Up Rising:
Rehabilitating J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* with R.D. Laing and Lauren Berlant

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The balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly in the past decades. Increasingly their roles are reversed. We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind – mass-merchandising, advertising…the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel.

—Ballard (1995, iii)

A giant of 'literary geography' (Beaumont and Martin, 2016), J.G. Ballard ranks among the foremost critics, chroniclers and cartographers of consumer society's outer limits (Coverley, 2010). Suburban shopping malls, office parks, ring roads, drive-ins, flyovers, underpasses, traffic islands, leisure centres, cineplexes and billboard-festooned thoroughfares are his source material and satirical target (Baxter, 2008). In a long line of 'concrete and steel' novels, from *Crash* to *Kingdom Come*, Ballard lifts the lid on postmodern civilisation and reveals the discontents within. More than that, the Marco Polo of metropolitan peripheries shows how a cesspit of consumer psychosis seethes beneath the placid, placeless surface of anodyne, Ikeatized anonymity (Calcott and Shephard, 1998). Whether it be the coastal holiday resort in *Cocaine Nights*, the high-tech business park in *Super-Cannes*, or the luxury apartment block in *High-Rise* – initially entitled *Up!* – Ballard's ostensibly utopian settings unfailingly descend into dystopian anarchy, where blood is spilt, gore pores forth and late capitalism's societal stranglehold is strengthened.

Or do they?   This article argues that, far from being a descent into hell, where alpha males battle for supremacy and feral females feast on their flesh, *High-Rise* recounts a journey of psychic redemption that culminates in decidedly utopian vistas of post-patriarchal society. With the conceptual assistance of R.D. Laing and Lauren Berlant, we show that Ballard's seemingly infernal otherworld is a potentially paradisal motherworld. This not only accords with recent, post-feminist reinterpretations of seminal androcentric texts, such as *On the Road* (Vanmouwerik, 2017), but reveals that the book's spatial organization, if not exactly celestial, is less carceral than some commentators suppose (Baxter and Wymer, 2012). A classic work of literary geography (Beaumont and Martin, 2016), *High-Rise* is a novel that's ripe for rereading, not unlike its predecessor *Concrete Island* (Keyes, 2016; Robertson, 2016), and especially so in the aftermath of Ben Wheatley's (2015) film adaptation, which restates the standard slaughterhouse story.

Our article begins with a short survey of literary geography and Ballard's situation therein. A synopsis of *High-Rise* then follows, as does a summary of critics' reactions to its perverse spatial poetics. This consensus is interrogated in subsequent sections, where the novel's dominant metaphor is examined and Laing's studies of schizophrenia offer an antithetical interpretation of the novel's unsettled and unsettling events. These 'close readings' are thereafter re-read under the influence of Berlant's (2014) 'flat affect', itself predicated on psychiatric sources. This uncovers a shadowy, hitherto unremarked subtext in Ballard's novel, where matriarchy obtains and harmony is restored to the high-rise charnel-house. After considering alternative interpretive possibilities, we conclude that Ballard was more than a pessimistic prophet of inexorable urban breakdown. He envisaged a gynocratic uprising as well.

A Little History of Literary Geography

Novels, according to the *Financial Times*, 'are the new textbooks of history' (Roy, 2017, page16). In a spin-filled world of fake news, post-truth and barefaced clickbait, today's historians find the facts they lack in works of fiction. This is especially so, Roy says, in closely-guarded societies like China, Egypt, Russia, Turkey and Pakistan, where semi-samizdat novels expose the dirty secrets of authoritarian regimes. Fiction, contra Oscar Wilde's famous quip, isn't so much the lie that tells the truth, as the truth that reveals the lies of the land.

The veracity of the *FT*'s viewpoint is of course debatable. Taken at face value, it suggests that capital's chroniclers are following in the footsteps of geographers, who have long regarded novels and analogous cultural artefacts as valuable sources of spatial information (Alexander 2015). From the early analyses of realistically represented Victorian landscapes, such as those of Thomas Hardy and George Eliot (Pocock, 1981), via telling tales of migration and exile, not least Joyce's Ulyssean tour of Dublin's fair city (Preston and Simpson-Housley, 1994), to latter-day excursions into wildly imaginative secondary worlds, like Tolkien's Middle Earth and Lovecraft's Cluthu Mythos (Kneale, 2006), the fictional frontier has been progressively pushed back by humanistic geography's homesteaders. And while these clearances have not gone unchallenged (Hones, 2008), they have been reinforced by the spatial and cultural 'turns' in sociology and geography respectively.

As Sharp's (2000), Saunders' (2010) and Hones' (2015) reviews reveal, the realm of literary geography has spread in four cardinal directions. *Terminologically*, it goes by a host of semi-synonymous descriptors including 'geocriticism', 'imaginary geographies', 'literary cartography', and 'spatial literary studies', to say nothing of 'narrative cartography', '*romans-géographes*' and 'geopoetics' (Peraldo, 2016). *Conceptually*, it is mining the rich, thick and frequently fault-fissured seams of pre-existing literary theory, from Feminist and Psychoanalytical to Post-colonialist and good old-fashioned New Criticism (Thacker, 2005-6). *Ideologically*, it is no longer treated as a decorative garnish – a source of well-wrought words that enliven research reports – but as a deep-seated, spatially-situated activity where literary production, distribution and reception is conditioned by the circuits, and channelled by the conduits, of multinational capital (Hones, 2008). *Empirically*, it is venturing into ever more literary genres, as well as contiguous cultural forms like film, dance, sculpture and the visual arts (Alexander, 2015). According to Brosseau (2017), studies of the place of space in works of literature started with nineteenth-century novels, turned to the tomes of modernism, gravitated toward popular pulp fiction, tackled children's adventure stories thereafter and has since taken up with crime, SF, poetry, short stories, comic books and autobiography, in that order.

The compass of this corpus is perhaps best boxed by psychogeography. An aptly named, conceptually accommodating, ideologically freighted and empirically engaged literary genre, psychogeography's genesis is variously identified with William Blake's eighteenth-century poetic visions, Daniel Defoe's pseudo-biographical *Robinson Crusoe*, Thomas de Quincy's opium-fuelled journeys around olde London town, Edgar Allan Poe's profoundly unsettling essay 'The Man in the Crowd', and the oneiric Parisian novels of prominent surrealists André Breton and Louis Aragon (Coverley, 2010). However, most commentators agree that it was the radical, openly insurgent writings of Guy Debord and the Situationists that put psychogeography on the map (Pinder, 2005). It's a map that has guided assorted avant-garde novelists including Martin Amis, Will Self, Iain Sinclair and Britain's astronaut of 'inner

space', J.G. Ballard. Few wordsmiths, Taylor (2002) shows, have done more to explore the ill-defined borderlands between geography, literature and the psyche. And fewer still have better expressed the 'subjectivity of the near future'. Ballard's works of the 1970s, especially his dystopian urban trilogy *Crash*, *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*, not only anticipated the blandscapes that now surround us – non-places (Augé, 1995), junk-spaces (Koolhaus, 2002), placeless places (Relph, 2010), leftover edgelands (Moss, 2016) et al – but have taken on a new significance in today's world of sick cities (LeDuff, 2013), vampire empires (Pile, 2005) and psychotic geographies (Baker, 2007). It is an infernal, Grenfell-disfigured world where apartment blocks are death traps once more.

The Lowdown on High-Rise

In the topography of texts, first lines loom large, be it 'The past is a foreign country', 'A spectre is haunting Europe', or 'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit' (Oz, 1999). The Everest of opening sentences is of course much debated, but J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* must surely rank among the Himalayan peaks. Its ostensibly cosy vision of an affluent, middle-class professional enjoying the view from the veranda of his expensive apartment in a newly-built tower block – with spectacular views over the sweeping Thames estuary – is undercut by the fact that he is barbequing an Alsatian. This high-rise is a hellhole. Our protagonist has survived the carnage and, much like Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, is about to recount the horror, the horror:

> Later, as he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr. Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous three months.

Thus begins Ballard's story of a civic civil war, where the occupants of an enormous, beautifully appointed 'vertical city' (p.4), complete with pre-school, shopping precinct, leisure complex and rooftop sculpture playground, gradually descend into inter-floor faction fighting and socially-stratified ethnic cleansing. The confrontation commences when a wine bottle is carelessly dropped – or perhaps thrown – from one of the upper floors and smashes on the balcony of a mid-level tenant. The tension rises when upper-tier inhabitants become convinced that the children of the lower floors are urinating in the communal swimming pool. Suspicion further increases after the high-speed lifts are delayed – possibly deliberately sabotaged – in parts of the pristine tower block, which also suffer from unaccountable power outages. Fun to start with, these provide the cover of darkness for assorted unconscionable acts.

In due course, a dog is drowned, a woman is molested and a man inexplicably plummets to his death. Yet the tenants remain unmoved. They prefer, perversely, to keep themselves to themselves. Even when the fatality takes place, no one bothers to inform the police. Slowly but surely the residents withdraw from their outside lives, disconnect the telephones and attend to the unsettling situation within the building. Seemingly bent on mutually assured destruction, the internecine conflict swiftly escalates to extremities of violence, vandalism, degeneracy, defilement and inter-floor conflict. The latter takes the form of intense class-racism as the various levels of the high-rise find temporary tribal solidarity in their collective hatred of those above and below. As Amis (2001, page 102) observes, 'Eventually the high-rise takes on that quality common to all Ballardian *loci*: it is suspended, no longer to do with the rest of the planet, screened off by its own surreal logic'.

This surreal logic is embodied in three focal characters, each representative of their respective social situation. In the lower floors, television producer Richard Wilder becomes fixated on his self-actualizing mission of climbing the tower and seizing the top floor. Up above, the building's architect and occupant of the penthouse suite, Anthony Royal, strives to maintain his mastery as self-styled 'lord of the manor' (p.100). Meanwhile Dr. Robert Laing 'knew his place' (p.101) in the social and spatial middle of the mayhem. He observes the mounting chaos as, up and down the building, its female inhabitants are abandoned by their partners and routinely subjected to gratuitous sexual abuse.

As the apartment block slides ever deeper into anarchy, Wilder climbs higher and higher and, at the same time, becomes increasingly brutish and infantile. On reaching the summit, he shoots Royal in cold blood, only to be murdered in turn by feral female cannibals, who have somehow commandeered the rooftop play area. Dr. Laing survives the slaughter, albeit as a lackey for two demanding matriarchs, and helps rehabilitate the ransacked building alongside the remaining women. Meanwhile a second high-rise, four hundred yards from the original, reaches full occupancy and suffers its first unaccountable power outage:

> Already torch beams were moving about in the darkness, as the residents made their first confused attempts to discover where they were. Laing watched them contentedly, ready to welcome them to their new world. (Ballard 1975, page 248)

Placing Critics on the Couch

Epitomised by the grotesquery of its first line and ominous portents in the last, *High-Rise* is conventionally described as a 'classic tale of urban disintegration' (Child, 2013). Critics typically read it as a 'de-civilizing process' (Baxter and Wymer, 2012, page 12), an 'urban disaster' (Brigg, 1985, page 67), a 'dystopian evocation of urban life' (Gasiorek, 2005, page 20), 'a return to primitivism and tribal warfare' (Taylor, 2002, page 4), and 'a towering inferno of violence and debauchery' (Hewitt, 2016, page 82) in which, 'relieved of social restraints, a group of civilized humans will revert swiftly to savagery' (Baxter, 2011, page 235). As a consequence, *High-Rise* comes across as a spectacularly squalid rendering of geo-psychosis, where the building's occupants actively dissolve their social order into a murderous man-eating bloodbath (Graham, 2016). It's an allegory of urban nullity. It's a parable of consumer society consuming itself.

There's more to *High-Rise* than that, though. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Ballard's novel is that, throughout the narrative, readers encounter 'psychoanalytical innuendos' (Oramus 2015, page 108) which portend richer theoretical pickings (McGeachan, 2016). It is no coincidence, for instance, that two of the central characters are called Wilder and Royal. The former yields to animality and finishes in an infantile state, whereas the latter is the building's designer who presides with regal charisma, considering himself the keeper of 'a private zoo' (p.138). Their names are thus indicative of superego and id, as are the characters' characteristic actions. In between Wilder and Royal, Ballard's third focal character is the ego figure Dr. Robert Laing. Described by Royal as the 'most true tenant' in the building (p.101), his name gestures toward the then esteemed psychiatric theorist, Dr. Ronald David Laing (cf. Brigg, 1985; Groes, 2011; O'Hara, 2011). Ballard, it seems, is not only seeking to tease well-informed readers, those with the requisite cultural capital, but also actively working with theory while artfully alluding to his sources of inspiration.

It is possible, therefore, to read *High-Rise* as more than an admittedly compelling account of crazed destruction. It is interpretable in psychoanalytical terms, an approach that has long been employed by learned literary critics (Vice, 1996; Wright, 1998) and latterly embraced by 'psychoanalytic geographers' (Kingsbury and Pile, 2016). As Ogden and Ogden (2013, p.7) observe about the former, 'contemporary psychoanalytic literary critics continue to produce readings of literature based on the supposition that literary characters behave and think like real human beings; that fictional characters have unconscious psychological problems that the reader may identify and diagnose; and that the author and his characters share the same unconscious dilemmas'. Spokespersons for the latter likewise note that psychoanalysis in its myriad manifestations is predicated, more often than not, on spatial tropes (Davidson and Parr, 2016). According to Kingsbury and Pile (2016), these include Freud's initial topographical model of the unconscious, Klein's projection/introjection interactions between outer world and inner life, Kristeva's abjection-orientated focus on the phobias that arise from uncertain boundaries and Winnicott's premise pertaining to a therapeutically propitious 'potential space' between people and things.

That said, psychoanalysts are often traduced for tackling works of literature in a heavy-handed manner, effectively force-fitting fixed interpretations on inherently ambiguous texts (Eagleton, 1986; Frosh, 2010). And while the same charges have yet to be levelled at psychoanalytic geographers, 'maps of misreading' remain an ever-present possibility (Bloom, 1974). Felman (1982), accordingly, recommends a flexible and open-ended interpretive approach on the part of psychoanalysts and literary critics alike. The same principle presumably applies to the rapidly growing field of psychoanalytical geography, whose exponents 'now feel confident enough to embrace psychoanalytic approaches in ways that are unfettered by a sense of marginality or fear of crude caricatures or deliberately contrary interpretations' (Kingsbury and Pile, 2016, page 6).

When it comes to analyses of Ballard, however, even the most flexible and open-minded readings are complicated by the incontrovertible fact that his oeuvre is always-already informed by theory. According to Francis (2011, page 1), Ballard's works are 'imbued with the discursive textures of psychoanalysis'. Baxter and Wymer (2012) likewise argue that he deliberately introduces, and systematically embeds, psychological paradoxes imported from readings of Freud and Jung. Elsewhere, Baxter (2009) maintains that Ballard was not only working within a Surrealist tradition inspired by those proto-psychogeographers Aragon and Breton, but also drawing sustenance from Adorno, Benjamin, Barthes, Marcuse and more.

Of course, Ballard does not engage with theory in the methodical, rigorous manner expected of academics. But, as Francis (2011, page 26) puts it, he can be seen to 'make use of particular psychological texts as conceptual raw material for his narrative fictions'. Accordingly, readers encounter Ballard as an author who generates fictive forms by imaginatively mixing together theoretical insights in a way that conventional psychoanalytical scholars find uncomfortable and unsettling. In Luckhurst's (1997, page xvii) words:

> His work at once constantly activates theoretical models, but it is also awkward, didactic, and over-theorized, tending to evade or supersede the theories meant to 'explain' it. This is to be caught on the horns of readability and unreadability, graspability and ungraspability. It much that his texts at once welcome theoretical 'capture' but always escape it.

Such is the extent of the challenge facing the Wilders of scholarship, those who strive to clamber to the summit of Ballard's edifice complex with only 'close reading' for support. Formulated by I.A. Richards in the 1920s, and rendered hegemonic by the New Critics of the mid-twentieth century, close reading comprises a line-by-line interrogation of the chosen text, focussing on its tropes and schemes (Eagleton, 1986).

Reading High-Rise Metaphorically

Famously described by an early reviewer as being beyond psychiatric help, Ballard is nowadays considered disturbingly prescient, nothing less than a soothsayer of consumer society (see Elborough, 2008). Dubbed the Seer of Shepperton, he has been credited with predicting Ronald Reagan's presidency (in a 1967 short story), anticipating the aftermath of Princess Diana's untimely death (in his 1970 novel *Crash*), foretelling terrorist bomb attacks on international airports (with 2003's *Millennium People*), prophesying the construction of the Berlin Wall (four years before the event), grasping the apocalyptic implications of global warming (way back in 1961's *Drowned World*), intuiting the inexorable advance of advertising-saturated consumer society (the 'Subliminal Man' short story of 1963), and inventing Facebook for good measure (in a 1977 article for *Vogue*). According to Baxter (2008, page 2), Ballard encapsulates 'the contemporary condition in all of its violence and ambiguity: murdered celebrities, crashed cars, surveillance technologies, media politicians, gated communities, vast shopping malls, drowned cities, nuclear weapons ranges and testing sites, landscaped business parks'. His books are an allegory of, and metaphor for, today's decentred, demented world.

Read closely, however, the most striking thing about *High-Rise* is its reliance on that most ancient of rhetorical devices: *prosopopeia* (aka personification). Thus, the apartment block in Ballard's novel is consistently construed as a living thing, a sentient creature with malevolence in mind. Situated in east London, the skyline of which 'resembled the disturbed encephalograph of an unresolved mental crisis' (p.5), the condominium is 'less a habitable architecture…than the unconscious diagram of a mysterious psychic event' (p.28). An immense creature (p.24), with an apparent ability to expand and contract diurnally (p.19), it has its own rhythms (p.9), a second life (p.8), a natural social order (p.11) and, early on in the narrative, a kind of knowing calm (p.25) that infiltrated the minds of residents, creating a new social type that was impervious to the social pressures of high-rise life (p.43). The building, one character suggests, is nothing less than a 'huge animate presence, brooding over them and keeping a magisterial eye on the events taking place':

> 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 the neurons of a brain. (p.50)

Each of the focal characters, furthermore, is acutely attuned to the apartment block's baneful presence. When Laing leaves for work, he feels as if he has left part of his mind behind (p.43) and is later struck by the contours of an adjacent ornamental lake, which are suggestive of a deep reductive psychosis (p.144). Royal, the zoo-keeper, is convinced that his moribund creation's vital functions are failing one by one (p.93), that the power outages are akin to dead strata in a fading brain (p.104) and that he and the building are conjoined twins

inasmuch as testing of the building is a testing of himself (ibid). Wilder, meanwhile, feels that his body is the focus of the lines of force running through the high rise – pressing on him at night, forcing the air from his chest – and, when drowning the dog, he is simultaneously struggling with the building itself (pp.62-63). But the 'unsettling' (p.59) apartment block isn't easily overcome:

> The tampering with the electricity system had affected the air conditioning. Dust was spurting from the vents in the walls. Exasperated, Wilder drove his fists together. Like a huge and aggressive malefactor, the high-rise was determined to inflict every conceivable hostility upon them. Wilder tried to close the grilles, but within minutes they were forced to take refuge on the balcony. (p.76)

According to Gasiorek (2005, page 123), this series of anthropomorphic images revives and reanimates the time-worn gothic trope of a creation or creature that 'becomes monstrous, turning on those whom it was supposed to benefit and destroy the creator in his penthouse lair'. It is thus on a direct line of descent from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and, more to the point, the infernal line of sentient psychotic buildings that feature in Stephen King's *The Shining*, Lauren Beukes' *Broken Monsters*, Will Wiles' *The Way Inn* and Edgar Allan Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher*. Architects aren't averse to anthropomorphising their urban imaginings either. As Anderson (2015) explains, Le Corbusier contended that towns are biological phenomena; Frank Lloyd Wright compared cities to fibrous tumours; Oscar Niemeyer insisted that his buildings be sensuous; and Alvar Aalto regarded architecture as a biodynamic process. Lewis Mumford's (1961) monumental *City in History* likewise reveals how personification of place inheres in Leonardo da Vinci's ideal city, Vitruvius's embodied city (complete with gendered classical columns) and Plato's belief that the human soul is similar to a city. Freud's model of the unconscious, furthermore, came from a 1901 visit to Rome, where he was struck by the city's stratigraphy of history, an apt metaphor for the human mind (Pile, 2005).

Personification, of course, is one of humankind's most deeply rooted tropes (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), a primal propensity that's made manifest in everything from the man in the moon and houses that look like Hitler to Jesus's face mysteriously materialising on Margherita pizzas (Guthrie, 1995). An ever-popular trope among lyric poets, who happily apostrophise 'dancing' daffodils, 'babbling' brooks, 'smiling' sunbeams and, for T.S. Eliot at least, the feline fog that rubs its back on windowpanes, *prosopopeia* is no less evident in the social sciences, where Winnicott wrestled with object-relations, Latour enlivens actor-networks and material anthropologists like Daniel Miller (2010) maintain that the notion of agentic or animate buildings is best understood through the multiple meanings of the word 'accommodation'.

At the most basic level, Miller claims, accommodation can refer to the act of finding a place to live. But accommodation also involves a process of accommodating, that is 'an appropriation of the home by its inhabitants' (Miller, 2010, page 96). This second meaning, he goes on, is reciprocal. 'It may imply our changing of a home to suit ourselves, but it can also imply the need to change ourselves in order to suit our accommodation' (ibid). More important still is that…

> …the term accommodating expresses a sense of willing, of benign agreement to compromise on behalf of the other, often the only spirit within which accommodation can be achieved. By considering our relationship to the home through the term

accommodating we face the home not as a thing but a process. Being accommodating and being accommodated is something in which we are constantly engaged. So how, then, does accommodating become accommodating? How do we, in practice, achieve this balance between our agency and that of the home? (Miller, 2010, ibid)

Accommodation is not necessarily a voluntary process, however. Even in conditions of carnage, such as those of the tenants in *High-Rise*, it is far-fetched to imagine that the residents might relocate. As Gasiorek (2005, page 110) reminds us, life within alienating, dangerous and dilapidated apartment blocks is more than mere fiction for many. It is an everyday reality for those who reside in stultifying urban high-rises that 'isolate their inhabitants, promote violent conflict, and destroy belief in the possibility that viable community life might be sustained'. The brute reality is that the tenants must achieve accommodation, even in a building as monstrous as Ballard's carnivorous condominium:

> It is a commonplace that anyone can leave a bad marriage or sell their property and buy a sailboat to cruise in the Pacific, but most people realize that it is an illusion to assume that life can be changed so readily. In fact, people to some extent seek out life situations that suit them and then adapt themselves and modify their needs and desires until they are where they belong and have a feeling of familiarity combined with security. Ballard recognizes this trait, which, when taken in conjunction with the possibility that people have within them the desire for bizarre or unfamiliar life experiences that may be permitted or advocated by modern technology, explains why the characters in these novels seem at home in situations that are at first glance nightmares from which they would be expected to flee. (Brigg, 1985, pages 71-2)

Reading *High-Rise* Psychoanalytically

Miller's accommodating metaphor is likewise applicable to *High-Rise* readings, insofar as the conventional account – descent into demented degeneracy – can accommodate a very different interpretation. Namely, that the characters' behaviour is intelligible within a particular constellation's set of processes, praxes and material reality. As the grisly opening vignette intimates, Laing's dog-eating is not a moment of madness but something that (eventually) makes sense within the logic of the narrative. In other words, a new normative structure has been produced in which seemingly obscene acts become intelligible. The reader is required to reshuffle their conceptions and grasp the new normal. Unless readers reshuffle, they only see delinquency and disintegration. Equipped with the appropriate theoretical lens, however, readers may recognize that a redemptive collective journey has transpired and that rehabilitation is possible.

That lens is R.D. Laing's allegedly 'anti-psychiatric' theory, first reported in *The Divided Self* and later reconfigured in interpersonal (*Self and Other*) and societal terms (*The Politics of Experience*). Many critics have, of course, noted Laing's influence on Ballard (Baxter and Wymer, 2012; Francis, 2011; Luckhurst, 1997), although Self (2000) stresses that the latter parodied not parroted the former. As Stephenson (1991, page 7) suggests, nevertheless, 'both share the notion that we are profoundly ambivalent with regard to our individual identities and our collective social identity, that we are clinging determinedly, apprehensively, to an illusion while at the same time forces within our psyches are working to overturn that illusion. Both writers also share the belief that "break-down" and "break-through" are

inextricably intertwined, that what may appear to be madness or disaster may be…"veritable manna from heaven"".

Nowadays, admittedly, R.D. Laing tends to be dismissed as a pseudo-guru of '60s mysticism whose personal excesses led to professional disbarment (Ronson, 2012). However, Laing was also a member of the renowned Tavistock Clinic, where he produced notable additions to understandings of inter-familial relations, particularly within the context of schizophrenia. Working alongside prominent psychoanalytic figures like Charles Rycroft and Donald Winnicott, he aimed to add insights from phenomenology and existentialism to the established psychoanalytical array (Miller, 2004). More than that, though, Laing was a literary geographer of sorts. Numerous scholars, not least the otherwise dismissive Elaine Showalter (1987), acknowledge that he was a gifted literary stylist (Chapman, 2014), whose 'fresh and invigorating' voice (Clay, 1997, page 72) inspired many literary contemporaries including Doris Lessing and Allen Ginsberg (Miller, 2006). However, in addition to his 'gift for language equalled by only a few social critics of the time' (Showalter, 1987, page 228), Laing appreciated the place of space in therapeutic praxis, whether it be the unlocked wards of Gortnavel Hospital, the micro-geographies of Tavistock Clinic, or indeed the epicentre of anti-psychiatric counter-culture, Kingsley Hall (McGeachan, 2016). Eschewing internal psychological functions, he examined the 'time-place situatedness' of the patient (McGeachan, 2014, page 284) and sought to 're-world' them by grounding their displaced sense of self back into its corporeal, interpersonal and material contexts.

Regardless of Laing's reputation as a shaman, charlatan or poet without portfolio, four aspects of his theories are pertinent to *High-Rise*. First, he contended that the status-quo of everyday living did not provide an index point for normality or sanity, but is saturated instead by alienation and violence. The everyday functioning of (consumer) society is fundamentally violent:

> We are bemused and crazed creatures, strangers to our true selves, to one another and to the spiritual and material world – mad, even, from an ideal standpoint we can glimpse but not adopt. We are born into a world where alienation awaits us. We are potentially men, but we are in an alienated state, and this state is not simply a natural system. Alienation as our present destiny is achieved only by outrageous violence perpetrated by human beings on human beings (Laing 1967, page 12).

As a result, we not only live 'out of our minds' (ibid, p.50) but live in a society where 'normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years' (p.24). Such a diagnosis contrasts sharply with traditional psychiatrists' tendency to label certain forms of behaviour insane or schizophrenic, an act that leads inexorably to lobotomy, electric shock therapy and the isolation ward.

Second, Laing posited that schizophrenia should be regarded, not as a mental illness that assails certain individuals, but as an entirely rational reaction to disturbing social modalities. 'Schizophrenia,' he states, 'is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unliveable situation' (ibid, p.95). One of psychiatry's foremost errors, Laing believed, is that instead of investigating what sort of unliveable situation nurtures this special strategy – such as a deeply dysfunctional family relationship – psychiatry seeks to return the patient to their pre-schizophrenic state. Laing preferred to think of the condition as a 'course to run'. Sometimes, he said, 'actions may be part of a potentially orderly natural sequence of experiences', a sequence which is 'seldom allowed to occur' (p.102). Laing further claimed

that psychiatrists should not interrupt the sequence by seeking to restore a semblance of 'normal' conduct and return the person to their previous way of being – the mark of success by standard criteria – but rather to 'understand sanity and madness in existential social terms and then confront common problems' (p.108). Expressions, in short, that seem mad from the perspective of a notionally sane person many be intelligible if understood in their social context.

The third aspect of Laing's work that is relevant to *High-Rise* is his methodology. In conjunction with Aaron Esterson, Laing conducted longitudinal research on the topic of sanity, madness, and the family (Laing and Esterson, 1964). The authors regarded schizophrenia as a hypothesis not a fact. Therefore a schizophrenic was a person diagnosed as such and treated accordingly. Laing and Esterson further investigated whether the utterances and behaviour of 'schizophrenics' were intelligible within the family context where the supposed 'schizophrenia' arose. As they asked themselves about one of their subjects: 'is the way this girl acts and are the things she says intelligible in terms of social praxis, or are they purely and simply the unintelligible effluxion of a pathological process?' (ibid. p.132). Their answer was that study should not be limited to individuals, but take appropriate account of each person in the family, the relationships between family members and the family itself as a spatially-situated social system. Home is where the hurt is.

Fourth, Laing (1967) further noted that as the socio-spatial setting expands from micro to macro, revolutionary changes tend not to take place at the poles (neither the 'individual pirouette of solitary repentance on the one hand, or by a seizure of the machinery of the state on the other', p.16). Revolutionary transformation, rather, tends to be brought about by 'sudden, structural, radical qualitative changes in the intermediate system levels', which typically consist of transformations in a factory, a hospital, a university or, indeed, an apartment block. The conceptual gaze should therefore fall, not on isolated individuals nor broader socio-economic phenomena, but on *situations* at the meso level, much like the activities that transpire in Ballard's fictional setting. We should strive, Laing says, to account for the 'extreme normality' in which seemingly irrational behaviour and violence takes place. He tells of a boy of three, held by his neck by his mother as she dangles him out of a high-rise. His mother says, 'See how much I love you'.

Taken together, Laing's theorizing provides us with the following key considerations in relation to *High-Rise*: (a) madness, alienation and violence is not something that suddenly overcomes the tenants, they were already in a state of extremity over the course of ordinary psychogeographical existence; (b) rather than regard the actions of the tenants as mad or as moments of disintegration, we should consider the actions as intelligible with reference to the process and praxis of the situation within the building, the specific socio-spatial setting; and (c) the characters are engaged in a process, a voyage or a sequence which takes the protagonists to a resolution of their unbearable position. The overall sequence, therefore, is not a journey *into* madness (as the novel is ordinarily understood) but a journey *away* from madness.

Indeed, the emplotment of *High-Rise* is predicated on this idea of a quest, sequence or journey through collective communal madness. A defining aspect of Ballard's novel – much like the amnesiac party animals in *The Hangover* who cleave to the credo 'what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas' (Pile, 2016) – is how determined the tenants are to see things through to the bitter end while maintaining a conspiracy of silence from the wider world. As Wilder reflects, there is a need, shared by everyone, 'to shift away, most of all from oneself, any

realization of what was actually happening in the high-rise, so that events there could follow their own logic and get even more out of hand' (p.56). And, as Laing likewise concedes about his own spatial settings, residents are 'united in assuring any outsiders that all was well – partly out of a displaced pride in the high-rise, but also out of a need to resolve the confrontation between them without interference' (p.103).

In a similar vein, Gasiorek (2005, page 23) observes that Ballard's books are peopled with characters who seek 'immersion in the destructive element' because it 'offers the only chance of confronting these ambiguities head-on. The protagonists who receive authorial approval in Ballard's texts embrace the new challenges with which they are confronted, welcoming them as portals to new experiences'. Optimism, therefore, is the outcome. 'This is what enables Ballard to claim that his is a "fiction of psychic fulfilment" because it encourages his characters to discover "the truth about themselves" even if this process of discovery culminates in their deaths' (ibid). We see this process in *High-Rise* as the tenants embrace each escalation of violence: 'Each one brought them a step closer to the ultimate goal of the high-rise, a realm where their most deviant impulses were free at last to exercise themselves in any way they wished. At this point physical violence would cease at last' (ibid, p.150). We might begin to imagine a Ballardian/Laingian journey or sequence through which profound psychological problems are resolved, not by finding a 'cure' or a successful preventative course of action. But by the opposite: fearlessly giving way to impulses no matter what the risk or repercussions.

Reading High-Rise Matriarchally

In Laing and Esterson's (1964) *Sanity, Madness & the Family* a series of socially and spatially situated case studies of 'schizophrenic' women is presented. A shared supposed symptom of the women is 'flat affect'. In the case of Maya, for example, it was noted that amongst her clinical attribution, she was 'depersonalised; showed signs of catatonia; exhibited affective impoverishment and autistic withdrawal' (p.32). These 'symptoms' recur throughout their case studies: patients are found to have 'impoverished affect' (p.75), to be 'listless, apathetic, quiet, withdrawn and lacking in concentration' (p.109), to be in a 'inaccessible catatonic stupor' with 'shallowness of affect' (p.131), 'withdrawal from external reality, rigidity of posture and movement, thought disorder (vagueness, thought blocking), affective flattening' (p.144), to be like a 'puzzled child doing her best to meet the demands of adults' (p176) and as demonstrating 'emotional apathy' (p.203).

The women of Laing and Esterson's case studies behave very like the women in *High-Rise* who stage a communal mental withdrawal from the action. Throughout the novel, we encounter descriptions of women disengaged from the traumatic events surrounding them: '(she was) barely aware of what she was doing, as if a large part of her mind had been switched off' (p.78); 'she was detached and uneasy at the same time, like a spectator forced to watch someone about to be involved in an accident' (p.66); 'she soon became tiresomely maudlin, wandering about the corridors in a vacant way as if she had lost the key to her own mind' (p.96); 'Mrs Wilder stood passively… the sexual assault itself had ceased to have any meaning' (p.135). Even the women on the reception desk turned a blind eye to it all:

> In the absence of the manager – still lying in a state of mental collapse in his ground-floor apartment – his dwindling staff of two (the wives of a dubbing-mixer on the 2nd floor and a first violinist on the 3rd) sat stoically at their desks in the entrance lobby, oblivious of the deterioration going on apace over their heads. (p.105)

When not in the company of men, however, the women of the building are perfectly capable of animated discussion. As Royal notes about Mrs Wilder, 'She spoke in a flat voice unlike the animated tone she used with Anne and the other women' (p.135). Wilder later leaves the roof, furthermore, because the women are hosting an all-hands meeting. Apparently, the women's somnambulism was a feint to lure the men into a false sense of security. Indeed, this tactic was explicitly revealed as one character's strategy for dealing with Wilder: 'She had accepted him as she would any marauding hunter. First, she would try to kill him, but failing this give him food and her body, breast-feed him back to a state of childishness and even, perhaps, feel affection for him. Then, the moment he was asleep, cut his throat' (p.160). It was a tactical ploy from the outset, when supermarket shoppers first went feral:

> Hundreds of residents jostled against each other, pulling and shoving among the wine-bins and shelves of detergent packs, wire trollies locked together in a mesh of chromium wire. Voices rose in anger above the singing of the cash registers. Meanwhile, as these scuffles took place, a line of women customers sat under the driers in the hairdressing salon, calmly reading their magazines. The two cashiers on evening duty at the bank impassively counted out their bank-notes. (p.84)

Following Laing and Esterson, it appears that the women's flat affect is not so much a psychiatric symptom as a strategic form of performative withdrawal. For Lauren Berlant (2015), the ability to performatively withdraw should be understood as an alternativity for a person 'who cannot say or do anything to change her life material' (p.48), and is 'a mode of affect or flattened affect that shows up to perform its recession from melodramatic norms, foregrounds the obstacles to immediate reading, without negating the affective encounter with immediacy' (p.194). As Duschinsky and Wilson (2015) explain, flat affect marks a disruption of the series: event-senses-apprehension-responses. Crucially, the meaning of the underperformance is left unclear. Flat affect might be understood as a symptom of trauma, as a mode of apolitical disavowal, or even a form of 'broken-heartedness', as Laing once artfully described schizophrenia (McGeachan, 2014). But, it might also be interpreted as allowing a 'degree of reserve from situational injunctions which carves out some affective and relational – indeed some ethical – room for manoeuvre or apprehension' (Duschinsky and Wilson, 2015, page 185). We might then say that flat affect is akin to passive aggressiveness because, as Berlant states, it 'sneaks around the codes of sincerity and intelligibility that make possible normative social trust and trust in the social… In this sentimental scene, where we prism emotional universality and an ethics of emotional intelligibility, manners and manner are pathways to the confirmation of mutuality and collective belonging' (p.195).

Whilst we should heed Berlant's caveat that we ought not over-read unforthcoming bodies, clearly the *High-Rise* women are rejecting the grotesque emergent forms of the men's collective belonging and, instead, form themselves into an alternative power bloc that secretly plots to overthrow the overlords. To be sure, the women's inexorable rise is insidious. More than that, it intimates that lesbian relationships are integral to the insurgents' post-patriarchal societal vision, *à la* Berlant's (2011) cruelly optimistic contentions concerning queer theory. But from the women who casually stroll arm-in-arm around the condominium's commodious corridors, through the female commune on the 29th floor where three air hostesses and a writer of children's stories happily co-habit, to the powerful pair of matriarchs in the final chapter who share the same bed, eat from the same dinner plate and together maintain a male flunky in happy servitude, the novel includes beguiling hints of a nascent lesbiarchy:

> The two women lay side by side, so close that they seemed to be merging into each other. At intervals throughout the day he brought them their food, but he was never

exactly sure whose bodily needs and functions he was satisfying…Later, after he had carved the dog and served generous but not excessive portions to the two women, Laing thought about his good fortune as he sat on the balcony with his back to the railing. Above all, it no longer mattered how he behaved, what wayward impulses he gave way to or which perverse pathways he chose to follow…Laing waved reassuringly to the two women, who sat on the mattress with the tray across their knees, eating from the same plate. Laing finished the dark, garlic-flavoured meat, and looked up at the face of the high-rise. All the floors were in darkness, and he felt happy at this (pp.245-7).

The real genius of Ballard's *High-Rise* is how this secretive behaviour evades the narrator's observations, leaving readers with mere glimpses of the emerging matriarchy. Throughout the novel, the narrative attention remains squarely focused on the experiences of the male protagonists and, just like the psychiatric gaze critiqued by Laing and Esterson, the narrator appears to lure readers towards misunderstanding the performative withdrawal of the women as symptomatic of the psychosocial chaos, rather than as deliberate strategic action. Yet, if we accept the women's flat affect as strategic, as per the Laingian perspective, *High-Rise* should be read as a novel of constant misdirection which invites readers to make identifications with precisely the wrong characters and the wrong actions.

This invites a rather more utopian interpretation of *High-Rise*. Perhaps Ballard is tricking readers into reproducing a homonormative and psychiatric gaze which grounds the novel in the perspective of three male protagonists, each of whom is oblivious to the conduct of the women. In this dominant reading, the women exist merely as passive victims. Yet by the book's conclusion we realise that Laing's existence is spared because he meets the needs of two powerful matriarchs. In this regard, it is surprising that none of the academic analyses seem to note the uterine uprising of the gynocrats and instead, fixate upon the violence of the male characters. When Gasiorek (2005, page 127), for instance, writes, 'Some paradigm, this. Large-scale vandalism, total collapse of social ties and any sense of community, casual sexual abuse and indiscriminate violence leading to murder', he misses the point that *High-Rise* concludes with a highly-knit post-patriarchal community that sets about the task of child-friendly rehabilitation and communal action. How can this count for nothing?

> Children were playing in the sculpture garden. The doors, chained for so long to exclude them, were now wide open, and Wilder could see the geometric forms of the play-structures, their vivid colours standing out against the white walls. Everything had been freshly painted, and the roof was vibrant with light (p.238).

Indeed, it is evident that the killing of Wilder is likely the final act of violence in the new child- and women-friendly high-rise. The story ends with the remaining tenants cleaning the corridors and Laing getting ready to go back to work. The process, through madness, is complete. Laing has the last laugh.

Up! For Discussion

In a 1984 interview with *The Paris Review*, Ballard discussed the inspiration for *High-Rise* (Frick, 1984) While on vacation in Rosas, right beside Salvador Dali's domicile at Port Lligat, he witnessed a surreal episode. A ground-floor tenant in their holiday apartment block was being driven to distraction by cigarette butts thrown down from the upper floors. A photographer by profession, he started patrolling the beach, taking zoom lens photos of fellow holiday-makers' boorish behaviours, then displayed them in the foyer of the shared

high-rise. 'It was a very curious exhibition,' Ballard recalled. 'It was a green light to my imagination' (Frick, 1984).

This green light, the pioneering explorer of 'inner space' adds, also inspired him to write the novel in the form of a flat, dispassionate social worker's report on the strange events that had transpired in the forty-storey building. The first draft of *High-Rise* comprised a 25,000-word case history. 'I wish I had kept it,' he said. 'I think it was better than the novel.' He likewise preferred his original title – *Up!* – which was changed at the insistence of his publisher, despite Ballard's protests and purported 'better judgment' (Frick, 1984).

Authors' better judgment has, of course, long been a moot point among literary critics (Eagleton, 1986). From the intentional fallacy of the New Critics to the basic premises of structuralist, psychoanalytical, reader-response, post-colonial and Marxian schools of literary theory, the authority of authors is no longer accepted. Their opinions are pertinent but they're not privileged. They do not have the final word. There is no final word, not even for someone like Ballard, who studied medicine at Cambridge, who wanted to be a psychoanalyst, who was described by his friends as 'schizophrenic child' (p.91) and who was unusually attuned to the interplay of space and society. As he reports in his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Kindness of Women* (Ballard, 1991, page 200).

> The central nervous system is nature's Sistine Chapel, but we have to bear in mind that the world our senses present to us…is a ramshackle construct which our brains have devised to let us get on with the job of maintaining ourselves and reproducing our species. What we see is a highly conventionalized picture, a simple tourist guide to a very strange city.

The foregoing reading and re-reading of *High-Rise* is a simple tourist guide of sorts. It is no more or less privileged than that of prior critics, who have variously construed Ballard's novel as an exercise in Jungian depth psychology (Oramus, 2015), a form of hyper-organizational space (Zhang et al, 2008), a post-industrial re-enactment of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Groes, 2012), and a critical treatise on modern Brutalist architecture, where 'Laing' refers not to the celebrity psychoanalyst but a major British building contractor that constructed many of the country's most notorious apartment blocks (Beauman, 2014).

What it offers instead is an amalgam of psychoanalytically-inspired insights into a classic work of literary geography that has long been viewed from a singular, arguably single-minded perspective, recently reiterated by rising movie director Ben Wheatley. It's a Berlantine reading that chimes with recent Bechdel-tested, where's-the-woman critiques of iconic androcentric novels like *The Great Gatsby* and *Fight Club* (Vanmouwerik, 2017). It's a close reading that juxtaposes the works of a literary and spatially-inclined psychoanalyst, R.D. Laing, and a spatially and psychoanalytically-inclined novelist, J.G. Ballard. It's a subversive reading that recuperates at least some of the radical, revolutionary, unashamedly utopian aspirations of '60s city planners – and '60s anti-psychiatrists – albeit through a gynocritical glass darkly. It's a retroactive reading that reaches back to the personified prehistory of urban geography, not least its primal publication, Robert E. Park's *The City*. Explicating his 'ecological' model of urban development, Park (1925) posited that there's more to the city than its physical form, its infrastructure, its buildings. The city, he said, is 'a state of mind' (p.1). But what, Ballard asks, if that state of mind is disturbed, psychotic, schizophrenic? If it is, then Laing and Berlant can help 're-ground' the ever-growing community of literary geographers (Alexander, 2015; Hones, 2016; Peraldo, 2016).

Regardless of whether our reading is accepted or rejected, it is incontestable that *High-Rise* is a prescient parable of consumer society's spatial compulsions. According to Fitchett (2002, page 310), Ballard's entire oeuvre is characterized by a general concern with how 'the utopian hopes and visions for an ever more confident and capable consumer culture that were conceived in the middle of the twentieth century are…simultaneously being realized and disintegrated'. Francis (2011, page 8), similarly, suggests that Ballard's primary concern was composing fiction 'closely relevant to some of the inherent problems and contradictions of contemporary Western culture'. More forcefully still, Gasiorek (2005, page 20), proclaims that Ballard's basic preoccupation is with consumer society 'as end-game and terminal zone, the site of late capitalist colonization so complete that temporality has been evacuated from it and can only be conceived in terms of spatial extension: more buildings, roads, airports, shopping malls, car parks'. Ballard, he goes on…

> …objects to a world that has been mechanized, affectless and aggressive, but he is exhilarated by its electric dreams, so potent, glamorous and unpredictable. Inasmuch as his writing traces the sinister trajectories often taken by a potentially world-annihilating technology, it also explores the emancipatory hopes and uneasy pleasures unleashed by the juggernaut of modernity (ibid, pp.22-3).

The juggernaut is with us yet. But at least we know which direction it is heading. Brilliantly creative writing, like J.G Ballard's *High-Rise*, provides a sat-nav for a disoriented and demented society riven by mindless violence, driven by utopian aspiration.

Conclusion

Almost forty years after its publication, *High-Rise* almost came to pass in Hayes, west London (Quinn, 2013). A new apartment block went feral when residents of the 'luxury' and 'affordable' units clashed over the building's intermittent water supply. After being cut off for two whole days, tenants of the affordable units were denied access to an emergency standpipe that was provided for the luxury apartment dwellers. Forced to fill their water bottles from a decorative fountain at the entrance to the upscale housing zone, the affordables must have been tempted to follow Ballard's bellicose script. But they chose not to on this occasion. No dogs were barbequed in Hayes. And peace was finally restored (Beaumont, 2014).

Not everyone accepts that J.G. Ballard 'has issued a series of bulletins on the modern world of almost unerring prescience' (Self, 2003, page 3). But there is certainly some truth to Self's contention that 'others describe, Ballard anticipates' (ibid). His inventory of incessantly iterated images – empty swimming pools, open-air cinemas, abandoned buildings, advertising hoardings, white hotels, dead fish, broken jukeboxes, motorway flyovers, medical laboratories, low-flying aircraft, multi-storey car parks, smashed Coke bottles (Oramus, 2015) – comprise a neo-surrealist vision of late capitalist consumer culture that's on a par with Foucault's famously fantastic list, borrowed from Borges, of ancient Chinese animals.

The present paper doesn't purport to be a new *episteme* in Ballardian thought. Nor does it strive to settle the unsettled readings of Ballard's unsettling novel. Drawing upon the conceptual insights of R.D. Laing and Lauren Berlant, it attempts to rehabilitate Ballard's belief that his writings, far from being beyond psychiatric help, employ psychiatric concepts that may help rehabilitate the "inner space" of contemporary consumer society.

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