

# YOU: COMA: MARILYN MONROE

by J. G. Ballard

*He thinks of Max Ernst, Marilyn Monroe and the woman in the apartment; he conceives the "false" space and time of the apartment; he visits the deserted planetarium; he sees Coma, the psychiatrist and the dancer; his impressions of Africa; he meditates on the persistence of the beach, the individual as an aspect of landscape; he witnesses the assumption of the sand-dune; he conceives the "real" space and time of the apartment; he kills the woman when she occludes the interval between the "false" and "real"; he sees Marilyn Monroe, epiphany of this death; he leaves with Coma.*

**The Robing of the Bride.** At noon, when she awoke, Tallis was sitting on the metal chair beside the bed, his shoulders pressed to the wall as if trying to place the greatest possible distance between himself and the sunlight waiting on the balcony like a trap. In the three days since their meeting at the beach planetarium he had done nothing but pace out the dimensions of the apartment, constructing some labyrinth from within. She sat up, aware of the absence of any sounds or movement in the apartment. He had brought with him an immense quiet. Through this glaciated silence the white walls of the apartment fixed arbitrary planes. She began to dress, aware of his eyes staring at her body. Then she realised that she was standing in his way.

**Fragmentation.** For Tallis, this period in the apartment was a time of increasing fragmentation. A pointless vacation had led him by some kind of negative logic to the small resort on the sand-bar. In his faded cotton suit he had sat for hours at the tables of the closed cafes, but already his memories of the beach had faded. The adjacent apartment block screened the high wall of the dunes. The young woman slept for most of the day and the apartment was silent, the white volumes of the rooms extending themselves around him. Above all, the whiteness of the walls obsessed him.

**The "Soft" Death of Marilyn Monroe.** Standing in front of him as she dressed, Karen Novotny's body seemed as smooth and annealed as those frozen planes. Yet a displacement of time would drain away the soft interstices, leaving walls like scraped clinkers. He remembered Ernst's 'Robing . . .': Marilyn's pitted skin, breasts of carved pumice, volcanic thighs, a face of ash. The widowed bride of Vesuvius.

**Indefinite Divisibility.** At the beginning, when they had met in the deserted planetarium among the dunes, he had seized on Karen Novotny's presence. All day he had been wandering among the sand-hills, trying to escape the apartment houses which rose in the distance above the dissolving crests. The opposing slopes, inclined at all angles to the sun like an immense Hindu yantra, were marked with the muffled ciphers left by his sliding feet. On the concrete terrace outside the planetarium the young woman in the white dress watched him approach with maternal eyes.

**Enneper's Surface.** Tallis was immediately struck by the unusual planes of her face, intersecting each other like the dunes around her. When she offered him a cigarette he involuntarily held her wrist, feeling the junction between the radial and ulna bones. He followed her across the dunes. The young woman was a geometric equation, the demonstration model of a landscape. Her breasts and buttocks illustrated Enneper's surface of negative constant curve, the differential coefficient of the pseudo-sphere.

**Fake Space and Time of the Apartment.** These planes found their rectilinear equivalent in the apartment. The right angles between the walls and ceiling were footholds in a valid system of time, unlike the suffocating dome of the planetarium, expressing its infinity of symmetrical boredom. He watched Karen Novotny walk through the rooms, relating the movements of her thighs and hips to the architectonics of floor and ceiling. This cool-limbed young woman was a modulus, by multiplying her into the space and time of the apartment he would obtain a valid unit of existence.

**Suite Mentale.** Conversely, Karen Novotny found in Tallis a kinetic expression of her own mood of abstraction, that growing entropy which had begun to occupy her life in the deserted beach resort since the season's end. She had been conscious for some days of an increasing sense of disembodiment, as if her limbs and musculature merely established the residential context of her body. She cooked for Tallis, and washed his suit, her eyes over the ironing board watching his tall limping figure interlocking with the dimensions and angles of the apartment. Later, the sexual act between them was a dual communion between themselves and the continuum of time and space which they occupied.

**The Dead Planetarium.** Under a bland, equinoctial sky, the morning light lay evenly over the white concrete outside the entrance to the planetarium. Nearby the hollow basins of cracked mud were inversions of the damaged dome of the planetarium, and of the eroded breasts of Marilyn Monroe. Almost hidden by the dunes, the distant apartment blocks showed no signs of activity. Tallis waited in the deserted cafe terrace beside the entrance,

scraping with a burnt-out match at the gull droppings that had fallen through the tattered awning on to the green metal tables. He stood up when the helicopter appeared in the sky.

**A Silent Tableau.** Soundlessly the Sikorski circled the dunes, its fans driving the fine sand down the slopes. It landed in a shallow basin fifty yards from the planetarium. Tallis went forward. Dr. Nathan stepped from the aircraft, finding his feet uncertainly in the sand. The two men shook hands. After a pause, during which he scrutinised Tallis closely, the psychiatrist began to speak. His mouth worked silently, eyes fixed on Tallis. He stopped and then began again with an effort, lips and jaw moving in exaggerated spasms as if he were trying to extricate some gumlike residue from his teeth. After several intervals, when he had failed to make a single audible sound, he turned and went back to the helicopter. Without any noise it took off into the sky.

**Appearance of Coma.** She was waiting for him at the cafe terrace. As he took his seat she remarked: "Do you lip-read? I won't ask what he was saying." Tallis leaned back, hands in the pockets of his freshly pressed suit "He accepts now that I'm quite sane—at least, as far as that term goes, these days its limits seem to be narrowing. The problem is one of geometry, what these slopes and planes mean." He glanced at Coma's broadcheeked face. More and more she resembled the dead film star. What code would fit both this face and body and Karen Novotny's apartment?

**Dune Arabesque.** Later, walking across the dunes, he saw the figure of the dancer. Her muscular body, clad in white rights and sweater that made her almost invisible against the sloping sand, moved like a wraith up and down the crests. She lived in the apartment facing Karen Novotny's, and would come out each day to practise among the dunes. Tallis sat down on the roof of a car buried in the sand. He watched her dance, a random cipher drawing its signature across the time-slopes of this dissolving yantra, a symbol in a transcendental geometry.

**Impressions of Africa.** A low shoreline; air glazed like amber; derricks and jetties above brown water; the silver geometry of a petrochemical complex, a vorticist assemblage of cylinders and cubes superimposed upon the distant plateau of mountains; a single Horton sphere, enigmatic balloon tethered to the fused sand by its steel cradles; the unique clarity of the African light; fluted tablelands and jigsaw bastions; the limitless neural geometry of the landscape.

**The Persistence of the Beach.** The white flanks of the dunes reminded

him of the endless promenades of Karen Novotny's body—diorama of flesh and hillock; the broad avenues of the thighs, piazzas of pelvis and abdomen, the closed arcades of the womb. This terracing of Karen's body in the landscape of the beach in some way diminished the identity of the young woman asleep in her apartment. He walked among the displaced contours of her pectoral girdle. What time could be read off the slopes and inclines of this inorganic musculature, the drifting planes of its face?

**The Assumption of the Sand-dune.** This Venus of the dunes, virgin of the time-slopes, rose above Tallis into the meridian sky. The porous sand, reminiscent of the eroded walls of the apartment, and of the dead film star, with her breasts of carved pumice and thighs of ash, diffused along its crests into the wind.

**The Apartment: Real Space and Time.** The white rectilinear walls, Tallis realised, were aspects of that virgin of the sand-dunes whose assumption he had witnessed. The apartment was a box-clock, a cubicular extrapolation of the facial planes of the yantra, the cheekbones of Marilyn Monroe. The annealed walls froze all the rigid grief of the actress. He had come to this apartment in a misguided attempt to prevent her suicide.

**Murder.** Tallis stood behind the door of the lounge, shielded from the sunlight on the balcony, and considered the white cube of the room. At intervals Karen Novotny moved across it, carrying out a sequence of apparently random acts. Already she was confusing the perspectives of the room, transforming it into a dislocated clock. She noticed Tallis behind the door and walked towards him. Tallis waited for her to leave. Her figure interrupted the junction between the walls in the corner on his right. After a few seconds her presence became an unbearable intrusion into the time-geometry of the room.

**Epiphany of this Death.** Undisturbed, the walls of the apartment contained the serene face of the film star, the assuaged time of the dunes.

**Departure.** When Coma called at the apartment Tallis rose from his chair by Karen Novotny's body. "Are you ready?" she asked. Tallis began to lower the blinds over the windows. "I'll close these—no-one may come here for a year." Coma paced around the lounge. "I saw the helicopter this morning—it didn't land." Tallis disconnected the telephone behind the white leather desk. "Perhaps Dr. Nathan has given up;" Coma sat down beside Karen Novotny's body. She glanced at Tallis, who pointed to the corner. "She was standing in the angle between the walls," he said. Coma lit a cigarette and then stood up. "What do you mean? Over here?"

