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THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

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The Dialectic of the Enlightenment

Synopsis:

This paper will analyze J. G. Ballard's 1962 sci-fi novel, 'The Drowned World', as a critique of the Enlightenment and its toxic legacy. The discussion will be illustrated with my own artwork which responds to Ballard's vivid prognostications, particularly climate change; the most significant issue of our age.

Tracey Clement

The Dialectic of the Enlightenment: Abstract

Over the centuries, the Enlightenment has been critiqued by artists in a variety of ways. Written in 1962, J.G. Ballard's novel, *The Drowned World*, was a prescient warning of climate change, long before the phrase was even coined. More than five decades later, the causes may be different, but we seem to be spiraling into an ecological melt-down straight out of his post-apocalyptic vision. In this paper, I will argue that this fictional work of art presents an English language critique of many aspects of the legacy of the Enlightenment, particularly what Horkheimer and Adorno identify as the drive to quantify and dominate nature, that is not only earlier (in English) than their 1944 *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, but also much more accessible, and possibly, therefore, even more influential.

Through his startling, vivid and disturbing imagery of a submerged city, strangled by vines and patrolled by reptiles, Ballard shows that the earth is not a garden ripe for exploitation by rational beings. In his critique, Ballard points out that nature cannot be contained and controlled; the only rational response may be to acknowledge its inexorable power. I will illustrate my discussion of the insights offered by *The Drowned World* with images from my own art practice, which continues Ballard's critique of the Enlightenment with specific reference to climate change; the key issue of our age.

Tracey Clement is a current PhD candidate in Fine Arts at The University of Sydney in Australia. Supervisor: Professor Brad Buckley.