



## 'Out of an experience of the cities came an experience of the future' (Raymond Williams). How have modern urban fictions connected representations of the city with an articulation of utopian politics?

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'I'm frightened that the possibilities of a genuine dystopia may be much more appealing than any utopian project that people can come up with-'<sup>1</sup>

J.G. Ballard

Ballard's 1975 novel *High-Rise* opens with Laing introducing his over-priced cell: the high-rise apartment that he bought after his divorce 'specifically for its peace, quiet and anonymity'.<sup>2</sup> However, the notion of the high-rise as a retreat from the bustle of the city is subverted by the urbanising of the building into 'a small vertical city' (p.9). It becomes its own micro-city, distinctly separate and isolated from the true city. The tenants' descent into irrational behaviour and then primitive violence follows, revealing the destructive and disorientating influence of the architecture. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this transformation is how the inhabitants of the high-rise, including Laing, embrace it. By presenting *High-Rise* as a modern urban fiction, I shall argue that it connects this vertical city with a portrayal of dystopian politics through metaphorical, stylistic and structural means. The result of this is a representation of the disturbing and disorientating relationship between physical space and social, psychological space in modern urban environments.

Within the first chapter Laing muses that despite being only two miles away from the city of London, the high-rise constituted a leap of fifty years into a different world; a world offering 'more than enough opportunities for violence and confrontation' (p.7-9). Within this context a dystopian reading of *High-Rise* is wholly possible. The high-rise (albeit metaphorically) creates an alternate world through isolating itself and inhabitants from the real city both spatially and temporally, therefore agreeing with Baxter's definition of utopia/dystopia: 'an imaginary realm in which time, space and history are crucially absent' and 'insidious forms of power and violence can operate and flourish'.<sup>3</sup>

History may be felt to be crucially absent in the high-rise since Ballard imagines this fictional realm from a world where 'the future is felt to be already exhausted before it has even arrived'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Laing ponders this same notion amidst the ascending chaos:

Even the run-down nature of the high-rise was a model of the world into which the future was carrying them, a landscape beyond technology where everything was either derelict or, more ambiguously, recombined in unexpected but more meaningful ways

<sup>1</sup> V. Vale, ed., *J.G. Ballard: Conversations* (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 2005), p.74.

<sup>2</sup> J.G. Ballard, *High-Rise* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006 [1975]), p.7. All subsequent references to the text will be from this source.

<sup>3</sup> Jeannette Baxter, ed., *J.G. Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (London: Continuum, 2008), p.96.

<sup>4</sup> Andrzej Gasiorek, *J.G. Ballard* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p.109.

[...] sometimes he found it difficult not to believe that they were living in a future that had already taken place, and was now exhausted. (p.147).

*High-Rise* is set in a near future that was created from a realistic present; 'In the 1960s and 1970s the problems associated with high-rises became a regular feature of the national press'.<sup>5</sup> Many of the documented problems Gasiorek lists are present in *High-Rise*: the break down of shared facilities; accumulation of rubbish and vandalism; communal areas unsuitable for families with children. Ballard adopts these issues and exaggerates them: he stretches their possibilities and the responses of the tenants until life within his high-rise is almost unrecognisable from any kind of 1970s reality. However, the fact that his starting point was as realistic as the portrayals of high-rise life in the media makes *High-Rise* all the more chilling, enhancing the notion of living under the shadow of an exhausted future. It also reflects Ballard's fears that present society would find the possibilities of a genuine dystopia more appealing than utopia.<sup>6</sup>

The descent to dystopia in *High-Rise* resembles Williams' *technological transformation*: a new technology that brings out certain inevitable social consequences, placing the agency not on the inhabitants but completely on the building.<sup>7</sup> This reading is reasonable, but reduces the architects and inhabitants to passive parts. By consideration of the *willed transformation*: social degeneration caused by some social agency, be it explicit or implicit, often the consequence of a failed attempt at social improvement, Ballard's comments on wider society are recognised.<sup>8</sup> Therefore I argue that the dystopia in *High-Rise* is reached by a combination of willed and technological transformation.

The relationship between technology and society is represented through the relationship between the building's physical space and its inhabitants' moral, psychological space. As the building's practical and theoretical failings start to appear, so do the cracks in the inhabitants' inner spaces, and its complete breakdown is accelerated and then followed by their psychological and social disorientation and disintegration.

In the chapter 'Final Triumph' Royal realises that no new social order will emerge, due to the tenants' social and psychological retreat into animalistic behaviour:

Without knowing it, he had constructed a gigantic vertical zoo, its hundreds of cages stacked above each other. All the events of the past few months made sense if one realized that these brilliant and exotic creatures had learned to open the doors. (p.134)

This metaphor suggests the structure of the high-rise may have simply been a nurturing ground for the behaviour provoked within it, the source of which was innate. Therefore the failing of the high-rise structurally, almost teaches its inhabitants to behave in a way that may reinstate it with a different purpose, helping the space to evolve in more meaningful ways.

Due to some similarities Royal may be seen as a version of Le Corbusier: 'possibly the greatest twentieth-century architect and certainly the most influential'.<sup>9</sup> Le Corbusier's designs represent a twentieth-century form of utopian thought portrayed through his desire to create a new social harmony.<sup>10</sup> He regarded the house as a machine to live in and

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<sup>5</sup> Gasiorek, J.G. Ballard, p.121.

<sup>6</sup> Vale, Conversations, p.74.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Williams, 'Utopia and Science Fiction', from *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 2005), p.198.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.197-8.

<sup>9</sup> Marshall Berman, 'The Twentieth Century: The Halo and the Highway', from *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), p.165.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p.187.

consequently his designs catered for his ideal society, whom he arranged spatially in terms of their social standing.<sup>11</sup> Therefore it could be that *High-Rise* is passing comment on the social consequences of such designs. Hall recognises the real life high-rise issues arose partly in the misguided imposition of Corbusian designs and ideals on society.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, Harvey reflects on architects such as Corbusier as acting out a socially constructed role, where they appear 'as a cog in the wheel of capitalist urbanization'.<sup>13</sup> In which case we can place the blame of the disintegration of the high-rise not on Royal and his fellow architects, but on the capitalist society they represent. Indeed, far from embracing the high-rise dystopia, as Laing and Wilder seem to, by the end Royal is disgusted and shocked by the escalating violence and retreats into isolation. He refers to the other tenants as 'psychotics' and 'human intruders' that unsettle him and upon discovering the bloodied sculpture garden Royal is appalled (pp.143,163,164). He consequently makes what seems like an attempt at escape, his decent off the roof, but is shot by Wilder on the staircase. In contrast, Wilder dies on the roof embracing the new future wholeheartedly and Laing seems content with living half-way up the building, enclosed within this new world.

The symbolism of the three protagonists' names is also significant: Royal, the man on top and in charge of this physical and social structure, whose downfall comes from its revolution; Wilder, the brutal and instinctive cave-man figure who embraces the animalistic behaviour and is arguably one of the first creatures to break open his door; and Laing, named after the infamous psychiatrist R.D. Laing who held unconventional views on mental illness. Amongst these views was his belief that schizophrenia is a strategy used for survival in reaction to certain social situations, and his desire to show that 'even the most bizarre behaviours were intelligible from the sufferer's point of view'.<sup>14</sup> This symbolism may help explain the logic behind the psychosis nurtured within the high-rise, why virtually none of its inhabitants are appalled by the behaviours this provokes, and why Laing views the end result as a return to normality (p.7).

Despite the wealth of imagery in *High-Rise*, the narrative tone is distanced, controlled and logical, reflective of the way events unfold in the novel. These logical steps from realism into dystopia are therefore reflected in style, producing a defamiliarising, chilling tone.

Like a true Corbusian design, Laing describes the high-rise as: 'a huge machine designed to serve, not the collective body of tenants, but the individual resident in isolation' (p.10). Appropriately then, the contrived form of the novel reflects this. Three protagonists are focalised through the omniscient narrative, which switches between these characters at chapter breaks. The first three chapters focalise Laing, the next three Wilder, then the next three Royal. The pattern is continued in this order, but decreasing the number of chapters between switches with each repetition, first to two, then one. The final chapter leaves us with only Laing, eventually returning to the same spatial and temporal point at which the first chapter began.

The repetitive and somewhat predictable order of the chapters reflects the content of the novel. As the perspective switches accelerate towards the last chapter, so does the violence and sense of danger. The reader is carried along a disorientating journey within the high-rise, narrowing their chance of returning to any form of rationality or escaping to the real, recognisable city. Following the murders of two of the protagonists, the reader is almost completely alienated, left with only the perspective of Laing.

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<sup>11</sup> Tim Hall, from *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp.205 and 209.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.240.

<sup>13</sup> David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p.237.

<sup>14</sup> Mick Cooper, *Existential Therapies* (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), pp.95-97.

The perspective has been cut off in the same way the high-rise and its tenants are isolated. The only view granted away from this world in the final chapter, is towards a new high-rise four hundred yards away where a temporary power cut seems to signal the beginning of their own anarchic dystopia. Laing observes the second vertical city contentedly, welcoming the residents into their new world. (p.173) Therefore not only have we returned to the same time and place that the novel opened at, but we are left at the beginning of a new cycle of a new high-rise and can only assume an identical disturbing logic to unfold. This disturbing prediction creates a dizzying sense of dread, which is contrasted to Laing's contentedness so that his world view now seems to be normal, and the world outside the high-rise an out of date way of living that lies in await of its transformation.

The cyclical form produced by in medias res contributes to Ballard's subversion of assumptions and defamiliarisation.<sup>15</sup> The reader is dropped where they started but without a comforting sense of conclusion or return to normality; ironically Laing's assurance of normality and contentedness provokes the opposite response in the reader.

The form of the novel therefore predicts and warns: its building momentum and acceleration shocks and disorients the reader so that it is impossible to tell at which point the narrative left a sense of realistic normality and plunged into the primitive world of violence and survival. By returning to Laing's 'normality' the reader realises they have been inside this world from the first page, isolated and without hope of resurrection into true normality.

William's observation; 'Out of an experience of the cities came an experience of the future' relates to *High-Rise* thus: the city is a vertical one and the future is a deliberately hyperbolised near future, felt to already be exhausted.<sup>16</sup> Therefore *High-Rise* connects the experience of this vertical city, an exaggerated non-realistic representation of modern reality, with an articulation of dystopian politics. Consequently I argue that through *High-Rise* Ballard critiques both the theoretical and practical issues of high-rise living and moreover comments on the capitalist society through which the high-rise designs are imposed. The imagery, style and form of *High-Rise* are reflective of the controlled dystopian logic at the heart of its content. These textual features, combined with the historical and social context, create a vastly disturbing novel that poses uncomfortable questions about the future of technology and society.

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<sup>15</sup> Gasiorek, J.G Ballard, p.7.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Williams, 'The City and the Future', from *The Country and the City* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1993), p.272.

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