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Body and Space in J. G. Ballard's  
*Concrete Island and High-Rise*

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## Abstract

The fiction of J. G. Ballard is unusually concerned with spaces, both internal and exterior. Influenced by Surrealism and Freudian psychoanalysis, Ballard's texts explore the thin divide between mind and body. Two of his novels of the 1970s, namely *Concrete Island* (1974) and *High-Rise* (1975) depict with detail his preoccupation with how the modern, urban world pushes man to the point where an escape to inner world is the solution to the tacit and oppressive forces of the external world. This escape is characterized by a suspension of conventional morality, with characters expressing atavistic tendencies, an effective return of the repressed. The present thesis poses a reading of these two novels, aided by analyses of some of Ballard's short stories, with a focus on the relation between bodies and spaces and how they project and introject into one another. Such a reading is grounded on theories of the *uncanny* as described by Freud and highlights Ballard's kinship to Gothic fiction. It presents Ballard's fiction as highly complex and ambiguous, affirming the power of external space to shape and control the human psyche, creating dangerously deterministic scenarios, but at the same time attesting the power of the human mind and imagination to ultimately transcend this oppression and even death.

Keywords: J. G. Ballard, body, space, the uncanny, Gothic fiction

## Resumo

A ficção de J. G. Ballard possui uma forte ligação com espaços, sejam eles internos ou externos. Influenciado pelo Surrealismo e psicanálise Freudiana, Ballard explora a linha tênue entre mente e corpo. Dois de seus romances da década de 70, *Concrete Island* (1974) e *High-Rise* (1975) descrevem em detalhe como o mundo moderno e urbano pode levar o homem ao ponto onde escapar para um mundo interior é a solução para as forças opressivas e tácitas do mundo externo. Este escape é caracterizado por uma suspensão de valores morais convencionais, com personagens expressando tendências atavísticas, um retorno do recalcado. Esta dissertação apresenta uma leitura desses dois romances, além de análises de alguns contos de Ballard, com um enfoque na relação entre corpos e os espaços que habitam. Tal leitura se baseia em teorias do Estranho, conforme descrito por Freud e destaca uma relação entre Ballard e a Literatura Gótica. A literatura de Ballard se mostra extremamente complexa e ambígua, afirmando o poder dos espaços externos de moldar e controlar a psique humana, levando a situações perigosamente deterministas, mas ao mesmo tempo é um atestado do poder da imaginação e da mente humana de transcender tal opressão e até mesmo a morte.

Palavras-chave: J. G. Ballard, corpo, espaço, o Estranho, Literatura Gótica

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# 1. Ballardian Space

## 1.1. J. G. Ballard and the Creation of Inner Space

The fiction of J. G. Ballard is concerned with psychology, both by way of characters and their relationships, and an exploration of the real, outer world in terms of the mind. In reading Ballard, one should be attentive of spaces, how they inform and are informed by the characters' psyches – be these spaces imagined or real. In 1962, writing for *New Worlds*, the avant-garde science fiction (SF) magazine of the sixties, Ballard advocated a separation between “inner” and “outer” spaces. He believed that, taking his cues from Sigmund Freud and the surrealists, “outer space” was no longer that important, and that writers should turn their attention to “inner space,” meaning mind exploration rather than the space travel often depicted in the more generic flavor of SF. It was a true manifesto, and many took heed, turning Ballard into the champion of the “New Wave” of British SF. For him, “outer space” could only have any kind of interest if it were to mirror “inner space”: “The biggest developments of the intermediate future will take place, not on the Moon or Mars, but on Earth, and its inner space, not outer, that needs to be explored. The only truly alien planet is Earth” (*A User's Guide to the Millennium* 197). Ballard argued that SF was “the only medium with an adequate vocabulary” for the ideas and situations of the twentieth century, but that it still was sorely lacking in one aspect, and that was an emphasis on the psychological and the biological. For him, the human body and mind were the true technological apparatuses that SF should deal with, far more interesting than spaceships, robots or laser guns. His turn, then, to a speculative and imaginative fiction more informed of the workings of the mind, memory, fantasy, the body and its impulses, is completely justified by this need to explore the new thematic ground of the twentieth century.

To confirm his lineage to the surrealists, Ballard concludes the text with an allusion to Salvador Dali's delivering a lecture in London dressed in a diving suit. When asked how deep Dali proposed to descend, he answered, “To the Unconscious!” Ballard feels that we need that inner space suit, and it is up to SF to build it. The period between 1962 and 1970, the year Ballard published *The Atrocity Exhibition*, his collection of avant-garde “condensed novels,” is his most prolific, with dozens of SF short stories and four novels (later he kept producing them, but in a much reduced

number). In another essay for *New Worlds*, “The Paranoid as Artist,” Ballard conflated SF and surrealism, reading them as means of departing from accepted norms and received accounts of reality (*A User’s Guide to the Millennium* 97), which would produce a kind of “cognitive estrangement,” which, according to SF critics such as Darko Suvin, is an indispensable feature of SF (Suvin 5). With *The Atrocity Exhibition*, he devised a new language and abandoned most of the more superficial devices of the genre – the four novels, for instance, all dealt with dystopian, post-catastrophe scenarios in a near future – but still maintaining its characteristic aura of estrangement.

The subject matter of SF is the subject matter of everyday life: the gleam on refrigerator cabinets, the contours of a wife’s or a husband’s thighs passing the newsreel images on a color TV set, the conjunction of musculature and chromium artifact within an automobile interior, the unique postures of passengers on an airport escalator. (“Fictions of Every Kind” 99)

It is all about adopting a SF perspective to the real world and defamiliarizing it, uncovering hidden relations and logics to objects and situations of everyday life. According to Andrzej Gasiorek, SF offered Ballard a “way of exploring and perhaps coming to terms with the unprecedented scale of twentieth-century social and technological change, a way of grasping how and why human life had developed in the ways that it had,” whereas surrealism “provided a technique for generating insights into the hidden logics that motivated these developments; yet in another version of estrangement, it laid bare the unconscious processes that informed key aspects of external public life” (9). Ballard’s fiction draws from both genres, as well as from Pop Art and the Gothic.

### 1.2. The Terminal Beach

One of the key short stories in the Ballard canon, one that exemplifies his synthesis between techniques of Surrealism and SF, is “The Terminal Beach” (1964). In his introduction to *The Best SF of J. G. Ballard*, he wrote that it is “the most important story I have written. It marks the link between the science fiction of my first ten years, and the next phase of my writings that led to *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*” (6). In the same 1962 manifesto for *New Worlds*, Ballard stated, “The first true s-f story, and one I intend to write myself if no one else will, is about a man with amnesia lying on a beach and looking at a rusty bicycle wheel, trying to work out the

absolute essence of the relationship between them” (198). “The Terminal Beach” comes close to this proposed scenario, and it might be Ballard’s most overt piece in this new kind of SF.

“The Terminal Beach,” also published in *New Worlds*, is set on Eniwetok or a similar Pacific island that used to serve as testing ground for atomic explosions. A pilot named Traven is voluntarily stranded on the island, trying to come to terms with the premature death of his wife and son. The physical description of the island is almost like a text version of Dali’s “The Persistence of Memory,” suggesting a conflation of past and present time. The island is frequently described by the narrator as a “zone of non-time,” and “a synthesis of the historical and psychic zero” (32), which provokes in Traven a need to engage in a kind of psychic erasure and ultimately self-annihilation.

The architecture of strange buildings, camera towers, and test platforms is said to be a “continuous concrete cap upon the island, a functional, megalithic architecture as grey and minatory (and apparently as ancient, in its projection into, and from, time future) as any of Assyria or Babylon” (32). Ballard suggests that this is a kind of future archeological ground, removed from our sense of history and reality to appear alien. Still, it is clear that the shadow of the past of atomic tests has plunged this landscape into a sort of geographical and chronological abjection, transforming it into a site that erases and effectively denies history and humanity.

Traven supplies his own ghosts, those of his dead family, and as he goes deeper into a state of complete deprivation, starving for days, he provokes a sort of fusion between his mind and the environment. “All sense of time soon vanished, and his life became completely existential, an absolute break separating one moment from the next like two quantal events” (35). Ballard provides very little in terms of conventional character psychology to describe Traven. Instead, he describes the landscape, the architecture of the buildings, and the strange objects he finds. With “The Terminal Beach,” Ballard suggests a way of looking at mental processes, conscious and unconscious, by way of geography and spatiality. By doing so, he draws on the Gothic tradition of examining structures that project and introject certain anxieties and desires that can go by unnoticed on everyday life. In a sense, landscapes and buildings can be metaphors for a number of psychological, moral, and aesthetic issues. In Ballard’s works, as in Gothic fiction and Surrealism, these external structures are often projections that embody in one way or another unspoken tensions, contradictions, and thought processes of their inhabitants and designers.



In the light of Ballard's manifesto, "Which Way to Inner Space", we can posit Traven as the "man with amnesia," not so much with a loss of memory but with an unusual sense of memory, one that conflates past, present, and future. The beach is, symbolically, not only a primordial setting, but one that explicitly alludes to the cyclic nature of time, in constant renewal, erasure and erosion. The bicycle wheel is an allusion to a piece by artist Eduardo Paolozzi of the Independent Group's exhibition of contemporary art "This is Tomorrow" in 1956, one that the theorist Scott Bukatman says could be the inspiration for many of Ballard's texts, especially *Crash*, *High-Rise*, and *The Atrocity Exhibition* (43). Here is an excerpt from Ballard's autobiography, *Miracles of Life* (2007) about the event:

Another of the teams brought together the sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi, and the architects Peter and Alison Smithson, who constructed a basic unit of human habitation in what would be left of the world after nuclear war. Their terminal hut, as I thought of it, stood on a patch of sand, on which were laid out the basic implements that modern man would need to survive: a power tool, a bicycle wheel and a pistol. (188)

Indeed one can see Traven struggling to find the relationship between the fabricated, physical elements of the present, and the more essential, almost eternal, elements of nature. His mind seeks solace in the synthesis between the two, and in a way, this is the locus of much of Ballard's concerns in his fiction. Gasiorek summarizes Ballard's attempt to "overcome divisions between self and world, the rational and the irrational, the conscious and the unconscious – sublating them in a liberatory synthesis" (9). Ballard's fiction is often located within this border zone, searching for a synthesis of opposite elements that should lead to liberation.

Gasiorek sees Ballard's appropriation of Surrealism as a technique. SF, on the other hand, provides a rich vocabulary that Ballard finds attuned to the time and that he has claimed as the true literature of the twentieth century. But his fiction is remarkably uninterested in the commonplace, and while he does adopt at that point SF as his nominal genre, his concern is elsewhere. The trope of sublating time and space with internal psychology is not unique to Surrealism either – it approximates Ballard to the Gothic. David Punter, in *The Literature of Terror*, warns that the Gothic is not a unified and consistent movement, but rather a number of novels that were later grouped under the same moniker. These were written by authors such as Horace Walpole, Ann

Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, C. R. Maturin, and Mary Shelley; they featured haunted houses and castles, extreme sensation and situations of terror (8).

At first sight, there is very little to connect Ballard to the nominal Gothic fiction of that period, but Punter lists other, more punctual and pervasive features of the Gothic, such as the restricted access to an “objective” world, being instead narratives immersed in the psyche of the protagonist, but more importantly, its development into a literature of “landscapes of the mind, settings which are distorted by the pressure of the principal characters’ psychological obsession” (2). The use of physical settings to illustrate, influence, and contain the workings and the states of the mind is a thoroughly Gothic trope, as is the concern with psychic and social decay, a “tone of desensitized acquiescence in the horror of obsessions and prevalent insanity” (3). With the latter, Punter might as well be describing Ballard’s *The Atrocity Exhibition*, which is, in general terms, about the death of affect and about giving voice to a looming sense of insanity.

“The Terminal Beach” even figures a couple of overt conventions of the Gothic, such as the obsession with architectural ruins and decay, and the haunting visions of Traven’s dead wife and son, both elements that tie him to the past. In this short excerpt, “The Terminal Beach” reads like something out of Edgar Allan Poe:

His wife’s pale features seemed illuminated from within, her lips parted as if in greeting, one hand raised to take his own. His son’s face, with its curiously fixed expression, regarded him with the same enigmatic smile of the child in the photograph. ‘Judith! David!’ Startled, Traven ran forwards to them. Then, in a sudden movement of light, their clothes turned into shrouds, and he saw the wounds that disfigured their necks and chests. Appalled, he cried out. (“The Terminal Beach” 45)

This is a typical Gothic situation: ghosts luring the living and eventually provoking fear and terror. Their appeal lies in their apparent ability to cheat death, but in uncanny fashion, the appearance is revealed false by exposing their wounds and shrouds. This makes explicit Ballard’s debt to the genre, but he updates many of its conventions and concerns through other, subtler ways. One is the use of the uncanny in relation to spaces, real and imagined.

In “The Terminal Beach,” there is a striking space consisting of two thousand concrete blocks, perfect cubes of 15 cubic feet, spaced at 10 yards. One of the sides of these cubes holds a door, visible only at a certain angle (not unlike the surrealistic

*trompe l'œil*), and the blocks are described as having the “size and air of a house” (46). Inside them, Traven finds solace and the fatigue that took over his body vanishes. “For the first time since his arrival at the island, the sense of dissociation set off by its derelict landscapes began to recede” (38). If the alien, inhospitable landscape of the island is uneasy to Traven, the homelike “concrete monsters” give him comfort.

Here Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” (1919) can be of help. Freud suggests, by etymologically analyzing the word “*unheimlich*” (uncanny), that which is (literally) “homely” or “*heimlich*” ends up having also its opposite meaning, that is, “*unheimlich*” (unhomely). Following Ernst Jentsch’s definition of *Unheimlich* as that which “ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (956), Freud develops the uncanny as a manifestation of the unconscious process of repression. What is uncanny is at the same time unfamiliar and strange but is also homely and familiar, thus articulating hidden and repressed tensions by bringing them to light, and is a mark of the return of the repressed. Much of the Gothic, and for that matter, of all that provokes terror, is triggered by uncanny elements that force us to come to terms with taboos or uncomfortable, forgotten ideas. It is still homely because it is instantly recognizable, and pertains to primitive and infantile feelings that morality, ethics, and values consistently efface and repress. Quoting Freud, “[T]he uncanny is uncanny only because it is secretly all too familiar, which is why it is repressed” (956). The uncanny has a very complex, crucial role in the history of spaces and the history of literature, and will be discussed later on.

For now, it suffices to understand how the blocks in “The Terminal Beach” have for Traven an uncanny role, one that allows the elision of past and present, conscious and unconscious, inner and outer space. These interstitial spaces are numerous in Ballard’s fiction, and it may even be said that much of his work fulfills the same role on a genre, or category, level. Stories such as “The Terminal Beach” use this blurred interstitial zone to comment on the unspoken role of spaces in the postwar world, working by way of Gothic, SF, and surrealist conventions to explore the hidden logics of a largely chaotic and irrational world.

“The Terminal Beach” seems to be the ideal starting point because it is one of Ballard’s early attempts to put all those elements together, while explicitly locating his text in history. The island is a former H-bomb test site. Consequently, being that the landscape becomes a fusion of Traven’s psyche and the actual, physical world, it is possible to extrapolate Traven’s obsessions and fears onto a larger sphere: his

fragmented consciousness and fixation with past events, both his family's death and the history of the landscape, that of the atomic bomb. The story was written at the height of the Cold War, but there is a sense that the bomb caused a profound change in Western civilization. In a later text, his semi-autobiographical novel *Empire of the Sun*, Ballard elects the Nagasaki bomb as the turning point not only of World War 2 and his fictional stand-in's place in it (at the time a prisoner of war in China) but also of his emotional and intellectual maturity, signaling a permanent shift in his imagination.

Dominika Oramus, in her book-length study *Grave New World*, identifies the gradual internal degeneration of Western civilization in the second half of the twentieth century as a major current in Ballard's fiction. Contemporary reality in later Ballard texts is presented as "post-apocalyptic: though we are not literally living amidst the ruins, the golden age is far behind us and we are witnessing the twilight of the West." (Oramus) She suggests that this turning point is the bomb, its invention and use, because it makes the human propensity for self-destruction finally explicit, because it makes total annihilation possible. In a way Ballard's fiction, despite the elements of estrangement widely employed, is about the contemporary world, living in the shadow of irreconcilable and illogical events in history. His texts expose modern man's difficulty in contextualizing the world around him and a consequent crisis of identity.

### 1.3. Death and the Post-War Condition

Self-destruction and catastrophe are manifestations of another Gothic topic, that of death. If we assume the first SF novel to be Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1817), as Brian Aldiss proposes in his *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction*, it also means that the genre sprung out of the Gothic. The technological element in the story is the ability to create a human being by artificial means, out of dead bodies. Victor Frankenstein transgresses many boundaries by making his creature, one of which is the finality of death, a thought that provokes terror and uneasiness. Death itself is put into question, as man can now manipulate this natural fact. That haunting preoccupation with death and its relation to technology is at the core of SF, and in early Ballard post-apocalyptic stories such as "The Terminal Beach." The intersection of SF and Gothic – and Ballard's use of conventions of both genres – will be discussed later.

In later Ballard texts, subjectivity toward all elements of life, including death, is increasingly more pervasive and progresses at an enormous rate, as in *Crash* (1973), in which death is seen as the logical next step of an extremely abstract approach to

sexuality and technology. Both *Concrete Island* (1974) and *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979) seem to be creative explorations of near or actual death experiences, attempts to represent death in fiction and its liberating effect on the imagination. *Empire of the Sun* (1984) contains one of his most complete and provoking approaches to the theme, as the delirious protagonist, Jim, sees a reversal of the process of death and experiences the dead coming back to life towards the end of the novel – the looming presence of the Nagasaki bomb determining the outcome of Jim’s predicament and the war. That scene from *Empire of the Sun* is almost a recreation of a portion of “The Terminal Beach,” in which Traven finds the body of a Japanese man in a crevice. He is not military or science personnel, and, like Traven, has no apparent motive to be on the island, suggesting that he might be in fact Traven’s double, a projection of his own self. Hallucinating, he converses with this man, Yasuda, who urges him to exercise a “philosophy of acceptance,” letting go of his guilt and his ties to the past. Ironically, Yasuda can only “accept” this because he is already dead, and has fully merged (body and mind) with the island. As the story ends, Traven drags Yasuda’s body, now referred to as “the dead archangel,” from the crevice and uses it as a “guardian,” to keep Traven away from the blocks (which seem to accelerate his process of dissolution). In a sense, he has found a way to project his own death onto a double, deflecting his own process of decay, but which remains nonetheless a physical sign of the future.

Freud identified the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), describing it as a force that makes living creatures strive for an inorganic state, which is the deeper, primordial, and essential state of things. This concept can be useful to understand how, especially in the kind of fiction we are dealing with, there is an overwhelming concern with death and destruction. It links death with birth and the compulsion to repeat. The energy of the death drive is, according to André Green, a “work of the negative,” and seems always to be related with dissociation, regression, and dissolution (85). It is only curious that the sounds of the deathly island, where Traven goes to die and come to terms with the inevitability of death, remind him of the beach at Dover, where he was born, signaling the relation between death and birth, the end and the beginning of life. “The landscape seems to be involved with certain unconscious notions of time, and in particular with those that may be a repressed premonition of our own deaths” (“The Terminal Beach” 40), which constitutes a privileged space in which time is but an illusion. “The Terminal Beach” tries to convey

a psychic reinvention of space, a physical incarnation of all these drives and obsessions, history and psychology together encoded in architecture and spatiality. In a section of the short story titled “The Catechism of Goodbye,” Traven begins a pretense of saying “goodbye” to a location that had been used test sites for atom bombs, such as Eniwetok and Los Alamos. When he does that, one of the blocks disappears: “the corridors remained intact, but somewhere in his mind appeared a small interval of neutral space.” Eventually he stops, realizing that if he kept on, he would have to “fix his signature upon every one of the particles of the universe” (46). If we follow Freud’s explanation of the death drive as a principle of stability and his affirmation that the dominating tendency of mental life is the “effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli” (*Beyond* 56), Traven’s saying “goodbye” is his attempt to reduce tension, or his guilt, physically present as the blocks. The only way to set the mental tension to zero, and deplete the landscape of the ominous blocks, is death, and is, we assume, Traven’s destiny.

#### 1.4. Ballardian Space

Ballard often isolates characters in settings, as he has done in “The Terminal Beach,” in ways that the socio-historical context becomes embedded in the physical landscape, which is also informed by the psychology of the characters. These closed and almost controlled spaces become perfect stage sets in which he can enact the key problems of urban alienation and the death of affect. This kind of isolation disallows appeals to exterior forces, relying primarily on the external/physical and internal/mental spaces of the characters. A powerful technique, it yields disturbing and cogent results, asserting the ongoing importance of certain surrealist tropes in contemporary art and literature, as well as the force of the compressed form. Both these ideas can be traced back to Freud’s description of the dream-work in 1900, the conflation of conscious and unconscious stimuli in one narrative, and the workings of condensation and displacement. Ballard’s metaphors and imagery are often dream-like, but the narrative form of dreams seems to have influenced him the most. The synthesis of subject and object, character and setting, internal and external, reality and fiction, are all marked features his style.

The study of spaces in literature began to receive special attention with the Gothic, and is now more important than ever. As Ballard has stated, the difference Freud pointed out between the latent and the manifest content of a dream now has to be

applied to reality (“Introduction to *Crash*” 103). It is as if reality and fiction have traded places, and our experience of reality must be guided by fictional and dream states. To truly comprehend an actual space, we must look at its subtext, at its latent content. Michel Foucault suggested that

a whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers (both these terms in the plural) – from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat, institutional architecture from the classroom to the design of hospitals, passing via economic and political installations. (149)

Foucault notes that spaces are not only physical locations but also embodiments of a subtext of power. Relations of authority and power are encoded in the way hospitals and schools, for instance, are designed, and the act of looking beyond the manifest content of reality provides a powerful tool of analysis. Ballard too ascribes the same importance to spaces, an obsession that takes full form in two of his novels of the 1970s – *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* – tales of urban alienation and psychological and physical entrapment. Set in contemporary locations of everyday life, but isolated in time and space, they are Ballard’s most developed explorations of the theme of space and modern man’s dislocation in the world.

Gasiorek suggests that the two novels occupy opposite ends of the civic spectrum: “one exposes the hidden byproducts of contemporary life, while the other concentrates on its dreams of rational design” (120). In *Concrete Island*, an architect crashes his car in a deject traffic island among interceding carriageways, and finds himself unable to escape. The traffic island is inhabited by some of society’s rejects and is a byproduct of late twentieth-century urban planning, a forgotten space that may or not be a projection of the dying architect’s mind. In *High-Rise*, written shortly thereafter, a thousand-apartment building set on the outskirts of London answers the problems of modernity by compartmentalizing and embodying every living need and comfort possible for its inhabitants, a utopia in the manner of the architect Le Corbusier. It quickly turns into a dystopia, one without a discernible particular cause, as people living in the high-rise find the need to liberate their atavistic impulses, descending into barbarism and full-fledged clan warfare, indulging in every kind of moral transgression, including rape and murder. Ballard’s characterization is more concerned with the architecture and the artificial social organization imposed by the spaces themselves than with conventional character psychology. All the action takes

place inside such spaces, without hardly any mention of other locations, suggesting that the relation of space and individual is more than just physical. It is as if any of the events of both texts, either actual or psychological, could never take place if not for the influence of the unusual surroundings, which asks for a reading that considers Ballard's treatment of space and architecture, and how it relates to human psychology.

The present study attempts to analyze two of Ballard's novels, *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*, through the lens the identification of Ballard with the Gothic has opened up. It does not affirm that he is a Gothic, SF or even surrealist writer; it claims that by tracing the influences of the Gothic in his work – particularly those related to the representation of space and the body – there will be new insights into these complex, unassimilated and almost uncategorizable texts. Roger Luckhurst, in his book *The Angle between Two Walls*, points out the elusive character of Ballard's texts: "His work at once constantly activates theoretical models, but it is also awkward, didactic, and overtheorized, tending to evade or supersede the theories meant to 'explain' it" (xvii). To be sure, a great number of postmodern theorists and academics "use" Ballard to illustrate and explain many works of art made possible by new technology, such as video art and cyberpunk. Ballard is often invoked to show how SF writers have anticipated a contemporary sensibility; for example, the fusion of man and machine so explored in cyberpunk, is thought to have sprung out of *Crash*. Jean Baudrillard famously takes the novel and uses it to explain his theory of simulacrum, not the other way around. Still, there are few book-length studies of Ballard's fiction, although he is widely known and seen as a paragon of SF New Wave and cyberpunk and a huge influence in media studies. He is barely read in the United States (his last published novel in the country is 2000's *Super-Cannes*) and it appears that whereas he is superficially known, his fiction remains unassimilated by readers and theorists.

The ideas expounded in his texts are extremely prescient, both because they have aged better than a great number of his contemporaries' in the SF field, and mainly because they have anticipated psychological and social changes triggered by technology, rather than just the technological changes themselves. For Ballard, "SF is a response to science and technology as perceived by the inhabitants of a consumer goods society" ("Fictions of Every Kind" 99), and in a sense it should accurately portray, project, and anticipate the true paradigm shift, the one inside our heads. As Ballard took that into account, and described an "external reality ontologically transformed by the multiplicity of electronic signals in the air," or as Bukatman terms



it, the “mediascape” (43), he has seen how the imaginary space of mass media began to take hold of reality in the 1960s, something that became evident to theorists in the 80s, with the advent of cyberpunk and cyberspace.

The techniques of surrealism have a particular relevance at this moment [1966], when the fictional elements in the world around us are multiplying to the point where it is almost impossible to distinguish between the “real” and the “false” – the terms no longer have any meaning. (Ballard, “The Coming of the Unconscious” 88)

Undoubtedly Ballard employs surrealist techniques because he identifies them taking place in a much larger scale, again stressing his pressing concern with the socio-historical sphere. Oramus stresses that

irrespective of the literary conventions Ballard applies in a given text (science fiction, speculative fiction, detective story, thriller, war novel or any other), he charts the very same territory and remains throughout primarily interested in the reaction of the human mind to the post-World War II reality which is the common denominator of his diverse obsessions.

Ballard’s preoccupation with the present and the technological and social developments since the war is certainly paramount, but we must look into his uses of the conventions and the genres he employs to understand how general and wide his insights really are. The act of comparing and tracing the development of the uses of certain literary tropes over time is fundamental to contextualize and represent the subject. To better understand Ballard’s fiction and his representation of the landscapes of the mind and their meaning as literary creations and social observations, we must investigate his use of certain techniques and the largely unexplored affinity with the Gothic and its relation to architecture and the representation of space.

## 2. Literature, Space, and Architecture

### 2.1. The Gothic

The origins of the Gothic in literature are intrinsically linked with the history of the novel form itself (Punter 1:22). As the novel came to be in the eighteenth century, it reflected changes in the structure of English society and a widening of the reading public. Authors no longer followed a system of patronage for the aristocracy, and authorship and readership grew in the middle classes. The novel also highlighted an eighteenth century contradiction between the “official,” high culture and the actual, popular taste. The official culture followed the principles of rationalism and the Enlightenment and was radically progressive, advocating the scientific progress toward knowledge at the expense of faith and religion. Reason was held as the only path to truth.

There were those, such as William Blake and the Romantics, who disagreed with this view, and saw the reduction of the human to the rational as “circular and sterile,” ignoring the power and effect of human emotions and passions. In a sense, they viewed the attempt to control and rationalize every aspect of human endeavor as a sort of universal taboo, risen out of fear and that could only produce more fear. Furthermore, the principles of the Enlightenment were never easy with the novel form. Punter suggests that its panoramic nature and inability to sustain contradictions of actual behavior exposed the flaws in the rationalist perspective, revealing that it was not truly rational at all. The forerunners of the novel, such as Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding, were aware of this and invested their works with irony in an attempt to further expose this hypocrisy.

The Gothic was a popular, but at the same time a marginalized cultural production, because of its transgressive nature. It has remained versatile and able to “provide imagery to express the anxieties of successive historical epochs” (Davenport-Hines 1). In its late eighteenth and nineteenth century incarnation, it had an emphasis on the terrifying, archaic settings, use of the supernatural, and featured highly stereotypical characters (Punter 1:2). The Gothic romance was more concerned with techniques of literary suspense than with plausible plots or characters. In fact, the exaggerated form the stories took could be read as a commentary on the artificiality of the literary construction itself, and giving more attention to the work of the imagination

and how the mind – and consequently, art – interprets the outside world, only to distort and adapt it into a personal and congenial truth. The window opened by this form of fiction into the psychological processes of the mind and the artistic process were later observed notably by Freud, among others, who attempted to schematize in the guise of the discipline of psychoanalysis what Gothic writers such as E. T. A. Hoffmann and Edgar Allan Poe had already discovered in their fiction.

The term “Gothic” harks back to the Goths of Late Antiquity, but now it is mostly used (except in architecture) to refer to the Counter-Enlightenment movement in art that began in the late eighteenth century. The Gothic then was a revival of older aesthetics and values, deeply seated in tradition and always expressing awe before images of power such as the power of natural forces, human power over nature, power of autocracy, and science (Davenport-Hines 3). The fact that principles of rationality did not seem dominant in the real world led to an admiration of their opposite in fiction, allowing a more inclusive and comprehensive view of human nature, finally addressing what had been conspicuously left out of the dominant eighteenth century discourse. Transgressive at heart, the Gothic explores acts of immorality that defy or subvert the ruling authority, as it is necessary to locate dark antitheses to power systems.

## 2.2. The Sublime

Between 1770 and 1800, the genre of sentimentalism in English fiction, which in a way encompassed the Gothic and had writers such as Samuel Richardson and Jane Austen, “stimulated conscious of emotions, and even a certain vanity in that consciousness,” (Davenport-Hines 19) embraced the possibility of balance and reason of the Enlightenment being crushed by the weight of feeling and passion. It paved the way for a better acceptance of Edmund Burke’s treatise on the sublime, a major influence on many of the Gothic writers. In a sense, Burke elevated terror as the strongest of emotions, and therefore the most sublime:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the idea of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort, terrible, or is conversant about terrible subjects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is a productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. (549)

More importantly, terror represents the primary means by which the dictates of reason and the stifling principles of rationalism can be bypassed. The term “sublime”, first

described by Longinus in the first century, was associated to “excellence in language” and the “expression of a great spirit,” as well as to natural and great natural phenomena such as volcanoes and storms (Longinus 140). It was not defined as either natural or aesthetic. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the adjective “sublime” meant grand, elevated, lofty, and later the highest moral, intellectual or emotional level, as well as great nobility of character, and as both an adjective and a noun, referred to, as it does today, to a sensation – overwhelming awe, astonishment, fear, and terror – produced by nature or great works of art. In his treatise “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful” (1757), Burke is interested in describing this irrational element in both nature and art, something that eludes reason, order, and balance. In Part II, Section II, he writes, “[T]error is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime” (549). This led to an aesthetic of the ugly and the negative, but those were only sublime when they excited “a strong terror”, the strongest emotion the mind was capable of feeling, and therefore sublime. Burke’s rationale is that

the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. Without all doubt, the torments which we may be made to suffer, are much greater in their effect on the body and mind, than any pleasures which the most learned voluptuary could suggest, or than the liveliest imagination, and the most sound and exquisitely sensible body could enjoy. (550)

He also prefigures the Gothic concern with death, “the king of terrors” to which pain was nothing but an emissary. His ideas had a huge influence in the Gothic. Ann Radcliffe, in her novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), describes the impact of terror on the mind in Burkean terms: “A terror of this nature, as it occupies and expands the mind, and elevates it to a high expectation, is purely sublime, and leads us, by a kind of fascination, to seek even the object from which we appear to shrink” (236). She recognizes the twofold nature of the terror to repulse and attract at the same time – that it provokes both reactions is curious and a testament to its vitality.

The eighteenth century aesthetic preoccupation with the sublime is in many ways contradictory to the defense of reason and rationality. It is as if art attempted to undercut the prevailing sense of objectivity and rationality, since the sublime was subjective and dependent on experience. Burke believed that the sublime was antithetical to beauty, as light is to dark, and they are mutually exclusive. Both can

produce pleasure, even with the invocation of terror, as the pleasure comes by knowing that this feeling is not real. In a sense, Burke justifies that ugliness is an aesthetic quality, and advocates an empiricist method based on feeling for aesthetics. This contributed to sensibilities more in touch with psychology and the development of that discipline.

After Burke, Immanuel Kant tackle the sublime in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), arguing that what is beautiful is concerned with the form of the object. The sublime, on the other hand, “can also be found in a formless object,” and is “a pleasure that arises only indirectly; it is produced by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger” (520). Like Burke, Kant believes that, at first, we are repelled by the sublime, but a posterior realization of its vicariousness allows us to regard it as admirable and awe-inspiring. “The liking for the sublime contains not so much a positive pleasure as rather admiration and respect, and so should be called a negative pleasure” (522). The German philosopher tries to systematize the rather irrational feeling produced by the sublime, but acknowledges its power to undercut our preconceived notions and to take us aback with its formlessness and unboundedness, as he summarized: “Sublime is what even to be able to think [about] proves the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense” (523). Kant here is driving at the elusive nature of the sublime that is able to transcend boundaries of standards tied by time or place.

### 2.3. The Uncanny

Freud, however, in his influential contribution to literary studies, the essay “The Uncanny” (1919), believes that the aesthetic investigation of the sublime and the beautiful leaves out an important element, that which is disturbing, unsettling, or uncomfortable. That, he postulates, is the uncanny, in German, *unheimlich* (literally unhomelike), which shares a meaning with its apparent opposite, *heimlich* (homelike), which can also mean concealed, secret or out of sight, contrary to the idea of being familiar and agreeable (“Uncanny” 933). Freud questions Ernst Jentsch’s definition of the uncanny as connected to an uncertainty toward wax figures and automata, a question whether they are animate or inanimate beings and conversely, apparently mechanical processes at work in living beings, such as those seen during epileptic fits or manifestations of insanity (“Uncanny” 935). Jentsch uses the example of the doll Olympia in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman,” but Freud argues that the

“unparalleled atmosphere of uncanniness evoked by the story” is due not only to this element, and suggests that the uncanny is “directly attached to the figure of the Sand-Man, that is, to the idea of being robbed of one’s eyes” (“Uncanny” 937). Jentsch’s intellectual uncertainty gives way to a baser, even primal feeling, which Freud links with the castration complex, the fear of the removal of the penis, fundamental to the organizing principle of psychosexuality in tandem with the Oedipus complex.

In Hoffmann’s story, there are elements, according to Freud, that seem “arbitrary and meaningless so long as we deny all connection between fears about the eye and castration; but they become intelligible as soon as we replace the Sand-Man by the dreaded father at whose hands castration is expected” (“Uncanny” 939). The uncanny feeling provoked by the Sand-Man must be then connected to castration, but more importantly, it points out that this feeling conceals a conflict or a hidden meaning that merits investigation. Essentially, Freud lists six circumstances in which the uncanny might arise: animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man’s attitude to death, involuntary repetition, and the castration complex. These factors might turn something frightening into something uncanny, and these are often combined. The central features were the double and repetition, which would inform the other factors described by Freud, and the necessary condition for it was the concept of repression (“Uncanny” 945).

The double (*doppelgänger*), writes Freud, was originally a guarantee of immortality in childhood and primitive cultures, but as this narcissistic phase is surmounted, the double becomes a foreshadowing of death, a source of criticism and persecution, and “the uncanny harbinger of death” (“Uncanny” 940). Freud draws on Otto Rank’s study of the double, in which the ego is described in literature by its double, as authors such as Hoffmann, Poe, and Maupassant create imaginary figures that end up reflecting their authors’ symptoms. Separate from narcissism, the double forms a special agency that observes, criticizes, and censors the self (“Uncanny” 941). In other words, the double is a powerful figure able to exert castrating power over the self, a force dubbed by Freud “critical agency.” Freud ascribes the uncanny power of the double to an early stage in mental development, and the double becomes “a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons.” Later he describes the uncanny as a “form of terror that leads back to something known to us, once very familiar” (“Uncanny” 948), reinforcing the Gothic premise that the present is always in thrall to the past.

Freud dedicated *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to the investigation of repetition, but the “compulsion to repeat” had already been described as a clinical phenomenon, and is outlined in “The Uncanny.” This compulsion is instinctual and “powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle” (in German *Lustprinzip*, *Lust* meaning also desire and want), “lending certain aspects of the mind the demonic character [of instincts], and still very clearly expressed in the impulses of small children” (“Uncanny” 942). The psychic apparatus can do nothing but desire, and a principle that goes beyond it would guide irrational, uncanny, and seemingly strange behavior.

He also draws a connection with animism, by writing that everyone goes through a phase of individual development corresponding to primitive men, and that in some way residues and traces of it remain and manifest themselves, and “everything which now strikes us as ‘uncanny’ fulfills the condition of touching those residues of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression” (944). While later critics have attacked him for this judgmental, Eurocentric view on primitive cultures, the suggestion that much of civilization and knowledge function as to conceal and ignore certain features of the external world is pertinent. Our culture filters the information met by our cognitive apparatus and builds a system: it is worth investigating what is left out to better understand it. Freud’s essay acknowledges this and that literature, more precisely stories that have this uncanny element, provides a way of looking deeper, beyond what we have tried to hide and ignore. Insights into human nature and culture that can see beyond our humanistic conception of the universe can be immensely valuable.

#### 2.4. The Uncanny as an Aesthetic Trope

The uncanny as an aesthetic trope was to be found in many art works, its main motif being “precisely the contrast between a secure and homely interior and the fearful invasion of an alien presence; on a psychological level, its play was one of doubling, where the other is, strangely enough, experienced as a replica of the self, all the more fearful because apparently the same” (Vidler 1). Early investigations such as Freud’s elected the Gothic as its home and relegated it to minor genres such as the fairy tale or *Märchen*, but as Freud pointed out, the uncanny feeling was a basic element, elicited by art works, of the psychological apparatus. Its power to defamiliarize or “make strange” ensured its vitality and transcendence beyond genre fiction.

Although the term “defamiliarization” was coined in 1917 by Victor Shklovsky in “Art as Technique” and appropriated by the Russian Formalists, the concept is similar to the uncanny. For the Formalists, it meant making a familiar word, image, or event seem strange, going against habituated perception or “automatism,” which would provoke a renewed aesthetic response. Art for Shklovsky increased the difficulty and span of perception “because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (12), and art could act as a means of destroying the “automatism of perception.” The purpose of the image would be not to represent an object, but to provide a special perception of that object, one that would eventually call attention to the representation and the form of the object itself. This technique, like the uncanny, consists in taking the familiar and making it strange, as to reveal a concealed truth.

Already in *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Samuel Taylor Coleridge describes the same practice in William Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1799):

to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind’s attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand. (Coleridge 313)

Coleridge admits that he wrote “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” with this in mind, the attempt to break free from habit and custom by way of an artifice. The technique was popularized by Bertold Brecht in the twentieth century, and was used by Dada and Surrealism to achieve the effect of looking at something familiar with new eyes. Brecht called it the *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement or alienation effect), which consisted of techniques that kept reminding his audiences that they were seeing a play, an artificial construct, such as breaking the fourth wall, linguistic plays, self-referentiality, etc. (Brecht 138). Coleridge, Freud, the Formalists, and Brecht all thought that there was something pernicious and clutterish about real life, that in some way our cognition led us to be familiarized with most things after a certain time, especially those of daily life. The effect of estrangement or defamiliarization, however, is artificial – it does not account for expressions of such an effect by any agency other than the author or artist, and remains limited to a technique. The uncanny, on the other hand, can provide the estranged look but, at the same time, it reinforces the idea of the sublime that there are



feelings and emotions that cannot be fully described or understood. It also goes back to why the Gothic was so important in the nineteenth century, as it reminded readers of an irrational and animistic world.

As early as 1915, Freud noted in “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” themes of anxiety and dread, provoked by a sense of “unhomeliness” provoked by the events that seemed to put the “homeland” of Europe, the secure cradle and house of western civilization into a stage of barbaric regression, enacting feelings of shock and awe through violence (Vidler 7). The uncanny is more than defamiliarization or a feeling of “unhomeliness,” as it has depicts the underlying disposition of the familiar to turn on the subject and suddenly become estranged, out of itself and reality, as if in a dream. This unsettling nature led Freud to investigate this propensity toward a betrayal of the intellect, reason, and morals. This underlying lack of control puts us in a different light, and forces us to face problematic features of the human condition, such as anxiety and irrationality. The fear of regression suggested by Freud is also at the heart of the Gothic, as Punter pointed out in *The Literature of Terror* as one of the main elements of the genre.

Punter writes that the barbaric crops up in a number of forms, namely fear of the past, of the aristocracy, and of racial degeneracy. It also appears in modern incarnations of the Gothic as a generalized fear of the past but also the present and the future, which “brings us up against the boundaries of the civilized, [demonstrates] the relative nature of ethical and behavioral codes, [places] over against the conventional world, a different sphere in which these codes operate at best in distorted forms” (2:183). The idea is that this goes against realism, and the Gothic attempts to depict worlds that account for the mysterious, the terrifying, and the violent. The Gothic rejects the idea that realism can demonstrate laws of cause and effect, a stance that effectively “smooth out the moments of terror and vision which comprise experience and render them into a unitary whole” (2:186), noting that there is such a thing as multiple accounts of history and reality. In “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” (1908), Freud suggested that the ego always conceives of itself as heroic: we are always subject to a distortion of reality. Jacques Lacan argued that distortion is a necessary effect or product of desire, forcing us to see the object not in itself, but a distortion of it, which he called *objet petit a*, as informed by desire (292). Since this askew perception is inevitable, secondary and marginalized accounts can and should be taken into consideration. Punter suggests that the Gothic is one of the principal modes of “unofficial history,” and urges us to

embrace these modes that insert a much-needed “‘foreign body’ into the apparently immaculate surface of international corporate technology” (2:187). He talks here of late capitalism and the contemporary, positivist view that harkens back to the Enlightenment. In many ways, western culture is still coming to terms with how the events of the twentieth century have undermined the values of the eighteenth century, hence the question of the notion of realism and even of rationality.

We can recognize the Gothic in our culture, even if it is still negated a high status or even acknowledged, as outlined by Mark Edmundson’s study *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sado-masochism, and the Culture of the Gothic*. Modern writers, Ballard among them, are cited by Punter as examples of a contemporary production tuned to many of the Gothic ideals, even if it does not feature its more superficial and recognizable elements such as vampires, haunted houses, and ghosts. The general feeling of anxiety produced and the ability of this literature to elicit similar responses and articulate the same overall themes reflect that the Gothic is still very much alive.

In the case of Ballard’s fiction, one of the more interesting ways the Gothic spirit remains is by replicating or actualizing the complex relationship the genre had with space and architecture. By substituting the clean and antiseptic skyscraper of *High-Rise* (1975) for the ancient ruins and haunted decrepit mansions, Ballard changes some of the rules of the game, locating the essential Gothic elements in different places, featuring his dramas in plain light rather than in shadows. What remains constant, as we shall see, is the uncanny, and what this trope allows us to see is the development of the genre.

### 2.5. The Architectural Uncanny

After the First World War, philosophers investigated the lost nature of “dwelling,” prompted by the shaky status of Europe as a “home,” reading the poets of the first Romantic uncanny. For Georg Lukács, the uncanny reinforced the links with tradition and nostalgia, and the modern condition was a “transcendental homelessness” (41). Hubert Dreyfus describes Martin Heidegger’s view of *unheimlich* or “unsettledness” in his translation, as a “condition of such radical restlessness that everyone feels fundamentally unsettled (*unheimlich*), that is, senses that human beings can never be alone in the world. This, according to Heidegger, is why we plunge into trying to make ourselves at home and secure” (Dreyfus 37). The war had thrown the world into a state never before experienced, evoking by the sheer scale of its violence,

feelings of dread and anxiety toward the home, the basis and safe ground for the Western culture. Home, in a sense, was no longer secure and protected, and the post-war condition was one of perpetual homelessness or unsettledness.

The modernist avant-gardes employed the uncanny as an instrument of defamiliarization, and everywhere from the fiction of Franz Kafka to the paintings of Salvador Dali, uncanny themes such as the double, the automat, and the “derealization into service as symptoms of posthistorical existence” (Vidler 8) were to be found. Moreover, the dream-like state of the uncanny, and its ability to bridge the wake and dream states, was also exploited, which helped to renew the uncanny as an aesthetic category, even if it became closely associated with modernism’s infatuation with elements of shock and disturbance (8). Theodor Adorno wrote that “estrangement from the world is a moment of art,” and for him the uncanny was the only way to explain why “the most extreme shocks and gestures of estrangement emanating from modern art – seismograms of a general, inescapable mode of response – are closer to us than past art which merely seems close because of its historical reification” (*Aesthetic Theory* 369). In fact, Adorno’s notion of “negative dialectics” would present a strong case for the uncanny, as it is based on “human suffering,” a fact of “unreason” to counter Kant’s “fact of reason.” In *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argued that the human will is bound by the categorical imperative – a standard of rationality that delimits moral – and our wills are autonomous because of this fact of reason (*Factum der Vernunft*). Therefore, for Adorno (and Hegel before him), reason and Kant’s conditions of experience (and the difference between *phenomena* and *noumena*) are not clear-cut or separate, and reason alone cannot be so “pure” as to be able to grasp it fully. “The need to let suffering speak for itself is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject” (*Negative Dialectics* 118). Missing, for Adorno, is a certain surplus of meaning only provided with extreme shocks, events that put into question the whole notion of being able to rationalize experience as distanced and disinterested.

We can detect the uncanny in more recent critical theory, where it appears almost tangentially in the postmodern discourses of thinkers such as Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard. For Lacan, the uncanny was the very image of lack and genesis of his study of anxiety. For Derrida, the uncanny is in the instability of the links between signifier and signified, the author and the text (300). The themes of the double and elision of reality and fiction are basic to Baudrillard’s theory of

simulacra (91). The metaphorical home for the uncanny, however, according to Anthony Vidler, is architecture: it is not “a property of the space itself nor can it be provoked by any particular spatial conformation; it is, in its aesthetic dimension, a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming” (11). There are no uncanny characteristics in architecture, but spaces that have been sites for uncanny experiences do have specific properties, such as the haunted houses in Gothic novels, and spaces are therefore historical cultural signs of estrangement.

In this sense, the study of the Gothic in relation to Ballard’s fiction is no more than the circumstantial representation of spaces and mental spaces projected and introjected in it. The trope began with the Gothic and was carried into twentieth-century fiction, but critically it has been largely unexplored. It is worth considering it in Ballard’s case, as a considerable amount of meaning is invested in the spaces in his fiction, be they historical or psychological. One of the main issues of this study is the investigation of how Ballard’s appropriation of Gothic elements is informed by this complex relationship between inner and outer spaces.

## 2.6. Spaces and the Uncanny

The uncanny, writes Vidler, is a valuable concept that serves as an interpretative model that “cuts through the periodizations of historians according to categories such as romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism, as a way of understanding an aspect of modernity that has given a new meaning to the traditional Homeric notion of ‘homesickness’” (12). It also allows for a reevaluation of aesthetic theory in terms of the double (imitation), repetition, the symbolic, the sublime, and the discourse of estrangement and the Other. Moreover, it posits an unfinished view of history and aesthetics, effectively grounding contemporaneity in history, for we are trapped in history repeating the same models, but also questioning it. Ballard’s concern with urban alienation, starting with short stories from the 1960s but coming to fruition in the novels *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* and later developed in the final quartet, *Cocaine Nights*, *Super-Cannes*, *Millennium People*, and *Kingdom Come*, asks for a fresh way of looking at and understanding urban spatiality.

*Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* tap into the anxiety toward “empty spaces” appropriated or created by urbanism, as taken literally, but also the emptiness and void

of the modernist utopias. They stand each at one end of the civic spectrum and present radically different setups and outcomes. *Concrete Island* deals with the actual empty space, a byproduct of urbanism and capitalism, but also a reflection of the problems of individuality, the psyche, and alienation in contemporary urban environments. As the architect (both novels have architects as protagonists) Robert Maitland is stranded on a traffic island and finds himself unable to leave it, we see that the site stands for his own mind and his marooned condition is a plea for individualism and the shaping power of the imagination.

*High-Rise* tackles the modernist utopian credo literally, openly acknowledging architecture as a project informed by and informing people's psyches insidiously. Modern architecture sought to eliminate the past and achieve a self-regulating, machine-like working system, open and transparent, with no traumas or ties to the past. This effacing of history and denial of the human turns against itself as the occupants of the high-rise descend into barbarism and engage into clan warfare. The high-rise enacts a massive spatial and mental repression, only to encounter the very elements it sought to repress, largely amplified.

Ballard warns of the effects of the affectless urban life, but suggests that new sensibilities open up in the process, as a testament to the ability of the human mind to adapt and the inability of any system of thought being able to contain and determine its seemingly infinite potential. The question remains whether these new sensibilities will yield productive results or will collapse into destruction and nothingness like the utopian modernist projects. In the novels of the early 1970s – *Crash*, *Concrete Island*, and *High-Rise* – Ballard seems certain that the process leads only to self-destruction and death, but his more recent novels – *Cocaine Nights*, *Super-Cannes*, *Millennium People*, and *Kingdom Come* – reveal communities and systems that foster and develop psychopathologies and wayward impulses. Instead of denying and marginalizing them, the future for Ballard will be ruled by systems in which contingency is not only expected, but also designed.

### 3. Concrete Island

#### 3.1. Survival Narrative

The title of Ballard's novel alludes to the image of the island in his own mythos and to other survival narratives of English literature, such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, William Golding's *Pincher Martin* and *Lord of the Flies*, and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, all of which resound in the novel. The island in "The Terminal Beach" served, for Ballard, as a *tabula rasa* in which Traven, the protagonist, imprinted a topographical version of his psyche. Nothing, however, is every definite or absolute in Ballard's fiction: the island is also alive in its own terms, and it stands at one time for the self and for everything else outside – the other. This confused and ambiguous relation is at stake in "Terminal Beach" and *Concrete Island*, for the latter can be considered a partial rewrite or a reworking of previous themes and ideas.

The island of *Concrete Island* acknowledges and signals a development and complication of this concept, for this island is symbolic from the outset, as the title attests. Written in 1972-3, shortly after the publication of *Crash*, a book that marked Ballard's increasing preoccupation with the literary possibilities of the contemporary urban landscape and the psychic geography induced by it, *Concrete Island* is his exploration and mapping of the crumbling barrier between inner and outer space by way of modern man's use of technology. As discussed before, Ballard is only tangentially interested in technology, as the way the mind works or adapts to contemporary life and its dependence on the technologies created by man are more important. There seems to be a huge, unexplored gap between the foundational narratives of Western civilization and the actual way in which man lives and deals with the outside world/reality. In a way, Ballard proposes a literary mapping of this hazy interface with which we all live but fail to comprehend almost entirely.

For such an ambitious task, it is no wonder he has turned to the freeing literary devices of SF and horror, but grounding his narratives firmly on the present world, producing a kind of "prophecy of the next five minutes," a rather common description of Ballard's work. The main literary device at work in *Concrete Island* is the isolation of the characters in the rubble-strewn, deject traffic island in the outskirts of London. All action takes place there, a literal and symbolic fissure in the urban landscape. The spatial limitation suggests a number of issues related to the space itself and its historical

and natural dimensions, but more importantly the way it affects the characters simply by being a space. Furthermore, Ballard shifts from the subjective first-person narration of *Crash* to a third-person narrator that while not omniscient, is decidedly more objective, if not at least in appearance. David Pringle writes in 1979 that “in recent novels Ballard has been making larger concessions to social realism [. . .] in *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* he is trying to become more of a novelist” (50). By isolating his characters and employing, even partially, a naturalistic stance, Ballard seems to be studying modern man from a distance, isolating a sample and changing its element, just to see what happens.

Gasiorek writes that Ballard’s focus shifted in that period from the more outlandish possibilities of SF to the “power of contemporary fabulation” (107). He continues, “These tightly constructed and rigidly controlled myths of the near future [*Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*] depart from devastatingly simple starting points and then unfold with a relentless logic.” The act of isolation allows Ballard to expose how much of his characters’ identity is a mere social construct, and how the new predicament asks for an entirely new set of rules and guidelines, a descent into primitivism that will not fully concretize. The physical isolation cuts the characters off from the social world and therefore psychologizes their interior life and denies them possibility of external action. The critic Peter Brigg wrote, “[A] detailed realism of scene is, of course, one of the aspects of surreal presentation, but Ballard seems to be angling closer to actual realism in these novels” (66). Contemporary reviews of *Concrete Island* (such as that of Ian Watson, reprinted in Goddard and Pringle) saw a closer relation to the work of Samuel Beckett, in which allegory, not social realism, was at work. The French critic Antoine Griset wrote that the novel is a continuation of the previous book, *Crash*, but this time “the automobile is a mere symbolic pretext for an examination of the flip-side of our ordered, automatic, aseptic lifestyle” (Hupp). The focus, according to Griset, is the urban Man Friday living in the “interstices of modern cities: the invisible masses we observe daily from behind the safety of the windscreen or the office window” (Hupp). The architect Maitland crosses the invisible barrier into the hellish landscape and has to confront the enigmas of the social inequality as well as those of his own psyche and body.

What is most striking is how this semblance of objectivity and realism will eventually subside, and *Concrete Island* will gradually reveal itself as a deeply

subjective narrative. The novel opens with the protagonist's accident, told in a detached and even clinical manner:

Soon after three o'clock on the afternoon of April 22nd 1973, a 35-year-old architect named Robert Maitland was driving down the high-speed exit lane of the Westway interchange in central London. Six hundred yards from the junction with the newly built spur of the M4 motorway, when the Jaguar had already passed the 70 m.p.h. speed limit, a blow-out collapsed the front near-side tyre. (7)

The narrator is not omniscient, as Brigg states, since we only see what Maitland sees, and later with the introduction of Jane and Proctor, the narrator never discloses any information that Maitland himself does not possess. This technique allows for a more subjective reading of the events, and in the subsequent novel, *High-Rise*, Ballard will employ three different semi-omniscient narrators, each following a main character in alternating chapters, but even then, there will not be complete objectivity and omniscience.

Several textual clues that the narrative is indeed subjective and shaped by Maitland's conscience are present from page one. The extent and the manner in which the external events and space respond to Maitland's psyche vary. While still narrating the accident, the narrator says, "[T]he exploding air reflected from the concrete parapet seemed to detonate *inside* Maitland's skull" (7, emphasis added). Shortly thereafter, Maitland looks at himself in the mirror and sees his eyes, "blank and unresponsive," like those of a "psychotic twin" (9). At the time of the crash, Maitland is returning from a three-day conference he spent with his mistress, Helen Fairfax. This "duplication involved in seeing his wife so soon after a week with Helen," we are told, might have driven him to "almost willfully [devise] the crash, perhaps a bizarre kind of rationalization" (9). The idea that an underlying reality to the text is sneaking up on the reader, a textual mirroring of the contrast of a baser and darker reality in the story, is Ballard's reworking of classical Freudian theory. One of the main elements of the uncanny, as described by Freud, is the presence of a double. In the novel, it is not fully displaced as it would be on a classic Gothic tale into another character with similar traits to the protagonist (such as in Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson"), but present in a more realistic way, as a side of Maitland's psyche that might have wished and even deliberately crashed into the island. This gradual transformation and combination of two realities, imagined and real, internal and external is one of the more interesting



possibilities allowed by the uncanny. *Concrete Island* is Ballard's exploration of the gap between mind and body, as in the text Maitland will desperately try to dissociate his mind from his injured body, a process that is never realized – which suggests that the widening of such a gap is only a tentative solution to his problems. Through the futility and the frustration of this effort, made possible only by the special circumstances of the external reality, i.e. the actual space of the island, Ballard meditates on how distanced from reality the modern world has become, and how it is necessary to turn our attention to the imagined, the unreal, and the fictional.

### 3.2. Dark Space

Space, writes Vidler, is assumed to

hide, in its darkest recesses and forgotten margins, all the objects of fear and phobia that have returned with such insistency to haunt the imaginations of those who have tried to stake out spaces to protect their health and happiness. Indeed, space as threat, as harbinger of the unseen, operates as [a] medical and psychical metaphor for all the possible erosions of bourgeois bodily and social well being. (168)

By disrupting the boundaries in the cities, the uncanny became public and modern, coming to the metropolis and affecting multiple spaces and classes.

Phobias associated with spatial fear, agoraphobia and claustrophobia, were first diagnosed in the late nineteenth century, showing how drastic changes in living conditions and the perception of space could be a source of anxiety. François Delaporte writes in *Disease and Civilization*, “Living conditions affect two distinct areas, one within the body, the other outside it: organic space and social space. Social space is the space within which the organism lives and labors, and the conditions of existence within that space – living conditions – determine the probability of life and death” (80). The dual nature of space, always internal and external, parallels the way cities are organized, clearly demarcated and isolated. Michel Foucault argued for spatial empowerment in *Discipline and Punish*, building on Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, clearly the basis for the concept of transparent space. Transparent space is that which can be seen from all sides, light space, where nothing or nobody can hide, the paradigm of total control in Bentham's conception. In the early twentieth century, modernists led by Le Corbusier championed the idea of “hygienic space,” as transparency was thought to “eradicate the domain of myth, suspicion, tyranny, and above all the irrational”

(Vidler 168). There was power through transparency, as Foucault elaborated on “The Eye of Power,” and the idea that surveillance was the optimal instrument of control, as “the principle of the dungeon is reversed; daylight and the overseer’s gaze capture the inmate more effectively than darkness, which afforded after all a sort of protection” (153). At the same time, every institutionalized space, from hospitals and prisons to schools to cities, can be analyzed for hidden contents and the instrumentalization of the politics of surveillance.

Foucault points out that the spatial paradigm of modernism and the insistence on transparency was born out of a fear of the Enlightenment in the face of “darkened spaces, of the pall of gloom which prevents the full visibility of things, men and truths” (154). The notion that there is a transparent, clean, and utopian space leads us to examine its negative counterpart, a dark space, a double vision already in place in late eighteenth-century architecture. The neoclassical French architect Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799) promoted the idea of an expressive architecture, an architecture that revealed its purpose (*architecture parlante*). The architecture of death, he thought, should “express the extreme melancholy of mourning by means of its stripped and naked walls, deprived of all ornament” (qtd. in Vidler 170) and it, in effect, was a kind of visual shadow of conventional architecture. These buildings were to literally embody the burial they symbolized, creating a negative space, shadowed on the ground, based on the “death form” of the body, just as conventionally the proportions of architecture followed the dimensions of the human body in life. Vidler suggests that, by doing so, Boullée prefigured the nineteenth century concern with the double as “harbinger of death, or as the shadow of the unburied dead” (171), something that Freud would identify as one of the aspects of the uncanny, the ability to slip from one state to the other. Essential for the working of power through transparency are the binaries light/dark, clear/obscure, central to Enlightenment phenomenology, writes Foucault (1950). This vision is limited, however, because transparency needs obscurity, needs the ambiguity to “stage the presence of death in life, dark space in bright space” and therefore the *panopticon* or Le Corbusier’s utopian city “La Ville Radieuse” do not effect a “triumph of light over dark but precisely [the] insistent presence of the one in the other” (Vidler 172). The uncanny becomes important as an aesthetic trope because it allows us to go beyond the binary opposition and grasp a more human dimension, one that acknowledges and embraces ambiguity and ambivalence.

Marc Augé coined a term that might bear on the study of the shady gray area in between places of power: non-place. Non-places are spaces of transience that cannot be defined as “relational, historical, and concerned with identity” (77), and those abound in supermodernity, “spaces that are not themselves anthropological places and [. . .] do not integrate the earlier places” (78). Supermarkets, airports, modern housing estates, hotels, and motorways are non-places, and Augé points out that more and more of our lives is being spent in these spaces. What characterizes them is a conscious convergence of homogeneity, as everything is made to appear and act neutral, without any apparent signs of identity, and for this reason, any person of any social background and nationality can be made to feel accommodated in them. We have grown accustomed to this apparent neutrality, but what Augé, and Ballard in his fiction, suggests is that it is far from neutral, and the uniform and inorganic social life promoted by these spaces is somehow aggressive and even anti-human.

### 3.3. Paraspace and Simulation

Henri Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space*, argues that each mode of production creates its own peculiar space, and a proper science of space would embody “a technological utopia, a sort of computer simulation of the future, or of the possible, within the framework of the real – the framework of the existing mode of production” (9), the subject of many SF novels, but also “all kinds of projects concerned with space, be they those of architecture, urbanism or social planning” (8). This Marxist turn grounds Lefebvre’s theory in history, and is welcome because it is particularly attentive to political, economic, and social changes, as if every space begins as a utopia, prompted by the shifts of one mode of production to another. In every space, writes Lefebvre, subjects are situated either to “recognize themselves or lose themselves” (35). As Michael Benedikt pointed out, there is a new spatiality prompted by the changes in the mode of production, and that is cyberspace, “a word, in fact, that gives a name to a new stage, a new and irresistible development in the elaboration of human culture and business under the sign of technology” (1). Cyberspace is characterized by being a zone of invisibility, everywhere and nowhere, created and made possible by technology.

“Cyberspace is clearly a *paraspace*,” writes Bukatman, referring to Samuel Delany’s definition of the term, a “parallel space to the normal space of the diegesis – rhetorically heightened ‘other realm’” (157). Common in SF, according to Delany, is

the depiction of a future world and at the same time an “alternate space, sometimes largely mental, but always materially manifested, that sits beside the real world, and in which language is raised to an extraordinarily lyric level”; and perhaps more importantly, “conflicts that begin in ordinary space are resolved in this linguistically intensified paraspace” (31). Brian McHale’s discussion of “zones” touches on the same ground, and Bukatman summarizes both concepts as places of “ontological shift, as they redefine and extend the realms of experience and human definition in contradistinction to the possibilities inherent in normal space [. . .] What is demolished in paraspace and zone is any vision of fixed space, subjectivity, or language, as these new, and radically mutating, ontologies emerge” (166). Not quite there, effecting a proto-paraspace, is Ballard’s use of a mental space in *Concrete Island*, which follows some of the traits observed by these theorists. In the materially-manifested mental world of the novel, mundane conflicts are resolved: technology makes this place possible, not the same brand of technology that would be so prominent in cyberpunk fiction in the 1980s, but the kind Ballard seems to be more interested in, one that is far more transparent – that of the car and the spaces created for it, the motorways and consequently the traffic island.

On the other hand, *Concrete Island* is not an alternate space, because the novel does not present another reality, unless we assume Maitland’s memories and tangential allusions to the social world as a grounding reality. One of the defining angles of cyberspace is its boundless possibilities and the idea of infinity in social and spatial terms. The space in Ballard’s novel is contained, markedly so, and while there is some social interaction, it is extremely limited. The main common idea, however, is that of a mental space, technologically influenced, in which the social, moral, and ontological order are suspended, allowing an exploration and the possibility of resolution of certain conflicts that would be impossible in external reality.

Jean Baudrillard’s discussion of simulacra is pertinent here. He suggests that we no longer have referents, no grounding reality out there on which to base our signs; all we have are signs that refer to other signs, essentially creating a world of simulation. This reversion is central to his theory, and the more “convincing example” of a fictional work that has already incorporated this reversion is Ballard’s *Crash* – “even more than *High-Rise* or *Concrete Island*,” Baudrillard adds. The contemporary model for this SF that is no longer SF is without a doubt *Crash*:

*Crash* is our world, nothing is really “invented” therein, and everything is hyper-functional: traffic and accidents, technology and death, sex and the camera eye. Everything is like a huge simulated and synchronous machine; an acceleration of our own models, of all the models that surround us, all mixed together and hyper-operationalized in the void. What distinguishes *Crash* from almost all other SF, which still seems to revolve around the old (mechanical/mechanistic) duo of function vs. dysfunction, is that it projects into the future along the same lines of force and the same finalities as those of the “normal” universe. Fiction can go beyond reality (or inversely, which is more subtle), but according to the same rules of the game. But in *Crash*, there is neither fiction nor reality – a kind of hyperreality has abolished both. (“Simulacra and Science Fiction” 4)

In cyberspace, as Delany pointed out, there is a spatiotemporal disconnect from reality and simulation, but not in *Crash*, according to Baudrillard. The text is already inside the simulation, and there is no established normality, no estrangement techniques for us to create a distance between our world and that of the text. Ballard’s metaphor of the car as the ultimate technological model of transparency and simulation has a certain purpose here, because it creates a simulated space and time that we take for granted in our daily lives – we are already living in the simulacrum and have not yet realized it.

Nicholas Ruddick, in response to the French philosopher’s article on *Crash*, argues that the concept of the real is at stake in the novel, but not in the sense Baudrillard believes. For Ruddick, “the real has not been nor is it in the process of being abolished. Far from it: the catastrophe, whatever form it takes, actually signifies the liberation of a ‘deep’ real (associated with the unconscious), that has been until then latent in a ‘shallow’ manifest reality (held in place by mechanisms of repression)” (3). Ruddick, properly contextualizing the novel in Ballard’s body of work, offers a more cogent reading than Baudrillard does of this oblique concept of a crumbling reality. Both, however, see that Ballard deals with different levels of reality and its consciousness in these novels.

It is significant, therefore, that *Concrete Island*, Ballard’s first novel after *Crash*, essentially begins where the former left off – with a car crash – suggesting that it may be an exploration of the same ideas, or even more likely, a parallel path taken from the same starting point. Ruddick writes that the accident that initiates the narrative

in *Crash* is “no accident, but the product of a psychopathology operating at the cultural level that is worked out according to a post-Freudian logic” (3), and this is true for *Concrete Island* as well. The premise of each novel, however, is very different, especially because in the latter text there is a realized concept of a contained space. Ruddick summarizes Ballard’s psychological interest in the car crash:

[T]here is a direct connection between the individual unconscious and apparently external sociological phenomena. Ballard uses individual character to represent aspects of human desire, the expression of which is the external landscape, and the power of which is attested to by the fact that in the late 20th century the landscape in which Western civilization inhabits is increasingly artificial. As desire has both conscious and unconscious levels, so does the landscape. (4)

Ballard and Baudrillard both observe the same thing, and that is what Ruddick here describes as the increasingly artificial landscape of the late twentieth century. Whereas Baudrillard stops at the surface and claims that there is nothing beyond that, Ballard believes the opposite, that some deep, hidden agency is at work, manifesting symptomatically as these artifices.

Ruddick concludes his defense of Ballard by acknowledging the writer’s debt to Freud:

The catastrophic interactions between individual and landscape in Ballard’s fiction are expressions of the disjunctions between conscious and unconscious desires at the psychic level. The unconscious level represents *real* desire, the intractable ground of being, and it is Ballard’s project to make this reality manifest, with the very Freudian – and ultimately moral – idea of bringing light to dark.

This project, as the critic points out, is very Freudian (an author to whom Ballard has repeatedly professed his admiration), but the whole premise of a dark world coming to light, especially in connection with physical landscape and space, combining the psychological aspects of unconscious and conscious desires, is inherently Gothic. And, as in that tradition, the revelation comes at some expense, such as an act of violence or a break in the moral order.

### 3.4. Gothic Space: “The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista”

Between 1956 and 1970, Ballard wrote a number of short stories that had as setting a “decrepit, nostalgic, and decadent” vacation resort called Vermilion Sands, taking place in a future with numerous references to a strange, almost organic and retro technology. Characters in these stories are always wealthy and disaffected, living in a world that in Ballard’s words, “celebrates the neglected virtues of the glossy, lurid and bizarre” (5). This fascination with the decadent and extravagant evokes a strong Gothic influence. Each of the stories is concerned with a particular kind of artistic medium, from music to painting. For instance, “Cry Hope, Cry Fury” (1966) alludes widely to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and J. M. W. Turner, whereas “Prima Belladonna” (1956) deals with music. Architecture plays a central role in the 1962 story “The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista,” which illustrates the writer’s use of space and his understanding, strongly informed by the Gothic, of how space can project and introject unconscious desires.

Amid the “abstract villas and fake palazzos” of Vermilion Sands, the protagonist, Howard Talbot, is looking for a “psychotropic house,” a type of habitation that is sensitive to its owner’s moods and unconscious wishes, the very space responding in real time by altering its shape, size, and texture. The first house he visits illustrates the concept well, a place that “would have shaken even an old-guard surrealist on a heroin swing” (Ballard, “The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista” 414), made of six suspended spheres, like a mobile. A lot is made of the house’s previous occupants and how it responds to strangers rather negatively, a “blend of past reactions to negative emotions, the hostility of the previous tenants, a traumatic encounter with a bailiff or burglar” (416). Already we see the play of history manifesting itself in the present, being literally embodied in the walls of the house. At a certain point Talbot notices the ceiling dilating and contracting, in parallel to a previous owner’s respiratory rhythms. He detects the hint of a spasm, a “feedback of a cardiac failure” (417). That the house reveals certain symptoms that might have even been hidden from the occupant itself is a nice touch, acknowledging the Freudian notion of bodily distress manifesting themselves as unconscious symptoms in dreams.

Someone may want a psychotropic house for more practical reasons, as the protagonist explains: the “laughter of a family” and the “harmony of a marriage” (418) of a previous owner could bear a positive influence on the present. Over time there should be an overlay of responses, the edges smoothed and house and owner learn to

live in harmony. Eventually Talbot settles on a house that he later discovers was owned by Gloria Tremayne, a retired movie star. Tremayne had shot and killed her husband, the producer Miles Vanden Starr, and Talbot had helped to defend her at her trial, so he was well acquainted with the details of this melodrama. He notes that at the trial they called her “The Ice Face,” because her personality was not apparent in real life, but in morbid curiosity, he hoped that the real Gloria Tremayne would materialize through the house.

Slowly the woman he knew is overridden by the one who lived in the house and left her mark, despite the attempts to preserve sanity and ignore her by Talbot’s wife, who acts as if her husband is having a ghostly love affair with the movie star. Before leaving him, she cries, “Haven’t I a right to my own husband? I’m sick of sharing him with a homicidal neurotic who died five years ago. It’s positively ghoulish!” (426). What transpires is that Talbot starts to assume Vanden Starr’s character, so the house – and Tremayne – can reenact a murderous Gothic psychodrama. The story ends with the house attempting to kill Talbot, who escapes and discusses the affair with the real estate agent Stammers. Tongue-in-cheek, Stammers suggests that the house might need a psychiatrist to sort it all out, to which Talbot seriously asserts, “You’re right. In fact, that was exactly my role – to reconstruct the original traumatic situation and release the repressed material” (434). Indeed, Talbot explains that it was not the house that attempted murder, but the memory of Vanden Starr’s death, and if his wife had stayed, she would have assumed Tremayne’s role and killed him.

Talbot knows and wants to decode the moods the house influence on him. Ballard never quite describes how exactly this mechanism works other than by abstract and subjective passages such as the following: “Above me the ceiling flexed and quivered, the colour of roof slates, here and there mottled by angry veins that bunched the walls in on each other. The air pressure mounted but I felt too tired to open a window and sat stewing in a pit of black anger” (426). Thus, Talbot’s perception that he needed to reenact the drama for the house is not quite right. Rather he is enacting a psychodrama that he imagines is encoded in the signs the house gives him. He interprets a certain dilation of the wall as a mood of Tremayne’s manifesting. In essence, he is providing the meaning and an underlying narrative. The technology of the psychotropic house is only a literalization of a typical Gothic trope, that of the environment being receptive to internal projections, present in countless tales, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). In Gilman’s story, the



female protagonist suffers from depression, confined in a bedroom for the duration of a summer, becomes obsessed with the patterns on the room's wallpaper, since there is nothing else to stimulate her.

It is the strangest yellow, that wall-paper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw — not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things. But there is something else about that paper — the smell! ... The only thing I can think of that it is like is the color of the paper! A yellow smell. (Gilman)

She feeds her imagination with the sparse stimulus she has, and goes on into imagining horrible scenarios, such as that of a woman hidden behind the patterns of the wallpaper, obviously a projection of her own self. The description is also synesthetic, a combination of different senses (“yellow smell”) that is also present in Ballard (“black anger”).

An important part of “The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista” is that Talbot desires the influence of surrounding space to affect him, in a sense rejecting his private, inner self in favor of an anonymous feeling. Impersonal space and transparent space is what modernist architecture offered, a space so radically stark and devoid of personality that it was supposed to be beneficial. The psychotropic houses of Vermilion Sands can be seen as a response to that, but which, in a sense, deflate this opposition between transparent and dark space. The houses are not impersonal, they are quite unique not only because of their design but of their history. Talbot knows the influence space can and will have on individuals, but even so, he seeks external stimuli, an off-hand acknowledgment of dissatisfaction with his own life, which explains why he allows himself to take the position of an actor of a drama presented for his own benefit. The story ends with Talbot moving back into the house, with the psychotropic mechanisms deactivated, but knowing that one day, he will have to turn the house on again – as if his true, unconscious desire was indeed to step into the roles for real and die at the hands of this buried narrative.

### 3.5. Repetition and Reenactment

Ballard returns to the device of staging a narrative in real life in *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), where a psychiatrist sees the world as being encoded, and believes that he can decode it by way of bizarre psychological experiments that involve the restaging of key events of the twentieth century, such as John F. Kennedy's

assassination. For these events must be reimagined in a way that they can be made to make sense, because as they stand, they do not, and therefore the contemporary world is an indecipherable mess. The ideas of repetition and the creation of meaning are central in Ballard's work. In *Concrete Island*, Maitland consciously sees himself as a modern Crusoe, and at a certain stage enacts the narrative of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to survive. He says to himself, "Maitland, poor man, you're marooned here like Crusoe – If you don't look out you'll be beached here forever," to which the narrator adds that this is true, as the patch of ground he found himself was "literally a deserted island" (32). There are later references to the Caliban-like figure of Proctor, the demented tramp that lives on the island, being a sort of Man Friday. At certain points, Maitland finds himself reenacting childhood scenarios, as if the repetition in the privileged space he is now in enables him to resolve some of his childhood neuroses.

Likewise, Jane, the prostitute who lives in an abandoned cinema in the island, left her husband and her bourgeois lifestyle after her newborn son died. Caring for the injured Maitland, she often acts as if he is in fact her baby, talking to him as if with an infant, changing his clothes and tucking him in bed: "She held [Maitland]'s head in her arm, crooning reassuringly as he drank from the plastic cup, half-working her plump breast against his forehead as if feeding her own baby" (114). At other times, this scenario is skewed, and she has sexual relations with Maitland, talking about Proctor as if he was their child. A telling moment occurs when Jane attempts to poison Maitland in a way we can only assume had happened before with her baby, since we are never told the exact circumstances of Jane's history. After Maitland spends the first half of the novel exploring the island on his own, trying to find a way out in vain, he is found by Proctor and taken to Jane, who proceeds into taking him in her bed, feeding him, and tending to his wounds. Realizing that the only way to escape is to exploit the two, Maitland plays Jane and Proctor against each other, "feeding their mutual distrust" (114).

Yet for the time being he was the young woman's prisoner, and a prey to whatever devious whims might flick through her mind. In an odd way she seemed to enjoy their relationship. Her attitude towards him varied from tenderness and good humour to a sudden vengeful anger, almost as if he represented two different people for her. (114)

Later that night, suffering from fever and in the hands of an emotionally unbalanced Jane, he is given a cup of diluted paraffin to drink. She laughs maniacally at him

vomiting, while Proctor comes to Maitland's rescue. Gasiorek writes that Maitland's instrumentalization of human relations parallels his "means-end approach to the island," so that "preservation of self is predicated on a need to dominate" (116). The aggressiveness of his approach stems from a need to "control things (people, environments) outside the self, [disclosing] a desire to make [the] self an inviolable entity" (ibid).

The back-story of every character is very incomplete and only told in oblique fragments. Jane never talks openly of her past, only silently acknowledging when Maitland presents his version, gathered from the objects and photographs found in her room. Her actions, such as the repetition of previous acts, reveal a great deal by way of projection, and we look at her as an insane woman, often incapable of seeing reality for what it is, caught in a loop. Proctor hardly ever talks, and Jane, who tells Maitland he had been in the circus, fills in his past. Significantly, however, Maitland's own story is equally fragmented and oblique, told to the reader in the same terms as to the other characters', by indirect and disconnected pieces of their past.

Still injured and largely immobile at the end of Chapter 3, Maitland reflects on his wife, Catherine, and his son, David, only to conclude that he enjoys being alone with this rather cryptic passage:

For years now he had remythologized his own childhood. The image in his mind of small boy playing endlessly by himself in a long suburban garden surrounded by a high fence seemed strangely comforting. It was not entirely vanity that the framed photograph of seven-year-old boy in a drawer of his desk at the office was not of his son, but of himself. Perhaps even his marriage to Catherine, a failure by anyone else's standards, had succeeded precisely because it recreated for him this imaginary empty garden. (27)

What exactly does he mean by the failure of his marriage we can only guess, for at this point all we know is that he had been with his mistress, Helen, and that he had managed successfully to isolate each section of his life. He had been careful enough not to mix business with pleasure, and family with either, a convenient arrangement that only augmented his sense of alienation. That he had to remythologize his childhood can only mean that his childhood, spent mostly alone, was frustrating and painful at the time, but in view of present self, it is comforting because those were formative years, and those events shaped him. The island he now finds himself in is nothing more than a realized

empty garden of his unconscious, strangely comforting, uncanny, at the same time disquieting and familiar.

Finding an abandoned print-shop in chapter 8, Maitland stumbles upon a letterpress block depicting “the cloudy figures of a dark-suited man and a white-haired woman,” which triggers a remembrance of his parents’ divorce: “the uncertainties of this period, when he was eight years old, seemed to be replicated on this negative image on the letterpress plate, in the reversed tones of this man and woman” (65). This image works, as discussed above, in filling in the blanks of Maitland’s character, but like the empty garden, it is an imagined, negative image of reality, an instance of a greater theme of the book. The island is a negative, dark space, a place that reflects in reverse the actual conditions of reality, and it is a space closer to the mental processes of the mind, often employing dream logic. Looking at the negative plate, we realize that what we see in the outside is only a print, or a shadow, of a former state. *Concrete Island* explores, above all else, the gaps between the negative and the positive image, between the mind and the body, past and present, and interior and exterior.

### 3.6. The Pavilion of Doors

In a late chapter, titled “The Pavilion of Doors,” Maitland’s body is starting to subside, his fever returning, but his mind is closer than ever to the reality of the island. He asks Proctor to build him a shelter out of discarded sections of car bodies: “A semi-circle of doors formed the sides, tied together by their window pillars. Above, two hoods completed a primitive roof” (162). This is the first time Maitland abandons his pursuit for a way out of the island, and this change is probably triggered by the events in the previous chapter, in which he teaches Proctor how to write. Mischievously, he leads Proctor to think that the words “MAITLAND HELP” are in fact, Proctor’s own name. Maitland’s exploit of the tramp, who then feels happy and starts scribbling those words on everything he sees in the belief he is naming the island after himself, amounts to a bigger humiliation than the earlier moment when Maitland urinates on him. The architect effectively colonizes the tramp, indoctrinating him into naming the island after Maitland himself without knowing, which gives him satisfaction, but also confuses him. The chapter is titled “The naming of the island,” illustrating that, via Proctor, Maitland takes ownership of the island by naming it with fragments of his own name.

The shelter built by Proctor is likewise covered by his finger-writing, displaying what we assume are repeated instances of Maitland’s name and the word “help.” These

signs point to the real meaning behind these events, and in fact to all of the narrative, which is a man in trouble. Everything on the island is a part of it, and is a part of Maitland, and as Gasiorek suggests, it is part of the “novel’s progressive dissolution of the various sign-systems through which society encodes meaning, symbolically structuring human intercourse and exchange” (117). The linguistic confusion also plays a part in blurring the distinction between the two men. After Proctor is accidentally killed by a motorway repair vehicle, a kind of realization of the “device of torture” (60) hallucinated by Maitland in his vision of death, Maitland becomes a version of the tramp, concerned with a fusion of his own body with the island. The shelter is Maitland’s final step of this process, by which he inhabits the island effecting also a fusion of his body with technology, retooling the discarded bits and pieces of machinery. Gasiorek sees in this act the starting point of a new form of life:

The possibility of combating the negative effects of technology resides not in some fantasized “elsewhere” that bypasses it altogether [. . .] but in the world it has helped to forge. It is not just that the technology is ubiquitous in the bits and pieces of equipment that one might take or leave, use and choose not to use, as Proctor and Maitland do in their reassembly of various discarded machines. The novel portrays a world that has been entirely remade by technology and that now exists in a self-perpetuating cycle that has spun out of control to service that technology. (118)

A fusion with the island is impossible, as is a descent into primitivism, because the shedding off the layers of his own self, as Maitland does, leaves him no alternative but to build his own self again from the very things he tried to dissociate himself from. The solution here, as it was in *Crash*, was to exploit the ability to reuse the technology for other purposes and see it from different ways in order to obtain new meanings.

Jane quips to Maitland when seeing his shack that it is “at least as good as most of the speculative building that’s going up these days. I can see that you’re a real architect” (163). In a way, that is what Maitland had set out to do from the very beginning, no longer wanting to escape in vain, but to build a new space. In other words, the future does not lie in modernist utopias (a place that cannot be) but right here and now, with what we already have.

Maitland’s retreat into his own mind is, ultimately, unsuccessful. Earlier, he name-checks La Grande Motte, a European futurist resort complex characterized by

“hard, affectless architecture” marked by “stylized concrete surfaces” (65), a place as hostile to fostering real human relations as the island. His predilection for this kind of architecture, as well as his deep desire to escape into the empty garden of his childhood (of which the island is a version), is what turns the island into a social and psychical dead-end. “Already he felt no real need to leave the island, and this alone confirmed that he had established his dominion over it” (176), and this realization is followed by the appearance of a police car, the officers attentive to the island, an easy chance of rescue that Maitland consciously avoids. The final paragraph echoes the earlier story “The Terminal Beach”: “Maitland thought of Catherine and his son. He would be seeing them soon. When he had eaten it would be time to rest, and to plan his escape from the island” (176). In the manner of his predecessor Traven, Maitland collapses under the weight of his own fantasy.

Ballard returned to this theme of being marooned inside one’s own fantasies, even alluding again to Crusoe, in “The Enormous Space,” a short story published in 1989. In it, Geoffrey Ballantyne, a recent divorcee, decides to never leave his home again after a series of personal and professional setbacks, expecting to “shut out the world and solve all [his] difficulties at a stroke” (“The Enormous Space” 118). Ballantyne hopes to “move to a different realm” and feels “tremendously buoyant, almost lightheaded,” as he thinks “only of essentials: the physics of the gyroscope, the flux of photons, the architecture of very large structures” (119) and relies only on “time and space” to sustain him after his food runs out. Like Maitland, he seeks to abandon parts of his personality and his life that he feels are not essential, shutting off his mind in order to find some internal essence.

In every way I am marooned, but a reductive Crusoe paring away exactly those elements of bourgeois life which the original Robinson so dutifully reconstituted. Crusoe wished to bring the Croydons of his own day to life again on his island. I want to expel them, and find in their place a far richer realm formed from the elements of light, time and space. (120)

We have seen that Maitland, after paring away the elements of his own life, has to build some semblance of a self again. As Gasiorek points out, “both the terrain on which he tries to achieve his self-exorcism and the identity he seeks to re-establish have been made out of the materials he proposes to discard” (119), which is ultimately why his task is a fruitless one. The characters of both texts, Maitland and Ballantyne, have the

same project in mind, but whereas Maitland finds himself gradually reintegrating aspects of his bourgeois, modern mentality back into his realm, Ballantyne further loses himself in emptiness. Maitland and Ballantyne, two explorers of uncharted mental territory, are probably named after the real-life aviator Edward Maitland and his crewmember W. W. Ballantyne, British men who took part in the first transatlantic flight by the airship R-34 in 1919.

Ballantyne's senses attune to what he perceives are the essentials, "the visual continuum around me, and the play of air and light" (121), a light that floods into the empty rooms of his suburban house and highlights the emptiness of both his internal and external spaces. This "reversed spatial universe" is "uncluttered by the paraphernalia of everyday life" (124) and therefore closer to reality, he believes. His hallucinatory state, like those experienced by the protagonists of *Concrete Island* and *Empire of the Sun*, is greatly intensified by his hunger and debilitated body. Gradually Ballantyne starts fearing it, as his food supplies are depleted and he has to resort to cannibalism, described as if it is the enormous, empty space of the house that attacks the TV repairman:

As [the repairman] stepped into the first of those white chambers, as large as aircraft hangars carved in the roof of an iceberg, he seemed to realise that he had entered a zone of danger. I grappled with him as we blundered through that white world, like Arctic explorers losing all sense of distance within a few steps of their tent. An hour later, when I had calmed his fears and carried him down the staircase, he had sadly yielded to the terrors of light and space. (126)

Again, there is a sense of geographical disproportion and complete avoidance of responsibility on the part of the protagonist, as he feels it is the space itself that presented danger. In a sense, Ballantyne has, like Maitland, projected his mind onto the empty space of his house, effectively losing his self rather than finding it, the white, empty immensity of nothing engulfing him and propelling him into a particular kind of madness. Differently from *Concrete Island*, the self is completely effaced and completely given over to the surrounding space. Ironically, the outcomes of both texts are similar; each character trapped in his created reality, but ultimately satisfied.

As suggested by Antoine Griset's contemporary review of *Concrete Island* in *Magazine Littéraire*, the novel allows us to witness the displacement of Ballard's focus, from the automobile in *Crash* to another manifestation of the death of affect: our

apparent indifference to an alternate world that takes place outside our windows. Maitland's island opens up like a portal, allowing him more than just see through, but actually experience a world quite different from that of our "ordained, aseptic, automatized and banalized modern daily lives" (Griset 53). This alternate reality is not alternate at all, only one that exists and is all but inaccessible to Maitland's social class. Griset's socially and morally oriented critique argues for a changed Maitland at the end of the book, even if with issues still unresolved. He does not leave the island, but is a "different man, harder, stronger, but still turning away from himself" (54), which is true, as Maitland has concocted a new lie, or a mode of living, after the arduous destruction and abandonment of his previous life and values.

As discussed before, Gasiorek identifies Maitland's failure in resolving his psychological issues precisely because the architect seeks to rebuild his identity out of materials from the island and his own body, but these are byproducts of the same set of values and beliefs he turned away from (Gasiorek 119). He becomes not a new man, but a new version of himself, attesting the unshakeable power of two forces: his own mind, playing games on itself, endlessly adapting to shifting circumstances; and that of the landscape, the physical realization of a collective brain, shaped by architects and businessmen like Maitland, probably trying to come to terms with the same fundamental questions.



## 4. High-Rise

### 4.1. The Vertical Zoo

Contrary to the survivalist narrative of *Concrete Island*, which reduced social life to its bare minimum, *High-Rise* (1975) resorts to some conventions of social realism, foregrounding naturalistic concerns with social anthropology and objectivity, made evident by Ballard's use of third-person narration and the one-off use of three different narrative perspectives. The tripartite division follows the building's own physical segmentation of social classes: the richest on the upper floors, represented by the high-rise's architect Anthony Royal; the poorer on the lower, represented by the documentarian Richard Wilder; and in middle-class, we have Robert Laing, a university physician, a more typical Ballard protagonist. This is the only time Ballard adopted this formal division, which greatly enhances the novel's attempt at social critique and relevance. It allows him to create a microcosm of British society, in clear contrast to the individuality of *Concrete Island*, and to show how the strange events occurring in the high-rise affect the behavior of the three men – and their respective social classes – differently, implying that the segregation is not only physical or economic, but primarily mental.

Gasiorek writes that these two novels “are situated at opposite ends of the civic spectrum: one exposes the hidden byproducts of contemporary life, while the other concentrates on its dreams of rational design” (120). *High-Rise* takes its starting point from the architectural theory of the modernists and their utopian, self-contained cities aimed at solving the problems of high-density housing. This is Ballard as his most dystopian, pushing to extremes all the tensions generated by high-rise living and exploring the social and mental breakdown of this failed modernist project. The fact that is alluding to a real-life situation – high-rise living is a reality in Britain and other countries – marks the novel as one that is firmly grounded on reality and has claims of social relevance, a rather uncommon trait for a Ballard novel. Well since the Dwellings Improvement Act of 1875, Britain has been concerned with improving urban housing. After the Second World War, movements of urban regeneration ensued, and tower blocks were introduced, designed to be affordable, practical, and egalitarian. However, the buildings offered dismal living conditions marred by structural problems and insufficient social and green space, which tended to isolate and alienate their

inhabitants. Their uncompromising architecture only serves people that do not exist, and there is a reversal: the inhabitants have to adapt to inhuman conditions.

Ballard was interested in “new lifestyles which permit modern technology [. . .] the life led in [high-rises] seems to me very abstract, and that’s an aspect of setting with which I’m concerned when I write – the technological landscape” (Hupp). For Ballard, this abstraction is forced in the inhabitants’ lives by the surrounding Brutalist architecture and its “rigid lines, austere forms, and geometrization of living space” (Gasiorek 122), echoing Le Corbusier’s dictum that “the great problems of modern construction must have a geometrical solution” (Le Corbusier 8). This structure reinforces the concept of transparency, enforced by modernist architecture, drawing from Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon. Transparency, according to Anthony Vidler, is a myth that haunts modernity (218). It is a movement toward honesty on one hand and hypocrisy on the other, since these model homes are being based on Bentham’s 1785 prison project, in which the all-seeing eye and transparency are used to enforce power. In this design, the prisoners are unable to tell if they are being watched, thus creating a sense of invisible omniscience, the mind controlling the body by a heightened and permanent sense of paranoia. The modernists, however, believed that the experience of living in a glass house was “revolutionary” and “intoxicating,” as Walter Benjamin expressed (180), advocating an “ideology of the glass house of the soul, a psychogeographic glass house [that] parallels [. . .] the glass house of the body” (Vidler 218).

Michel Foucault, in his discussion of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* alluded to eighteenth-century Gothic. For him, in Gothic narratives there was the obverse of the dreams of the Enlightenment, developing “a whole fantasy-world of stone walls, darkness, hideouts and dungeons” and these “imaginary spaces are like the negative of the transparency and visibility it is aimed to establish” (154). In the modernist transparent house, the inverse occurs, bringing forward the anxieties about the excessive rationalism and planning existence in purely Gothic terms. There is a reversal of the genre’s reliance on darkness, shadows, fear of the past, enacting its terrors in the aseptic light of the pure and clean home. Le Corbusier summarizes the concept of a healthy home:

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. (qtd. in Vidler 63)

There is a strong connection between morality and transparency, as if the home needs the perfect flow of air and light to make it more efficient and therefore morally healthier, effacing the dark and secret corners of the dusty and crooked Gothic houses. In Ballard's text, Anthony Royal, the architect of the high-rise, envisions the building as a giant aviary or a vertical zoo with hundreds of cages (134), but the animals had learned to open the doors, he realizes as the system breaks down.

In a 2006 article for *The Guardian*, Ballard wrote about architecture, affirming that

the modernists maintained that ornamentation concealed rather than embellished. Classical columns, pediments and pilasters defined a hierarchical order. Power and authority were separated from the common street by huge flights of steps that we were forced to climb on our way to law courts, parliaments and town halls. Gothic ornament, with all its spikes and barbs, expressed pain, Christ's crown of thorns and agony on the cross. The Gothic expressed our guilt, pointing to a heaven we could never reach. ("A Handful of Dust")

After the Great War, modernism was an appealing option for a society willing to forget and overcome its terrors. A fresh start, based on cleanliness and rationality was what they offered, but this utopian project fell short, opening the doors to the excesses of Nazism and Fascism. Ballard continues:

Architecture is a stage set where we need to be at ease in order to perform. Fearing ourselves, we need our illusions to protect us, even if the protection takes the form of finials and cartouches, Corinthian columns and acanthus leaves. Modernism lacked mystery and emotion, was a little too frank about the limits of human nature and never prepared us for our eventual end. ("A Handful of Dust")

The recesses and dark corners of Gothic architecture, with its towering power to recriminate and judge, were actually complex systems to maintain mental and social health, Ballard implies. The opacity of the Gothic and Baroque models of architecture, which projected inner anxiety onto physical space, protected us from looking at ourselves, thus displacing our moral anxieties to "illusions" and myths. Modernism, on the other hand, was laid bare of ornamentation and this blankness created a dead space,

a hall of mirrors that reflected only our worst impulses. Instead of darkness, there is an excess of light, inviting the repressive tendencies to manifest themselves. The impersonal nature of the building in *High-Rise* expresses a pathology already in place, that of anomie and the death of affect. This is what Ballard set out to do in the novel: to explore how utopia can quickly turn into dystopia by way of the use of space. The text, suggests Gasiorek, shows a “synergy between form and function [. . .] in the way the tower-block’s rebarbative architecture interpellates those who inhabit it as dehumanized subjects – a fit species for a machine-made world” (128). Ballard’s novel of social criticism exposes the dangers of the modernist world-view as mediated by contemporary technology.

#### 4.2. The House-Machine

The Gothic emphasis on a body-centric architecture, with its haunted houses and body metaphors, is still present in *High-Rise*, as the building retains an immanent, personified force. One resident voices her concern that the building has a “huge animate presence, brooding over them and keeping a magisterial eye on the events taking place,” and the body metaphor expands, as she is aware of “the elevators pumping up and down the long shafts resembled pistons in the chambers of a heart” (40), and the residents are linked to cells, corridors to arteries, and the electric lights to neurons. Later, as electricity fails, the dark bands on the face of the building are compared to “strata in a fading brain” (75) and the landscape, a “cluster of auditorium roofs, curving roadway embankments and rectilinear curtain walling formed an intriguing medley of geometries – less a habitable architecture [. . .] than the unconscious diagram of a mysterious psychic event” (25), and as the project fails the building is likened to a “moribund structure, with its vital signs fading” (68). Helen Wilder, Richard’s wife, complains that “there’s too much hostility [. . .] it’s always been there, but now it stands out [. . .] it’s not really the other residents, it’s the building” (46). The architect, Anthony Royal, living on the penthouse, is almost an archetypal Gothic villain, whose demented project for the high-rise gradually reveals itself reminiscent of those of a giant aviary and over-ambitious attempts to “challenge the sun itself” and “colonize the sky” (19). The notion of transcending one’s place in the natural or social order is a sign of the hubristic excesses that underlie Gothic fiction. Royal and the other architects did not foresee the barbarism that would take place; quite

the contrary: their intent was to arrive at the perfect “house-machine” as voiced by Le Corbusier, complete with tenants as their cells or cogs, “body-machines.”

The immediate consequence of the project is the heightened sense of alienation and isolation from moral norms and systems of order. Isolated in their microcosm, the tenants become free to dictate their own rules, and every one of them knows the importance of preserving this and perpetuates this distance, even when they leave the high-rise in the first chapters – soon they abandon the notion that there even is a world outside the building. Laing reflects that “the high-rise was a huge machine designed to serve, not the collective body of tenants, but the individual resident in isolation” (10) and for that he was its “truest tenant” (73), an individual that exemplifies the detachment nurtured by the high-rise, since “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” (35). This kind of existence paradoxically invites alienated introspection rather than creates meaningful social bonds, partly because one is forced to bridge a supposedly healthy distance to the other constantly. In the high-rise, there are always endless parties, operating on the “internal time of the high-rise, an artificial psychological climate [. . .] generated by a combination of alcohol and insomnia” (12). The atmosphere is one of constant agitation and bordering on mass hysteria.

Vidler theorizes that in the Corbusian “house-machine” the line between “nature and the machine, between the organic and the inorganic seemed crystal clear,” but there has been a reconfiguration and blurring of the boundaries effected by “cybernetic and bio-technologies.” He continues, “[T]he body, itself invaded and reshaped by technology, invades and permeates the space outside, even as this space takes on dimensions that themselves confuse the inner and the outer, visually, mentally, and physically” (147). Ballard anticipates this drift into the uncanny realm in *High-Rise*, playing on the confusion between the building, the entity or the collective body, and its individual tenants and their psyches. Virtually every character describes at one point the illusion that the building exists solely on their minds (34, 44) or is an extension of it (144). The novel effects the same movement of projection of inner space onto outer space as *Concrete Island*, creating an alternate reality in which moral values are suspended. The high-rise

removed the need to repress every kind of anti-social behavior, and left [the residents] free to explore any deviant or wayward impulses. [. . .] Secure within the shell of the high-rise [. . .] they were free to behave in any way they wished, explore the darkest corners they could find. In many ways, the high-rise was a model of all that technology had done to make possible the expression of a truly 'free' psychopathology. (36)

As in *Concrete Island*, the existence and the slippage into another reality are circumscribed in space, differently from what happens in *Crash*. During the first weeks, the residents still leave the building to work as if nothing special is taking place. After the suicide of a jeweler, the first human casualty of the high-rise, the police are never called in, the residents feeling the need to protect and keep the matter internally, as if resorting to outside forces for whatever purposes, would jeopardize the situation, clearly cherished by the residents as a whole. Individually, some of them are wary, as is the case of Helen Wilder and Anne Royal, but they eventually succumb to the invisible pressures of the community.

The only ones who seem to retain some individuality are Royal, Wilder, and Laing, but still, they seem to be speaking for their social class rather than themselves. Wilder, symbolizing instinctual aggressiveness and class resentment, is engaged in a mythical climb from the first floor, which he inhabits, to the penthouse in the sky in an odyssey to kill Royal and take his place. David Punter argues that the narratives of escape (in *Concrete Island*) and Wilder's slow climb are

two points of entry into systematic delusion, two ways of beginning to satisfy needs, but needs which have themselves been shaped through the narrative: the storylines are the reduction and adjustment of needs, a twinned recognition of also of the inappropriateness of the masculine aspiration in worlds where the strength of the subject is demonstrably superseded. (18)

In a sense, his mythical climb of upward mobility is facilitated by the high-rise, uncovering the hidden desire to ascend socially and achieve a position of power, since, as Royal asserts, the success (or failure) of the high-rise is due to its rigid hierarchy (Ballard 70). Wilder is all too aware of it, having an affair with an actress of the upper floors, "conscious of the distance to the ground," thinking of his wife and children "far below, like the exploited women and child labourers of the nineteenth century" (61). As Punter suggested, the masculine drives are inadequate, as Wilder is defeated in his two

ascents, first by Royal and the upper class, and second by a matriarchal clan, which after the complete breakdown of the building and the death of hundreds of residents, surfaces as the dominating power, taking revenge on the strongest and most virile man (47), in essence mocking his notions of hierarchy and mobility.

#### 4.3. Mediation and Simulation

Wilder's main weapon to get back at the oppressive vertical hierarchy of the building is his video camera. He aims to make a documentary, anthropological in nature, of the high-rise, an attempt to forge a "strong sense of identity" among the residents and galvanize them by way of a "dramatization of their resentments," exaggerating tensions to make them more apparent (54). This documentary is a metaphor for Ballard's book, in the sense that it projects a fictional construct exaggerating real tendencies, and a testament to the resident's overreliance on technologically mediated versions of the truth. Wilder imagines the opening of the documentary with a "60-second zoom," with the whole building in frame and slowly closing in a single apartment, an idea that became a short story in 1977. One of the leaders of the middle class group is Paul Crosland, a newscaster, whom people often take for his image on TV (151), as when Eleanor Powell, a film critic, watches him speak and reaches over in the air, trying to adjust the image, alter the color, or turn down the sound (40). The hundreds of television sets turned on without sound, conveying only the image without content or context, establish a mediatic dimension. Much of the violence that takes place in the building is filmed and screened back to them, as if part of the experience is achieved through the act of watching. A particularly unsettling moment for Wilder is when he finds other residents filming him in their "dubious private newsreels" (62). Violence becomes stylized, as if enacted for seen and unseen video cameras, in "spasms of cold and random aggression" (146).

The very structure of the narrative prefigures that of closed circuit TV and reality TV in its fragmentation and shifts in perspective. It is also elliptical, spanning unspecified periods each time one of the three main characters is reintroduced. This formal characteristic is completely unselfconscious, not at all similar to Ballard's 1977 short story "Theatre of War," which mimicked a newsreel in prose. There is, however, a strong but more diffuse influence of the language of film and TV in his fiction, explicit in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, as well as the narrative that better links simulation as mediated by technology and the death of affect, the short story "The

Intensive Care Unit” (1977). It shares with *High-Rise* a circumscription in space and the treatment of space as technology and its role in shaping an individual’s perception and mentality.

Ballard imagines a future in which all social interaction occurs mediated through television: school, work, sex, marriage, child rearing, etc. are done by way of cameras and monitors, each individual separated and isolated from others. For Scott Bukatman, “the surrogate experience provided by the media has fully usurped, and even surpassed, the potentials of actual existence” (43) in “The Intensive Care Unit.” Through the language of film individual traits and personality have a chance to be expressed, becoming the very form of representation. The protagonist and narrator, a doctor, observes as the “more neurotic patients [. . .] presented themselves with the disjointed cutting, aggressive zooms and split-screen techniques that went far beyond the worst excesses of experimental cinema” (“The Intensive Care Unit” 444), and even rolling credits at the end of the consultation, as if on a TV show. His own family is represented differently:

I relished the elegantly stylized way in which we now presented ourselves to each other – fortunately we had moved from the earnestness of Bergman and the more facile mannerisms of Fellini and Hitchcock to the classical serenity and wit of Rene Clair and Max Ophuls, though the children, with their love of the hand-held camera, still resembled so many budding Godards. (448)

Physical contact is eschewed in favor of abstract representations of the body, creating and enforcing a distance that is only broken upon the appearance of the protagonist’s future wife, who appears without the obligatory makeup and exposes her bare breast for examination, breaking the “almost Victorian code of visual ethics [which] governed the doctor/patient relationship, and all social intercourse” (445). This excess points to a lack of signification, an extraneous element that is linked to the uncanny: it harkens back to a natural sense of the human body, at once strange and familiar. The unexpected intrusion of a more “real” element, one outside the semiotic codes prompts the protagonist to seek physical contact for the first time. “It must have been this absence of make-up that first seeded the idea, to flower with such devastating consequences ten years later, to actually meet her in person” (446). The actual encounter falls short of their expectations, each feeling that their unmediated bodies and faces appeared less real than on the screen, to which they turn back to in relief to



recover a lost dimension of perception. When the family finally meets, they break down in bursts of irrational violence and sexuality: the daughter undresses for her father and the son lunges at him with a pair of scissors, enacting their infantile Freudian fantasies. The protagonist's reaction, though, is unflinching, and with his wounded family at the brink of death, still believes that what is happening is an expression of acts of affection, simply because he has no way of interpreting them as violence and murder, but only as the physical contact he craved. He imagines the cameras in the room capturing the moment to be creating the "ultimate home-movie," a show of the immense affection of this family.

This short story, in its ingenious simplicity, schematizes how the social aspects of behavior and perception are not innate, but configured by the environment. Everything in the narrative is mediated by a visual medium, perceived and expressed visually without any contact. The introduction of an uncanny element breaks the illusion momentarily, engaging the protagonist's mind in an obsessive journey of sensorial and conceptual expansion. The problem is that his mind has been equipped to deal with the world only in certain terms – those of the visual, distant mediation – and not with the physical world. The novels *Crash*, *Concrete Island*, and *High-Rise* follow the same structure. The acts beyond the border zones of the traffic island, the high-rise, or the family reunion in "The Intensive Care Unit" are destructive and barbaric because they reflect the notion that even though humankind devises technological systems that in some way forego physical and bodily experience, a natural dimension, a certain kind of primitivism driven by instincts and wayward impulses surface. It is as if these so-called deviant psychopathic impulses are the very nature of the human, and the special circumstances of time and space in these narratives elicit a return of the repressed.

It is no wonder that Wilder, halfway on his ascent of the high-rise, starts to communicate only by savage grunts, words introducing "the wrong set of meanings into everything" (130). He uses a tape recorder, recording his grunts and belches, playing them back to himself: "Wilder was amused by the deft way in which he edited the tape, overlaying one set of belches with a second and third, a skill that now resided entirely in his scarred fingers with their cracked and blackened nails" (129). Later, he remixes these sounds with that of his rape of Charlotte Melville, playing them back again during their sexual act. This, combined with the "true light of the high-rise," that of the Polaroid camera, "that intermittent radiation which recorded a moment of hoped-for violence for some later voyeuristic pleasure" (109) constitutes an atmosphere where

everything is dissociated from the physical dimension, only having meaning at a later, mediated stage. The continued reliance on technology counters claims that the breakdown on the high-rise is a descent into simple primitivism. Talbot, a psychiatrist, comments:

It's a mistake to imagine that we're all moving towards a state of happy primitivism. The model here seems to be less the noble savage than our un-innocent post-Freudian selves, outraged by all that over-indulgent toilet-training, dedicated breast-feeding and parental affection – obviously a more dangerous mix than anything our Victorian forebears had to cope with. [. . .] Perhaps they resent never having had a chance to become perverse... (Ballard 109)

This behavior, as pointed out by Talbot, is closer to a movement toward a systematic destruction and consequent reconstruction of codes that govern meaning and social behavior. The allusions to infantile education make it clear that it is a case of reeducation and reassigning meaning to old structures, and for that, it is necessary that some degree of primitivism is reached before a new sensibility and mentality is to emerge. This underlying narrative of reconstruction is present in many of Ballard's texts, from the establishment of a new civilization in *The Drought* and "The Ultimate City" to the awakening of novel emotions and sexual impulses in *Crash*, as well as Maitland's reconstruction of his own fragmented self in *Concrete Island*.

#### 4.4. Exhausted Futures

*High-Rise*, even more than *Concrete Island*, is a horror narrative in its gloomy obsession with entropy and decay. There seems to be no escape to the predicament the residents of the high-rise have put themselves, and the grotesqueness escalates in descriptions of repulsive and dreadful scenarios. There is a stark contrast between the chaotic and morally corrupt tableaux portrayed toward the end of the novel with the clean, orderly design of the space. Once suffused with light and transparency, residents embrace the lack of electricity, as "the darkness was more comforting, a place where real illusions might flourish" (136). The surviving residents move among their garbage, kept inside the building "less from fear of attracting the attention of the outside world than from a need to cling to their own," among the sound of screams of pain, lust or rage – "the cries were expressions of totally abstracted emotions, detached from the context of events around them" (137). Venturing outside one's apartment for food or

supplies is wholly dangerous, with the possibility of being attacked by rogue savage groups. Royal, in his epic descent, crosses paths with Wilder, who shoots him, but is unable to finish him off. Laing later finds Royal on the brink of death, crawling toward the 10<sup>th</sup>-floor swimming pool, a “bone-pit” covered with the “skulls, bones and dismembered limbs of dozens of corpses” (170). Ironically, this extremely horrific site is where it all began, where Wilder drowned the Afghan dog and set into motion the barbaric events. Royal chooses this place, reminiscent of Joseph Conrad, to accept his failure, one more tenant “of a crowded beach visited by a sudden holocaust” (170).

This intensely bleak vision counters a certain sense of optimism that the high-rise offered, a chance to finally set free those repressed impulses and the previous, even more abstract concept of the high-rise as a modern kind of living. Earlier, Laing is able to peek into an empty apartment through a hole in the floor, and catches a glimpse into “a parallel world, where the laws of the high-rise were suspended, a magical domain where these huge buildings were furnished and decorated but never occupied” (152). This uncanny vision is related to the earlier realization of the ambiguous nature of the concrete landscape, “an environment made not for man, but for man’s absence” (25). Laing’s rupture of reality allows him to see into the world of the purely abstract, the project of the high-rise as it was envisioned: designed, built, and furnished, but uninhabited because their ideal tenants are unreal. The building is designed not for a human existence, but for a perverse, machine-like one.

Gasiorek writes that the novels of the early 1970s “are all in different ways attempts to grasp the nature of the dominative regimes that were recoding the human being as a bio-mechanical entity,” attempts met with limited success (208). The new subjectivity ushered by the deviant behavior made possible by the high-rise is paradoxical. It is at the same time an endogenous, instinctual, bodily response to the biomechanical exogenous design and a completely detached and affectless mode of behavior. This detachment is common to both forces, but there is a sense that the dominant one is the chaotic *id*, unrepressed and without regard for boundaries other than that set by the residents of the high-rise in its last stages: security, food, and sex (124). There is a sense that the dystopian logic of the high-rise, ultimately, is there to facilitate death, extirpating those who inhabit it but for whom it was never really built (Gasiorek 129). At one point Laing imagines one of the members of the middle-class, Steele, repopulating the high-rise with corpses dressed as human beings:

[Steele's] imagination [. . .] came alive particularly when he was playing with the dead. The previous day Laing had blundered into an apartment and found him painting a bizarre cosmetic mask on the face of a dead account-executive, dressing the body like an over-blown drag-queen in a voluminous silk nightdress. Given time, and a continuing supply of subjects, the dentist would repopulate the entire high-rise. (150)

As in the instances of Jim in *Empire of the Sun*, who imagines the resurrection of a Japanese soldier, and Traven in "The Terminal Beach," who elects Yasuda, another Japanese soldier as the guardian of the boundaries of his dissolving mind, here death is assigned the role of a means. For the psychopathic and distressed characters in the narratives, to transcend death in such a way is the ultimate testament of the power of the living, a deeply optimistic outlook in an abstract way. For the reader, though, distanced from this cautionary tale, the horrific imagery of a complete breakdown of morality and the chaos that ensues are far more powerful and arresting, and for that, Ballard's fiction is seen as oppressive and pessimistic. Ballard advocates the exploration of inner space on a purely creative level, as he warns that our own psychopathology must find an outlet in one way or another – better creatively than in the development of controlling and dehumanizing systems such as that of *High-Rise*. The contrast between *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*, one dealing with a "non-place" in an individual level, and the other a "place" in a social level, suggests that no matter the scale or the object, whenever space has been shaped, in the name of progress and technology, into inhuman psychological wastelands, the human mind will have to struggle with conflicting forces to dominate the environment in an attempt to make it more human, even if that means resorting to the chaotic forces of the *id* and ultimately becoming a monument to a new kind of alienation and death.

## 5. Human Space

David Punter in *The Literature of Terror* identifies one of the key features of the Gothic as fear of the past, manifesting in the form of ghosts and old buildings, haunting the characters reminding them of previous sins (2:185). Ballard's take on the Gothic, however, displays a sort of fear of the future. His characters are haunted not by the past, but by the unrealized future, the promises of great technological achievements such as interplanetary traveling, an idea prompted by the Space Age and the success of the Moon landing but that never came to fruition. In the dilapidated, abandoned and rundown sites of progress led astray Ballard sets his tales, often characterized by drained swimming pools, empty runways and car-parks, symbols of an exhausted future, once auspicious and tangible, but looking now like ruins of an ancient era. Differently from the paralyzing fear of the traditional Gothic, this is a driving force that compels the characters to regress and indulge their atavistic tendencies, as if their psyches are responding to the unnatural and inhuman spaces they inhabit, thus justifying the adoption of "a logic more powerful than reason" (*High-Rise* 60). The pursuit of these logics, however, entails dissolution of moral values, free will, and identity, ultimately leading up to death. In *The Hidden Script*, Punter noted that

the long tradition of enclosed and unitary subjectivity comes to mean less and less [to Ballard] as he explores the ways in which a person is controlled by landscape and machine, increasingly becomes a point of intersection for overloaded scripts and processes which have effectively concealed their distant origins in human agency. (9)

The systems described by Ballard in his urban dystopias – *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* – and further developed in his late quartet of novels – *Cocaine Nights*, *Super-Cannes*, *Millennium People*, and *Kingdom Come* – effect a tacit and subtle form of control of individuals by the way space is designed. Individuals inserted in these schemes cease to have the ability to make moral decisions since morality is suspended in deference to a positivistic sense of the "greater good" and health of the system itself. In any case, they become little more than behaviorist puppets, responding to pre-programmed stimuli.

The uncovering of the "script," as mentioned by Punter, is certainly the focus of Ballard's fiction, the discovery of the "hidden logics" embedded in both exterior and

interior space. In truly uncanny fashion, Ballard seems to communicate the need to shed light on what has been obscured by the insidious machinery. By doing so, his fiction brings to the surface – the return of the repressed – certain aspects of humanity, that, instead of being seen with the usual fear and dread of horror fiction, atavistic tendencies, perverse sexuality, and violence engage in an ideological struggle with the forces of the system. In the course of eliminating many unwanted aspects of human life, underhanded projects such as that of Modernist architecture and the advent of the telecommunications industries have deeply transformed perception. Before, Ballard writes, “the cultural and political events of the day were part of one whole – sort of graspable in a way. [. . .] [Soon] sections of the landscape will have no connection whatsoever with each other [. . .] probably nobody will ever again be fully engaged with a sort of central experience” (Juno and Vale 36). This has been done so quickly that the human psyche has not had time to properly adapt, and in his dystopias, Ballard suggests that soon there will be a dispute between our mind and bodies in a truly physical and dramatic way.

There has been some degree of attention given to Ballard in architectural circles, although still limited in academia. The architecture scholar Geoff Manaugh argues that “we have more to learn from the fiction of J. G. Ballard [. . .] than we do from Le Corbusier,” because it is a fiction that analyses the ways in which the built environment can impact psychologically its users and inhabitants.

[Ballard] presents the modern, built environment as this kind of psychological field lab for testing new ways of being human. He encodes all this, or hardwires it, into the actual landscapes of his novels. You get humans trying to understand and psychologically accommodate themselves to the presence of vast, empty car parks, derelict hospitals, redundant freeways, under-subscribed exurban high-rises and so on. It’s a “malfunctioning central nervous system” in spatial form, on the scale of a whole civilisation. (Manaugh)

Manaugh implies that Ballard’s attention to architecture is somewhat sobering because it deals in contemporary terms with spaces that reflect “unresolved mental crises” and a socio-cultural neurosis in physical terms, which in turn create and exacerbate other neuroses. This reading owes, as Ballard’s fiction does, to Freud. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud theorized that the two driving forces of humankind were those of Eros and Thanatos; Eros would be a positive force, leading to civilization, altruism, and

community life. Thanatos would be a destructive force, selfish and aggressive, that if not curbed and controlled would destroy human civilization and life (Freud 754).

Civilization has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man's aggressive instincts and to hold the manifestations of them in check by psychical reaction-formations [. . .] Civilization, therefore, obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city (750, 756).

Freud classifies the regulatory forces that control the aggressive instincts as both external (community) and internal (conscience), which comes later and is enforced by the sense of guilt (767). Ballard's urban dystopias take this model and subvert it, by having the environment remove the need for an internal regulatory system since external space does the thinking for the people inhabiting it. Thus, human aggressive instincts, kept at bay by the delicate balance between external and internal forces, surface and lead into chaos. A new conscience is later formed from what remained, in order to foster a new type of civilization, with a different set of moral codes, and again, a new balance. This is particularly apparent in *High-Rise* with Laing and the "new social order" completely adapted to the perverse logics of the building.

In this sense, Ballard's fiction is a kind of therapy for the contemporary world, in which the inner motivations and the "hidden scripts" are uncovered in order to diffuse the invisible system of control put in place by civilization. Examining Ballardian spaces through the lens of the uncanny, it is possible to link these spaces with their actual locations or place of origin (the unconscious) and see through the material illusion and perceive them as the insidious, controlling forces that they are. Even if his vision is rather pessimistic and his style is, at first glance, cold and affectless, Ballard is at heart a Romantic, who believes in the power of the individual, and primarily, of one's imagination. The British novelist Toby Litt describes Ballard's imagery as completely unique:

Plenty of other writers now fictionally venture into multistorey car parks, airport hospital wards, decaying hotels, but they do so in the knowledge that they're trespassing on Ballard's territory. He was here first; he was the pioneer - back when these places were seen as totally unliterary. What could possibly happen on a motorway embankment that was of interest? (Litt)

By claiming these spaces his own literary ground, Ballard constructs a poetics and personal mythology with specific settings, scenarios, characters, and even a dry and deadpan sense of humor. More importantly, Ballard manages to revitalize these essentially dead spaces by appealing to metaphors of the body and the unleashing of the primal – but full of life – forces of the *id*. In a sense, in his poetics, life, whatever shape it might take, stands above order and preconceived notions of humanity. To be human is not to control one's environment, but stave off death, even if by mythologizing it, as in the case of *Crash*.

Similar to his contemporary Philip K. Dick (an author writing on the fringes of genre fiction), Ballard is concerned with what makes us human. For Ballard, humanity is the ever-adaptable buoyancy of the human mind, able to decode objects and reencode them with whatever meaning made necessary by the circumstances, an ability that makes us able even to transcend the finality of death. Narratives based on Ballard's wartime experiences in Shanghai – *Empire of the Sun*, *The Kindness of Women*, and the autobiography *Miracles of Life* – make clear that it was vital for the young Ballard to rely and foster his own imagination in order to survive. In these texts, he suggests that despite the hunger, malnutrition, sickness, and emotional stress, the years he (and his textual stand-in) spent in the Lunghua interment camp outside Shanghai were the happiest of his life, feasting his mind on all sorts of stimulating images and experiences, such that of his love of airplanes. Ballard characters who find themselves in similar circumstances of physical strain and spatial oppression resort and develop a richer inner life, often contaminating others with their appealing world-view (Blake in *The Unlimited Dream Company*, Vaughan in *Crash*). The power of the imagination and that vastly untapped resource of our own psychopathologies seem to constitute a way for humankind to save itself from its own self-destruction.



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