

Space and Identity in J. G. Ballard's Urban Disaster Fiction

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Abstract: The confluence of spatiality and identity has been one of the central issues in psychogeographical research. J.G. Ballard's fiction offers a valuable entry point into such considerations, especially when viewed alongside theoretical developments in the field of spatiality studies. In approaching the topic of identity disintegration in Ballard's *High-Rise* and *Concrete Island*, this article attempts to present the complicit role the environment plays in self-determination. Though psychoanalysis has traditionally served as the first-line approach to Ballard's work, spatiality studies offers an invaluable theoretical context, in which to further flesh out relationship that exists between the alienation, violence and isolation experienced by the characters and the particular environment they find themselves occupying.

Key words: ?

Ballard's novels and short stories are known for how spatial determinants, i.e. the environment, both constructed and natural, serve as a trigger for the behavior of the characters immersed in these worlds. Unlike traditional sf, where exotic and alien environments were explored for the sake of sensationalism or philosophical debate, New Age sf, of which Ballard is perhaps the most famous exemplar, tends to use exteriority as a way into psychological phenomena much in the vein of gothic fiction, which is perhaps David Punter commented that Ballard's science fiction is not about technological development and future civilizations, but about "the slight relocation of perception, wherein the monstrosity of our environment might at any movement spring into focus" (9). Because self-identity is inextricably bound to the social codes which allow identification possible, Ballard's disintegrating, unhinged and dislocated places raise questions as to the interdependence of identity and the environment, especially in the context of postmodern decentralization of codes.

The two novellas that I intend to discuss are part of what Peter Brigg refers to as the urban trilogy (Brigg 1985, 69) or Rachele Dini as the urban disaster

trilogy (Dini 2016, 113), published in the 1970s, *The Concrete Island* (1974) and *High-Rise* (1975). The omitted part is the first book of this trilogy, the infamous *Crash* (1973). These three books signal a clear departure from Ballard's earlier, more overtly science fiction work, concentrating instead on the consequences of rampant urbanization. This new subject matter is approached through familiar aesthetics; the "ballardian" landscapes of manmade dystopian environments, desolation and technological detritus are brought into sharp focus. The psychological makeup of the characters is also in line with his previously established models of psychopathological detachment.

A few preliminary remarks should be mentioned in order to provide a context to the analysis that is to follow. A very important consideration to keep in mind when approaching Ballard's work was articulated by Toby Litt: "As soon as one takes the external world which they inhabit as their subconscious, as soon as one sees sublimation as being replaced by efflorescence, by architecture, then one begins to see Ballard aright. In this reading, there remains no barrier between external and internal worlds" (2008 ix). This is certainly in line with Ballard's own "manifesto", *Which Way to Inner Space?*, where he bemoans the "juvenile" form science fiction has taken and advocates for a change in direction away from such topics as space and interstellar travel towards a more experimental and abstract approach to "inner space", the role of psychology in apprehending experience (Ballard 1997, 197). This is a more synergistic approach than the one which has dominated psychogeographical research, where the focus is on the psychological effects of the built environment, a concern that can be found almost a hundred years earlier in Georg Simmel's *Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903) and later in Guy Debord's *Spectacle of Society* (1967). Certainly, Ballard's work incorporates similar Malthusian themes of overpopulation and media-saturated consumerist society, and applies a microscope to the psychological effects these architectural structures and landscapes exert on his characters. However, the way in which the built environment is often depicted in Ballard's work is also an expression of the protagonist's psyche, a theme that brings his work close to surrealist art. The synergy between these two approaches lends itself well to an analysis along the lines of the spatial turn in literary theory, a term inaugurated by Edward Soja and one that has been applied to an array of disciplines, such as geography, sociology, etc. As Marc Augé argues, the question of space has come to the fore because it is "difficult to make time into a principle of intelligibility, let alone a principle of identity" and given the interest in the dialectic linages

between identity, space and capitalism critics have turned to spatial considerations in an effort to better represent the power dynamics at play in a postcapitalist environment.

It is not space as a theoretical concept that pervades Ballard's work, though Foucault's concept of heterotopias is applicable to his environment; instead, Ballard's focus is on the effects of modernist architecture and urban development on the human psyche. The development of spatial theory is concomitant with broader considerations concerning the effects of capitalism, as is attested to by both Soja's and Harvey's theories, which involve a distinct Marxist approach to urbanization, outlining the development of cities as running parallel with the development of capitalism itself: David Harvey writes:

the city is the high point of human achievement, objectifying the most sophisticated knowledge in a physical landscape of extraordinary complexity and splendor at the same time as it brings together social forces capable of the most amazing sociotechnical and political innovation. But it is also the site of squalid human failure, the lightning rod of the conflict. It is a place of mystery, the site of the unexpected, full of agitations and ferments, of multiple liberties, opportunities, and alienations; of passions and repressions; of cosmopolitanism and extreme parochialisms; of violence, innovation, and reaction. The capitalist city is the arena of the most intense social and political confusions at the same time as it is a monumental testimony to and a moving force within the dialectics of capitalism's uneven development. (1989, 229)

The idea of cities being the sites of repressions and liberties, of alienation and social identity is also to be found in Ballard's fiction, which often plays with these two contrasting forces. It is not surprising, therefore, that most cultural analyses of urbanization are cast in a Marxist perspective, emphasizing the capitalist forces of developing and disintegrating identity formation. Ballard's fiction, especially his urban trilogy, sits well in this theoretical context, as it too represents the consequences of urbanization with regard to individuality and identity.

Ballard's 1975 *High-Rise* was written partly as a reaction to the rationalized, modernist social planning project in and around London in the 1950s and 1960s, specifically the high-rise projects. The eponymous "high-rise" is a modern 40-story

London building occupied by a representative assortment of professional classes. It is presented as an almost utopian enclave, catering to the most discerning needs of its residents. Equipped with restaurants, a swimming pool, gym, shops, the high-rise is constructed in a way to be an almost self-sufficient microcosm.

Soon, however, with no reason, the residents began to turn on themselves. Arguments over petty annoyances like noise and broken elevators, soon escalates to outright violence, and by the end of the novel the whole high-rise is engulfed in tribal warfare, with residents pitted against one another, occupying various territories of the building. Ballard is clearly presenting the devolution of the species, which is taking place in stark contrast to the ultra-modern environment, which seems to be having some ominous effect on the residents. "The dominant narrative movement of the novel therefore consists of a progressive breakdown of the social order of the high-rise, a breakdown made possible by the very architectural features that seemed at first to reinforce that order" (Spurr 2012, 228). The novel never moves away from the environment of the high-rise. Though the residents do leave the building to work, the narration focuses primarily on the events taking place in the high rise. Throughout the book the high-rise is compared to a zoo and a prison, which further stresses its carceral aspect, even though the illusion of choice is carefully maintained, allowing the residents to willingly decide to imprison themselves in a gradually disintegrating building. Apart from appearing to be prison, the high-rise is also presented as a laboratory, where a human experiment is being conducted, or what Spurr referred to as "a kind of experiment designed to tests the limits of psychological and social cohesion in the artificial environment of created by the high-rise" (Ballard 2012: 228). The key word here is "artificial", as architecture by its very nature is artificial, though the particular type of architecture alluded to by Ballard is especially laden with criticisms of artificiality and technological dehumanization.

The aesthetics as well as the ideological assumptions underlying the architectural structure of the high-rise are reminiscent of Le Corbusier's utopian project of the "vertical village", or Radiant City in Marseille, a point that has already been highlighted by most critics (Groes 2012, 134; Spurr 2012, 226; Gasiorek 2004, 120). On the one hand, Le Corbusier's project took form in the years following World War I at a time when there was a concerted effort to uplift the living standards of the populace from nineteenth-century squalor. This was to take place by means of more rational and measured urban

planning, which would stress hygiene and order. If Ballard's high-rise is to be seen as a beneficiary of these aspirations, it is ironic that, as Rachele Dini in her study on the significance of waste in fiction, notices that "the casual flinging of garbage from the apartment balconies is explicitly likened to the customs of nineteenth-century tenements" (Dini 2016, 125). The social experiment that takes place in this high-rise laboratory has to do with the effect such Corbusian architecture has on its tenants, which by extension should perhaps be seen as the effect of a technocratic social structure. In the high-rise, "A new social type was being created by the apartment building, a cool, unemotional personality impervious to the psychological pressures of high-rise life, with minimal needs for privacy, who thrived like an advanced species of machine in the neutral atmosphere" (Ballard 2012, 46). This is exactly the type of person that is attracted to this type of environment, the cool, and emotionally detached resident here represented by Dr. Laing, who is emotionally recovering from a divorce. The death of affect is a recurring theme in Ballard's work and is found to apply to most of his protagonists. There is also a hint of irony in this description of the residents as "an advanced species of machine", as Ballard often presents the high-rise in anthropomorphic, or biological, terms. "There was something in this feeling – the elevators pumping up and down the long shafts resembled pistons in the chamber of a heart. The residents moving along the corridors were the cells in a network of arteries, the lights in their apartments neurons of a brain" (Ballard 2012, 51). There is an interesting conflation here between Corbusier's house-machine and the people inhabiting the high rise as a species of machine.

One of the primary functions of this engineered social space was to relieve the inhabitants of obligation to define themselves as individuals by imposing predefined identities on the basis of social status. The building is divided along social lines, with the rich occupying the top floors, with each social class represented in descending fashion down to the ground floor. As Duff notes: "Ballard emphasizes the structure of the building as significant to identity formation, and ultimately the conquest of space within the building becomes a mode by which the residents can define, and redefine, themselves in relation to each other" (Duff 2014, 69). With the disintegration of social order amid the violence and warfare, personal identities, based as they were mostly on class identities, also begin to unfurl, exposing a dismal, animalistic psychological substrate that offers little in the way of redemption to the protagonists.

Emotional detachment that is both provoked and encouraged by this architecture is seen to trigger repressed impulses which are given free rein, as if the almost totalitarian order of the high-rise environment has created optimal conditions for subversive amoral behavior. And it is this amoral behavior that is very often seen in terms of a liberation from the repressive social structures imposed on people. This is where we can see Ballard drawing from R. D. Laing's theories, which ask us to consider the difference between the self and the self that is mapped onto us by the environment. Laing was an existential psychiatrist working in the existential vein, positing the idea that the experience of one's own identity is radically different in various environments. In the case of *High-Rise* there is a constant reminder of the tenants' social status, their profession, their place in the hierarchy, which renders the difference between individual identity and collective identity tentative at best. Individual coherence and self-identity are sacrificed in exchange for a sense of stability, even if it comes by way of complete isolation:

isolated as is the self as a defence against the dangers from without which are felt as a threat to its identity, it loses what precarious identity it already has. Moreover, the withdrawal from reality results in the 'self's' own impoverishment. Its omnipotence is based on impotence. Its freedom operates in a vacuum. [. . .] The self becomes dessicated and dead. (Laing 1969, 157)

These are precisely the affectless protagonist which populate Ballard's fictions, entities that are devoid of agency and dynamism. The cost of their withdrawal from any relationships is a kind of psychological death, which Ballard referenced earlier in his *Atrocity Exhibition* as "the death of affect". Drawing further parallels between Laing and Ballard, Gregory Stephenson notes that both of them:

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 share the belief that "breakdown" and "break-through" are inextricably intertwined, that what may appear to be madness or disaster may be, as Laing phrases it, 'veritable manna from heaven'. (1991, 7)

Laing argued that psychosis and loss of identity is a coping mechanism to modern culture, one that by-passes cultural programming, allowing the subject to discover deeper, archetypal, levels of self-awareness. There is a visible nostalgic element to this primitivism, which could be regarded as reactionary, if not slightly outmoded by today's standards. Nonetheless, this line of argument seems to predominate much of Ballardian scholarship, placing Ballard in the role of a new age Freudian prophet discontent with civilization.

The protagonist of *Concrete Island* finds himself in a similar situation as Laing in *High-Rise*. Also a middle-aged professional, in this case an architect, Maitland one day while homebound veers off the exit lane of the Westway interchange in west London, crashing his Jaguar through the ramps onto a patch of deserted wasteland beneath and between the motorways. There is no clear reason for this accident, though it is suggested that perhaps it was a deliberate act, a subconscious push away from a staid life that needed reinvention. This island is described as "a small traffic island, some two hundred yards long and triangular in shape, that lay in the waste ground between three converging motorway routes" (Ballard 2011, 11). It is a forgotten by-product of urban development, a negative space that has been discarded from the homogenized space of the urban environment. Dini refers to this space as "a monument to obsolescence and to tenacious survival" (Dini 2016, 120). In a manner similar to *High-Rise*, this island is also described as if it were a biological entity: "A thin yellow light lay across the island, an unpleasant haze that seemed to rise from the grass, festering over the ground as if over a wound that had never healed" (Ballard 2011, 14). There is an air of sickness surrounding this space, indicating its function as a reservoir of the rejected and traumatic, which also serves to establish the connection with Maitland's state of mind. Very much in line with Toby Litt's comment quoted earlier, Maitland eventually begins to see the island as "an exact model of his own head" (Ballard 2011, 69) and later even declares that "I am the island" (52).

After a series of predictable but ultimately futile escape attempts, Maitland begins to explore this land in hopes of mapping it, finding help, food and shelter, but the landscape is so overgrown that Maitland is unable to find his bearings. Incapacitated by his injuries and weakened by hunger, he is found by Jane Sheppard and Proctor, who nurse him back to health and keep him captive. However, as time goes by, Maitland discards any attempts at escape, resigning himself to life on this deserted island. With time the last remaining vestiges of his habitual bourgeois behavior are shed and he becomes like his captors, who

are also socially marginalized figures. Jane is a prostitute and Proctor an ex-circus performer, and both seem unable to permanently leave the island.

The question that runs through the story hinges on the psychogeographical relation of this space to Maitland's sense of belonging. Especially provocative in this regard is the depiction of his gradually shifting behavior – at a certain point he is no longer concerned about his life beyond the embankments and is no longer desperate to leave; he instead passively resigns himself to his new situation and embraces this new environment as his own. There is a haunting effect this space exerts on Maitland, as it drains his will, deprives him of his previous identity – that of a well-mannered, upper-class architect – now Maitland proclaims that his goal is to exert dominion over his new territory, a theme that coincides with the story's two most important intertexts – *Robinson Crusoe* and *Tempest*.

The task in approaching this novel, therefore, is to explain the nature of this environment in terms of its effects on Maitland's mindset, and how this environment is perhaps indicative of urban processes of wider implications. In the commentaries that have appeared about *Concrete Island*, Marc Augé's notion of non-spaces has been often utilized as a theoretical framework to present this space in its ideological relevance. Non-spaces develop a result of postmodern, postcapitalist, posthistorical transformations in spatial construction, where the excess of events and signifiers disintegrates organically created social spaces. These are usually presented as transitory spaces, which have no stable meaning (e.g., airports, service stations, supermarkets), and are predicated on intermediary existence and as such they erode human interaction and enforce solitude. Non-places are not occupied by inhabitants, but traversed by shoppers, migrants, and commuters. Upon entering a non-place, a person "is relieved of his usual determinants and becomes no more than what he or she does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver" (Augé 1995, 103). As they do nothing to integrate earlier places and localizations, they are themselves divorced from any kind of cultural master narrative, suspended in a kind of meaningless vacuum: "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Augé 1995, 77). Taking into account the pace of globalization and the effects of what David Harvey terms the "space-time compression"¹, individuals

1 See David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (1991), 260-307.

have become consigned to the role of inactive witnesses, their identity no longer resulting from organic social conditions, but are instead products of what Augé calls the "solitary contractuality" of non-places. "As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality" (Augé 1995, 76).

Insofar as the island is bereft of any relational markers and is a blank spot on the city map, then indeed it can be viewed as a non-place, especially when the effects on Maitland's sense of personal identity are taken into account. However, what initially appeared as a non-place later begins to reveal ghostly traces of an earlier urban topography. Eventually, as Maitland explores the island, he is able to notice that it "was far older than the surrounding terrain, as if this triangular patch of waste ground had survive by the exercise of a unique guile and persistence, and would continue to survive, unknown and disregarded, long after the motorways had collapsed into dust" (Ballard 2011, 69). On the ground there is evidence of past life, a pre-War World II churchyard, Edwardian terraced houses, air-raid shelters, the ground plan of a post-war cinema (Ballard 2011, 68-69). Seeing history architecturally imprinted on what at first seemed ahistorical wasteland elevates the island's significance as a mindscape. This is noted by Gasiorek: "Maitland's realization that the island is a historical site marks the beginning of a more perceptive mapping of the terrain on which he is ostensibly trapped and leads him to relate the sedimentation of history disclosed by the island's topography to his own past" (Ballard 2011, 113). Therefore, it this aspect of the past encroaching on the concrete island that puts into question the applicability of Augé's notion of non-place as a context in which this particular space can be described, as non-places are manifestly ahistorical, acultural, whereas here we are dealing with a spectral historicity that further aligns this space with markers of the past. Perhaps this classification would prove more useful if understood as a narrative devise used to illustrate the social alienation endemic to supermodernity. As Gasiorek states: "Non-places are never straightforwardly demarcated from places, nor do they exist in some pure state, but they offer a useful way of thinking about how the contemporary organization of space may create or exacerbate social alienation" (2004, 110).

The discovery of a hidden city underneath the desolate surface of the island corresponds to Maitland rediscovering his own past. This point that was developed by Samuel Francis, who noted that the island "evokes actual childhood memories as well. One notable effect of the island upon Maitland is to cause him to regain something of his childhood self" (Ballard 2011, 78). The connection be-

tween the island and Maitland's childhood past is reinforced throughout the text with his body "more and more beginning to resemble that of his younger self" (Ballard 2011, 92) and his relationship with Jane resembling that of a mother and child. This childhood identity, however, is only one of the many layers that have already peeled off during his time on the island and does not constitute an endpoint of any kind.

High Rise and *Concrete Island* represent the two opposite poles of how spaces affects identity formation and it is this difference that best communicates Ballard's understanding how space functions in relation to identity. Both Maitland and Laing are trapped and isolated on their respective islands and, at the same time, liberated from their respective social identities. In the case of *High-Rise*, the structured and predetermined space is responsible for the disintegration of identity, whereas in *Concrete Island*, the protagonist is allowed the possibility to redefine his identity only when the cultural and rationalistic influences on space are suspended. These effects are inseparable from Laing's understanding of psychotic experience, though, as is the case with most of Ballard's work, the psychosis to which the tenets succumb and which Maitland endures is a type of transcendental experience insofar as it suspends the structures of identity that have been constructed in social environments. Ballard shows a similar process that takes place in contrasting environments. The high-rise represents civilizational achievement and modern luxury, whereas the concrete island is a primitivist retreat from the demands of modern society. Both are to be found in the urban environment, but each has a unique effect.

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