

# OFF THE GRID. LEFT OUT AND OVER

BY CARL DOUGLAS

## /// Infrastructure

In James Graham Ballard's novella *Concrete Island*, architect Robert Maitland crashes his Jaguar over a motorway embankment onto a traffic island, a thin triangle of waste ground two hundred meters long.<sup>1</sup> Here, in a parody of Robinson Crusoe, he finds himself marooned:

His jacket and trousers were stained with sweat, mud and engine grease. Few drivers, even if they did notice him, would be eager to give him a lift. Besides, it would be almost impossible to slow down here and stop. The pressure of the following traffic, free at last from the long tail-backs that always blocked the Westway interchange during the rush hour, forced them on relentlessly.<sup>2</sup>

The fast-flowing arms of the motorway continue to operate perfectly, ensuring the rapid movement of bodies and objects; but their operation is inaccessible to Maitland. Immobilized by the infrastructure of mobility, he has not simply exited urban life, he has slipped off the grid while remaining firmly within its network of effects.

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It is useful to distinguish between the idea of space as a container, and the idea of space as connection. In a threshold space, things, effects, and events are contained or exteriorized; in a transformational space, they are transmitted. Harry Beck's seminal map of the London Underground (1931) locates stations according to their topological relationship and their connections to one other, not their geographical position. For someone traversing the network, it is more important to know which connections are available at any given point and where transfers need to be made, than to know distances

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<sup>1</sup> James Graham Ballard, *Concrete Island*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> James Graham Ballard, *Concrete Island*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1974.

travelled or which stretches of track are underground and which are in the open air. Containment is secondary to connection. To pass outside in threshold space is to cross a line demarcating an interior, whether by choice, accident, or involuntary ejection. In transformational space, however, there is no strict exterior, only degrees of connection. Charing Cross, on Beck's map, differs from Edgeware not because it is a more capacious station, with better amenities and more platforms, but because it has greater connectivity.

Similarly, a motorway folds the city, creating points of accelerated connection and compressing distance. It cuts through the city like a street, but unlike a street, access can only be gained at certain strategic points where there are on-ramps. These short circuits modify the connectivity of the street-grid, and vary the ability of certain types of effects to propagate through the city. An accident at one point of the network can create congestion at another point. A business might choose to locate itself close to an on-ramp in order to facilitate rapid transmission of its goods. From the perspective of an urban inhabitant, the motorway is normally considered as a space of pure connection, barring an accident such as Maitland's. In the spatial operation of the motorway, the question of interiority is secondary, even problematic, compared to questions of access and the types of effect that thereby propagate.

So long as I am carrying a working phone, I have access to a cell-phone network, and can have remote effects through it. If my phone stops working, however, being 'within' the area of coverage is of no use to me. Without access, I am off the grid. From the point of view of a threshold spatiality, I could be said to be in the network, but without a connection or the capacity to have effects on other elements of the network, this would be a hollow claim: the dialectic of exteriority / interiority can have little to say about my situation.

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In the twentieth century, infrastructures became key determinants of urban form, and consequently of spatial experience and politics. In directing design attention to this cultural condition, an understanding of the nondialectical and transformational space of networks is necessary.

### **/// Failure**

Pierre Bélanger suggests that infrastructure "remains largely invisible until the precise moment at which it breaks down or fails."<sup>3</sup> This paper began with a moment of infrastructural failure: Maitland's Jaguar crashing through a barrier, and Maitland falling off the grid. He

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<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bélanger, *Landscape Infrastructure: Emerging Practices, Paradigms & Technologies Reshaping the Contemporary Urban Landscape*. [DVD]. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2008.

suddenly experiences the motorway as an explicit object whereas previously it had functioned transparently.

In Heidegger, we find an attribution of existential significance to the interchange between the visible and invisible aspects of an entity foregrounded by failure. He posits the way a tool withdraws into invisibility through use, but erupts into consciousness once it fails.<sup>4</sup> A hammer in use is not a subject of explicit awareness, but is simply relied upon for some end: perhaps building a boat or re-attaching the legs of a stool. As the hammer disappears into its operation, it becomes more fully itself:

[T]he less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is—as equipment.<sup>5</sup>

The being of the tool is disclosed most fully not through analysis or study, but through its performance. In this situation, Heidegger says the hammer is “ready-at-hand.” When the hammer breaks, however, and the carpenter is left staring blankly at the now-ineffective implement, the hammer erupts suddenly into awareness in the mode of “presence-to-hand.” Readiness-at-hand and presence-to-hand are not separate kinds of objects, but as Boedeker puts it, “two modes of the how-being of intraworldly entities.”<sup>6</sup> In use, the tool refers on to the task at hand, and when its use is interrupted, this reference is disturbed.

Graham Harman argues controversially that Heidegger’s insight is not limited to human encounters with objects — even if Heidegger himself believed this to be the case.<sup>7</sup> He believes that withdrawal through reference and presence-to-hand through encounter is part of the structure of all entities. Paper, for example, encounters the knife as knife in some sense at least, even given the obvious fact that the paper does not have consciousness of the knife, because it clearly does not encounter it as a pebble or drop saw. Each particular encounter is a moment of presence-to-hand, behind which both the thing encountered and the encounterer withdraw into the execution of their own being as part of the total in its “equipmental totality” or “referential contexture.”<sup>8</sup>

**4** Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, trans. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1962.

**5** Ibid.

**6** Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall, *A companion to Heidegger*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.

**7** Graham Harman, *Tool-being*. Chicago: Open Court, 2006.

**8** Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, trans. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1962, and Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall, A

As revealed in Maitland's encounter, the motorway as a seamless cultural system is broken and there is exposure of "a vast environmental backdrop supporting the thin and volatile layer of our explicit activities."<sup>9</sup> But the motorway exceeds this encounter: other road users successfully navigate its lanes, and homeless people sleep under its bridges. If we follow Harman's expansion of the scope of Heidegger's terms to encompass non-human encounters, we could also count the rain running off it, birds perching on its lighting masts, and carbon monoxide being released into the atmosphere. Maitland's experience is one moment of presence-to-hand, but in each of these encounters there is a form of presence-to-hand, and behind them all is a withdrawal into the performative being of readiness-at-hand. Withdrawal could be seen as the hyperobjectivity of all objects: the movement by which they exceed any single encounter and remain always open to others. Presence-to-hand is bounded by the horizon of a particular encounter, but withdrawing beyond this horizon is an infinitely connected equipmental totality.

### /// Off the grid

When Maitland falls off the grid, he does not fall outside. Ballard calls into question the applicability of a threshold spatiality to the network by placing Maitland in an ambiguous position: simultaneously outside and pocketed. The bursting of a tire triggers a reconfiguration of a network of elements in which Maitland finds himself even more deeply enmeshed. As the narrative unfolds it becomes evident that Maitland's alienation is not strictly an incarceration or exile, but a personal failure to connect: there is a phone, but he cannot get to it; a car stops for him, but he waves it on aggressively.

Following this argument, 'outside' pertains to threshold space, but 'off the grid' pertains to transformational space. When we fall off the grid, we do not escape it by exiting across any absolute horizon or threshold. We remain engaged in the grid's network of effects, even if those effects are indirect, remote, or weak. Off the grid is a position that exposes or engages these secondary effects that are masked by the horizons of specific encounters. As Maitland speeds along the motorway, his encounter is specific and bounded. Withdrawn over the horizons of this encounter, however, are a vast network of referrals — things operating or performing relations — that are exposed at the moment of his stranding. In siting ourselves off the grid, we encounter hitherto withdrawn aspects of the grid, but not from the perspective of a disengaged observer. Off the grid describes this state of being alongside, encountering obliquely something that had been operating previously in a transparent way. This perspective

reveals potently the ontological shifts implicit in a transformational concept of space. From off the grid, I encounter my own connections in ways I had previously been unaware. My shift in perspective unveils the world as a referential contexture.

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