Modern Wastelands: The Psychogeographical Dystopia of J.G. Ballard's "High-Rise"

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Introduction

Urban environments have frequently served as a setting for both utopian and dystopian narratives, representing both our progressive dreams as well as our nightmares; however, following the rapid urbanization of England during the nineteenth century, literature has most often cast urban living in a dystopian light. And with the end of World War II, when more emphasis was placed on urban planning as a means of ensuring social harmony, the line separating fiction and urban planning became increasingly blurred. After all, urban spaces, as David Harvey remarked, are "somewhere where fact and imagination simply have to fuse" (Harvey 1990: 5) and architecture has come to play a significant role in how we conceptualize our relation to the environment. It is, therefore, fitting that urban architecture, utilized as an ideologically charged instrument to assuage the inherent dangers of urban life, has frequently become the focus of literature and social criticism. As Jonathan Charley notes: "In fact it is a feature of most dystopian and utopian literature that it uses technology and architecture as a narrative device to reinforce the political critique of social progress that all such novels share" (Charley 2012: 13)—and it is with this very thought that I would like to approach James Graham Ballard's *High-Rise* in relation to modernist architecture with the aim to identify not only the psychological effects

resulting from such specifically designed architectural space but also the ideological function of architecture in representing a dystopian development of modern urban society.

One of the most important themes running through much of Ballard's work is the psychogeographical concern of how the built environment affects the individual, a concern that can be found almost a hundred years earlier in Georg Simmel's *Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903) and later in Guy Debord's *Spectacle of Society* (1967). Ballard's work incorporates similar considerations of overpopulation and media-saturated consumerist society, and applies a microscope to the psychological effects these architectural structures and landscapes exert on us. So important is this psychogeographical element in Ballard's fiction that it found its way to the *Collin's English Dictionary* definition of the adjective "Ballardian" as "resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in Ballard's novels and stories, especially dystopian modernity, bleak manmade landscapes and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments" (CollinsDictionary.com 2016).

The inclusion of Ballard's name into the *Collins English Dictionary* is certainly an acknowledgment of his importance and unique vision, but is also, on the other hand, as Roger Luckhurst observes (1997), a highly ambivalent gesture. In his seminal study of Ballard, *The Angle Between Two Walls*, he argues that this institutionalized definition might deprive Ballard's work of its subversive power, neutralizing a poetics which relied greatly on instability for its effect. There is a "visible discomfort" that Ballard's work produces which may be assuaged to the detriment of the work, as it would remove it from the "margins to the center" (Luckhurst 1997: xiii). Yet, what will still preserve this discomfort is the inherent moral and intellectual ambiguity that characterizes his work.

Modernist Architecture and Literature

Before approaching J. G. Ballard's *High-Rise*, I would like to make a few preliminary remarks about the relationship between modernist architecture and literature, especially since it is within the context of this relationship that the themes in the novel become particularly poignant. *High-Rise* was published in 1975, at the height of public dissatisfaction with urban council estates and tower blocks built on the foundations of socialist ideology along the aesthetic lines of modernist architecture, at a time

when modernist tendencies in architecture saw a challenge mounted by postmodernism. Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, outlines this challenge in architectural terms by drawing attention to the populist aspirations of postmodernist architecture, which went at odds with high-modernism architecture's elitist separation from the surrounding environment. This is demonstrated by how Le Corbusier's buildings are raised on pillars "whose gesture radically separates the new Utopian space of the modern from the degraded and fallen city fabric which it thereby explicitly repudiates" (Jameson 1991: 41). Andrzej Gasiorek, on the other hand, in his study of Ballard's fiction outlines the historical context behind the emergence of block towers, indicating that what at first promised rational solutions to the postwar housing crisis, quickly gained a reputation for blandness and disrepair resulting from both shoddy workmanship and high maintenance costs (Gasiorek 2004: 120-123). Whatever the final results were of this project, the impulse that brought it to fruition was utopian.

Modernist architecture is a response to the conditions of modernity. It is precisely this response in which we see a manifestation of a wider biopolitical project that is now associated with modernist architecture. Rapid population growth, new technologies, increased pace put a premium on innovative architectural solutions that would not only meet the demands of modern lifestyles but would also relieve the various ills and pathologies produced by rapid urbanization. More austere, angular and rigid aesthetics of these new buildings corresponded to the emphasis placed on rationality, transparency and efficiency promoted by a rather technocratic oriented ideology. Modernist architecture was not only an esthetics but an ideologically charged response to what the Swiss architect, Le Corbusier, termed the "social unrest" caused by architecture (Le Corbusier 1985: 169). And it is with Le Corbusier that we find a utopian architectural project, where there is not only a deliberate acknowledgement of architecture's influence on the social and psychological lives of people but a clear call for the betterment of social cohesion by architectural means. This betterment could come about as a result of rational and ordered architecture offsetting the chaotic and disordered state of contemporary society. Le Corbusier states explicitly in *Towards a New Architecture* that:

> If we eliminate from our hearts and minds all dead concepts in regard to the house, […] we shall arrive at the "House-Machine", the mass-production house, healthy (and morally so too) and beautiful in the same way that the working tools and instruments that accompany our existence are beautiful (Le Corbusier 1985: 6-7).

Faith in the socially stabilizing effects of machine-based efficiency inspired his aesthetics of asceticism and unity, it also inspired his ideas of standardization and rationalism, themselves being reflections of the natural (biological) world Le Corbusier strove to embody in his architecture. Though it is, as Coleman rightly observes, "difficult to ascertain when modern architecture was first characterized as utopian" (Coleman 2014: 2), these principles, which extended from the smallest element of interior decoration, furniture, to urban planning, should be considered utopian, as they established a project that looked to the future in an effort to improve social relations by means of modifying the environment, in other words, architectural social engineering or biopolitics.

Apart from focusing on rationality and transparency, this new architecture was also predicated on severing itself from historical influences. Modernist architecture looked to the possibilities made possible by technological advancement in an effort to elevate living conditions from those associated with the Victorian era, i.e. squalor, overcrowded streets, urban moral decay. In its detachment from the inheritance of past styles, this architecture rejected ornamentation in favor of clean lines. By contrast, dystopias often return to the past as a means of transgressing the dystopian present. This is certainly the case in Zamyatin's *We*, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, where the respective protagonists subvert the dominant ideology partly by recourse to the forbidden past.

Le Corbusier's uncompromising stance towards the implementation of his architectural designs is a commonplace example for the dictatorial tone found in this architecture, something that has alienated future generations of architects. Diane Morgan draws a comparison to Howard Roark, the architect protagonist in Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (1947)*,* who claims, "I set my own standards. I inherit nothing. I stand at the end of no tradition. I may, perhaps, stand at the beginning of one" (Rand 1971: 16). This declaration is, on the one hand, a clear manifestation of modernist's break with the oppressive baggage of history, a brave call to cultural autonomy; however, this same impulse, undertaken in the name of purity and transparency, can be seen as assuming the form of an authoritarian dictate, wholly unresponsive to the tastes and opinions of the populace. Such was the case with the almost medicinal aspect of modernist architecture, which was advocated by its architects as a hygienic and cleansing alternative to the squalor of Victorian housing. There is a clearly dictatorial strain that can be heard in these pronouncements running counter

to the egalitarian ideals they promoted, and perhaps this undemocratic aspect of modernist architecture remains its most visible flaw, one that Fredric Jameson notes, when remarking that "the prophetic elitism and authoritarianism of the modern movement are remorselessly identified in the imperious gesture of the charismatic Master" (Jameson 1991: 2).

Modernist architecture, with its emphasis on sanitary, rational and ahistorical modes of habitation was, however, not met with universal acceptance, giving rise to an anti-urban discourse, skeptical of the consequences of modernist architecture as promoted by the International Congress of Modern Architecture. Anthony Vidler develops an account of this resistance, citing such critics as Walter Benjamin, Theodore Adorno, Martin Heidegger, Max Horkheimer and Andre Breton being particularly antipathetic to modernist architecture. There was, in short, a general criticism of what appeared to be an anti-humanist aspect of these biopolitical designs and doubt whether such constructed environments were fit for human habitation. But it is to the notion of dwelling that we must turn, as this point was especially emphasized by Martin Heidegger in his 1951 essay *Building Dwelling Thinking*, written in response to the dwelling question, Wohnungsfrage, of war-torn postwar Germany. As if referring to Le Corbusier, Heidegger asks: "today's houses may even be well planned, easy to keep, attractively cheap, open to air, light, and sun, but—do the houses themselves hold any guarantee that dwelling occurs in them?" (Heidegger 2001: 144). Heidegger's analysis of the housing condition hinges on his understanding of dwelling, a term that he develops throughout the essay, tracing its etymology to the word *bauen* (The Old English and High German word for "building") and *baun* which means "to dwell", "to remain", or "to stay in place". However, one of the roots of *bauen* comes from the Gothic *wunian* which distinctly tells us what dwelling consists in being at peace. This is why "not every building is a dwelling" (Heidegger 2001: 146), a thesis substantiated by the fact that modernist glass and steel high-rises were first built to accommodate executive office space, not living space and certainly not dwelling which is predicated on integration with the surroundings. David Spurr in *Architecture and Literature* states that dwelling is "that idealized conception of space that promises rootedness, permanence, and a womblike removal from the experience of modernity" (Spurr 2012: 52-53). Modernist architecture based on the ideology of efficiency and rationality was antithetical to the this conception of dwelling, in fact Heidegger's concept of dwelling stands in opposition to architecture understood as the production of art objects.

The Modernist Project in Ballard's *High-Rise*

The echoes of this debate can be heard in Ballard's novels and short stories, whose one salient feature is their focus on place, landscape, and architecture. Even a cursory glance at the types of architectural structures encountered in Ballard's fiction reveals how ostensibly mundane and familiar these places are, entirely innocuous at first sight—corporate office parks, suburban shopping malls, traffic island and, of course, urban high-rise—but this familiarity is shown to reveal a more insidious element, or as Christopher Hitchens aptly describes it in an eloquent piece for *The Atlantic*, an "insistence on apocalypse in familiar surroundings" (Hitchens 2010: par. 11). Behind the gleaming veneer of modernity, a sense of decay and pathology haunts each building or town, which in effect become agents in their own right, while the characters inhabiting these spaces degenerate psychologically to a level of savagery or meld into their environment in a gesture of total affirmation. It is in the relation between the physical environment and the individual psyche that Ballard's narratives are at their most prescient. These environments are presented as almost literally overwhelming their inhabitants, as is the case in *The Enormous Space*, where the protagonist isolates himself in his suburban home to gradually have the rooms expand and engulf him, or in *Billenium* and *Concentration City*, which represent neo-Malthusian nightmares of overpopulation, where any hope of personal breathing space is drowned out by the swarms of people moving about the city. In all these cases both claustrophobia and agoraphobia are exploited as means of depicting the passive nature of the mind in its response to the spatial environment.

However, no other building is more representative of the coexistence between twentieth century architecture and capitalism than the titular high-rise of Ballard's 1975 novel. The high-rise as an architectural edifice is not only the setting but it also serves as the main subject. So deeply is the building incorporated into the narrative that it becomes a character in its own right, not only reflecting the human psyche but also merging with it. Rather than seeing this high-rise as simply a metaphor for the failure of the utopian project and overall decay of modern society based on capitalist principles, I would like to explore one of the underlying reasons for this failure, which is imposed stability.

The eponymous "high-rise" is a high-end forty-story London building occupied by the professional classes. What was meant to be a microcosm of utopian social engineering quickly degenerates into dystopian barbarism, as the residents begin to

gradually turn on themselves, first over petty annoyances, like noise, trash, broken elevators; later these petty squabbles escalate into clan warfare, transforming the whole building into a veritable war-zone. Though, as Peter Briggs observes, this progression from seemingly ordinary events to surrealistic extremes is rendered in such as a way "so that the reader is drawn along by the possibility that the escalation is logical and inevitable" (Briggs 1985: 70). It is little wonder why the first reviews of this novels drew comparisons with William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, though instead of a deserted island overpowering the moral compasses of proper public schools English boys, it is an artificial island in the form of the high-rise that succeeds in laying bear the amorality of natural instincts.

Firstly, it should be pointed out that Ballard's titular high-rise is a clear reference to Le Corbusier's utopian project of the "vertical village", or Cite Radieuse in Marseille, a point that has already been highlighted by most critics (Groes 2012: 134, Spurr 2012: 226, Gasiorek 2004: 120). Equipped with restaurants, a swimming pool, gym, shops, the high-rise represents the epitome of Corbusierian aesthetics and planning—it is a self-sustaining structure, catering to all the expensive whims of its residents and as a result establishing itself as a utopian enclave, severed from the outside world. Indeed, there is no reason to leave its walls, which is made evident in how little attention is given to life outside of the high-rise. In other words, the building can be construed as a kind of island, completely separated from the London seen only from the balconies, and offering its tenants a closed environment, engineered in accordance with the highest possible standards of social cohabitation. The ambiguity makes itself known when we ask the question to what degree this self-isolation is self-imposed. Throughout the book the high-rise is compared to a zoo and a prison, which further stresses the carceral aspect of utopian enclaves which rarely overtly manifests itself. The illusion of choice is carefully maintained, allowing the residents to willingly decide to imprison themselves in a building which is falling apart in line with the disintegration of social structure within the building.

In their isolation from the outer world and despite the egalitarian ideological thrust of the architectural projects, the residents of this high-rise replicate the standard social divisions, as the less affluent residents are relegated to the bottom floors, while the upper crust of society occupies the top floors. Groes makes an interesting point in reference to this division: "one cannot translate the egalitarian impulses of the post-war period into practice by using vertical structures that (unconsciously)

remind an already class-conscious people of the social hierarchies that are embedded within their national past" (Groes 2012: 136). The architectural structure of the building itself provokes class divisions and creates the battlefield that is later played out during the course of events, which further reinforces a Marxist reading, since the revolutionary uprising spreads upwards from the lower classes below. Bill Wilder, one of the three protagonists of the story, at one point makes a desperate attempt to ascend the high-rise in the midst of this warfare, as if acting out the futility of upward mobility. Putting a spin on the Marxist adage, one could claim that it is not so much social but architectural conditions which determine consciousness.

The environment is exuding an influence that overturns societal norms, as the residents voluntarily succumb to the emerging clan-like social structures and rituals, sacrificing their jobs and mundane habits in the process. Such a revolt against established civilizational norms could be seen as fueled by anti-capitalist romantic anarchism reminiscent of Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, but what is conspicuously missing from behind this nihilism is any kind of ideological motivation; there are no anti-capitalist manifestoes and revolutionary sentiments declared by any of the characters, nothing that would incline the reader to suspect ideological agency at work. Nonetheless it would seem that the source of this regression is attributable to the particular environment created by the building which itself is thoroughly ideological. We are told that "At first Laing found something alienating about the concrete landscape of the project—an architecture designed for war, on the unconscious level if no other" (Ballard 2012: 16). This quote raises an important point, because unlike modernist architecture, Ballard's architectural settings are allowed to act on their accord, divorced from any intent or purpose of an architect, in this case Anthony Royal, who occupies the top penthouse of the high-rise.

There is an echo of Heidegger's denunciation of modernist architecture in the narrator's observation that "Part of its appeal lay all too clearly in the fact that this was an environment built, not for man, but for man's absence" (Ballard 2012: 34). In other words, we can say that this is a building, but not a dwelling, not a home affording its inhabitants security, stability and peace, but instead a cold container which only emphasizes the absence of humanity, thus attracting a type of resident whose psychological makeup is a reflection of this environment. In the high-rise:

> A new social type was being created by the apartment building, a cool, unemotional personality impervious to the psychological pressures of high-rise life, with minimal needs for privacy, who thrived like an advanced species of machine in the neutral atmosphere (Ballard 2012: 46).

This is exactly the type of person that is attracted to this type of environment, the cool, emotionally detached resident here represented by Dr. Laing, who is emotionally recovering from a divorce. It should also be pointed out that there is a hint of irony in this description of the residents as "an advanced species of machine" as the building is so often presented in a language that lends it anthropomorphic characteristics:

> There was something in this feeling—the elevators pumping up and down the long shafts resembled pistons in the chamber of a heart. The residents moving along the corridors were the cells in a network of arteries, the lights in their apartments neurons of a brain (Ballard 2012: 51).

The building is depicted in more human terms than the people inhabiting it.

Emotional detachment that is both provoked and encouraged by this architecture is seen to trigger repressed impulses which are given free rein, as if the almost totalitarian order and rationalization of the high-rise environment have created optimal conditions for subversive amoral behavior. Though in this case it is not the external organization of society or totalitarian dictatorships that give rise to dystopian reality, but the psychopathological reactions to the streamlined rationality and almost lulling comfort of high-rise life. The stability that is imposed on the residents seems to generate the opposite effect.

This subversive reaction to imposed rationality is highly reminiscent of Gothic literature. Gregory Claeys locates the first turn of dystopian fiction in the eighteenth century, a period that coincides with the origin of the Gothic novel (Claeys 2010: 110). The Enlightenment, itself an age where rationality was viewed as a savior of humanity from the pull of superstition and savagery, was paradoxically also the age that gave rise to an adverse tendency that ran counter to the dominant ideological sway of Enlightenment politics. This tradition of "rationally planned existence […] harbors the gothic nightmare" (Gasiorek 2004: 124) with its emphasis on mystery and darkness (instead of clarity and transparency), on superstition and irrationality (instead of reason and science), on labyrinthine underground passages (instead of open vistas). The Gothic is the illegitimate child of the Enlightenment, an example of a literary genre that took shape from within a dominant culture that by definition suppressed its defining characteristics. As Harvey states, there is a suspicion that "the Enlightenment project was doomed to turn against itself and transform the quest for human emancipation into a system of universal oppression in the name of human liberation" (1990: 13). The argument could be made that in *High-Rise*, the "renaissant

barbarism" (Ballard 2012: 79) is also a result of the repressive insistence on order and stability giving rise to a subversive reaction to the culturally institutionalized emphasis on rationality and stability. Taking this Gothic analogy further, the high-rise itself can be viewed as a modern manifestation of the haunted house trope, a failed utopian project that has turned against its master. David Ian Paddy makes the point that the high-rise is: "not a gloomy Gothic mansion, though it shares its shadows and moral depravity. Its frightful dimension comes not from chthonic darkness and decay but from its opposite: an immaculate cleanliness, order and modernity" (Paddy 2015: 146-147).

Like a haunted house, the high-rise is itself animated, given a consciousness and agency in relation to the tenants. The high-rise looks "as if it were some kind of huge animate presence, brooding over them and keeping a magisterial eye on the events taking place" (Ballard 2012: 40). It is an all-seeing spatial structure, resembling Foucault's thought of the panopticon, its relation to the Gothic, and its implementation in eighteenth century prisons, (Foucault 1980: 153-154) a reference which fits well into the already established carceral aspects of *High-Rise*.

Conclusion

Modernist architecture provides Ballard with the spatial equivalent of Enlightenment philosophy, allowing him to conceptualize the outcomes of placing humans in what in theory are utopian settings—hygienic, rational, well-planned environments that are meant to promote analogous effects in the psyche. However, following Heidegger, we can say there is no guarantee that dwelling occurs in such spaces; instead, what emerges is a rather pessimistic diagnosis of the human condition, favoring regression instead of evolution as a reaction to social engineering. Understandably, this would present a rather reactionary attitude towards utopian planning and would place Ballard in the surrealist camp of artists who denounced modernist architecture as being antithetical to habitation. Postmodernism, as a cultural movement inextricably bound to post-capitalist modes of production, stressing a more globalized, multinational capitalism as described by Jameson, presents itself as a more pluralistic and open approach, but there is little to even hint of such a development in *High-Rise*. Rather than presenting romantic anarchism as a desperate response to the commodification and urbanization of modern society or suggesting escape from

the attendant hyperreality of spectacle, described by both Jean Baudrillard, in *Simulacra and Simulation,* and Guy Debord, in *Society of Spectacle*, as the product of image-driven capitalism, through relativism and metanarrative play, Ballard's fiction resides in the liminal zone precariously poised between affirmation and rejection. This is where ambiguity becomes a defining feature of Ballard's poetics. This is also where we find Ballard's interstitial space that is by definition a space of resistance, which is why defining the term "Ballardian," institutionalizing it within the boundaries of intellectual discourse, will always be saying too much and not enough.

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