



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

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3 **Abstract:** High-Rise by J.G. Ballard intriguingly contains a pivotal character named Dr.
4 Robert Laing, surely an allusion to the then influential psychiatric writer, Dr. R.D. Laing. Re-
5 reading Ballard's classic text through the prism of Laing's theories, with further explication
6 of the role of flat affect via Lauren Berlant, this article presents a new interpretation of a
7 classic text that argues that Ballard ingeniously misdirected his readers into making
8 identifications with precisely the wrong characters and the wrong actions. Re-focusing a
9 subject gaze in accordance with these theoretical analyses, allows for an entirely alternative
10 understanding of the text in which Ballard was more than a pessimistic prophet of inexorable
11 urban breakdown, he foretold societal rehabilitation as well. High-Rise is read as a classic of
12 psychogeography, an established genre which is argued to be of great relevance to the study
13 of society and space. This article therefore engages in a reading of a psychogeographical text
14 via theory implicitly alluded to by the text itself.
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17 A giant of 'literary geography' (Beaumont and Martin, 2016), J.G. Ballard ranks among the
18 foremost critics, chroniclers and cartographers of consumerism's outer limits (Coverley,
19 2010). Suburban shopping malls, office parks, ring roads, drive-ins, flyovers, underpasses,
20 traffic islands, leisure centres, cineplexes and billboard-festooned thoroughfares are his
21 source material and satirical target (Baxter, 2008). In a long line of 'concrete and steel'
22 novels, from *Crash* to *Kingdom Come*, Ballard lifts the lid on postmodern civilisation and
23 reveals the discontents within. Moreover, the Marco Polo of metropolitan peripheries shows
24 a cesspit of consumer psychosis seething beneath placid, placeless surfaces of anodyne,
25 Ikeatized anonymity (Calcott and Shephard, 1998). Whether the coastal holiday resort in
26 *Cocaine Nights*, the high-tech business park in *Super-Cannes*, or the luxury apartments in
27 *High-Rise* – initially entitled *Up!* – Ballard's ostensibly utopian settings unfailingly descend
28 into dystopian anarchy, where blood spills, gore pores and late capitalism's societal
29 stranglehold strengthens.
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32 Or does it? We argue that, far from a descent into hell, where alpha males battle for
33 supremacy and feral females feast on their flesh, *High-Rise* recounts a journey of psychic
34 redemption that culminates in decidedly utopian vistas of post-patriarchy. With the
35 conceptual assistance of R.D. Laing and Lauren Berlant, we show that Ballard's seemingly
36 infernal otherworld is a potentially paradisaal motherworld. This not only accords with recent,
37 feminist reinterpretations of seminal androcentric texts (Vanmouwerik, 2017), but reveals
38 that the book's spatial organization, if not exactly celestial, is less carceral than some
39 commentators suppose (Baxter and Wymer, 2012). A noteworthy example of literary
40 geography (Beaumont and Martin, 2016), *High-Rise* is a novel ripe for rereading, not unlike
41 its predecessor *Concrete Island* (Keyes, 2016; Robertson, 2016), and especially so following
42 Ben Wheatley's (2015) film adaptation, which restates the standard slaughterhouse story.
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45 Our article begins with a short survey of literary geography and Ballard's situation therein. A
46 synopsis of *High-Rise* follows, as does a summary of critics' reactions to its perverse spatial
47 poetics. This consensus is interrogated in subsequent sections, where the novel's dominant
48 metaphor is examined and Laing's studies of schizophrenia offers antithetical interpretations
49 of the novel's unsettled and unsettling events. These 'close readings' are thereafter re-read
50 under the influence of Berlant's (2014) 'flat affect'. This uncovers a shadowy, hitherto
51 unremarked subtext in Ballard's novel, where matriarchy obtains and harmony is restored to
52 the high-rise charnel-house. We conclude that Ballard was more than a pessimistic prophet
53 of inexorable urban breakdown. He envisaged gynocratic uprising as well.
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A Little History of Literary Geography

Geographers 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, like those of Hardy and Eliot (Pocock, 1981), via telling tales of migration and exile, not least Joyce's Ulyssean Dublin tour (Preston and Simpson-Housley, 1994), to 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 are reinforced by spatial and cultural 'turns' in sociology and geography respectively.

As Sharp's (2000), Saunders' (2010) and Hones' (2015) reveal, the realm of literary geography has 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 mines 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 ventures into ever more literary genres, as well as contiguous cultural forms like film, dance, sculpture and 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 pulp fiction, tackled children's adventure stories thereafter and has since explored crime, SF, poetry, short stories, comic books and autobiography, in that order.

The compass of this corpus also includes 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 Quincey'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). This map 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 (Koolhaas, 2002), in-between places (Prieto, 2013), leftover edgelands (Moss, 2016) et al – but have acquired new significance in today's world of sick cities (LeDuff, 2013), vampire empires (Pile, 2005) and psychotic geographies (Baker, 2007). As the Grenfell disaster of 2017 attests, it is an infernal 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 Ballard’s *High-Rise* must 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 is undercut by the fact that he is barbecuing an animal companion. This high-rise is a hellhole. Our protagonist has survived the carnage and, 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 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, descend into inter-floor faction fighting and socially-stratified ethnic cleansing. The confrontation commences when a bottle is carelessly dropped – or perhaps thrown – from an upper floor and smashes on a mid-level balcony. Tension rises when upper-tier inhabitants become convinced that lower floor children are urinating in the communal swimming pool. Suspicion increases after the high-speed lifts are delayed – possibly sabotaged – in parts of the pristine tower block, which also suffer from unaccountable power outages. Fun to start with, these provide cover of darkness for assorted unconscionable acts.

Soon a dog is drowned, a woman is groped, 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 telephones and attend to the unsettling situation within the building which now functions as a discreet place where repressed desire is unleashed. 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. 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 mayhem’s social and spatial middle. 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 violence, Wilder climbs 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 women 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). *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; Thrift, 2005). It’s an allegory of urban nullity. It’s a parable of consumer society consuming itself.

There’s more to *High-Rise*, though. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect is that, throughout the narrative, readers encounter ‘psychoanalytical innuendos’ (Oramus 2015, page 108) which portend richer theoretical pickings. 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 id and superego, as are the characters’ 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’ (p.101), his name gestures toward the notable psychiatric theorist, Dr. Ronald David Laing (cf. Brigg, 1985; Groes, 2011; O’Hara, 2011). Ballard, it seems, teases well-informed readers but also actively engages theory by 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 psychoanalytically; an approach long 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 often predicated 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,

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3 Kristeva's abjection-orientated focus on uncertain boundaries and Winnicott's premise
4 pertaining to a therapeutically propitious 'potential space' between people and things.
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6 That said, psychoanalysts are often traduced for heavy-handed interpretations, effectively
7 force-fitting fixed interpretations on inherently ambiguous texts (Eagleton, 1986; Frosh,
8 2010). And while the same charges have yet to be levelled at psychoanalytic geographers,
9 'maps of misreading' remain an ever-present possibility (Bloom, 1974). Felman (1982),
10 accordingly, recommends flexible and open-ended interpretive approaches from
11 psychoanalysts and literary critics alike. The same principle should presumably apply to the
12 rapidly growing field of psychoanalytical geography, whose exponents 'now feel confident
13 enough to embrace psychoanalytic approaches in ways that are unfettered by a sense of
14 marginality or fear of crude caricatures or deliberately contrary interpretations' (Kingsbury
15 and Pile, 2016, page 6).
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18 When it comes to analyses of Ballard, however, even the most flexible and open-minded
19 readings are complicated by the incontrovertible fact that his oeuvre is always-already
20 informed by theory. According to Francis (2011, page 1), Ballard's works are 'imbued with
21 the discursive textures of psychoanalysis'. Baxter and Wymer (2012) likewise argue that he
22 deliberately introduces, and systematically embeds, psychological paradoxes imported from
23 readings of Freud and Jung. Elsewhere, Baxter (2009) maintains that Ballard was not only
24 working within a Surrealist tradition inspired by those proto-psychogeographers Aragon and
25 Breton, but also drawing from Adorno, Benjamin, Barthes, Marcuse and more.
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28 Of course, Ballard does not engage with theory in the manner expected of academics. But, as
29 Francis (2011, page 26) puts it, he can be seen to 'make use of particular psychological texts
30 as conceptual raw material for his narrative fictions'. Accordingly, Ballard generates fictive
31 forms by imaginatively mixing theoretical insights in a way that conventional
32 psychoanalytical scholars might find uncomfortable and unsettling. In Luckhurst's (1997,
33 page xvii) words:
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35 His work at once constantly activates theoretical models, but it is also awkward,
36 didactic, and over-theorized, tending to evade or supersede the theories meant to
37 'explain' it. This is to be caught on the horns of readability and unreadability,
38 graspability and ungraspability. It is such that his texts at once welcome theoretical
39 'capture' but always escape it.
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42 Such is the extent of the challenge facing the Wilders of scholarship, those who strive to
43 clamber to the summit of Ballard's edifice complex with only 'close reading' for support.
44 Formulated by I.A. Richards in the 1920s, and rendered hegemonic by the New Critics of the
45 mid-twentieth century, close reading comprises a line-by-line interrogation of the chosen text,
46 focussing on its tropes and schemes (Eagleton, 1986).
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49 **Reading High-Rise Metaphorically**

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51 Famously described by an early reviewer as being beyond psychiatric help, Ballard is
52 nowadays considered disturbingly prescient, nothing less than a soothsayer of consumer
53 society (see Elborough, 2008). Dubbed the Seer of Shepperton, he has been credited with
54 predicting Ronald Reagan's presidency (in a 1967 short story), anticipating the aftermath of
55 Princess Diana's untimely death (in his 1970 novel *Crash*), foretelling terrorist bomb attacks
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on airports (with 2003's *Millennium People*), prophesying 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 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 focal character, 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 a fading brain's dead strata (p.104) and that he and the building are conjoined twins inasmuch as testing 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 time-worn gothic tropes 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 thus descends from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and, more to the point, the infernal

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3 line of sentient psychotic buildings in Stephen King's *The Shining*, Lauren Beukes' *Broken*
4 *Monsters*, Will Wiles' *The Way Inn* and Edgar Allan Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher* (cf.
5 Ameel, 2017). Architects aren't averse to anthropomorphising their urban imaginings either.
6 As Anderson (2015) explains, Le Corbusier contended that towns are biological phenomena;
7 Frank Lloyd Wright compared cities to fibrous tumours; Oscar Niemeyer insisted that his
8 buildings be sensuous; and Alvar Aalto regarded architecture as a biodynamic process.
9 Lewis Mumford's (1961) monumental *City in History* likewise reveals personification of
10 place in Leonardo da Vinci's ideal city, Vitruvius's embodied city (complete with gendered
11 classical columns) and Plato's belief that the human soul is similar to a city. Freud's model
12 of the unconscious, furthermore, came from a visit to Rome, where he was struck by the
13 city's stratigraphy of history, an apt metaphor for the human mind (Pile, 2005).
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16 Personification, of course, is one of humankind's most deeply rooted tropes (Lakoff and
17 Johnson, 1980), a primal propensity made manifest from the man in the moon and houses that
18 look like Hitler to Jesus's face mysteriously materialising on Margherita pizzas (Guthrie,
19 1995). Ever-popular among lyric poets, who happily apostrophise 'dancing' daffodils,
20 'babbling' brooks, 'smiling' sunbeams and, for T.S. Eliot at least, the feline fog that rubs its
21 back on windowpanes, *prosopopeia* is no less evident in the social sciences, where Winnicott
22 wrestled with object-relations, Latour enlivens actor-networks and material anthropologists
23 like Miller (2010) maintain that the notion of agentic or animate buildings is best understood
24 through the multiple meanings of the word 'accommodation'.
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27 At the most basic, Miller claims, accommodation refers to finding a place to live. But
28 accommodation also involves a process of accommodating, that is 'an appropriation of the
29 home by its inhabitants' (Miller, 2010, page 96). This second meaning is reciprocal; 'it may
30 imply our changing of a home to suit ourselves, but it can also imply the need to change
31 ourselves in order to suit our accommodation' (ibid). More importantly...
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33 ...the term accommodating expresses a sense of willing, of benign agreement to
34 compromise on behalf of the other, often the only spirit within which accommodation
35 can be achieved. By considering our relationship to the home through the term
36 accommodating we face the home not as a thing but a process. Being accommodating
37 and being accommodated is something in which we are constantly engaged. So how,
38 then, does accommodating become accommodating? How do we, in practice, achieve
39 this balance between our agency and that of the home? (Miller, 2010, ibid)
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42 Accommodation is not necessarily a voluntary process, however. Even in conditions of
43 carnage, like those in *High-Rise*, it is far-fetched to imagine that residents might relocate. As
44 Gasiorek (2005, page 110) reminds us, life within alienating, violent, dangerous, and
45 dilapidated apartment blocks is more than mere fiction for many. The brute reality is that
46 tenants must achieve accommodation, even in a building as monstrous as Ballard's
47 carnivorous condominium:
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50 Ballard recognizes this trait, which, when taken in conjunction with the possibility
51 that people have within them the desire for bizarre or unfamiliar life experiences that
52 may be permitted or advocated by modern technology, explains why the characters in
53 these novels seem at home in situations that are at first glance nightmares from which
54 they would be expected to flee. (Brigg, 1985, pages 71-2)
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Reading *High-Rise* Psychoanalytically

Miller's accommodating metaphor is likewise applicable to *High-Rise* readings, insofar as the conventional account – descent into demented degeneracy – accommodates a very different interpretation. Namely, 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 narrative's logic; a new normative structure is produced in which mad acts become intelligible. The reader must reshuffle conceptions to grasp this new normal. Unless readers reshuffle, they only see delinquency and disintegration. Equipped with the appropriate theoretical lens, however, readers may recognize a redemptive and rehabilitating collective journey.

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, Laing is often dismissed as a pseudo-guru whose work typified '60s mysticism and whose personal excesses led to professional disbarment (Ronson, 2012). However, Laing was also a member of the renowned Tavistock Clinic, where his earlier works provided notable additions to understanding inter-familial relations, particularly within the context of schizophrenia. Working alongside prominent psychoanalytic figures like Rycroft, Klein and Winnicott, he aimed to add insights from phenomenology and existentialism to psychoanalytical theory (Miller, 2004). Moreover, 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 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 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 patients (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 defined by alienation and violence. The everyday functioning of (consumer) society is fundamentally violent:

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3 We are bemused and crazed creatures, strangers to our true selves, to one another and
4 to the spiritual and material world – mad, even, from an ideal standpoint we can
5 glimpse but not adopt. We are born into a world where alienation awaits us. We are
6 potentially men, but we are in an alienated state, and this state is not simply a natural
7 system. Alienation as our present destiny is achieved only by outrageous violence
8 perpetrated by human beings on human beings (Laing 1967, page 12).
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10 As a result, we live ‘out of our minds’ (ibid, p.50) in a society where ‘normal men have killed
11 perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years’ (p.24). Such a
12 diagnosis contrasts sharply with traditional psychiatrists’ tendency to label certain forms of
13 behaviour insane or schizophrenic, an act that led, in Laing’s day, to lobotomy, electric
14 shock therapy and the isolation ward.
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17 Second, Laing posited that schizophrenia should be regarded, not as a mental illness that
18 assails certain individuals, but as a rational reaction to disturbing social modalities.
19 ‘Schizophrenia,’ he states, ‘is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an
20 unliveable situation’ (ibid, p.95). One of psychiatry’s foremost errors, Laing believed, is that
21 instead of investigating what sort of unliveable situation nurtures this special strategy – such
22 as a deeply dysfunctional family relationship – psychiatry seeks to return the patient to their
23 pre-schizophrenic state. Laing preferred to think of the condition as a ‘course to run’.
24 Sometimes, he said, ‘actions may be part of a potentially orderly natural sequence of
25 experiences’, a sequence which is ‘seldom allowed to occur’ (p.102). Laing further claimed
26 that psychiatrists should not interrupt the sequence by seeking to restore a semblance of
27 ‘normal’ conduct and return the person to their previous way of being – the mark of success
28 by standard criteria – but rather to ‘understand sanity and madness in existential social terms
29 and then confront common problems’ (p.108). Expressions, in short, that seem mad from the
30 perspective of a notionally sane person may be intelligible if understood in their social
31 situation.
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34 The third aspect of Laing’s work relevant to *High-Rise* is his methodology. In conjunction
35 with Aaron Esterson, Laing conducted longitudinal research on the topic of sanity, madness,
36 and the family (Laing and Esterson, 1964). The authors regarded schizophrenia as a
37 hypothesis not a fact. Therefore, a schizophrenic was a person diagnosed and treated as such.
38 Laing and Esterson investigated whether the utterances and behaviour of ‘schizophrenics’
39 were intelligible within the family context where the supposed ‘schizophrenia’ arose. As
40 they asked about a patient: ‘is the way this girl acts and are the things she says intelligible in
41 terms of social praxis, or are they purely and simply the unintelligible effluxion of a
42 pathological process?’ (ibid. p.132). Their answer was that study should not be limited to
43 individuals, but take appropriate account of each person in the family, the relationships
44 between family members and the family itself as a spatially-situated social system. These
45 bounded relationships, driven by interpersonal perception, projection, phantasy and
46 interpretation, sometimes unleash a ‘spiral of reciprocity’; a social constellation that explodes
47 into extreme dysfunction when paranoia enters the fray but only intelligible when approached
48 in terms of its own interpersonal dynamics (Laing, Philipson, Lee 1966).
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51 Fourth, Laing (1967) argued that as socio-spatial settings expand from micro to macro,
52 revolutionary changes tend not to occur at the poles (neither the ‘individual pirouette of
53 solitary repentance on the one hand, or by a seizure of the machinery of the state on the
54 other’, p.16) but tend to be brought about by ‘sudden, structural, radical qualitative changes
55 in the intermediate system levels’, which typically consist of transformations in a factory, a
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3 hospital, a university or, indeed, an apartment block. The conceptual gaze should therefore
4 fall, not on isolated individuals nor broader socio-economic phenomena, but on *situations* at
5 the meso level, much like the activities that transpire in Ballard's fictional setting. To this
6 end, Laing's work may be regarded as dedicatedly spatial because not only should a person
7 be 'grounded' in their material context, but that material context too may be a source of
8 mental destabilisation (McGeachan, 2014).
9

10 Taken together, Laing's theorizing provides us with the following key considerations in
11 relation to *High-Rise*: (a) madness, alienation, and violence is not something that suddenly
12 overcomes the tenants; they were already in a state of 'extreme normality' over the course of
13 ordinary psychogeographical existence; (b) rather than regard the actions of the tenants as
14 mad or as moments of disintegration, we should consider the actions as intelligible with
15 reference to the process and praxis of the situation within the building, the specific socio-
16 spatial setting; and (c) the characters are engaged in a process, a voyage or a sequence which
17 takes the protagonists to a resolution of their unbearable position. The overall sequence,
18 therefore, is not a journey *into* madness (as the novel is ordinarily understood) but a journey
19 *away* from madness.
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22 Indeed, the emplotment of *High-Rise* is predicated on this idea of a quest or journey – a
23 spatial trail - through collective communal madness. A defining aspect of Ballard's novel,
24 much like the amnesiac party animals in *The Hangover* who cleave to the credo 'what
25 happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas' (Pile, 2016), is how determined the tenants are to see
26 things through to the bitter end while maintaining a conspiracy of silence from the wider
27 world. As Wilder reflects, there is a need, shared by everyone, 'to shift away, most of all
28 from oneself, any realization of what was actually happening in the high-rise, so that events
29 there could follow their own logic and get even more out of hand' (p.56). And, as Laing
30 likewise concedes about his own spatial settings, residents are 'united in assuring any
31 outsiders that all was well – partly out of a displaced pride in the high-rise, but also out of a
32 need to resolve the confrontation between them without interference' (p.103).
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35 Similarly, Gasiorek (2005, page 23) observes that Ballard regularly explored characters who
36 seek 'immersion in the destructive element' because it 'offers the only chance of confronting
37 these ambiguities head-on. The protagonists who receive authorial approval in Ballard's texts
38 embrace the new challenges with which they are confronted, welcoming them as portals to
39 new experiences'. Optimism, therefore, is the outcome. 'This is what enables Ballard to claim
40 that his is a "fiction of psychic fulfilment" because it encourages his characters to discover
41 "the truth about themselves" even if this process of discovery culminates in their deaths'
42 (ibid). We see this process in *High-Rise* as tenants embrace each escalation of violence:
43 'Each one brought them a step closer to the ultimate goal of the high-rise, a realm where their
44 most deviant impulses were free at last to exercise themselves in any way they wished. At
45 this point physical violence would cease at last' (ibid, p.150). We might begin to imagine a
46 Ballardian/Laingian journey or sequence through which profound psychological problems are
47 resolved, not by finding a 'cure' or a successful preventative course of action. But by the
48 opposite: fearlessly giving way to impulses no matter the risk or repercussions. Baudrillard's
49 (2008) 'fatal strategies' *avant la letter*.
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54 **Reading High-Rise Matriarchally**

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3 In Laing and Esterson's (1964) *Sanity, Madness & the Family* a series of socially and
4 spatially situated case studies of 'schizophrenic' women are presented. A shared supposed
5 symptom of the women is 'flat affect' (Lebeau, 2015). In the case of 'Maya', for example, it
6 was noted that amongst her clinical attribution, she was 'depersonalised; showed signs of
7 catatonia; exhibited affective impoverishment and autistic withdrawal' (p.32). These
8 'symptoms' recur throughout their case studies: patients are found to have 'impoverished
9 affect' (p.75), to be 'listless, apathetic, quiet, withdrawn and lacking in concentration'
10 (p.109), to be in a 'inaccessible catatonic stupor' with 'shallowness of affect' (p.131),
11 'withdrawal from external reality, rigidity of posture and movement, thought disorder
12 (vagueness, thought blocking), affective flattening' (p.144), to be like a 'puzzled child doing
13 her best to meet the demands of adults' (p.176) and as demonstrating 'emotional apathy'
14 (p.203).

15
16 The women of Laing and Esterson's case studies behave very like the women in *High-Rise*
17 who stage a communal mental withdrawal from the action. Throughout the novel, we
18 encounter descriptions of women disengaged from the traumatic events surrounding them:
19 '(she was) barely aware of what she was doing, as if a large part of her mind had been
20 switched off' (p.78); 'she was detached and uneasy at the same time, like a spectator forced
21 to watch someone about to be involved in an accident' (p.66); 'she soon became tiresomely
22 maudlin, wandering about the corridors in a vacant way as if she had lost the key to her own
23 mind' (p.96); 'Mrs Wilder stood passively... the sexual assault itself had ceased to have any
24 meaning' (p.135). Even the women on the reception desk turned a blind eye to it all:

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

31
32 When not in male company, however, the women are perfectly capable of animated
33 discussion. As Royal notes of Mrs Wilder, 'She spoke in a flat voice unlike the animated
34 tone she used with Anne and the other women' (p.135). Wilder later leaves the roof,
35 furthermore, because the women are hosting an all-hands meeting. Apparently, the women's
36 somnambulism was a feint to lure the men into complacency. Indeed, this tactic was
37 explicitly revealed as one character's strategy for dealing with Wilder: 'She had accepted him
38 as she would any marauding hunter. First, she would try to kill him, but failing this give him
39 food and her body, breast-feed him back to a state of childishness and even, perhaps, feel
40 affection for him. Then, the moment he was asleep, cut his throat' (p.160). It was a tactical
41 ploy from the outset, when supermarket shoppers first went feral:

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

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

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

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31 The two women lay side by side, so close that they seemed to be merging into each
32 other. At intervals throughout the day he brought them their food, but he was never
33 exactly sure whose bodily needs and functions he was satisfying... Later, after he had
34 carved the dog and served generous but not excessive portions to the two women,
35 Laing thought about his good fortune as he sat on the balcony with his back to the
36 railing. Above all, it no longer mattered how he behaved, what wayward impulses he
37 gave way to or which perverse pathways he chose to follow... Laing waved
38 reassuringly to the two women, who sat on the mattress with the tray across their
39 knees, eating from the same plate. Laing finished the dark, garlic-flavoured meat, and
40 looked up at the face of the high-rise. All the floors were in darkness, and he felt
41 happy at this (pp.245-7).

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

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55 This invites a rather more utopian interpretation of *High-Rise*. Perhaps Ballard tricks readers
56 into reproducing a homonormative and psychiatric gaze that grounds the novel in the

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3 perspective of three male protagonists, each of whom is oblivious to the conduct of the
4 women. In this dominant reading, the women exist merely as passive victims. Yet by the
5 conclusion, we realise that Laing's existence is spared because he meets the needs of two
6 powerful matriarchs. Consequentially, it is surprising that none of the academic analyses
7 seem to note the uterine uprising of the gynocrats and instead fixate upon the violence of the
8 male characters. When Gasiorek (2005, page 127), for instance, writes, 'Some paradigm, this.
9 Large-scale vandalism, total collapse of social ties and any sense of community, casual
10 sexual abuse and indiscriminate violence leading to murder', he misses the point that *High-*
11 *Rise* concludes with a highly-knit post-patriarchal community that sets about the task of
12 child-friendly rehabilitation and communal action. How can this count for nothing?
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15 Children were playing in the sculpture garden. The doors, chained for so long to
16 exclude them, were now wide open, and Wilder could see the geometric forms of the
17 play-structures, their vivid colours standing out against the white walls. Everything
18 had been freshly painted, and the roof was vibrant with light (p.238).
19

20 Indeed, it is evident that the killing of Wilder is likely the final act of violence in the new
21 child- and women-friendly high-rise. The story ends with the remaining tenants cleaning the
22 corridors and Laing getting ready to return to work. The process, through madness, is
23 complete. Laing has the last laugh.
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25 **Up! For Discussion**

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27 In a 1984 interview with *The Paris Review*, Ballard discussed the inspiration for *High-Rise*
28 (Frick, 1984). On vacation in Rosas, right beside Salvador Dali's domicile at Port Lligat, he
29 witnessed a surreal episode. A ground-floor tenant in their holiday apartment block was
30 driven to distraction by cigarette butts thrown from the upper floors. A photographer by
31 profession, he started patrolling the beach, taking zoom lens photos of fellow holiday-
32 makers' boorish behaviours, then displayed them in the foyer of the shared high-rise. 'It was
33 a very curious exhibition,' Ballard recalled. 'It was a green light to my imagination' (Frick,
34 1984).
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37 This green light, the pioneering explorer of 'inner space' adds, inspired him to write *Up!*, the
38 working title for *High-Rise*, in the form of a flat, dispassionate social worker's report on the
39 strange events that had transpired in the forty-storey building. It was an imaginary building
40 that epitomised the utopian spirit of post-war inner-city redevelopment. As well as the half-
41 mad megalomania of Robert 'master builder' Moses in plate glass and pre-stressed concrete.
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44 Today, when the utopian visions of Corbusier and Goldfinger and grand urban redevelopment
45 projects like the Heygate Estate are discredited, demolished or consumed by capital – but also
46 when the charred remains of Grenfell Tower mark a 'tomb in the sky' of neoliberal neglect –
47 the ambivalent position of *High-Rise* towards utopian planning is as prescient and relevant as
48 ever. For some conservatives, the lesson of the 20th century is that utopian imagination is
49 inherently dangerous and the hallmark of a fundamentalist and immature mind wherein, as
50 Badiou puts it, 'to want something better is to want something worse' (Badiou, 2015 page 1).
51 From such a stance, the overall pejorative framing of utopianism means that any ambitious
52 urban planning can be quickly dismissed as unworthy of serious attention. Yet, to dismiss
53 utopia is to accept severe limitations on the horizons of political possibility (see Pinder,
54 2005). The ideology that suggests utopianism has failed, and the attendant rise of post-
55 utopian city-scapes in such contemporary developments as the Battersea Power Station – now
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3 re-purposed as a playground for the rich and a financial instrument for the overseas investor –
4 is a concomitant of neoliberalism's new world order and Margaret Thatcher's notorious
5 maxim that 'there is no alternative'.
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7 As Hatherley (2016) explores, the particular phase of British modernism that *High-Rise*
8 addresses is now often recalled as the moment in which socialist or social democratic
9 imagination collapsed into chaos and thereafter disappeared from the political landscape.
10 Whereupon once in London there were experiments in architecture and urban design that
11 echoed post-War British social democracy and spoke to utopian imagination, today there
12 stands bland expressions of class hegemony. Ballard's *High-Rise* might well be read as
13 representing the final failure of an attempt towards modernist spatial planning; as
14 modernism's death-knell. Indeed, this is one possible interpretation of Ben Wheatley's recent
15 cinematic adaptation of *High-Rise*, which concludes with an image of a child climbing to the
16 top of the ravaged high-rise to listen to a broadcast of Margaret Thatcher's speech where she
17 announces the hegemony of neoliberal thought. Neoliberal realism, it appears, arises from
18 the ruins of utopian failure.
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21 Our alternative reading of Ballard's novel, where we find regeneration in the chaos, is
22 instructive in this regard. Just as we here rediscover and appreciate anew the utopia of
23 Ballard's imagination, so too it is necessary to escape the bleak belief that utopianism
24 bespeaks failure. Utopian spatial design is a project reclaimable via the rediscovery and
25 retransmission of the utopian spatial possibilities that survive in our cities. As Walter
26 Benjamin would have it, we must read the city as containing the 'still burning embers of hope
27 from the past that might yet burn anew' (Proctor, 2015 page 16). 'What should haunt us',
28 Mark Fisher (2014 page 27) maintains, 'is not the *no longer* of actually existing social
29 democracy, but the *not yet* of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but
30 which never materialised'.
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33 A further, closely related theme that inheres in *High-Rise* is militant modernism (Hatherley
34 2016). An ideology that Royal wholeheartedly believed in, this was his determination to, as
35 Bertolt Brecht put it in 1926, 'erase the traces!' This was the belief that modernity must not
36 be built upon the 'stifling pile-up of historicist detritus that made up the bourgeois aesthetic'
37 (Hatherley, 2008 page 3) but rather should be a bold assertion of radical new ways of living
38 in new urban infrastructures that could only be built on razed spaces, on places purged of
39 slum dwellings, prior streetscapes, pre-existing communities, the entire urban palimpsest.
40 To embrace the modern life was to be committed to brutally eradicating remnants of the past.
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43 This provides us with another lens to interpret *High-Rise*. Rather than the building being too
44 modern for its tenants, it was simply *not modern enough*. Hence the destruction we see is the
45 laying to waste of all those objects and ways of living (homonormativity, class hierarchy,
46 patriarchy) that simply would not fit in, or indeed might have obstructed, the new order.
47 Perhaps the story of *High-Rise* is best explained by Gramsci's famous line: 'the crisis consists
48 precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a
49 great variety of morbid symptoms appear'.
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51 If we allow ourselves to read *High-Rise* as speaking to the *not yet* of futurism, and do so in a
52 present in which we are haunted by narratives of utopian failure, then what are we now
53 allowed to read? We can read *High-Rise* as an uprising, where the proletariat and bourgeoisie
54 go to class warfare with both unexpectedly overtaken at the last moment by a brutally
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3 effective gynocracy. *High-Rise*, in other words, is the science fiction of the ultimate utopian
4 project; a feminist revolution.
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6 What we offer in this article is an amalgam of psychoanalytically-inspired insights into a
7 classic work of literary geography that has long been viewed from a singular, arguably
8 single-minded perspective. We offer a Berlantine reading that chimes with recent Bechdel-
9 tested, where's-the-woman critiques of iconic androcentric novels like *The Great Gatsby* and
10 *Fight Club* (Vanmouwerik, 2017). We offer a close reading that juxtaposes the works of a
11 literary and spatially-inclined psychoanalyst, R.D. Laing, and a spatially and
12 psychoanalytically-inclined novelist, J.G. Ballard. We offer a subversive reading that
13 recuperates at least some of the radical, revolutionary, unashamedly utopian aspirations of
14 '60s city planners – and '60s anti-psychiatrists – albeit through a dark gynocritical glass. We
15 offer a retroactive reading that reaches back to the personified prehistory of urban geography,
16 not least its primal publication, Robert E. Park's *The City*. Explicating his 'ecological' model
17 of urban development, Park (1925) posited that there's more to the city than its physical
18 form, its infrastructure, its buildings. The city, he said, is 'a state of mind' (p.1). But what,
19 Ballard asks, if that state of mind is disturbed, psychotic, schizophrenic? If it is, then Laing
20 and Berlant help 're-ground' the ever-growing community of literary geographers
21 (Alexander, 2015; Hones, 2016; Peraldo, 2016).
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24 *High-Rise* is a prescient parable of consumer society's spatial compulsions. According to
25 Fitchett (2002, page 310), Ballard's entire oeuvre is characterized by general concerns with
26 how 'the utopian hopes and visions for an ever more confident and capable consumer culture
27 that were conceived in the middle of the twentieth century are...simultaneously being
28 realized and disintegrated'. Francis (2011, page 8), similarly, suggests that Ballard's primary
29 concern was composing fiction 'closely relevant to some of the inherent problems and
30 contradictions of contemporary Western culture'. More forcefully still, Gasiorek (2005, page
31 20), proclaims that Ballard's basic preoccupation is with consumer society 'as end-game and
32 terminal zone, the site of late capitalist colonization so complete that temporality has been
33 evacuated from it and can only be conceived in terms of spatial extension: more buildings,
34 roads, airports, shopping malls, car parks'. Ballard, he goes on...
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37 ...objects to a world that has been mechanized, affectless and aggressive, but he is
38 exhilarated by its electric dreams, so potent, glamorous and unpredictable. Inasmuch
39 as his writing traces the sinister trajectories often taken by a potentially world-
40 annihilating technology, it also explores the emancipatory hopes and uneasy pleasures
41 unleashed by the juggernaut of modernity (ibid, pp.22-3).
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44 The juggernaut is with us yet. But at least we know which direction it is heading. Brilliantly
45 creative writing, like J.G Ballard's *High-Rise*, provides a sat-nav for a disoriented and
46 demented society riven by mindless violence, driven by utopian aspiration.
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49 **Conclusion**

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51 A one-time medical student at Cambridge, who aspired to be a psychoanalyst and who was
52 regarded by his family and friends as a somewhat schizophrenic child, J.G. Ballard was
53 unusually attuned to the interplay of space and society. As he reports in his semi-
54 autobiographical novel, *The Kindness of Women* (Ballard, 1991, page 200).
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3 The central nervous system is nature's Sistine Chapel, but we have to bear in mind
4 that the world our senses present to us... is a ramshackle construct which our brains
5 have devised to let us get on with the job of maintaining ourselves and reproducing
6 our species. What we see is a highly conventionalized picture, a simple tourist guide
7 to a very strange city.
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9 The foregoing reading and re-reading of *High-Rise* is a simple tourist guide of sorts. It
10 contrasts with that of prior critics, who have variously construed Ballard's novel as an
11 exercise in Jungian depth psychology (Oramus, 2015), a form of hyper-organizational space
12 (Zhang et al, 2008), a post-industrial re-enactment of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Groes, 2012),
13 and a critical treatise on modern Brutalist architecture, where 'Laing' refers not to the
14 celebrity psychoanalyst but a major British building contractor that constructed many of the
15 country's most notorious apartment blocks (Beauman, 2014).
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18 We beg to differ. *High-Rise*, like all great works of literature, chimes with its times and
19 changes with them too. Our reading, we believe, is in tune with our time, a time when post-
20 truth prevails, when macho male posturing threatens apocalyptic ruination and when the
21 world is even madder, if such a thing were possible, than when Ballard was writing his works
22 of futuristic wonder.
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