in the way, for example, that people always refer to the Pentagon as a threatening presence.

V. Vale: I think the WTC towers were elevated into this position of representing American capitalism after the event.

J.G. Ballard: Well, whether they were or not, the point is: the attack on them was really meaningless — it didn't achieve anything, apart from killing a huge number of people. It was almost a meaningless act; the logic was difficult to follow. If you hated the U.S. so much, there were other and better targets, in a way: the Capitol in Washington, the White House, the Pentagon itself — one plane obviously wasn't going to do enough damage; all four planes could have gone into the Pentagon. The symbolic value of an attack, say, on the White House or the Capitol would have been far, far greater. By comparison, the attack on the World Trade Center in New York was really... It almost comes into the category of a meaningless act... and it's this that people find so unsettling. I think that when you're faced with a meaningless act of that kind, the brain rushes around trying to find some sort of conceivable reason at work in the perpetrators' mind. Although no one is prepared to come out and sort of back Samuel Huntington's notion of "The Clash of Civilizations" — you know, the Christian West vs. Islam — people act as if the war against the Muslim world were already declared.

V. Vale: In fact, Bush constantly talks about war, doesn't he? He refers to himself as the "War President."

J.G. Ballard: Whereas in terms of the huge enormous unlimited power of the U.S. military, I would regard the invasion of Iraq as a police action. I mean, it's degenerated into a kind of huge police action now — it's a "law and order" problem. The reactive mechanism in Bush's mind, and in the minds of the neo-cons around him, has been touched off. And also of course, the other thing that sort of worries us in Europe, is the way in which religious belief has begun to merge seamlessly into this sort of war mentality. That is something that is very scary, because it justifies anything. If "God" is on your side and you're absolutely convinced of that, then you can do anything.

V. Vale: And justify anything you did.

J.G. Ballard: Absolutely. Going back to the Crusades and religious pogroms in Europe, the Dark Ages, the Inquisition in the 14th-15th century (or whenever), the religious wars... One doesn't want to get too carried away, but there are unsettling echoes — put it like that. I think back to earlier American Presidents when I was younger — say, Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower... one can't imagine them ever having gotten into this war in Iraq. Or into this peculiar mind-set, this sort of "Religious Warrior" mind-set. They weren't riding an emotional horse... The puzzling thing is: Why has this happened? Is there something within the American view of the world, the way that Americans think, that is responsible? In other words, has the genie escaped from the Hollywood bottle ... and got out into the ordinary air we breathe? One can't help wondering that. The logic that underpins Independence Day and Con-Air and all these films seems to be directing America today. I'm probably wrong, but that's the impression that people have over here.

V. Vale: Definitely. Those popular films perpetuate, or inflict, a mythology, upon Americans ... there are all these assumptions underlying those films.

J.G. Ballard: Yes, it underpins those films, and it underpins the American comics that I read in the 1940s. I remember reading Superman comics in 1937, 1938 in Shanghai, and the hero could transform himself — which Bush thinks he can do: he goes into the War Room in the Pentagon and

he comes out a cross between Richard the Lion-Hearted and god knows who else. There is the idea that if what you're doing is "right," and "God" tells you so, you have unlimited power. That's a very powerful combination, actually, if you happen to be President of the U. S., but it's frightening for the rest of the world. I mean, I can imagine a world where everyone is so frightened of the U.S. that we all convince ourselves that we admire it absolutely, and will agree with everything America demands of us, but that will not satisfy the man in the White House at the time. What he needs — or it may be a she, although I would think that Hillary's hopes are rather slender at the moment — I mean for eight years' time, whenever. But there seems to be a need... Maybe it's something as simple as the need for revenge — it's hard to say. But I think it's more than that; I think it's the need to turn the rest of the world into a free-fire zone where anybody who puts his head up out of the nearest ditch is going to get it shot off. That way they're "safe." But, it may be a passing phase...

This interview was first published in *Arthur Magazine*, February 15, 2005, and was excerpted from the book, *J.G. Ballard: Conversations*. This book, and a companion volume, *J.G. Ballard: Quotations*, is now available from <http://www.researchpubs.com>