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Collective in Isolation: Technology, Space and Psyche in J.G. Ballard's *High Rise*

Yi-Wen Wang
Department of English
Literature and Culture, 1850-Present
King's College London, University of London
yiwen.wang@kclalumni.net

Abstract

The interaction of inner psychological space and the external landscapeis a prevalent theme in Ballard's works, especially in his novel High Rise(1975). In this paper, I will attempt to explore the ways in which he contextualisesand manifests the dialogue of inner and outer space within a postmodernist backdrop of late twentieth century architecture and technology, which drawspeople closer together while also alienating them at the same time. I aim to present these ideas by an analysis of the characters and the situations they are placed in, as well as excerpts from interviews with Ballard, and how he perceived postmodernism and the idea of boundaries.

What is the significance of the "inner space" concept depicted by Ballard in his 1975 novel *High Rise*? In an interview given by Ballard when he was still writing it, he suggests how external space, or more specifically the living environment, influences the inner space, or psychological health of its tenants:

> ...in cities, the degree of criminality is affected by liberty of movement; it's higher in culs-de-sac. And high-rises are culs-de-sac: 2,000 people jammed together in the air [...] Cut off from the rest of the world. In this kind of situation, all sorts can happen [...] I observed that there now exists a new race of people who are content in their little prisons, who tolerate a very high level of noise, but for whom the apartment is nothing more than a base allowing them to pass the night in comfort, as they're absent during the day (Sellars 63).

Architecture as a form of technology, and its ability to draw larger groups of people closer together while also alienating them, is the concept that makes high-rises possible. Though it is suggested here that the outer space is what affects the inhabitants, Ballard declares in a 1976 interview with JörgKrichbaum and ReinZondergeldthat the idea of the inner space

shaping the outer space is just as prevalent (if not more), and that he found thistoo in Surrealist paintings:

> The essence of the surrealist imagination is its ability to translate the apparent forms of the world, the outer forms, into inner ones, into mental forms. The surrealist painter doesn't seek to interpret the outer world as the classic schools of painting did[...] But the surrealists recreate the outer world, completely, in fact! And this was exactly the right method for SF, which needs something very similar. I used this concept of 'psychological space', and that again I found in surrealist paintings. I thought to myself, that's exactly what we need in science fiction. (Sellars 77)

Andrzej Gasiorek comments on the fact that inner space has an equal measure of influence upon the choice of the outer space within which they dwell, and that the outer space chosen by the tenants is merely a manifestation of their inner landscape:

> Typically for a Ballard text, it is suggested that [High Rise] may simply be exacerbating a sense of alienation which is already theirs and which has led them to select the high-rise as the habitat that expresses their detachment and ennui (Gasiorek 123).

Early on in the text, one of the main protagonists, Robert Laing, reflects that 'the high-rise was a huge machine designed to serve, not the collective body of tenants, but the individual resident in isolation (Ballard 6).' The statement underlines how technology hems in a collective group of people as well as isolating them, and details how the relationship between the inner psychological space and the external (or outer) landscape are key to one another. Ballard remarks in his 1976 interview that the lines between these two dimensions are sometimes blurred, to the point which they merge with each other.This, therefore, is the cause for the surrealist touch in his novels, and the unrealness of his characters and the scenarios which they are placed within:

> This traditional division between the inner and the outer world, between the mental, and the reality surrounding us, becomes fully abolished. There's no longer any dividing line, it's all continuity. And this method is the most fertile for a writer, because the outer world nowadays so resembles a dream. We live as though in an immense novel and therefore can only approach things in this way. (Ballard 77)

Gasiorekpoints out that the high rise is presented as a living organism, and therefore it possesses an inner space of its own: that it 'envisages a symbiosis between the building and its inhabitants, figuring the edifice as a living mechanism tenanted by standardised cybernetic organisms.' (Ballard 123)

Ballardrecounts how his childhood in war-torn Shanghai made him aware of the relationship between the external landscape and the inner self. (Ballard 64) Of particular interest to him was what would happen if humans were put into an oppressive, compressed or counter-natural environment - or, in other words, the modern technology-savvy world we live in today. The increasing dependence of humans upon technology prompted many anxieties -

what happens when these gadgets malfunction and can be depended upon no longer? These are manifested in the fragmentation of the high rise when lifts go out of order, staircases are blocked, landlines are broken, and the residents are effectively trapped in their own spaces, unable to communicate, unless they venture out - during which they would face a very real threat of being eliminated by others. In other words, the inner space is no longer able to manipulate the outer space. As the technology in the high rise building malfunctions and are rendered useless, so the boundaries of territories are drawn up, and the tenants areobliged to revert to a primordial way of living:in Freudian terms, the ego and super-ego have been stripped away, leaving the id to govern the body and mind (Freud).Ballard himself acknowledges the prowess of the famouspsychoanalyst on numerous occasions (Sellars 192-193).'In response to such conditions, his characters retreated into the private imagination – "inner space,"' Dan Sellarssummarises. (Sellars 6)

Each of the male protagonists in High Rise sets their own personal stage in which they are the main actors, whether it be Robert Laing and his two-woman harem, whom he regards as his property, or Richard Wilder, on his forbidden and ultimately doomed pilgrimage to the top of the building. When characters cross the liminal boundaries that they have drawn up for themselves, they are chased back to their turf; if they persist, they are eliminated. As the space in the high-rise building is broken up into smaller and more pronounced territories, the psyches of their inhabitants retreat more and more into their own minds - the fragmentation of the external space is consistent with the liminality of the inner space. 'I use this external transformation of the landscape to reflect and marry with the internal transformation of the characters,' Ballard said in a 1991 interview (Wager 56).The importance of maintaining this balance between inner and outer space can be reflected in his proclamation of Le Corbusier as 'possibly the greatest twentieth-century architect and certainly the most influential' (Berman 165). Of Le Corbusier, David Pinder notes that 'the more exact the order of the landscape is [Le Corbusier] suggested, the more happy and secure will the human subject feel' (Pinder 70). The high rise starts out as meticulously fragmented by design – the architect's design – and ultimately the inhabitants are trapped in it, and allow their psychological space to also become imprisoned within the design of the architect.

In *High Rise*, the landscape, or outer space - the living environment – is gradually thrown off balance. The story begins with the murder of a dog and ends with the murder of the architect, and the building proves to be both the root and the medium for dissent, dragging with it in its catastrophic wake the inner space: the security and well-being (psychological and otherwise) of its tenants, in a parallel tangent. Yet the residents themselves are the ones who sow the seeds of discord, and it is they who allow this imbalance of both the inner and outer space to happen. It is worth remembering at this point that all of the residents of the high-rise are at least upper middle class, with good incomes and socially approved, "respectable" occupations. Robert Laing, whom the novel begins and ends with, is both a

doctor and a university lecturer, yet he commits incest, eats dogs, and is the ultimate victor of the high-rise battle ground because the annexation of his humanity is the most complete. The implication here is that, no matter what the intentions of the architect or the building are, the potential for havoc lies in even the most respectable of humankind,even more so for them because they have the greatest access to technology, which warps their surroundings even more and thus their inner spaces. Ballard toys with the idea of the respectable gentleman doing the unthinkable, a concept which seems to have fascinated him. Of his admiration for Freud, he says 'Very few people have such strengths of character against such adversity, pushing what were absolutely revolutionary notions. He was a completely respectable man - that was the extraordinary thing.' (Sellars 192) To evolve into the "new kind of human being," the annexation of humanity and embrace of cyborgisation is the "revolution" that must be undergone.

Though he initially started out as a science fiction writer, Ballard soon became more interested in the portrayal of humans living in the 'true "togetherness" of the technological age,' and the psychological impact of this relentless social web. *High Rise* embodies this concept of the rise of human disconnect accompanied by communal urban regression that was the result of swift technological advancement. He was also concerned with the underlying social anxiety of the potential risk of humans growing too dependent on technology and the possibility that humankind would be consumed by what it had created. The consumption of humankind by technology could be realised in two manners: either cyborgisation or destruction. Andrzej Gasiorek notes how the high-rise building turns upon its creator and destroys him, in a twist reminiscent of Gothic literature (Gasiorek 123).The creator/architect Royal notes that 'the pay-phones in the elevator lobbies had been ripped out, as if the tenants, like Anne and himself, had agreed to shut off any contact with the world outside,' which is a stark reminder of the limits of technology even while it expands to new horizons, and the ways in which the modern age of technology isolates people while bringing them ever closer together (Gasiorek 55).

High Rise embodies the anxiety of how technology gains gradual control over the people who use them, effectively sucking the "life" out of them, even: "These mechanised, robotic figures, who are effectively programmed by the building itself, exemplify the logic of a technologised world that the high-rise represents on a miniature scale,' Gasiorek observes. 'Through a series of anthropomorphising images, the tower-block is portrayed as conscious, whereas the people it houses are depicted as replicable automata incapable of communal life.' (Gasiorek 124) Though the high rise - the outer space - is at first merely an utility, a convenient housing for the manifestation of the inner sense of isolation experienced by its tenants, it gradually manipulates, then gains control of the inner space, while the residents are still under the impression that it is their inner space that governs the outer. The high-rise has morphed into an autonomous single being with its own "inner space" - and the humans

beings living within its inner space are disrupting it. About a quarter-way into the book, the manipulative control of the outer space upon the inner has become evident: 'By its very efficiency, the high-rise took over the task of maintaining the social structure that supported them all.' Yet to the residents it is still the outer manifestation of their inner landscape. It

> for the first time [..] removed the need to repress every kind of anti-social behaviour, and left them free to explore any deviant or wayward impulses. It was precisely in these areas that the most important and most interesting aspects of their lives would take place. Secure within the shell of the high-rise like passengers on board an automatically piloted airliner, they were free to behave in any way they wished, explore the darkest corners they could find. In many ways, the high-rise was a model of all that technology had done to make possible the expression of a truly "free" psychopathology. (Ballard 22)

When the balance is lost and the outer space has complete and utter control over the inner space, instead of the other way round, pandemonium ensues.

> Not only do the landscapes mirror the soul; they help to shape and organize it. Following Martin Bax, one of Ballard's editors and close friends, the whole point of his [Ballard's] writing is to investigate how the "hardware" of objects and environments affects the "software"of human psyches. The action is, in fact, an interaction. The external world conditions us, but we in turn must engage and provoke the external world; there is, for Ballard, no way out of ourselves, no path to nirvana or transcendence or utopia, except by running the gauntlet of the world. (Wager 53)

'..Inner space for Ballard was a far more strange and compelling setting for science fiction than its traditional environs in outer space,' Sellars observes. He even goes so far as to say that Ballard believed that 'inner space, not outer, is the real subject of science fiction.'(Sellars 5)

The theme of solitude among the crowds was one that haunted Ballard and his output all throughout his life: how the 'isolation that results from immersion in technological systems will invariably play into our latent fantasies.' (Sellars 8) In a 1974 interview conducted just before *Concrete Island* was published, one year before *High Rise*, Ballard makes the following observation concerning voluntary crowded isolation:

> We tend to assume that people want to be together in a kind of renaissance city if you like, imaginatively speaking, strolling in the evening across a crowded piazza. I don't think people want to be together, I think they want to be alone. People are together in a traffic jam or in a crowded elevator in a department store, or on airlines. That's togetherness. People don't want to be together in a physical sense, in an actual running crowd on a pavement. People want to be alone. They want to be alone and watch television. (Sellars 56)

This is the same idea behind *High Rise*, the supposition that people want to be left alone to their own devices. The rise of technology and of organised urbanism purports the 'planning

of happiness,' which has resulted in a drastic change the perception of outer space, and therefore inner space, for humans (Vaneigem 119). The high-rise building is a perfect incarnation of managed isolation. It alienates while bringing people all the more closer together, the result of which it provides a space for people to fulfill their potential for perversity, all the while maintaining a semblance of normality. In a 1978 interview with Jon Savage, Ballard states that

> I was trying to point out that people discover there's some dubious pleasures of lifetapped by advanced technology. They canalise and tame and make tolerable perverse impulses that in previous societies would've been nipped in the bud. Modern technology makes possible the expression of guilt-free psychopathology. (Sellars 81)

People are no longer content with dwelling within their own spheres; they must communicate by rampaging upon others' turfs and violating each others' spaces,both inner and outer, and they do so through two mediums: sex, and violence, while taking a macabre pleasure in it:

> For the first time it occurred to Wilder that the residents enjoyed this breakdown of its services, and the growing confrontation between themselves. All this brought them together, and ended the frigid isolation of the previous months. (Ballard 37)

'In the future, violence would clearly become a valuable form of social cement,' the creator of the high rise observes (Ballard 58).When he commits adultery (although he does not view it that way: to him it is a marking of territorial claims) in front of his wife, he observes that

> during the sexual act that followed she watched them without speaking, as if she approved, not from any fashionable response to marital infidelity, but from what Royal realized was a sense of tribal solidarity, a complete deference to the clan leader. (Ballard 59)

Sex and violence are viewed as mediums for each other, even: 'Not for the first time Laing reflected that he and his neighbours were eager for trouble as the most effective means of enlarging their sex lives' (Ballard 60).The residents communicate through an interchange of violent and sexual acts, sometimes simultaneously, especially in the latter half of the story, when all the characters have regressed to a primitive state of homo sapiens and are "mating" with almost any of the opposite sex that they come across. In the sex scene featuring Richard Wilder and Charlotte Melville, the act is merely an acknowledgment of their mutual presence in the same space, the animal instinct to bond, with Wilder, the male, proclaiming his conquest of the female. The pivotal moment comes when he destroys his tape recorder after the act, and with it the higher reasoning of the human mind. The tape recorder is also a symbol of the technology that simultaneously montages and isolates. From that moment onwards, Wilder is completely feral, and his inner space is ruled completely by the outer space. The roaming characters of the high-rise as they are stripped of civilization share parallels with the situationist idea of the dérive pioneered by Guy Debord: they are similarly navigating a 'rapid passage through varied ambiences [...] drawn by the attractions of the

terrain and the encounters they find there' (Debord 176).Like the dérive, they must depend on their own physical abilities to move around. AndrzejGasiorek notes a resonance of Ballard's work with Guy Debord's, as *The Society of the Spectacle* preceded *The Atrocity Exhibition* by three years. (Gasiorek 71) 'All that was once was directly lived has become mere representation,' he quotes Debord, a statement that can be read as a Surrealist sentiment of the inner and outer space reflecting each other in a Ballardian mode.

This exposure of the strangeness, or the capacity for strangeness in normal life, is what Ballard is so adept at presenting. In *High Rise*, he parodies the pseudo-communal nature of suburbia when the residents shut themselves in the high-rise, cutting themselves off from the rest of the world, with no desire at all for outer distractions. The police are seen off when they try to intervene. The high-rise building is both the symbol of technology and an autonomous organism with an inner space, and without the mediation and correspondence with outer space, this inner space become perverted. The residents themselves are shut off from each other and have no desire to conform to the proverbial balance between inner and outer space, or to communal expectations, yet by their very movements and interactions they are doing just that. Their strangeness has, in an ironic twist, become "normal." This escape from the outer space and withdrawal into the self is actually an escape from reality - and the only escape possible. Royal attempts to leave, but finds that he cannot do so, therefore he must retreat to his inner space. 'For the European today, America represents something akin to exile, a phantasy of emigration and therefore a form of interiorisation of his or her own culture,' Baudrillard wrote. 'The geographical exile of the Founding Fathers of the seventeenth century add[s] itself to the voluntary exile of man within his own consciousness'(Baudrillard 75). Savage additionally notes that *High Rise* is reminiscent of the American high-rise building rather than the English one. (Savage 83)

The juxtaposition of the inner space with the technology – colonized outer space is what is ultimately responsible for the strangeness in normal life portrayed by Ballard in *High Rise*. The 'normalisation of deviation' in modern suburban life, and how people 'wade' through this mainstream 'deviation,' instead of fighting against it, abounds in the book, in what Ballard terms a 'Nietzchean sense of new morality and freedom' (Lewis 33).This is a direct result of the technology and its power of bringing people together while isolating them all the more further, remapping the landscapes, rendering the familiar into the unfamiliar. *High Rise*, as well as *Crash* and *Concrete Island*, 'seeks out the edgelands of cities, making strange the familiar landscapes of suburbia,' showcasing the gradual deterioration of civilised human beings into a primitive form of humankind guided only by primordial instinct, which to them seems a natural course of way. (Lewis 6) In some ways, the regression of humans into a pre-civilised state probably *is* more natural than the plugged-in, human-machine "cyborg" beings of the twenty-first century.

The novel opens with a scene of Dr. Robert Laing, the newly appointed 'senior lecturer in physiology at the new medical school,' eating a domestic pet as if it were a Sunday roast. (Ballard 6) As the story progresses, the characters perpetrate murder, incest and cannibalism with no qualms whatsoever, taking into their stride the increasingly horrific environment their outer space has degenerated into - an outer space created by technology. The characters seamlessly merge their psychologically repressed inner space into that of the progressively fractured outer space, with the breakdown of both dimensions happening simultaneously. Richard Wilder and Robert Laing are both Norman Bates, with Wilder as the aggressive side and Laing being the detached, "normal" half. Not surprisingly, it is Wilder who kills the creator (Royal), but it is Laing who lives and prevails, and he whom the story begins and ends with.

Gasiorek notes that the cool, detached Laing and the "implacable" Steele are the 'new social type being created by the apartment building, a cool, unemotional personality impervious to the psychological pressure of high-rise life with minimal needs for privacy.' (Gasiorek 124) In other forms, a form of cyborg that is already half consumed by technology. They are the machinated human beings created by a technologised world, who have selected the epoch of technological achievement, a high rise, to live in; who have manoeuvred and are being manoeuvred by the outer space, and in the process, allowed their inner space to be shaped on the mould of the outer space. There is no true win-win scenario in which the outer space should completely control the inner space, or vice versa. Achieving the balance between the inner and outer space is what Ballard challenges humankind to do - to 'confront and come to terms with the darkest recesses of human nature,' as V. Vale puts it in his 1982 interview with Ballard. His own background as a medical student who had once hoped to become a psychiatrist resonates with the mentally imbalanced characters in his novels attempting to reconcile their inner space with the outer space, and who are in very real need of a psychiatrist, on would suppose. Of course, even the psychiatrist himself/herself cannot doctor the psychological damage caused by this imbalance: Pearson in *Kingdom Come* anticipates his psychiatrist Tony Maxted's logic. *The Atrocity Exhibition* features a psychiatrist who has suffered a nervous breakdown, which to Ballard seemed the perfect expression for the discrepancy between the inner space and that of the technologically-mediated outer space:

> The media that brought the revolution in technology [...]We'd moved from a sort of print-dominated world of newspapers and magazines into an electronic world dominated by television. There was a sense that all the rules had changed and also that we were living in a kind of madhouse, that the world had become a sort of deranged psychiatric institution. When I was writing [*The Atrocity Exhibition*], it struck me that the one figure who best expressed this madness would be a psychiatrist who was having a mental breakdown (Ballard, Yellow).

This does not stop most people from putting their faith in psychiatrists, however, in a burst of optimism that would do Le Corbusier proud. When Ballard attended the premiere of Steven Spielberg's *Empire of the Sun*, he leafed through a copy of Los Angeles' Yellow Pages, which he found to be more telling of real life and the human condition than any Balzac novel he had read. 'There are more psychiatrists listed,' he wryly noted, 'than [there are] plumbers' (Ballard, Yellow).

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