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WASTE, WATER AND POWER: THE HYDROSOCIAL IMAGINATION OF J. G. BALLARD'S THE BURNING WORLD

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ABSTRACT

J. G. Ballard's The Burning World (1964), later revised as The Drought, imagines a planet dried out by a polymer film that industrial waste has formed on the oceans. Earlier criticism has read the novel through inner space, the chronotope and social ecology. This study adds a lens from political ecology, the hydrosocial cycle, which treats water as a flow shaped at once by nature and by social power. Combining this lens with Murray Bookchin's social ecology, a close reading shows that the novel stages a complete hydrosocial sequence. Industrial waste first breaks the physical water cycle. Social power then rebuilds the flow of water around exclusion, through guarded distillation plants on the coast and private hoarding in the town. Finally, the return of rain goes unnoticed by a protagonist whose social world has collapsed. The study argues that Ballard anticipated a central claim of current water research: scarcity is produced socially as well as physically. The novel therefore offers literary studies a way to read drought as a question of justice as much as of climate.

KEYWORDS : J. G. Ballard, Hydrosocial Cycle, Social Ecology, Climate Fiction

INTRODUCTION

Ballard is now widely treated as a forerunner of climate fiction. Clarke (2013) traces how his early novels came to be read as founding texts of the genre, while Ballard himself said the real subject of science fiction was inner space, since "the only truly alien planet is Earth" (Ballard, 1962a). For decades this remark guided criticism towards psychology and landscape (Luckhurst, 1997). Even Clarke (2018), who reads *The Drowned World* as climate fiction, calls it "psycho-geographical", stressing how the flooded city mirrors the mind.

The Burning World is a special case among these novels. In *The Drowned World* (1962) a change in the sun floods the planet. Here the cause is human: decades of industrial effluent have produced a polymer skin on the sea that stops evaporation. The novel also appeared at a significant moment. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) had just made industrial pollution a public question, and Ballard's premise of chemicals accumulating unseen in the sea belongs to the same anxiety. A disaster caused by society invites questions about society. This study asks two of them. How does the novel connect the breakdown of the water cycle to economic life? And how does it show water being redistributed by power once it becomes scarce? The contribution claimed here is modest but specific: a reading that treats water itself, its flows and its owners, as the organising principle of the novel.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Recent work has moved *The Burning World* closer to ecocriticism. Çiftcibaşı (2016) reads its time and space through Bakhtin's chronotope. Tan (2020) offers the first sustained social-ecological reading, arguing that the novel indicts a capitalist order through a catastrophe caused by industrial excess. Ibrahim and Hasan (2023) read it as a projection of ecological catastrophe, and Oramus (2022) links Ballard's disaster fiction to eco-anxiety. These studies establish the novel's environmental seriousness, but none examines in detail how it represents the social circulation of water itself. That is the gap this study addresses.

FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

Two bodies of theory are combined. Bookchin argues that "the very notion of the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human" (Bookchin, 1982, p. 1), and calls the market economy a "grow or die" system (Bookchin, 1989). Political ecologists add the idea of the hydrosocial cycle. Water does not simply move through rain, rivers and seas; its flow is also directed by dams, pipes, prices, laws and power, so that nature and society produce water together (Swyngedouw, 2009; Linton & Budds, 2014). The two traditions fit well together. Social ecology explains why a hierarchical society damages nature; the hydrosocial cycle explains how that society then decides who receives what is left. Bookchin's distinction between "first nature", the evolutionary world of living things, and "second nature", the world of human institutions, gives a further tool: in Ballard's drought, second nature first wounds first nature and is then wounded in return. The method is close reading of the 1964 text, with these concepts used to trace three things: how water moves, who controls it, and how characters respond to that control.

ANALYSIS

Breaking the cycle. The novel explains its drought with unusual care. Industrial wastes, oil residues and atomic effluents poured into the sea over half a century have formed a membrane a few molecules thick. Clouds still rise over the open ocean but drop their rain there, and no method of removing the film is found. The contrast with *The Drowned World* is instructive. There, excess water floods the cities and becomes a medium of dream and return to an ancient past. Here, water is withheld, and its absence strips away memory and meaning instead of releasing them. The catastrophe is slow, invisible and cumulative, what Nixon (2011) calls "slow violence" (p. 2). It is also an exact image of growth without limits: an economy that treated the sea as a place where costs disappear discovers that the boundary between production and the living world is almost nothing.

Remaking the flow. Once rain stops, the novel shows water being rerouted by power. On the coast the survivors find distillation plants behind wire, guarded by soldiers and police, while most people camp on the dunes outside. The state does not vanish; it shrinks into a guardian of the one resource that matters and protects it by exclusion. In the town, the architect Richard Lomax keeps private reserves and mocks any appeal to the balance of nature. The minister Johnstone reads the drought as divine judgement, which binds his followers together but hides its material cause. Each figure illustrates the hydrosocial point that who receives water depends on property, authority and belief. Money, meanwhile, loses its value, and water becomes the only real currency. The novel thus makes visible what normal times conceal: that the tap, the reservoir and the pipe were always social arrangements, and that their failure does not abolish hierarchy but exposes it. Scarcity in a hierarchical society deepens division rather than producing equality, just as Bookchin (1982) predicts.

Rain without recognition. Not everyone is ruled by the old

order. Quilter, a strange and childlike man first seen on a dying river among dead birds and fish, adapts easily because he owns and commands nothing. His ease in the ruined world suggests that the people least invested in the old order of property may be best placed to survive its end, although Ballard gives him no programme for building anything new. The physician Charles Ransom refuses both greed and zeal, yet his detachment leaves him a survivor rather than the builder of a new community. At the close he walks inland across dry lake beds of sand and fish bones, and rain begins to fall without his noticing it. The physical cycle can recover. What has not recovered is the social one. Bookchin's hope for a "free nature", a society that consciously serves the living world (Bookchin, 1990), is absent, and Ransom's blindness marks that absence.

DISCUSSION

Read through the hydrosocial lens, the novel anticipates a claim now common in water research: drought is never only a lack of rain but also a pattern of access decided by power (Linton & Budds, 2014). Its fenced coast resembles present-day crises in which tankers, private bore wells and rationing favour those with money or influence. Indian readers will recognise the pattern. In recent urban water crises, cities that ran short of piped supply came to depend on tankers and private wells, and the burden fell most heavily on those who could least afford to buy water. The novel is not a prophecy of such events, but it captures their logic with unusual clarity. This adds something to Tan's (2020) reading. Ballard criticises capitalism in general, and he also gives a precise account of how scarce water is distributed. For climate-fiction studies, the novel shows that drought narratives can be read as accounts of distributive justice as well as of environmental loss.

The lens also says something about form. The plot follows water's path: from a shrinking river town, down to the sea where water is distilled and guarded, and back inland across dry lake beds. The story's geography traces the broken cycle it describes. This suggests that hydrosocial criticism can attend to how a narrative is built as well as to what it depicts, a direction that ecocritical readings of Ballard have not yet taken.

Finally, the reading clarifies the novel's much-debated pessimism. Firsching (1985) describes Ballard's apocalypses as ambiguous, and *The Burning World* is no exception. Its ambiguity, however, has a definite social shape. The planet is not finished, since rain returns; what is finished is a society organised around accumulation and command. The open question the novel leaves is whether a different social order could learn to see, value and share water. That question is political rather than meteorological, and it is the novel's most lasting contribution to climate fiction.

CONCLUSION

The Burning World presents a full hydrosocial sequence: industrial waste breaks the water cycle, power rebuilds the flow of water around exclusion, and renewal fails to register in a broken social world. Joining social ecology to the hydrosocial cycle explains why Ballard's drought reads so clearly today. The study is limited to one novel and to the 1964 text; a comparison with the 1965 revision and with later drought fiction such as Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* (2015) would test how far this pattern runs through the genre. Comparative work on Indian fiction about water and drought would also show whether the hydrosocial pattern Ballard imagined holds in a different social setting.

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