

From Page to Stage: Adapting *Vermilion Sands*

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In May 2015, as part of an academic-practice-as-research project, I produced an adaptation of J.G. Ballard's *Vermilion Sands* (1971). The project was tied in with a production module at the University of South Wales, had a budget of less than a thousand pounds, a cast of sixteen and only four weeks to prepare. Performed to an invited private audience, *Vermilion* was intended as a scenographic experiment in theatrical adaptation practices but it also became an exploration of science fiction writing in theatre.¹ This paper explores as a case study some of the dramaturgical and scenographic decisions made when adapting *Vermilion Sands* for the stage. It examines how theatrical sf sits between literary and cinematic definitions of sf, and argues how sf in theatre is not just a matter of applying an iconographic skin of sf design, but must become a narrativized element of the drama.

Vermilion Sands

Vermilion Sands is a collection of short stories written by Ballard between 1956 and 1970 and published in a single collection in 1971. It was chosen as a suitable source text, partly from a personal affinity for anything science fiction, with Ballard as a favourite, and partly because the short story collection offered a structure which could be parcelled up into scenes with narratives complete in themselves, set within a location that was strange enough to create a retrospective narrative of its own. As the prospective (revelatory) narratives of the scenes and the connecting dialogues become interwoven they create visual and thematic motifs as they unfold, allusions to *Vermilion Sands* and poetic references to the strange landscapes afforded by its deserts establishing a larger sense of the place only when looking back over the collection of tales.

Helpful in this respect was the position of the collection as part of the New Wave in the 1960s and 1970s. Like the work of Michael Moorcock, John Sladek and Pamela Zoline, Ballard's fiction is 'highly ambivalent' about its loss of specificity to the sf genre 'even as it strove to make science fiction more literary' (Evnine 2015: 26). Ballard establishes his stories as sf, with each story including an artistic novum, or 'an exclusive interest in a strange newness' (Suvin 1976: 58–59), in the form of an artistic notion or conceptual artistic device. In 'The Cloud Sculptors of Coral D' it is the ability of micro-aircraft to sculpt clouds artistically; in 'The Screen Game' one novum is the ability of the central female character to control and bejewel deadly insects, while a secondary novum uses an extravagant new form of formalist cinema-making as psychotherapy; 'Studio 5, The Stars' features an automated poetry machine; in 'Cry Hope, Cry Fury' a psychotropic painting is made that uses light and emotion to reveal changes over time; in 'Say Goodbye to the Wind' the protagonist is almost killed by a deadly psycho-morphic suit, similar to the psycho-tropic architecture of the house featured later in the collection in 'The Thousand Dreams of Stella-Vista'; 'Venus Smiles' and 'The Singing Statues' both feature sonic sculptures –in the former, the sculpture grows organically and uncontrollably when planted in the ground, while in the latter, the sculpture turns out to be a fraud, the artist having hidden inside it to impress the fading opera star who purchased it; some form of sonic creatures feature as minor nova in most of the stories but there is a shift to the plant kingdom in 'Prima Belladonna' with the breeding of sonic orchids.

Even though each story contains a technological or scientific novum, there is a good deal of what Simon Evnine calls 'generic entropy' (Evnine 2015: 26) evident in Ballard's work. *Vermilion Sands* often feels like a collection of Chanderlesque noirs set in a hot, red landscape, with characters who would not look out of place in the gin palaces and speakeasys of 1930s Chicago or Los Angeles. Each story presents a male protagonist, cyphers of Ballard himself as the differences between the central narrators of each story vary only slightly.

When these figures are faced with the ennui of the age, known elliptically in the stories as the ‘Recess’, they turn their artistic obsessions towards a female figure in the stories who acts as muse to each artist for the duration of each narrative, flitting in and out of their lives, leaving them with only failed art and melancholy memories. The rigidity of any sf definition is, together with the pulp narratives, further offset by the recurring themes of the stories, which are more Gothic than science fiction. There are thematic similarities to the female Gothic in particular, despite the masculinity of Ballard and his central characters, insofar as the stories eschew violence, bloodshed and the manifest monster in favour of existential terror, dread, psychological vulnerability and the haunting persistence of memories (see Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 89; Moers 1976: 90–98; Wallace 2013: 17; Williams 1995: 102–104).

Each of these elements made a compelling source text for adaptation, because the text was not straightforwardly science fiction. The characters were repetitive and flawed, the stories often very interesting in literary terms but inherently undramatic because they lacked action. Drama is about things being done, to use an Aristotelian definition, and in the collection the Recess meant things did not get done at all. Even so, the mood the stories evoked, the idea of Europe lying ‘on its back in the sun’, meant that the reasons for bringing the collection’s ‘virtues of the glossy, lurid and bizarre’ (Ballard 1985: i) to the stage in the twenty-first century was hard to resist.

The Adaptation

Based on five short stories from Ballard’s collection, *Vermilion* was a 95-minute stage adaptation performed at ATRiuM Theatre (22–23 May 2015). The project sought to investigate gender and science fiction through a scenographically-driven adaptation.

Vermilion evokes a red-desert world where technology and art have become synonymous and the residents of the world, decadent and listless. For Ballard, this was a world where a noir-

ish pulp-fiction could provoke a criticism of 1970s California, his stories clinging to the same motifs: a wayward techno-artist meeting a femme-fatale muse. All the stories lead to elliptical literary conclusions where the femmes fatales vanish, leaving the male protagonists alone with their unfulfilling art. These issues made it fertile material for producing a formally rare science-fiction theatre with a materialist feminist agenda (Dolan 1991: 10) through its sustained appropriation (Sanders 2006: 31–32), a methodology which ‘affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain’ (Sanders 2006: 26). Because of the limitations of the production (the constraints of time, casting, budget and logistics), a more thorough adaptation of *Vermilion Sands*, where the source material was transformed for a new medium as completely as possible, would have been unrealistic. Instead, the chosen production was not merely a staging of the text or an attempt to make it more ‘relevant’ (Sanders 2006: 19), but an attempt to rework the text for a different existence on the stage as a piece of theatre, and not just drama that observed a ‘duty of care’ (Minier 2014: 16) for Ballard’s work. Even though cinematic adaptations of fiction can often be a successful process, theatre is a different medium and an assumption that adaptation works in the same way from literature to theatre as from literature to film is an assumption that misunderstands what works ‘for the medium of expression’ (Stam 2000: 58). There have been many filmed adaptations of Ballard’s work but few theatrical ones.

Appropriating Science Fiction Definitions

Even though an appropriation may involve a generic shift (Sanders 2006: 26), the intention with *Vermilion* was to make a piece of science fiction theatre. The fields of literary and filmic sf are replete with definitions (see, for example, Mendlesohn 2003: 1–14; Roberts 2006: 1–28; Seed 2005: 1–8), but theatre is not. I will use two of the most distinct medium-specific definitions to highlight theatre’s liminal position: Darko Suvin’s literary definition of science

fiction in terms of cognitive estrangement, and Vivian Sobchack's definition of sf film as that which 'emphasizes actual, extrapolative, or speculative science and the empirical method, interacting in a social context with the lesser emphasized, but still present, transcendentalism of magic and religion, in an attempt to reconcile man with the unknown' (Sobchack 1998: 63).

Although Suvin's work is sometimes dismissed (see Clayton 1998), it provides an interesting overlap with sf in film. Suvin's definition has two elements and one component: cognition (that which is known, socially or scientifically) with a Brechtian concept of estrangement (*Verfremdungseffekt*, often misconceived as 'alienation' but better understood as 'making strange'); and the introduction to a narrative of the component *novum* or 'an exclusive interest in a strange newness' (Suvin 1976: 58–59). These elements and component cover most of Sobchack's definition, developed for talking about certain types of screen science fiction. They do this almost entirely but for the small sub-clause of the 'lesser emphasized, but still present, transcendentalism of magic and religion' (Sobchack 1998: 63), which Suvin regards as 'less congenial to SF' largely because it dilutes sf with other genres of fiction: 'the fantasy (ghost, horror, Gothic, weird) tale, a genre committed to the interposition of anti-cognitive laws into the empirical environment' (Suvin 1976: 62). For Suvin, sf literature cannot afford to waver from his rigid definition as a loss of cognition would affect the 'social truth' (Csicsery-Ronay 2003: 119) of the worlds formed by sf writers, since it would redirect the narrative from the naturalistic, where the protagonists' destinies are inescapably human, towards the metaphysical, where the character has a 'destiny' (Suvin 1976: 65). This literary definition would exclude much of sf film, so Sobchack's inclusion of the metaphysical in her definition allows for the role of destiny to be set alongside elements which could be considered nova or cognitively estranging. It also allows for elements of sf iconography to exist comfortably in the sf film without exposition:

space craft, warp engines, energy weapons, nano-technologies and so on are permitted within a film's design simply by the inclusion of what is basically a magical element within the realism of the text. In cinema, where the design is often considered as pure artifice, having 'decors that desert verisimilitude for visions conjured from legend and eschatology' (Affron and Affron 1995: 115), Sobchack's inclusion of transcendental magic offers *carte blanche* visual design that appears 'true' to the sf world it exists within. In literature, these elements often have the room to be explained, or pondered upon, if they feature as the novum of the text, and can be understood rationally. Film rarely has the time to delve into specifics. In literature, these elements often have the room to be explained, or pondered upon, if they feature as the novum of the text. Scientific explanation such as that included in works like Poul Anderson's *Tau Zero* (1970) or Larry Niven's *Integral Trees* (1984) can be understood rationally. Film, however, rarely has the time to delve into specifics. Film must 'give the impression of having photographed real objects' (Barsacq 1976: 7) even if those things are entirely imaginary, and it must do it with as much brevity as possible, without losing the audience's attention.

Caught between these positions, sf theatre is representationally not as iconic (objects are like the photographic representation of them) as film realism, but still visual; and it is not literary in the sense of it being 'readerly' (Barthes 1990: 4) with the luxury of printed, re-readable text. Theatre has advantages, however, over both fiction, as a more 'writerly text' (Barthes 1990: 5), created as it is experienced both verbally and orally as well as literarily, and over film, for through its manifestly live and ephemeral presence, it can be evocative in a way which film resists because of its iconic realism. Theatre is *psycho-plastic*, able to provoke the audience into filling iconic absences with their imaginations and it draws upon a sense of magic through its performativity and staging (Burian 1970: 123–45; D'Arcy 2012). Consequently, theatre is literary enough to 'reflect *of* but also *on* reality' (Suvin 1976: 64) in

terms of its cognition and it is also estranging enough ‘as an attitude and dominant formal device’ (61) through its live form, but it lacks the iconic realism of a film to include successfully the unexplained nova so often found in sf iconography unless the theatre production has an absurd amount of budget. Even so, an iconically realist theatre production attempting to stage the ‘transcendentalism of magic and religion’ (Sobchack 1998: 63) is not impossible, nor is it without its precedents theatrically. This one element can be used to describe a great deal of non-sf theatrical drama, but a production that attempts to replicate entirely the medium of film is probably doomed to failure.

To further reduce Sobchack’s definition to component and elements, it is difficult to see where the iconographic elements of sf actually fit: essentially it is ‘speculative science [...] interacting in a social context [...] in an attempt to reconcile man with the unknown’ (Sobchack 1998: 63). This is something that theatre has often done: Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* (1592) and William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611) explore the fringes of knowledge and the occult, whilst Samuel Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon speculate upon time and existence in *Waiting for Godot* (1948), although very rarely would we count any of these texts and countless others as science fiction without making a particularly ugly set of forced readings and arguments. Although, if we were to deliberately stage and design them so that they drew upon the iconography of science fiction, then the productions would become science fiction productions of those texts. Distinct from this is the example of Bob Carlton’s 1989 musical *Return to the Forbidden Planet* which is more of a cultural appropriation of *The Tempest* than an adaptation or a staging of it. This stage musical borrows character names and plot devices, whilst also being an intertextual “sequel” to the 1956 film *The Forbidden Planet* (Fred. M. Wilcox) itself a loose adaptation of playtext and not really a production of the work by Shakespeare. In the same way that alterations in the uniforms of the Soldiers in a production of *King Lear* (1606) can evoke the historical military uniforms of

many periods and historical nations in various stagings of that Shakespeare text, so too can a sf iconography code a production as sf: ‘The icons of sf are the signs which announce the genre, which warn the reader that this is a different world’ (Jones 2003: 163). Even though the audience may recognize Sobchack’s definition as applying to any number of literary dramas, only if a visual realization of a sf design is appended to that production will an audience qualify the production they are watching as sf. The question could therefore become: how much sf iconography is needed to make a theatre production sf? A designer’s reply might be: how much budget do you have and how sf do you want it to be? A more dramaturgical response might be to see in what ways the dramatic narrative can be science fiction without over-explanation, and still appear visually interesting scenographically, without clumsily trying to evoke sf iconography that could not be afforded for the production. That was the approach taken with the adaptation of *Vermilion Sands*.

Vermilion

Due to the constraints of the project, in this theatrical appropriation of Ballard’s work, the aim was to embellish the female roles, to redress the gender imbalances whilst exploring the same technological, artistic and interpersonal themes as the source. Female roles were expanded, and some roles gender-swapped, exploring relationships between characters and those between artist and artworks. Central to each story is malfunctioning media technology; the failure of technology to produce art is linked with the failure of relationships. By making media and scenographic technology central to the production of *Vermilion*, the interplay between people and technology and the art that they both fail to create in this world became a central theme of the work; it had to be spatially fluid, allowing diverse theatrical forms such as poetic realism and radio drama to exist within the same theatrical construct. *Vermilion* was not intended to be a dramatic work with a sf skin, but a work of science fiction which

explored the same issues as Ballard, but through the theatrical medium. Initially intending to stage versions of all nine of Ballard's short stories within ninety minutes, the production eventually featured just six of the tales in various degrees using a range of theatrical conventions, framing devices and styles to realize the texts. This section will outline some of the scenographically-driven dramaturgical choices.

The play opens to the sound of desert wind, and an empty red stage appearing in the dawning light of a new day. Into the space runs Emerelda, drawn from the wan, insane starlet from 'The Screen Game'. Emerelda's flight from her husband, through the painted re-arrangeable screens set out by him, becomes the recurring scenographic motif. Four wheeled periactoi, pillars with three different painted faces, were moved around the space to create different locales, courtyards, buildings and eventually the psychotropic walls of the killer house from 'The Thousand Dreams of Stella Vista'. The architectural nature of these columns gave a great deal of spatial variety to a limited stage space, and when moved by the actors could produce a variety of environments. Their three faces, painted, white, black and red, matched and contrasted with the vermilion-coloured floor. In conjunction with a simple white cyclorama stretched across the rear of the stage and a limited lighting colour palette of reds, blues and oranges, the periactoi were all that were needed to produce a sense of shifting time, place and mood. Consequently, a transition from one scene or story into the next became demarcated by the shifting of the screens. Each time the screens were rearranged, Emerelda appeared and engaged in direct address with the audience, a convention that only she was permitted; all other characters were fixed within the realism of their story-worlds so that Emerelda's appearance marked her as an unreliable narrator and an estranging reminder of the theatre. In this way, the red rocks and sand seas of Vermilion Sands were evoked for the audience in each transition, when the machinery, such as it was, was shown to the audience, producing a theatrically estranging effect. Contributing to this scenographic convention, the

lighting shifted over time, from red through blues and eventually back to red, establishing a sense of rhythm and the passage of a day cycle; the silence of the theatre was undercut by sounds of desert winds blowing, with the occasional howl from a haywire sonic sculpture.

To add a sense of the surreal and dreamlike, furniture was limited to a single wheeled chaise lounge, which was 'sailed' on to the stage as a sand yacht by the antagonists of 'Cry Hope, Cry Fury' when they rescue the stranded hero of that tale, Melville, and place him on it centrally in the space while he recovers. Here Melville is taunted by a shifting and altering psychotropic painting, created with a surrealistic photo animation projected onto two of the periactoi's white faces. Afterwards the chaise is sailed away again, only to return as a piece of furniture, but also as the site of the memory drum of the house in 'Stella Vista', which is accessed through a panel in the base. Emerelda's obsession with jewelled insects is realized in a similar way to the painting, created via a projection of the bejewelled creatures onto a white cloth placed upon the floor. As animated insects appear to scurry across the cloth and her pale skin she explains the processes used to tame and jewel them. When Emerelda leaves, the cloth is recoded by Melville as the glass sand of the sea he is stranded on.

The sound sculpture from 'Venus Smiles' was initially chosen as a framing device to introduce all the characters and have them interact at the disastrous unveiling of a vindictive piece of art, but because of its themes the story became a central feature of the play. In the story, the sonic sculpture is created by the artist to give Vermilion Sands a statue it 'would grow to like' (Ballard 1985: 115) but it becomes a horror of a thing which eventually must be destroyed because it grows, and howls, out of control. The story of its unveiling was to be passed over briefly to explore the theatrically more achievable smaller-scale story, 'The Singing Statues', where an artist becomes farcically (in the play) trapped in his own art work; in the performance, one of the periactoi opens to allow the hapless artist inside, and in that small space he remains, singing (a mix of live voices and recorded sound), with his new

owner. Having already presented one idea of a sonic sculpture, the idea of a constantly growing one taking over the world was too much fun not to include.

‘The Cloud Sculptors of Coral D’ and ‘Prima Belladonna’ had already been cut from the script for scale, whilst ‘Say Goodbye to The Wind’ was cut for length. ‘Venus Smiles’ had brought everyone onto the stage and introduced the mysterious artist responsible for the debacle at the start of the play, so it made sense to blend that character with another of Ballard’s femmes fatales, the muse from ‘Studio 5, The Stars’, and because she had reappeared, so too could her sculpture. Aurora Drexel, an amalgam of Aurora Day from ‘Studio 5’ and Lorraine Drexel from ‘Venus Smiles’, became a recurring antagonist and artistic muse whose mission was to wake the artists of Vermilion Sands from their apathy. It seemed fitting that her sculpture should make the final version of the play, not through its physical presence on the stage, as the original story might suggest, but sonically, through a retelling of the tale in a radio-play. We meet the characters first in the opening scene where the sonic sculpture goes wrong and must be carted off stage; those same people reappear in the darkness, their faces and microphones lit, dominated by four of the periactoi looming over themover them. The mounting terror and inescapable sense of doom caused by the uncontrollable, ever-growing, metallic sonic sculpture and the sonic apocalypse that it causes is an entertaining addition to Ballard’s book, but in the prospective narrative of a stage production, an apocalypse that is not at the end of the work is problematic. However, in a theatrical form which relies upon establishing a whole new set of conventions, the narrative would alter retrospectively and be a sf tale within a sf play, and not a realist event in a realist work. The methods and feel of 1950s horror and sf radio shows, like *X-Minus 1* and the *Inner Sanctum*, were deliberately evoked to stage the out-of-control sonic sculpture, and to present the new world that the characters eventually become trapped in. As this section was presented so differently from the rest of the play, and required a different method of audience

engagement, the section could exist within its own story-world and, retrospectively, be seen in narrative terms as an alternate or possible narrative course outside of the main dramatic flow.

The final two stories chosen were 'Studio 5, The Stars' and 'The Thousand Dreams of Stella Vista'. The amalgam character, Aurora Drexel, appeared both as an absent figure in the radio play dealing with her art work, and as the poet's muse in 'Studio 5', with the central editor figure played by a female actor in a revised role inspired by the poet Elizabeth Bishop. Streams of white tape and projected animated text taken from the script flooded the stage and swamped the poet, Paulette, while Aurora Drexel, apparently in control of the maelstrom, laughed. Their ensuing argument summarized the central argument of the play: 'I ask what is art? Only art can answer.' Implying automation and technology have replaced passion and craft in art, whilst ennui and malaise have replaced passion and love in people, Drexel argues for the return of both in humans, and the abandonment of the technology and lifestyle that is their ruination, thus framing the central argument, in various forms, of each of the stories.

The final scene was deliberately the most dramatic of all the stories, and the most realist in theatrical terms, simply because it ended with a death, unlike the other chosen stories. 'The Thousand Dreams of Stella Vista' deliberately made use of the periactoi and the moveable space, by then familiar to the audience, and used them to force the action right down to the apron of the space, and eventually to crush the central female figure of the story. The other stories had been poetic, fleeting, strange, and even surreal, but 'Stella Vista' is a domestic psycho-drama about a couple who end up getting divorced because the house that they move into contains the psychic memory of a woman the husband was once infatuated with. It is this memory which shapes and transforms the plastic architecture of their new home; in the original story, the wife leaves the husband and goes to live with her mother. In the play, the self-morphing psycho-tropic house kills the wife, not through any sense of

misogyny, but necessarily for dramatic irony. It was undramatic to leave the husband moping for his estranged wife in a technologically 'haunted house'. In the story, it is acceptable to understand that the character's life falls apart because of his obsession with a memory of a dead woman he barely knew, but on stage, it weakens the figure of the wife and makes the husband merely pathetic. In the production, when the house kills the wife, it is directly his fault: in the story, it is his neglect of her wishes and his neglect of her feelings and her person which drives her away, in the play it is those same things which kill her and shift the story from the domestically sad to the dramatically tragic. The husband is left destitute and, importantly, haunted by not one, but two women who are dead because of his selfish actions. Foreshadowed by the art work out of control in the earlier radio play section, this scene becomes the culmination of Drexel's argument: balance technology with human interaction or face the inevitable consequences.

Appropriation as Critique

The episodic nature of the production, and the brevity of the story adaptations, plus the importance of having substantial roles in an "assessed" production meant that everyone had to get an equal part in the play and that the genders must be balanced. Such challenges were met by utilizing the adaptation process not only as an adaptation which realizes several aspects and themes of the original work, but by a methodology that could also appropriate and critique the original text. Genders were shifted and characters blended into each other to make the new version work dramatically given the constraints. Emerelda became a solitary figure, her husband and would-be lover never seen; Aurora Drexel became an amalgamation of several of Ballard's female characters, including from the two stories that remained unstaged; against Drexel, Paul became Paulette, the regendering of the role having little impact upon their discussion but an intense one upon their relationship. The contexts were

altered, though still recognizably Ballardian, the stories adjusted to accommodate these new people and explore the same issues that Ballard explores: themes of obsession, lust, memory and mythology, interwoven with explorations of art in an age of automated reproduction of simulacra. Central to each story was a novum, a technology made to produce art, misused, gone haywire or failing. Each failing technology became coded as a failing relationship. Each artwork was at once fantastical, and cognitive and was central to the discussion of the interpersonal relationships in each section. The technology of Vermilion Sands was created to make art in the Recess, a non-specified period of social and technological atrophy, and its failure to function becomes a central problem in each story, not because the stories spend time trying to fix the technology, but because their failure can be read as the failure of the relationships of the characters involved in the stories. The characters' attempts to manipulate, or possess each other are mirrored by the technologies central to each story: the opera singer falls in love with the sonic statue, because she thinks it sings back to her, when it is actually the artist inside who is infatuated with her; the poetry machine breaks and the poet is forced to write again for the love of the poetry and not just for their muse; a husband obsessed with the recording of a woman ends up preserving the recording of his wife as well. All the stories are intrinsically interwoven with the nova of the originals, since whereas dressing the world with science fiction iconography only makes theatre look like science fiction, the actual exploration of science fiction on stage necessitates a deeper requirement than the surface elements of its design. In theatre sf, the novum needs to be narrativized, used to extend or expand the sf discourse in a way which the iconic realism of film takes for granted, while the specificity of its definition in literature restricts the encroachment of anti-cognitive elements. Even though theatre is capable of being iconically realist or purely literary, it rarely does one or the other completely; a definition a definition of sf in theatre is hard to pin down in the oscillations between these two positions. By making them integral to the narrative of theatre

writing, science fiction elements must be recognized as such. While Ballard's original lacked generic specificity in its attempt 'to make science fiction more literary' (Evnine 2015: 26), the introduction of elements of the Gothic or pulp make the same text seem too much like a common theatre drama. Likewise, what makes a science fiction film appear to be science fiction in theatre may only mask a similar type of everyday drama by evoking a surface appearance of the genre. By appropriating the stories for theatre performance, even in this small-scale example the nova in the stories which offer a sense of science fiction in the originals become integral to the dramatic narrative of the stage.

Endnote

¹ 1A video of *Vermilion* can be accessed at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OFJr5bpA0g&t=1897s>. It was recorded for research purposes only. A pdf of the script is available on request from the author.

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