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Islands of Mind and Matter: Challenging Dualism in J. G. Ballard's 'The Terminal Beach' and The Chinese Room's *Dear Esther*

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Abstract

Ideas *enter* our mind, a realization can *dawn* on us, and we should let bad news *sink in*. This article argues that experimental narrative can destabilize this widespread tendency to describe mental processes through spatial metaphors. My case studies are J. G. Ballard's short story 'The Terminal Beach' (1964) and *Dear Esther* (2012), an arthouse video game developed by The Chinese Room. These narratives develop and literalize metaphors for mind by foregrounding the continuity between the physical space of the setting (an island) and the protagonists' existential predicament. Going beyond a dualistic reading of the 'mind as space' metaphor, these texts construct spaces that are more than a symbol for the characters' mental processes: narrative space is causally linked to mind in neurophysiological terms (in Ballard's short story), or extends the protagonist's emotional meaning-making (in *Dear Esther*). This set-up is unsettling, I contend, because it raises deep questions about the relationship between subjective experience and material realities. By exploring these narratives and their ramifications, the article seeks to open a conversation between the cognitive humanities and the 'nonhuman turn' in contemporary literary studies.

Keywords

Experimental narrative, environmental storytelling, embodiment, cognitive approaches to literature, metaphor, J. G. Ballard, 'The Terminal Beach', *Dear Esther*, video games.

Introduction

Mind scientists of the 'embodied' stripe have been making a powerful case for the cognitive centrality of organism-environment interactions. As researchers in the area of embodied

cognition argue, living organisms are coupled with the world through feedback loops of sensorimotor actions and responses that are constitutive of perception (Noë 2004) and basic experience (Hutto and Myin 2012). In cognitively complex organisms like human beings, these loops are not purely external, physical happenings, but they shape our conceptual structure through what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call ‘image schemata’—that is, Gestalt-like patterns derived from perceptual experience.

As an example of image schema, consider the notion of obstruction or ‘blockage’ (Evans and Green 2006, 188), which reflects an embodied scenario in which something—an object, perhaps, or another person—blocks a movement by physically getting in the way. This schema, so often experienced in day-to-day interactions with the world, can become a vehicle for conceptual thought: in a news article we read, for instance, that ‘the path for Palestinian freedom and statehood has been obstructed by Israel’s continuing policy of occupying and colonizing Palestinian territory’ (Shaath 2010). This sentence applies the notion of ‘obstruction’ to a situation that involves not only physical events—Israel occupying Palestinian territory—but also, and more importantly, intangible concepts (freedom) and a relatively abstract outcome (Palestine’s statehood). The image schema of obstruction, which has its roots in an embodied pattern of interaction with the world, is thus metaphorically used to model a complex situation that includes abstract ideas as well as events and entities distant from the here and now.

Note the important role that is assigned to analogy and metaphorical thinking in this conception of cognitive functioning: the move from perceptual patterns to conceptual structure is fundamentally analogical (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Turner 1996). Our embodied encounters with the world lay down pathways for conceptual thought, thus corroborating the hypothesis that mind and world are closely bound up. This much has been extensively, and persuasively, shown by philosophers and mind scientists affiliated with enactive, embodied, and extended

cognition: the mind, they contend, is not dualistically opposed to the world but ‘world-involving’ at a very basic level. I am thinking in particular of the so-called ‘extended mind hypothesis’ advanced by Clark and Chalmers (2010) in an influential paper: their core claim is that the mind *involves* the external world, through material artefacts and tools (for instance, pen and paper or a smartphone) that can play a causal role in human cognition. As Clark and Chalmers put it, ‘the human organism is linked with an external entity in a two-way interaction, creating a *coupled system* that can be seen as a cognitive system in its own right’ (2010, 29).

This article argues that narrative can confront us with the world-involving nature of mind by challenging widely held presumptions about the dualistic separation between mind and world. I will be looking at two experimental narratives that place this challenge at their very focus. These narratives occur in different media but deal with a similar set of thematic concerns: they are a short story by J. G. Ballard, ‘The Terminal Beach’ (1964), and *Dear Esther*, an experimental video game developed by the British game development studio The Chinese Room and released in 2012. I will have more to say about these case studies in the next section.¹ For now, let me introduce the kind of world-mind entanglement that is, on my reading, at the root of both Ballard’s short story and the video game.

Here is a curious fact: the language we use to talk about mental processes is highly metaphorical. Ideas *enter* our mind, a realization can *dawn on* us, and we should let bad news *sink in*. All these are relatively conventional metaphors for psychological events, and they converge on a single conceptual mapping—namely, between the mind and a physical space. The dawn metaphor, for instance, describes a specific way in which a thought can emerge, in a gradual process analogous to daybreak. The sinking-in metaphor, for its part, captures our becoming fully aware of the consequences of a piece of information—which is compared to an object being completely immersed in liquid. Psychologists have not failed to comment on these

metaphors for mental processes. John Barnden (1997), for example, has drawn up a comprehensive inventory of folk-psychological metaphors, including ‘mind as physical space’, ‘ideas as physical objects’, and other common mappings. Even *scientific* psychology has never been able to avoid metaphorical language, as David Leary (1990) has shown in a review article: from Aristotle’s analogy between memory and a wax tablet (Draaisma 2000) to the computer-inspired language of twentieth-century cognitive science, the history of scientific psychology is—essentially—a long series of shifting, and competing, metaphorical models.

This article examines how a single metaphorical mapping—‘mind as physical space’—can underlie a plot and raise pointed questions about the nature of mind. The conception of the mental implied by spatial metaphors such as ‘the inner world’ has been critiqued by David Herman (2011) because of its inherent dualism. For Herman, spatial language goes hand in hand with a strict separation between mental and physical substance—with the former being incommensurable with the latter (hence, of course, the dualism). But the relationship between these metaphors and the question of dualism is far more ambivalent than Herman admits, as I will show in this article: when spatial metaphors are blown up and materialized in a narrative environment, as in my case studies, dualism may lose its grip; the direct connection between mind and the physical world comes into view.

My argument attempts to bring together cognitive approaches to literature and recent discussions on the enmeshment of human and material realities in fields such as environmental philosophy and posthumanism.² In one of the seminal studies in this area, Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*, we read: ‘In what follows the otherwise important topic of subjectivity . . . gets short shrift so that I may focus on the task of developing a vocabulary and syntax for, and thus a better discernment of, the active powers issuing from nonsubjects’ (2010, xi). My case studies help reduce the divide between (human) subjects and (material) nonsubjects *without* giving

short shrift to the former: these texts highlight how even subjectivity is based on physical processes; and they do so by turning the ‘mind as space’ metaphor into a material environment that readers and players can explore. These experimental narratives thus hold a mirror up to the imbrication of nonhuman realities and psychological phenomena—a point that I will develop in the conclusion.

The Case Studies

Given the theoretical agenda of this article, the inclusion of a short story by J. G. Ballard should come as no surprise. Influenced by Freud’s topological model of the psyche, the British writer embraced spatial metaphors for mental processes throughout his work: from the post-apocalyptic landscapes of the early novels to the dystopian cityscapes of his later fiction, Ballard’s setting is always bound up with mind.³ In the short story ‘The Delta at Sunset’, a character puts this point as follows: ‘How else is nature meaningful, unless she illustrates some inner experience? The only real landscapes are the internal ones, or the external projections of them, such as this delta’ (Ballard 2009, 631). Ballard was not only a practitioner, but also a theorist of this spatial conception of mind: in a famous essay titled ‘Which Way to Inner Space?’ (1962), he critiqued the conventionality of science fiction and argued that the genre should turn to ‘inner space’—that is, the exploration of characters’ psychology in relation to what he called the ‘deep time’ (1996, 198) of the human species. Accordingly, biology should take precedence over the physical sciences in guiding the efforts of science fiction writers.

My first case study, ‘The Terminal Beach’, demonstrates this interest in biology, and more specifically in human evolution: its protagonist, Traven, is an ex-military pilot stranded on Eniwetok Atoll in the Pacific Ocean—the site of a number of US nuclear tests in the 1950s. Traven finds a research station on the atoll, coming ‘across a series of large charts of mutated chromosomes’ (2009, 596). In his half-delirious ramblings, he envisages the dawn of a

posthuman species, arising from the ashes of a nuclear catastrophe: he calls it ‘Homo hydrogenensis, Eniwetok Man’ (2009, 599). This species would go beyond the limitations and, in Traven’s term, the ‘cosmic guilt’ (2009, 599) of present-day human beings, with their heady mixture of fear for and attraction to nuclear weapons. The island and its concrete blocks thus serve as a monument—a ‘tomb of an unknown civilian’, as the text spells out (2009, 599)—dedicated to the soon-to-be-extinct human species. Traven also experiences a more private kind of psychological trauma: we learn that his wife and son died in a car accident, and he claims to be looking for them among the island’s barren locations. The character thus fuses his private grief with concerns over the biological destiny of the human species—and we’ll see that the spatiality of the island plays a role in conveying this complex emotional state.

Dear Esther is an independent video game developed by British studio The Chinese Room, as part of a research project on the artistic potential of the video game medium. The project—led by Dan Pinchbeck at the University of Portsmouth (see UoP News 2012)—was successful: when the game was released commercially in 2012, it drew considerable attention among critics and gamers alike. *Dear Esther* was praised for its vivid rendering of an island in the Hebrides archipelago and for the unusually emotional experience it offers through the monologue of the narrator and protagonist—who is, like Traven in ‘The Terminal Beach’—stranded on a remote island. (The similarities don’t end here, as we will see in a moment.) This unnamed narrator is the character we control in the game. *Dear Esther* belongs to the increasingly popular genre of exploration games, also known—slightly humorously—as ‘walking simulators’, where not much input is required from the player apart from steering the protagonist through a series of locations. There is little or no ludic challenge, and the emphasis is on what Henry Jenkins (2004) has called ‘environmental storytelling’—piecing together a narrative by uncovering clues scattered throughout the game world. In *Dear Esther*, most of the clues come from the narrator’s own voiceover monologue, which gradually reveals his past life and present circumstances—

often by commenting obliquely or elusively on the places visited by the player. The monologue is partly randomized: after restarting the game, the player may hear a different snippet when visiting the same location—a device that encourages multiple playthroughs.

The narrator's musings are cast in epistolary form, as if they were letters addressed to Esther, his wife (hence the title). We find out that Esther died in a car accident in which he was also involved; there are indications that she was pregnant at the time of the accident. Just like Traven in 'The Terminal Beach', the narrator is overcome with grief, and we may ascribe the monologue's occasional lapses and inconsistencies to the character's mental imbalance. It is possible that the developers of *Dear Esther* even drew inspiration from Ballard's short story; a passage would seem to corroborate this idea, referring to 'the lost shores and terminal beaches of this nascent archipelago' ('Dear Esther Script' 2014, pt. 4, 'The Beacon'). As remarked by game critic Thomas McMullan (2014), another important influence is William Burroughs's 'cut-up' technique—a further sign of experimental literature's relevance for art games like *Dear Esther*. The snippet-like form in which the narrator's monologue is delivered greatly contributes to the mystery surrounding his past and his relationship with the island, whetting players' narrative interest and driving on their exploration of the game world.

Indeed, both 'The Terminal Beach' and *Dear Esther* are examples of what Lars Bernaerts (2009) calls 'narrative delirium'—namely, texts where the narrative progression, the plot, is fuelled by the protagonist's incoherent or delirious perception of the fictional world. In the following analysis, I will tackle Ballard's short story and *Dear Esther*—in this chronological order—in order to show how in both works the narrative delirium converges with the physical space of the setting. There is a long history of literary texts that use the motif of the island to stage and probe the separateness of human society from the nonhuman world: a particularly salient precedent is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, along with rewritings such as, in the 20th

century, Michel Tournier's *Friday, or, The Other Island* and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*. All these narratives foreground the coupling between the human mind and the physical world (for discussion in relation to *Foe*, see Caracciolo 2012). What is distinctive about Ballard's short story and *Dear Esther* is that they radicalize the coupling into a complete breakdown of the subject vs. object binary: material space becomes integral part of the protagonists' minds. Hence the counterintuitive force of these narratives, which performs an implicit critique of dualism: the characters' deranged mind is not just extended into, but fundamentally *blended* with, the material world by turning spatial metaphors for psychological processes into literal, diegetic realities. In turn, this move signals how questions about the nature of subjective experience are intrinsically related to questions about the position of mind vis-à-vis nonhuman realities—thus bringing up the so-called 'hard problem' (Chalmers 1995) of how mind, and consciousness more specifically, can exist in a material world.

'The Terminal Beach': Time, Space, and Nuclear Catastrophe

Ballard's text is subdivided, rather unusually for a short story, into 22 sections of unequal length, most of them titled after one of the island's locations: throughout the text, Traven is seen roaming around the island and making a series of encounters—with the spectres of his wife and son, scientists involved in a research expedition, and finally the corpse of a Japanese soldier. What Ballard calls the 'synthetic landscape' of Eniwetok is described in minute detail, evoking a strong sense of place: for the willing reader, it is easy to project herself into the deserted and dust-strewn island, which is dominated by camera towers, concrete blocks, bunkers, and colourless beaches.⁴ The narrator explains that since 'the moratorium on atomic tests, the island had been abandoned by the Atomic Energy Commission, and the wilderness of weapons aisles, towers and blockhouses ruled out any attempt to return it to its natural state' (2009, 590). While the political and social implications of this human colonization of space are never completely out of the picture, Ballard chooses to focus on its psychological dimension.

Early on in the story we read: ‘This island is a state of mind’ (2009, 590). The protagonist himself reflects that ‘if primitive man felt the need to assimilate events in the external world to his own psyche, 20th century man had reversed this process; by this Cartesian yardstick, the island at least existed, in a sense true of few other places’ (2009, 590). With its abandoned ruins, the island’s landscape has thus become an externalization of deep-seated fears of nuclear disaster and annihilation. As a quotation from psychoanalyst Edward Glover’s book *War, Sadism and Pacifism* makes clear, these fantasies of extinction are not a twentieth-century invention but have their roots in the unconscious mind: ‘The actual and potential destructiveness of the atomic bomb plays straight into the hands of the Unconscious’ (2009, 590), writes Glover. Ballard’s own take on the unconscious is unmistakably Jungian insofar as he posits species-wide psychological propensities—archetypes—connecting us with our remote ancestors. At stake here is a collective unconscious grounded in ancient myth and fears shared across the ages: ‘In some way its landscape [i.e., of the island] seems to be involved with certain unconscious notions of time, and in particular with those that may be a repressed premonition of our own deaths’ (2009, 597).

This framework has important consequences for the temporality of the island—and for Traven’s (and therefore the reader’s) experience of it. We are told that the island’s ‘functional, megalithic architecture [is] as grey and minatory . . . as any of Assyria and Babylon’ (2009, 591)—a passage in which the reference to ancient civilizations reinforces the sense that the island is in touch with the ‘deep’ time of the human species.⁵ Yet the paradox is that, by prefiguring a nuclear apocalypse, the island appears to point to the future as much as to a distant past. The narrator observes: ‘The series of weapons tests had fused the sand in layers, and the pseudo-geological strata condensed the brief epochs, microseconds in duration, of thermonuclear time. Typically the island inverted the geologist’s maxim, “The key to the past lies in the present”. Here, the key to the present lay in the future. This island was a fossil of time future’ (2009,

591). The oxymoron of the 'fossil of time future' conveys the difficulty of grasping the nature of this place, whose temporality is schizophrenically divided between distant past and postapocalyptic future. Predictably, this situation is not without consequences for Traven's psyche: the whole story can be read as a thought experiment documenting the mental decline of a character exposed to an impossible environment.

It is here that the space of the island begins taking on a more personal dimension: after the narrator's initial stage-setting descriptions, the text shifts to an internally focalized account of the island's impact on Traven. First, his sense of time collapses: 'life became completely existential, an absolute break separating one moment from the next like two quantal events' (2009, 593). Traven's exposure to deep time causes a breakdown in his time consciousness: unable to link together the events he experiences, he is left with a series of 'quantal' (that is, discrete and microscopic) units. Space itself seems to be organized in a similar way; the island's identical blockhouses are painstakingly described by the narrator as follows (note the explicit instruction to visualize, which may increase readers' sense of imaginative closeness to the character):

To grasp something of the vast number and oppressive size of the blocks, and their impact upon Traven, one must try to visualize sitting in the shade of one of these concrete monsters, or walking about in the centre of this enormous labyrinth that extended across the central table of the island. There were two thousand [sic] of them, each a perfect cube 15 feet in height, regularly spaced at ten-yard intervals. They were arranged in a series of tracts, each composed of two hundred blocks, inclined to one another and to the direction of the blast. (2009, 595)

These cubes are ‘quantal’ in the same way as Traven’s experience of time, and the narrator is quick to catch on to the psychological effects of this spatial arrangement: ‘With their geometric regularity and finish, the blocks [imposed] on him a mood of absolute calm and order’ (2009, 595). The narrator even ventures a neurophysiological explanation of the changes in the character’s psyche: ‘Since the discovery of the blocks he had become a creature of reflexes, kindled from levels above those of his existing nervous system (if the autonomic system was dominated by the past, Traven sensed, the cerebro-spinal reached towards the future)’ (2009, 596). By directly acting on Traven’s ‘cerebro-spinal’ system, the island dulls his grief, making him temporarily forget his quest for his wife and son. This response is compared to a ‘reflex’—a low-level reaction hardwired into Traven’s unconscious, which the island seems uniquely able to trigger. Not just the character’s sense of time but also his mood and existential feelings are altered by this place. Throughout the short story, this emphasis on the island’s psychological impact is bound up with the motif of the landscape as ‘code’ or ‘cipher’, a hidden message that the character’s unconscious mind can receive and react to, while his more conscious, rational self remains in the dark. In a short section paratextually marked as a ‘parenthesis’ in Traven’s narrative, the text reiterates the association between the island and the ‘spinal’ system, with its temporal orientation towards the future, but also adds the idea of ‘code’ as key to understanding Traven’s response to this place:

Elements in a quantal world:

The terminal beach.

The terminal bunker.

The blocks.

The landscape is coded.

Entry points into the future = Levels in a spinal landscape = zones of significant time. (2009, 596–97)

From this temporal and emotional viewpoint, Traven can envisage a posthuman being—‘Homo hydrogenensis’—a creature or perhaps even species shaped by nuclear disaster. Shortly after this realization Traven has a final hallucinatory vision of the island:

Around him the lines of cubes formed the horizon of his world. At times they would appear to advance towards him, looming over him like cliffs, the intervals between them narrowing so that they were little more than an arm’s length apart, a labyrinth of corridors running between them. They then would recede from him, separating from each other like points in an expanding universe, until the nearest line formed an intermittent palisade along the horizon. (2009, 600–601)

Mirroring the fluctuations in Traven’s perception, this description works towards connecting the landscape of the island with a larger spatial scale, signalled here by the double reference to the ‘horizon’ and by the simile comparing the corridors to ‘points in an expanding universe’. The text so far has highlighted the *temporal* relationship between the island and the distant past or postapocalyptic future, but it becomes clear that this interconnectedness is spatial and ontological as well: after this description, Traven attempts to take leave of the island, in a crescendo that goes from ‘Goodbye, Eniwetok’ to a final ‘Goodbye, Moscow, London, Paris, New York’. He stops only when he realizes ‘the futility of this megathlon farewell. Such a leave-taking required him to fix his signature upon every one of the particles in the universe’ (2009, 601). The island thus becomes a window onto cosmic realities, which Traven manages to sense without—however—fully embracing them.

Ultimately, Traven does not and cannot turn into the posthuman creature whose rise he has foreseen. In a hallucinatory dialogue with the corpse of a Japanese pilot, Traven is told that the

dead, like his son and wife, ‘are fixed in our minds forever, their identities as certain as the stars’ (2009, 603). But Traven isn’t convinced of this alleged cosmic truth. In the story’s last section, he has a vision of ‘his wife and son watching him from the dunes’ (2009, 604) and waits for them to speak, as if he couldn’t dismiss their memory—and the sense of their, and his own, mortality. Traven thus comes across as a hybrid creature: he is able to experience the ‘quantal’ temporality of a postapocalyptic future but remains painfully attached to his personal past.

If the short story succeeds in grafting Cold-War-era anxieties onto the texture of Traven’s experiences, it is only through the unsettling spatiality of the island. Ballard attributes psychological significance to the story’s setting, but this move is more radical than the simple thematization of space: the island does *not* symbolically mirror Traven’s psyche. Rather, the barren landscape of Eniwetok effectively reshuffles Traven’s personality by tapping into his hardwired receptivity to calamity and extinction. It is hardly a coincidence that throughout the story the figurative language for Traven’s psychology is quite anaemic: at one point the image of Traven’s wife and son is said to be floating ‘on the river of his memory’ (2009, 594); a doctor claims that ‘there are rarer fish swimming in [Traven’s] head than in any submarine pen’ (2009, 599); finally, towards the end of the story we read that ‘somewhere in his mind had appeared a small interval of neutral space’ (2009, 601). These metaphors are, of course, unobtrusive compared to Ballard’s descriptions of the island, which are highly consistent and likely to evoke a strong sense of physical presence.

There is little room here for spatial metaphors because the figurative notion of an ‘inner space’ is elevated to a neurophysiological reality—the effect of the spatial features of the island on equally physical, material processes in Traven’s body: even his time perception is ‘quantal’—that is, grounded in elusive but nevertheless physical particles. The island is no longer a mere

metaphorical ‘mirror’ of inner reality; it fuses with the character’s perception and becomes a material extension of his brain and body. Participating in Traven’s experiences as witnesses or, potentially, as empathetic proxies, readers are thus likely to realize that, in the language of Clark and Chalmers’s extended mind hypothesis, the character and the island are a quintessentially ‘coupled system’ in which ‘external features [of the landscape, in this case] . . . are just as causally relevant as typical internal features of the brain’ (2010, 30). The short story, then, extends and literalizes the metaphors for the ‘inner’ that we normally use to discuss our own—and other people’s—mental life. The overall effect is both memorable and disturbing because of how it challenges assumptions about the dualistic separation of mind and ‘external’ reality. In this way, ‘The Terminal Beach’ shows how human minds and the material world are joined in a psychophysical grip whose reach is not just personal and historical but fundamentally cosmic.

Dear Esther: Material Anchors and Emotional Experience

Dear Esther does not share the fascination with nuclear power of ‘The Terminal Beach’, but some of the concerns and anxieties it voices are comparable to Traven’s. However, the video game’s approach to this subject-matter is quite different from Ballard’s. This is no internally focalized text, but rather a first-person narrative based—as we’ve seen above—on snippets of monologue; the format is epistolary, and the narrator’s words are addressed to Esther (his dead wife). The interactivity of the game world is limited: we can explore as much as we like, but we cannot change the course of events; all we can do is trace a path—a relatively linear and pre-scripted one—through the island. The narrator’s monologues are triggered by specific locations or sights, often in carefully staged scenes. Yet very few plot details are spelled out in the game: the player is asked to perform considerable inferential work in order to connect the narrator’s often ambiguous and poetic lines to the physical objects found in the game world; arguably, this strategy, combined with the relative freedom of exploration that comes with the

game medium, contribute to drawing the player into the narrator's emotional predicament. In literary games such as *Dear Esther* mind is evoked obliquely, but no less effectively, via feedback loops of player engagement with the represented environment and inferences based on the game's overt language.

Consider, for example, a sequence from the last part of the game.⁶ Walking along a cliff, we run into a candle-lit display of photographs showing a car crash—probably the crash in which Esther lost her life. This triggers a monologue, which at first seems to have little to do with the photographs or even with the avatar's surroundings. Towards the end of this text, however, a few suggestive details emerge: the 'ashes' point to Esther's death, while the 'tarmac', the 'Sanford junction', and the 'hard shoulder' are clear references to the scene of the accident. A second candle-lit shrine displays a defibrillator and a small collection of surgical instruments—all objects that serve as painful reminders of Esther's death. These carefully staged encounters are meant to convey the narrator's grief; interestingly, they seem to complement—rather than overlap with—the narrator's monologue. On the one hand, the objects scattered throughout the game world make sense only because we infer a narrative from the narrator's words. On the other hand, and this is the crucial aspect, the monologue—while poetic in tone—is largely devoid of direct expressions of the narrator's emotions: his love for Esther remains unstated, and we find few (if any) attempts at capturing how the narrator actually feels. The metaphors and similes are directed not at emotional experience, but at the physical sensation of pain: 'The infection in my leg is an oilrig that dredges black muck up from deep inside my bones. . . . The pain flows through me like an underground sea' ('Dear Esther Script' 2014, pt. 3, 'The Caves'). Even when it comes to expressing his inner experience, the narrator resorts to imagery that is reminiscent of the maritime space of the island: the oilrig, but especially the 'underground sea' (which points to the underground water in the cave complex explored by the player in this part of the game).

Clearly, the narrator's affectivity seems to be devolved to the island, in the form of the candlelit altars or other material stand-ins for his traumatic experience of loss. The protagonist's grief is thus externalized onto the island as players are asked to connect the dots between the verbal narrative and the physical environment they explore. This is an extreme case of extended cognition, one in which experiences that are traditionally seen as inner and private are offloaded onto the world through what Edwin Hutchins (1995) would call 'material anchors'—that is, physical objects standing in for relatively abstract meanings (in this case, the narrator's emotions).

Should we conclude that space in *Dear Esther* is purely symbolic—a projection of the protagonist's state of mind? We've seen that this was *not* the case for Ballard's island, because the narrator repeatedly emphasizes that this postapocalyptic space undermines Traven's mental processes through real, neurophysiologically grounded effects. Something similar happens in *Dear Esther*, particularly because of the associations generated by the narrator's monologue. We've seen that the script never lingers on the protagonist's emotional experience. What the script does, however, is consistently map his *body* and *bodily functions* onto the space of the island, leading to a number of surprising—if slightly puzzling—metaphorical associations. This effect is visible already in the opening monologue: 'Dear Esther. I sometimes feel as if I've given birth to this island. Somewhere, between the longitude and latitude a split opened up and it beached remotely here' ('Dear Esther Script' 2014, pt. 1, 'The Lighthouse'). Note how the symbolic reading of the island is discouraged by the narrator's claim to have 'given birth' to this place—a metaphor that puts his attitude towards the game world firmly in the realm of bodily, not mentalistic, experience. The following sentence *could* be taken to describe—again, metaphorically—a psychological 'split' (possibly between the time before and after Esther's death), but the image of the split 'beaching' here quickly reabsorbs the mental into the physical.

Throughout the monologue, the island is not invested with psychological significance, but with bodily experience. The narrator constantly refers to the caves as the island's 'guts', 'belly', and 'veins'. At times the focus shifts, and it is not the island to have 'guts', but the narrator to have his own guts in the caves: 'If the caves are my guts, this must be the place where the stones are first formed. The bacteria phosphoresce and rise, singing, through the tunnels' ('Dear Esther Script' 2014, pt. 3, 'The Caves'). We infer that the narrator suffered from kidney stones, and the physical environment is often depicted as mysteriously resulting from these stones: 'I had kidney stones, and you visited me in the hospital. After the operation, when I was still half submerged in anaesthetic, your outline and your speech both blurred. Now my stones have grown into an island and made their escape' ('Dear Esther Script' 2014, pt. 2, 'The Buoy'). The story follows the narrator's mental and physical decline, and at one point the chalk lines visible on the island's cliffs are compared to the marks of an infection making its way through his body. In another monologue the body becomes a vehicle used to reach the island: 'I've rowed to this island in a heart without a bottom; all the bacteria of my gut rising up to sing to me' ('Dear Esther Script' 2014, pt. 1, 'The Lighthouse'). Finally, in the following passage it is Esther's body, not the narrator's, to become one with the space of the island: 'You were all the world like a beach to me, laid out for investigation, your geography telling one story, but hinting at the geology hidden behind the cuts and bruises' ('Dear Esther Script' 2014, pt. 2, 'The Buoy').

This allusion to 'cuts and bruises' is probably another echo of Esther's death. We should keep in mind that, in *Dear Esther*, the narrator's embodied attitude towards the island is always mediated by a keen awareness of the body's mortality—his own and Esther's. Thus, the metaphorical blend between the physical features of the environment and the human body is complicated by a third layer of associations—namely, between the island's natural landscape and the human-made space of the highway where the car accident occurred. For example, the

narrator wonders: ‘Was this island formed during the moment of impact; when we were torn loose from our moorings and the seatbelts cut motorway lanes into our chests and shoulders, did it first break surface then?’ (‘Dear Esther Script’ 2014, pt. 1, ‘The Lighthouse’). This passage brings to light the material creativity of space—how the island may have been created by the mechanics of a crash, in a strange loop that apparently cuts human beings out of any sense of goal-directed causality. (Once again, this is strongly reminiscent of Ballard’s fiction, and particularly of the urban dystopias of novels like *Crash*.)

Ultimately, *Dear Esther* is marked by what Stacy Alaimo (2010) would call ‘transcorporeality’: a sense of fluid embodiment, where the boundaries between bodily feelings and world (and between human and nonhuman spaces) are constantly blurred and renegotiated. Readers’ familiarity with body parts and diseases is leveraged towards their understanding of the island’s physical environment—and, vice versa, the island’s geography serves to render the narrator’s bodily experience and objectify (through the affect-laden props) his grieving process. This continuous interchange between the physical, the bodily, and the emotional is demonstrated by the following passage:

Dear Esther. I have found myself to be as featureless as this ocean, as shallow and unoccupied as this bay, a listless wreck without identification. My rocks are these bones and a careful fence to keep the precipice at bay. Shot through me caves, my forehead a mount, this aerial will transmit into me so. . . . I will carry a torch for you; I will leave it at the foot of my headstone. You will need it for the tunnels that carry me under. (‘Dear Esther Script’ 2014, pt. 2, ‘The Buoy’)

This passage works through a systematic inversion of spatial boundaries. We would expect a metaphor along the lines of ‘My bones are these rocks’, but the narrator states ‘My rocks are these bones’, as if the text were enunciated not from the familiar perspective of metaphorical identification with space, but from a more radical, posthuman viewpoint in which the narrator *is* the island. Likewise, the aerial will not transmit the narrator, but *into* the narrator; the caves are both ‘shot through’ the narrator and what ‘carry [him] under’. What emerges is a sense of embodied fluidity and productivity of space that does *not* depend on an external anthropomorphic projection: the human floats in and out of the island ‘without identification’, as the narrator explicitly states. This scenario is indeed shot through with affect—and more specifically with love for Esther and despair at her death—but these emotions arise from a sense of communion with the nonhuman world rather than from the narrator’s supposedly inner experience.

The route to the mental taken by *Dear Esther* is more poetic and suggestive than Ballard’s approach in ‘The Terminal Beach’—a story, as we’ve seen, shaped by Cold-War-era anxieties and by an interest in the neurophysiology of humans’ interaction with space. But the two narratives have at least three key elements in common. First, they go against the grain of mind-body dualism by highlighting the inextricability of human psychology and material processes: in *Dear Esther*, the narrator’s traumatic experience is conveyed by a rich network of physical objects and narrative cues. Second, both texts position the protagonists’ mental and physical struggles against a ‘cosmic’ background, as if exploring the mesh of human and nonhuman realities necessarily brought up questions about humankind’s position in the universe. In *Dear Esther*, for example, we read the following: ‘Where you saw galaxies, I only saw bruises, cut into the cliff by my lack of sobriety’ (‘Dear Esther Script’ 2014, pt. 2, ‘The Buoy’). Bodily injury—probably resulting from Esther’s car accident—is here compared to the island’s landscape (the cliffs), which is in turn mapped onto a vision of galaxies: only by embracing this

cosmic perspective is it possible to fully grasp the implications of Esther's death, and perhaps take the edge off of the narrator's grief. (This conclusion is clearly reminiscent of the Japanese pilot's words in 'The Terminal Beach', with the cosmic statement that the dead are 'as certain as the stars'; Ballard 2009, 603).

The third element shared by *Dear Esther* and Ballard's short story goes hand in hand with this cosmic emphasis; it has to do with the posthuman orientation of the narrative.⁷ This aspect is strongly hinted at by the video game's final sequence.⁸ We see the protagonist climbing a radio tower and throwing himself into the void—in what is, apparently, a suicide attempt. However, one instant before the impact the protagonist turns into a bird, as indicated by the shadow projected onto the ground, and surprisingly flies away. This leads to a final tracking shot—a flyover of the island in which the avatar comes to rest over the sea, amid paper boats folded (so we are told in a previous passage) out of the letters he had sent Esther. While in 'The Terminal Beach' the posthuman consists in the evolution of the human species after a nuclear catastrophe, here it takes on a more intimate, almost metaphysical dimension: it is a shadowy hope of permanence after death—not in the sense of a dualistic survival of the soul, but in a final embrace with the nonhuman realities of the island, such as the gulls, the cliffs, and the sea.

Conclusion

My literary reading of *Dear Esther* ties in neatly with the focus of *CounterText* on literature's continued presence in the contemporary cultural landscape: literariness emerges where one may not expect it, and the interactive, multimodal medium of the video game can resonate with the formal sophistication and thematic depth that we associate with a literary writer such as Ballard. Both 'The Terminal Beach' and *Dear Esther* take advantage of a setting with a long literary pedigree—the island—to probe their protagonists' state of mind, thus revealing the imbrication of mind and world in our transactions with reality. The strategies they adopt to this end are

partly different: Ballard's short story posits a background of unconscious neurophysiological mechanisms that determine the island's impact on the protagonist's psyche, connecting him with the deep time of human evolution—and projecting him into a posthuman future. *Dear Esther*, by contrast, documents the narrator's grief process through a network of associations and resonances between the physical space explored by the player, with its mementos of the character's past life, and the poetic monologue of the voiceover narrative.

Both 'The Terminal Beach' and *Dear Esther* are, in an important sense, experimental, in that they overturn the widespread tendency to take spatial language for mental processes as a *mere* metaphor. In these works, by contrast, relatively conventional metaphors of mind are literalized into loops of mind-world interaction, where the world is key to understanding minds. Seen in this light, both narratives go against the grain of mind-body dualism—a position that is not just culturally dominant, but also to some extent cognitively hardwired (see Slingerland 2008, 394–97). This explains the counterintuitive appeal of both stories. Metaphorical language for mental processes is, after all, susceptible to a dualistic reading: 'mind as physical space' is a metaphor insofar as—on a certain understanding of the comparison—the mind is *not* spatial at all, but exists on another, nonphysical plane. By focusing on the coupling of mind and the space of the island, and by suggesting—in different ways—that this space is real and not merely symbolic, 'The Terminal Beach' and *Dear Esther* push back against dualism: they imply a form of psychophysical reductionism, a sense that the mind arises from patterns of bodily interaction with the material environment, without any dualistic residue. To restate this point another way, these narratives help us realize how any talk of the mind being 'inside' is fundamentally metaphorical: neither inside nor outside, the mind is a process that involves subpersonal biochemical mechanisms and bodily schemata for engaging with an environment that is always already 'us', as Harold Fromm (2009, chap. 9) puts it.

These narratives also remind us that confronting the material basis of mind inevitably raises questions about the relationship between human subjectivity and nonhuman realities. How does mind emerge from ‘mere’ matter? How are we tied—invisibly yet powerfully—to nonhuman animals, human-scale objects, and even realities that escape our perceptual capacities by being too small or distant in space and time? As Thomas Nagel argues, ‘the mind-body problem is not just a local problem, having to do with the relation between mind, brain, and behavior in living animal organisms, but [one that] invades our understanding of the entire cosmos and its history’ (2012, 3). By itself, narrative cannot provide answers to these thorny problems, but it has the imaginative and emotional clout to show their relevance and, perhaps, their inescapability. Ecological philosophers such as Timothy Morton (2010), Jane Bennett (2010), and others have called attention to the entanglement of human life and nonhuman things, in an attempt to undermine a culturally entrenched, but deeply problematic, conception of the human as metaphysically sealed off from other kinds of realities. This article sought to demonstrate how the position of embodied cognitive science, and particularly its critique of mind-body dualism, converge with this philosophical program at a very fundamental level. It seems to me that this convergence opens up rich possibilities for cross-fertilization between cognitive approaches to narrative media and the ‘nonhuman turn’ (Grusin 2015) in fields such as ecocriticism and posthumanist thought. Metaphor should play a key role in this effort, for it is deeply ingrained *both* in our understanding of the mental and in our attitude towards nonhuman phenomena. At the same time, we should remain aware of the limitations inherent in any particular metaphor. My case studies highlight these limitations by elevating spatial metaphors for mental processes to a scenario of physical, embodied interaction with the affect-laden space of the island: by appealing to bodily experience and discarding a purely symbolic reading of space, narrative can thus challenge dualistic ways of thinking and put us in touch with realities beyond the human.

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¹ I view *Dear Esther* as an excellent example of a recent wave of 'arthouse' video games that engage with ethically relevant and emotionally resonant themes. This explains why I tend to focus on the *script* of *Dear Esther* and not on its gameplay: the game calls for a distinctively literary mode of engagement. I won't be able to expand on this line of argument in this essay, but see at least Astrid Ensslin's important monograph *Literary Gaming* (2014).

² For a representative sample of work in cognitive approaches to literature, see the collection edited by Bernaerts et al. (2013) and Lisa Zunshine's *Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies* (2015).

³ I refer to Samuel Francis's excellent *The Psychological Fictions of J. G. Ballard* (2011) for further discussion on Ballard's sources and engagement with psychological themes.

⁴ For more on sense of place and readers' illusion of 'presence' in narrative spaces, see Caracciolo (2013).

⁵ See Mark McGurl (2011) on literature's engagement with the deep time of geological or evolutionary phenomena.

⁶ A video recording of this sequence is available in the following YouTube video (starting roughly at 0:52:00): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEjvpHpVyiw>.

⁷ For further discussion of how narrative can embrace a posthuman perspective, see Caracciolo (2018).

⁸ See, again, the YouTube video from 1:05:00.