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Modern Architecture And Dystopia In James Graham Ballad's *High-Rise*

S. Prem Kumar[1*], Dr. G. Aruputhavel Raja[2]

[1*]Ph. D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University. premenglish2907@gmail.com
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University.

Abstract
This article takes a look at the role that modernist architecture plays in J.G. Ballard's novel *High-Rise*, as well as the ideological and psychological implications that it has in a dystopian urban setting. By relying on the concepts of Le Corbusier, Heidegger, Foucault, and Jameson, it argues that modernist architecture is responsible for the creation of alienation, instability, and regression rather than the rationality and social cohesion that it was intended to foster. The *high-rise* building in the book, which is modelled after Le Corbusier's concept of the perfect "vertical village," transforms into a scene of social breakdown, psychological misery, and class struggle, so showing the authoritarian and dehumanising aspects of urban architecture. In a manner that is congruent with Foucault's views on power and surveillance, Ballard portrays the *High-rise* as a panoptic structure that simultaneously confines its inhabitants while simultaneously providing them with the impression of autonomy. This viewpoint is utilised throughout the book in order to draw attention to the discrepancies that exist between human psychology and architectural reason, while also condemning the failure of modernist ideals. As a result of its existence in a liminal region that calls into question the urban mythologies of social engineering and progress, *High-Rise* defies both the utopian and dystopian classifications.

Key Words: Alienation, Engineering, Psychology, Social, Utopia.

Introduction

Urban areas have been the setting for many ideal and dystopian stories, showing both our hopes and fears. However, since England became more and more urbanised in the 1800s, literature has mostly shown urban life in a bad light. After World War II, when urban planning became more important as a way to keep the peace, it became harder to tell the difference between fiction and urban planning. Ultimately, as David Harvey noted, metropolitan areas are "somewhere where fact and imagination simply have to fuse" (Harvey 5). The way we think about our relationship to the environment is now greatly influenced by architecture. It is therefore appropriate that urban architecture, which is often used as an ideologically laden tool to reassure people about the inherent risks of urban living, has often been the subject of social critique and literature. As Jonathan Charley highlights: "In fact it is a feature of most dystopian and utopian literature that it uses technology and architecture as a narrative device to reinforce the political critique of social progress that all such novels share" (Charley 13). This paper examines James Graham Ballard's *High-Rise* in respect to modernist building techniques, focussing on the psychological effects and architectural purpose in reflecting a dismal metropolitan society: ideological one.

Almost a century ago, in Georg Simmel's Metropolis and Mental Life (1903) and later in Guy Debord's Spectacle of Society (1967), Ballard addressed the psychogeographical issue of how the built environment impacts the individual. This is one of the most significant themes that permeates much of his writing. The psychological effects that these landscapes and architectural layouts have on people are examined under a microscope in Ballard's artwork, which combines concerns about overpopulation with media-driven consumerism. This psycho geographical component of Ballard's literature is so significant that it was included in the definition of the adjective "Ballardian" in the Collin's English Dictionary as s "resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in Ballard's novels and stories, especially dystopian modernity, bleak manmade landscapes and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments" (Collins Dictionary 2016).

Ballard's name being added to the Collins English Dictionary is undoubtedly recognition of his significance and original vision, but it is also, as Roger Luckhurst notes (1997), a very conflicting act. He contends in his groundbreaking analysis of Ballard, The Angle Between Two Walls, that this institutionalized definition may take away the subversive force of Ballard's writings, negating a poetics that heavily depended on instability to have its impact. Ballard's work creates a "visible discomfort" that may be alleviated to the work's harm by moving it from the "margins to the center" (Luckhurst 1997). However, the intrinsic ambiguity in his work, both morally and intellectually will continue to perpetuate this anxiety.

Modernism in Literature and Architecture

I would want to make some initial remarks on the connection between predecessors of modernism architecture and literature in reading of J. G. Ballard's *High-Rise*, especially as this connection makes the problems in the novel seem incredibly terrible. Published in 1975, at a time when postmodernism was challenging modernist architectural tendencies and public dissatisfaction with tower structures and urban council estates constructed on the basis of the peak of communist ideology coincided with the aesthetic principles of modernist architecture. The populist aspirations of

postmodernist architecture, as outlined by Fredric Jameson in Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, contrasted with the elitist detachment of high-modernism architecture from the surroundings. Le Corbusier's use of pillars to support his structures serves as an example of this "whose gesture radically separates the new Utopian space of the modern from the degraded and fallen city fabric which it thereby explicitly repudiates" (Jameson 41). However, in his analysis of Ballard's fiction, Andrzej Gasiorek describes the historical background of block tower development, showing that what initially appeared to be sensible answers to the postwar housing crisis soon came to be known for being uninteresting and dilapidated due to poor construction quality and expensive upkeep. The impulse that motivated this endeavour, regardless of its ultimate outcomes, was utopian.

The circumstances of modernity are reflected in modernist architecture. We observe a manifestation of a broader bio political endeavour that is now connected to modernist architecture in this exact response. Innovative architectural concepts that will not only satisfy the needs of contemporary lives but also alleviate the numerous diseases and pathologies brought on by fast urbanisation are highly valued due to factors like increasing speed, new technology, and rapid population rise. The stark, angular, and rigid aesthetics of these contemporary structures reflect the emphasis on reason, transparency, and efficiency advocated by a technocratic worldview. In addition to being aesthetically pleasing, modernist architecture was an ideologically charged reaction to what Swiss architect Le Corbusier called the "social unrest" caused by architecture (Corbusier 169). The utopian architectural concept that Le Corbusier created is one in which the improvement of social cohesiveness by architectural means is explicitly called for, in addition to a conscious recognition of the impact that architecture has on people's social and psychological well-being.

Modern society's chaotic and disorganised condition may be counterbalanced by logical and orderly architecture, leading to this improvement. According to Le Corbusier's stated statement in Towards a New Architecture:

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

Le Corbusier's views of standardisation and rationality, which are reflections of the natural (biological) world he sought to capture in his architecture, were influenced by his faith in the socially stabilising benefits of machine-based efficiency. However, as Coleman correctly notes, "difficult to ascertain when modern architecture was first characterized as utopian" (Coleman 2). These ideas, which encompassed everything from furniture and interior design to urban planning, should be viewed as utopian since they created a project that looked to the future in an attempt to enhance social relations through environmental modification—also known as architectural social engineering or bio politics.

This new architecture was founded not just on logic and openness but also on distancing oneself from previous influences. By focussing on the opportunities presented by technological advancement, modernist architecture sought to alleviate living conditions that were associated with the Victorian age, such as dirt, clogged streets, and urban moral degeneration. This structure broke with the tradition of earlier forms by eschewing ornamentation in favour of clean lines. On the other hand, dystopias might breach the gloomy present by returning to the past. This is undoubtedly the case with Huxley's Brave New World, Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, and Zamyatin's we, where the heroes in each work use the forbidden past to somewhat question the dominant ideology. Le Corbusier's relentless implementation of his ideas, which has turned off next generations of architects, is often used as an example of the authoritarian aspect of modern architecture. Diane Morgan compares this to the architect protagonist in Ayn Rand's The Fountainhead, Howard Roark, who says "I set my own standards. I inherit nothing. I stand at the end of no tradition. I may, perhaps, stand at the beginning of one" (Rand 16).

While this declaration is a bold call for cultural autonomy and a clear expression of modernism's break with the oppressive baggage of history, it can also be interpreted as an authoritarian mandate that is completely insensitive to the preferences and opinions of the populace when made in the name of transparency and purity. The creators of modernist architecture defended its almost medicinal character as a hygienic and hygienic substitute for the filth of Victorian homes. These statements have a blatantly authoritarian tone that runs opposite to the egalitarian principles they advocated, and maybe this undemocratic feature of modernist architecture continues to be its most obvious weakness, as Fredric Jameson observes when he says: "the prophetic elitism and authoritarianism of the modern movement are remorselessly identified in the imperious gesture of the charismatic Master" (Jameson 2).

A discourse against urbanisation that was doubtful of the effects of modernist architecture, as advocated by the International Congress of Modern Architecture, emerged as a result of modernist architecture's emphasis on hygienic, logical, and ahistorical modes of habitation not being widely accepted. In his explanation of this resistance, Anthony Vidler draws on the criticism of modernist architecture from critics like Walter Benjamin, Theodore Adorno, Martin Heidegger, Max Horkheimer, and Andre Breton. In summary, there was a broad question about whether these bio political designs were suitable for human habitation and a widespread condemnation of what seemed to be an anti-humanist feature to them. However, we must come to the idea of dwelling since Martin Heidegger specifically highlighted this issue in his 1951 article Building Dwelling Thinking, which was published in response to the Wohnungsfrage, or housing question, of post-war Germany that was devastated by war. In reference to Le Corbusier, Heidegger enquires: "today's houses may even be well planned, easy to keep, attractively cheap, open to air, light, and sun, but—do the houses themselves hold any guarantee that dwelling occurs in them?" (Heidegger 144).

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Heidegger's examination of the housing state is predicated on his interpretation of habitation, a concept he elaborates upon in the essay, connecting its derivation to the words bauen (the Old English and High German word for "building") and baun, which signifies "to dwell," "to remain," or "to stay in place." Nonetheless, the Gothic wunian, which clearly explains what living at peace entails, is one of the origins of bauen. This is the reason "not every building is a dwelling" (Heidegger 146). A point that is supported by the fact that contemporary glass and steel skyscrapers were first built to house executive offices, not living spaces or homes that are meant to blend in with their surroundings. A book called Architecture and Literature by David Spurr says that living is "that idealized conception of space that promises rootedness, permanence, and a womblike removal from the experience of modernity" (Spurr 52- 53). This idea of housing was incompatible with modernist architecture, which was founded on the ideologies of efficiency and reason. In reality, Heidegger's idea of dwelling contradicts architecture as the creation of artistic things.

The Modernist Endeavour

The reverberations of this discussion resonate throughout Ballard's novels and short stories, which prominently emphasise place, landscape, and architecture. Even a quick look at the architectural types found in Ballard's fiction demonstrates how seemingly commonplace and familiar these locations are—corporate office parks, suburban shopping centres, traffic islands, and, of course, urban high-rises—but this familiarity is revealed to reveal a more sinister element, or as Christopher Hitchens aptly puts it in an elegant piece for *The Atlantic*, an "insistence on apocalypse in familiar surroundings" (Hitchens 11). Each town or building, which effectively becomes an agent in and of itself, is haunted by a sense of pathology and decay beneath the shiny exterior of modernity, and the people who live there either completely affirm themselves by blending into their surroundings or psychologically deteriorate to a point of savagery. The most foreboding aspect of Ballard's stories is the relationship between the physical world and the individual mind. As in The Enormous Space, where the protagonist withdraws into his suburban home to allow the rooms to gradually enclose him, or in Billenium and Concentration City, which depict neo-Malthusian nightmares of overpopulation, where any hope of personal breathing space is drowned out by the swarms of people moving about the city, these environments are presented as practically overwhelming their inhabitants. In each of these instances, agoraphobia and claustrophobia are used to illustrate how the mind reacts passively to its physical surroundings.

Nonetheless, no other structure exemplifies the interplay between twentieth-century architecture and capitalism more than the eponymous *high-rise* in Ballard's 1975 novel. The *high-rise*, as an architectural structure, functions both as the location and the primary topic. The architecture is so intricately woven into the tale that it has a character of its own, mirroring and blending with the human psyche. Instead of perceiving this *high-rise* only as a symbol of the utopian project's failure and the general deterioration of modern society rooted in capitalist ideals, I wish to investigate one of the fundamental causes of this failure: forced stability.

The esteemed professional classes reside in the distinguished forty-story "*high-rise*" that carries his name in London. Initially stemming from trivial grievances such as noise, litter, and malfunctioning lifts, the microcosm of idealistic social engineering swiftly devolves into a state of dystopian chaos as the inhabitants begin to turn against one another. What starts as minor irritations gradually escalates into fierce clan rivalries, transforming the entire building into a genuine battleground. However, as Peter Briggs notes, this shift from relatively commonplace occurrences to surrealistic extremes is shown in a way that "so that the reader is drawn along by the possibility that the escalation is logical and inevitable" (Briggs 70). The novel's initial reviews drawing comparisons to William Golding's Lord of the Flies is quite expected. Instead of portraying a desolate island that undermines the moral standards of English boys in prestigious public schools, the novel's artificial island—a *high-rise*—effectively reveals the amorality of inherent instincts. It is important to highlight that many commentators have emphasised that Ballard's namesake *high-rise* distinctly alludes to Le Corbusier's idealistic concept of the "vertical village," or Cite Radieuse in Marseilles. The *high-rise*, which includes restaurants, a swimming pool, gym, and shops, showcases the principles of Corbusierian aesthetics and planning. This structure operates independently, catering to the lavish needs of its inhabitants, thus establishing itself as an ideal community, separate from the outside world. Indeed, there is scant reason to venture outside its boundaries, as evidenced by the limited attention given to life beyond the skyscraper. The building stands out as a distinct entity, very cut off from the London scenery that can only be glimpsed from the balconies, offering its residents a self-sufficient environment crafted to fulfil the highest standards of social living. The uncertainty is clear when we question how much of this self-isolation is actually self-imposed. The novel consistently compares the *high-rise* to both a zoo and a jail, highlighting the carceral nature of utopian enclaves that rarely makes it explicitly known. The facade of choice is carefully maintained, allowing the residents to willingly restrict themselves within a crumbling structure that mirrors the disintegration of the societal framework surrounding them.

The residents of this *high-rise* reflect the typical social hierarchies in their isolation from the outside world and in spite of the egalitarian architectural designs, with the wealthiest members of society occupying the upper levels and the less fortunate occupying the lower floors. Groes raises an intriguing observation about this separation: "one cannot translate the egalitarian impulses of the post-war period into practice by using vertical structures that (unconsciously) remind an already class-conscious people of the social hierarchies that are embedded within their national past" (Groes 136). The architectural design of the building, rising from the lower classes, accentuates class divides and creates the battleground

that unfolds throughout the events, thereby reinforcing a Marxist interpretation. In the midst of this conflict, one of the three heroes, Bill Wilder, makes a desperate effort to ascend the *high-rise*, embodying the futility of striving for upward mobility. Reversing the Marxist cliché, one could contend that architectural environments, rather than social contexts, shape consciousness more significantly. The environment influences societal norms, as individuals readily embrace emerging clan-like social systems and customs, leaving behind their jobs and daily routines in the process. This uprising against established civilisational norms seems to be fuelled by a form of anti-capitalist romantic anarchism reminiscent of Palahniuk's Fight Club; yet, what is strikingly missing from this nihilism is any ideological motivation. The characters do not express any anti-capitalist manifestos or revolutionary sentiments, providing no clues for the reader to discern any Ideological agency in operation. It appears that the cause of this regression can be linked to the specific environment established by the building, which is inherently ideological. It is said that "At first Laing found something alienating about the concrete landscape of the project—an architecture designed for war, on the unconscious level if no other" (Ballard 16). This quotation highlights an important aspect: unlike modernist architecture, Ballard's architectural environments can exist independently of the architect's intentions or objectives, exemplified by Anthony Royal, who resides in the penthouse of the *high-rise*. Heidegger's criticism of modernist architecture is echoed in the narrator's statement that "Part of its appeal lay all too clearly in the fact that this was an environment built, not for man, but for man's absence" (Ballard 34). This building serves as a stark container that emphasises the absence of humanity, attracting a specific type of resident whose psychological makeup mirrors this environment. It is neither a dwelling nor a home that offers its inhabitants security, stability, and tranquilly. Inside the skyscraper:

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

The serene, emotionally aloof resident here, Dr. Laing, is emotionally recovering after a divorce, which is the kind of individual drawn to this kind of setting. It is also noteworthy that the residents are portrayed as "an advanced species of machine" with hints of sarcasm, given how often the structure is depicted with human characteristics added:

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

The way the building is shown is more anthropocentric than the people who live there. As though the almost authoritarian layout and rationalisation of the *high-rise* environment had created the perfect environment for rebellious, immoral behaviour, the emotional distance cultivated by this architecture is perceived to awaken repressed desires and let them to emerge unhindered. In this case, a dystopian reality is created by responses of psychopaths to the simplified rationality and almost sedated luxury of *high-rise* living rather than by the external structure of society or totalitarian governments. It seems that the stability that is forced on the populace has the opposite impact.

Interestingly, the Enlightenment, when reason was seen as a way to rescue humanity from the clutches of superstition and barbarism, also gave rise to a negative trend that ran counter to the Enlightenment politics' dominant ideological drive. This custom of "rationally planned existence […] harbors the gothic nightmare" (Gasiorek 124). The Gothic is the fictitious child of the Enlightenment, a literary genre that sprang from a dominant culture that by its very nature suppressed its fundamental characteristics. As Harvey points out, there is a notion that "the Enlightenment project was doomed to turn against itself and transform the quest for human emancipation into a system of universal oppression in the name of human liberation" (13). One may argue that in High-Rise, the "renaissant barbarism" (Ballard 79). Originates from a rebellious response to the culturally institutionalised focus on stability and reason, which is also a product of the oppressive stress on order and stability. Elaborating on this Gothic analogy, the *high-rise* might be perceived as a A contemporary example of the haunted home archetype —a thwarted utopian aspiration that has deceived its originator. David Ian Paddy defines the *high-rise* as follows: "not a gloomy Gothic mansion, though it shares its shadows and moral depravity. Its frightful dimension comes not from chthonic darkness and decay but from its opposite: an immaculate cleanliness, order and modernity" (Paddy 146-147).

The high-rise has an alive quality, endowed with consciousness and agency regarding its people, much like a haunted house. The skyscraper appears "as if it were some kind of huge animate presence, brooding over them and keeping a magisterial eye on the events taking place" (Ballard 40). The reference that aligns seamlessly with the pre-existing carceral elements of *High-Rise*.

Conclusion

Ballard finds that modernist architecture offers the philosophical equivalent of the Enlightenment in terms of space, enabling him to foresee the repercussions of positioning people in supposedly ideal environments—hygienic, rational, and painstakingly constructed buildings meant to evoke similar psychological effects. Nevertheless, in line with Heidegger, one can say that there is no certainty that dwelling transpires in such contexts; rather, what surfaces is a very grim appraisal of the human situation, advocating regression over evolution as a response to social engineering. Therefore, it is not surprising that this would be seen as a reactionary posture towards utopian planning. This would place Ballard in the same category as surrealist painters who condemned modernist architecture for being incompatible with the idea of habitation.

According to Jameson, postmodernism is a cultural movement that emphasises a more globalised and multinational capitalism and is strongly associated with post-capitalist means of production. It promotes itself as a more open and pluralistic approach. *High-Rise*, however, makes no mention of such a development. It is not that Ballard's fiction suggests an escape from the accompanying hyperreality of spectacle, which is described as the result of image-driven capitalism by both Guy Debord in Society of Spectacle and Jean Baudrillard in Simulacra and Simulation. Rather, Ballard's fiction resides in the transitional area, which is teetering on the edge of acceptance or rejection by means of Meta narrative play and relativism. During this point in time, the poetics of Ballard stand out due to their lack of assurance. Additionally, this is the location of Ballard's interstitial space, which represents a place of resistance according to the concept. The definition of the term "Ballardian" and the institutionalisation of it within the confines of intellectual discourse will perpetually be neither sufficient nor sufficient.

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