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I Am The Island

An Ecocritical Reading of Selected Novels by J.G. Ballard

Supervisor
Ch. Prof. Shaul Bassi

Assistant Supervisor
Ch. Prof. Lucio De Capitani

Graduand
Jacopo Borin
Matriculation Number 841635

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A mia madre e mio padre, che continuano a sostenermi nel mio viaggio.

A Romina, la mia roccia e compagna di vita.

Ai miei amici, per il loro supporto.

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to provide key insights into the ecocritical trajectory contained in a selection of novels by J.G. Ballard. Particularly, I will investigate how the author's concept of 'inner space' evolves in the journey spanning across three novels in order to accommodate not only the growing unmappability of modern urban life, but also the unfolding of environmental collapse parallel and beyond human comprehension.

Through this analysis of *Concrete Island*, *High-Rise*, and *The Drowned World*, and drawing on ecocritical and postmodern theories, this thesis will explore the relationship between urban and natural space, subjectivity and collectivity, and ecological crisis. Beginning with the involuntary entrapment of the modern subject within a hybridised wasteland, the analysis will proceed towards the detonation of modern urban collectivity, to culminate in complete ontological dissolution within a beyond human condition.

By examining Ballard's selected works, I argue that such fiction does not narratively approach climate change in a cautionary fashion, but dwells within it completely – picturing apocalypse in its different guises anew; not as a tragic end, but as the profound intimacy of the self and the environment brought about by crisis, seen as an immensely transformative experience.

CHAPTER I

J.G. BALLARD, A FRAME OF REFERENCE

1.1 Life and Literary Production

James Graham Ballard (1930-2009) was born in Shanghai to English parents, with his father being a businessman managing the affairs of a textile company in the region. His early childhood lapsed in the relatively privileged environment of the International Settlement of Shanghai[1], a location that, while seemingly secure, was set in a peripheral area of the city that offered the young Ballard a glimpse into the wider, contradictory, and often harsh realities of wartime Shanghai. In his biographic recollections, Ballard reconstructs the image of Shanghai as a locus of stark contrasts; a place of immense wealth mixed with abject poverty, an ante-litteram melting pot of vibrant media modernity of multi-language newspapers and radio broadcasts living together with deeply rooted social inequalities (Ballard 2008, 7). The 'Paris of the Orient' displayed a wealth of visual stimuli to the growing expatriate, a city boiling with unimaginable cultural potency while being lined together with the constant presence of beggars, hunger, and disease. This paradoxical and intoxicating environment would instill in him a sense of – and a taste for – the surreal and the incongruous, a primitive perspective that would unconsciously permeate his later fiction.

[1] Ballard, J. G. (2008). *Miracles of Life*. Fourth Estate, p. 6.
Following quotations from the book are from this edition.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, for the Ballards and the other British expatriates in the region life in Shanghai became increasingly hazardous and precarious, as the Japanese entered the city and rapidly seized control (Ballard 2008, 40). Following the invasion, Ballard, along with his family, was interned in the Lunghua civilian internment camp in 1943. While conditions were harsh, he often emphasised the overall relative normalcy and freedom of everyday life as a growing boy in a foreign country[2]. Albeit somewhat liveable, however, the experience of confinement, the constant presence of gates and barbed wire, and the only partially unconscious psychological impact of war and the uncertainty concerning the near future indubitably left a lasting impression on him. He often stated that this time of his life proved extremely formative to him, and the experience in the camp taught him to see the truth of everything, to not resort to sentimentalism's distortions to edulcorate the harshities of life, and to greatly value his own imagination as an instrument not only to understand, but to depict the world (Ballard 2012, 289).

The visual repletion of semi-abandoned war-ridden landscapes disseminated with technological warfare would also leave a long lasting imaginative impression on the young Ballard, fueling and greatly informing his earlier fascination with similar themes and settings in his early fiction (Ballard 2012, 40-41), together with the overarching sense of estrangement characterising his imprisoned youth, elements that would later return in different artistic guises (Ballard 2012, 399). The war's end in 1945 signalled the end of Ballard's confinement, and while the momentary return to a liberated Shanghai brought freedom, it also brought an

[2] Ballard, J. G. (2012). *Extreme Metaphors (S. Sellars & D. O'Hara, Eds.)*. Fourth Estate, p. 292. Following quotations from the book are from this edition.

understandable feeling of displacement, and the sense that his world had yet again changed in the blink of an eye:

> The camp fell behind me more quickly than I expected. Around me was a silent terrain of abandoned paddy fields and burial mounds, derelict canals and bridges, ghost villages that had been deserted for years [...] The house seemed strange, and I felt that it should have changed, like everything else in Shanghai. It was almost as if the war had never happened (Ballard 2008, 70-72).

In 1946, at the age of sixteen, Ballard returned to England with his family, a transition that did not fail to prove culturally jarring after his upbringing in a completely different country – both geographically and culturally – as he himself would recollect in the course of one of his numerous interviews. The formative years of his youth in China and in the internment camp added to this sense of estrangement. Being born and having been brought up in a completely different continent, Ballard felt a stranger in his own country. These earlier discernments of his sense of alienation and visual disillusionment later fueled his desire to write and explore the psychological significance and impact of this newly found world:

> By the time I came to England at the age of sixteen I'd seen a great variety of landscapes. I think the English landscape was the only landscape I'd come across which didn't mean anything, particularly the urban landscape. England seemed to be very dull [...] I didn't like it, it seemed odd. England was a place that was totally exhausted. The war had

> drained everything. It seemed very small, and rather narrow mentally, and the physical landscape of England was so old. [...] The rural landscape of the meadow didn't mean anything to me. [...] They don't seem like landscapes that are psychologically significant (Ballard 2012, 96).

The young Ballard attended both boarding school and university in Cambridge, and while attending at Leys School did not prove to be a pleasant experience, the great proximity to the University and the Arts Theatre provided him with a glimpse into college life and an early access to a wealth of advanced material he would have never seen otherwise. His earlier short stories were written in idle moments in the evenings while attending boarding school, and yet, fed with a plethora of visual stimuli coming from his cinema attendance, the young Ballard felt as the fictional medium was not enough to examine a society and a reality that the novelistic form conceived as static, while his experiences and formation led him to concretise it as a constantly moving entity:

> I knew that the post-war film offered a serious challenge to any aspirant writer. The novel thrived on static societies, which the novelist could examine like an entomologist labelling a tray of butterflies. But too much had happened to me [...] in the wartime years. Too much had happened for even a race of novelists to digest (Ballard 2008, 87-88).

The immense relevance of the visual element in Ballard's creative writing is hinted at in almost any of his works. His quick attunement to psychiatry and the visual arts, especially to exponents of the Surrealism movement, offered to him a brand new interpretative key to the landscapes of his recent past and of his future production:

> Then, at the age of 16, I discovered Freud and the surrealists, a stick of bombs that fell in front of me and destroyed all the bridges that I was hesitating to cross (Ballard 2008, 88-89).
>
> I think that my whole career as a writer has been the substitute work of an unfulfilled painter. [...] The surrealists were a revelation [...] I devoured them. The surrealists, and the modern movement in painting as a whole, seemed to offer a key to the strange post-war world with its threat of nuclear war. The dislocations and ambiguities, in cubism and abstract art as well as the surrealists, reminded me of my childhood in Shanghai (Ballard 2012, 424).

Despite his robust literary enthusiasm and interest, the later parts of Ballard's education followed a completely different path, as he began studying medicine at Cambridge University. Albeit seemingly opposite from his future career as a writer – Ballard did not in fact pursue a life in the medical profession – nonetheless he found anatomy and physiology profoundly fascinating, adding to his imaginative outlet and completing the circle begun with psychiatry. It is not a case that more than one of his characters are professionals in the medical environment, and that a great part of his narratives engage with the intricacies of psychopathologies. The

richness in narrative metaphors provided by his studies enriched his production with a whole new language that in his mind depicted the human body and mind as an enormous fiction (Ballard 2012, 28).

It was in this stage of his life that for the first time Ballard seriously caressed the idea of pursuing his literary interest and building a career as a writer; after submitting one of his short stories at the annual University competition and winning it, his convictions did but solidify. The imaginative pressure to write became so strong that he began to growingly neglect medicine study and practice. Anatomy and physiology continued constituting two among his primary interests, but apart from basic courses attended in the first two years at Cambridge, through which he felt enriched with a brand new metaphoric vocabulary, he found advanced medicine too technical to relate to the narrative system he was striving to build (Ballard 2012, 101):

> Doing anatomy was an eye-opener: one had built one's whole life on an illusion about the integrity of one's body, this 'solid flesh'. One mythologises one's own familiar bits of flesh and tendon. Then to see a cadaver on a dissecting table and begin to dissect it myself and to find at the end of term that there was nothing left except a sort of heap of gristle and a clutch of bones with a label bearing some dead doctor's name – that was a tremendous experience of the lack of integrity of the flesh (Ballard 2012, 41).

Having realised that he would have not completed his medical training, Ballard left Cambridge and enrolled at Queen Mary's College in London to become a student of English

literature, where he only stayed one year. Despite proving a pleasant and fruitful experience, the lack of focus on modern fiction prompted him to leave college altogether and, needing to be free of all financial dependance on his parents – who strongly disagreed with his desire to become a writer – he found a job as as a novice copywriter in a small advertising company (Ballard 2008, 103-04). During these years he continued writing and sending unsuccessful short stories submissions to several literary magazines of the time, and at the same time he was dismayed by his failure to condense his imaginative outlet in a long novel. The years 1953-54, in which he served in Canada in the air force, proved pivotal for his formation as a fully fledged writer, as for the first time in his life he came across science fiction as a genre (Ballard 2012, 154).

It was thanks to his encounter with American and British science fiction that Ballard acquired the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle of his narrative vocabulary. In the 1960s he finally started emerging as a novel writer with a quartet of what some described as 'end-of-the-world disaster novels' (Ballard 2012, 5) that keenly anticipated contemporary current conditions and concerns surrounding climate change, although the theme was not developed in such eloquent terms in the subsequent works. His short stories from the same period also showed how Ballard was keen to make use of science fiction's boundless narrative possibilities by using it as a form, rather than as a genre per se, using its premises to formulate his personal theory of inner space, on which I will expand later on in the dissertation. The narrative realm Ballard was interested in was the planet Earth of his everyday life, and by means of his personal science fiction he sought to extrapolate an extremely different set of information. By means of his close collaboration and friendship with Michael Moorcock, to the cry of the slogan 'The only truly alien planet is Earth'[3] the two authors joined forces in leading the New Wave of British Science Fiction, an

[3] *https://emilianodimarco.wordpress.com/2020/10/19/dove-lo-spazio-interiore-il-manifesto-di-j-g-ballard-del-1962/*

unprecedented take on the genre's classical tropes while subverting them in a rediscovery of the present, rather than of distant futures and planets:

> Writers of so-called serious fiction shared one dominant characteristic – their fiction was first and foremost about themselves. The 'self ' lay at the heart of modernism, but now had a powerful rival, the everyday world, which was just as much a psychological construct, and just as prone to mysterious and often psychopathic impulses. It was this rather sinister realm, a consumer society that [...] science fiction was exploring (Ballard 2008, 112).

Following the furrows already left by the media landscape he sought to describe in his brand new way, Ballard's writing became increasingly more experimental, and again in the form of the short story that this time abandoned conventional linear narrative in order to prompt both the characters and the readers to explore different ways of looking at the same ordinary reality. These 'condensed novels' – in Ballard's terms 'like ordinary novels with the unimportant pieces left out' (Ballard 2012, 106) – were a literal stream of consciousness taking place in the mind of the protagonist, whose name is rendered unclear by the multiple names he goes by or are attributed to him, in which the narrative is non-linear, disrupted, and that could be started reading from every chapter anew, every time leading to new conclusions about the possible messages hinted at. Ballard himself admitted that such stories had no actual protagonist or clearly defined physical setting, because he was concerned with the nervous breakdown at the root of the collective madness the media landscape at the time seemed to have plunged everyone

into, in his opinion. What concerned Ballard was to have a new look at the traditional, ordinary, and overlooked themes of everyday reality and view them through subjective eyes, filtering them through the lenses bestowed on him by the science fiction genre, which provided him with the proper imaginative vocabulary with which to tackle such themes.

Having, at least formally, abandoned experimentative writing in favour of a more traditional narrative technique, from the subsequent 'urban' trilogy on the intersection of the external modern world and the internal psychological – or psychotic – states of his characters became the leitmotif of his writings, and in the case of these novels it dealt with the urban scenery, concrete artificial elements, more than with the abstract media landscape (Ballard 2012, 67). By coining one of his most iconic phrases – 'Sex times technology equals the future' – with the urban trilogy Ballard tackled one of the themes most dear to him: the increasing, almost invisible mingling of technology in all its forms with life, deeply and far-reaching into its most basic functions. Albeit sharing the 'dystopian' element with the previous 'climate disaster' tetralogy, once again none of these books can be strictly defined as proper science fiction; they are all concerned with modern urban architecture, its possibilities, discrepancies, and incongruences, as well as the effect they can cause on the human mind (Ballard 2012, 80).

The shifting back – in a sense – to a more conventional narrative form in the novels Ballard wrote from the 1970s onward was prompted by his belief that the narrative structure should suit the subject matter, with the style and technique serving it instead of dictating it. In Ballard's words, 'It's the idea that needs to be needled' (Ballard 2012, 67). From the 1980s onward, in his more mature creative phase, Ballard turned his production towards crime fiction, thus further amplifying the total scope of his narrative inquiry, extending it to yet another

genre. This 'cycle' of novels and other short stories of the same period mainly explored themes related to conspiracy theories and inscrutable power structures, but also dealt with themes more familiar to his earlier production. Ballard started postulating on the future of the TV generation of his time, imagining realms in which people did not meet in real life, but maintained contact with the sole help of technology, dramatically anticipating the introduction of the internet long before it joined in the media landscape (Ballard 2012, 256). He also dealt with the obscure side of high-end leisure societies, imagining worlds in which he saw as inevitable that, sinisterly enough, technology in the form of a leisure activity would increasingly mingle with much more physical and potent drugs, under the effects of which people would spend their days indulging every possible desire via advanced technology (Ballard 2012, 355). The Ballardian slogan 'Sex times technology equals the future' seems here uncannily tailored to fit these later narratives.

Roughly around the same period, towards the end of his life, Ballard started tackling what perhaps revealed to be the most delicate themes of all: his own life and what concerned him as a human being, as well as the writer he had become. As he would recollect in his semi-autobiographical novels and his final and much less fictional autobiographical work, Ballard's significant and defining childhood was not explicitly detailed in his early works, and yet it profoundly contributed to the moulding of his creative and visual imagination, as it would be funneled in recurring topoi and fascinations frequently seen in his more mature novels, such as the theme of consumerist societal breakdown, the concealing and rediscovering of psychological trauma, and the human encompassing capacity for both immense cruelty and vigorous resilience. His last book, published only a few months before his death, is a lucid,

non-fictional recollection of his own life, spanning from his youth in China to his quiet and long life spent in the tranquil suburb of Shepperton with his wife and children. The prostate cancer that would lead him to his grave is only briefly glossed in the very last page of the book, where he again thanks for the prodigies bestowed on him by the medical profession that fascinated him throughout his whole life, moulded him as a writer and as a person and, while failing to keeping him alive, allowed him to spend the last days of his life in relative peace: 'I am very grateful that my last days will be spent under the care of this strong-minded, wise and kindly physician' (Ballard 2008, 185).

1.2 The Core Concepts

Despite the broad availability of later critical material on which to construct a deep analysis of his production, unlike many other authors J.G. Ballard himself provided a dense framework through which to analyse his literary works, at least in his vision. Over the course of the decades, Ballard took part in an astounding number of interviews – over a hundred and fifty certified, recorded, and transcribed[4] – also thanks to his participation in the periodical publications of several science fiction magazines that hosted his more juvenile literary production as a short story writer, and his more or less direct involvement in the radio and filmic adaptation of his own works. Through these direct testimonies of the scaffoldings holding his creative outlet, I can start to delineate some of the main concepts which will accompany me through this exploration of a selection of his works.

[4] *https://jgballard.ca/media/interviews.html*

During his time serving in Canada with the air force (1953-54) Ballard quotes several science fiction magazines of the time as the most interesting literature material he had the chance to come across. The main authors he encountered in his first introduction to science fiction – or speculative fiction, as he called it – were American, specifically those under the public and critical acclaim spotlight of the time – i.e. Asimov, Heinlein, and Clarke (Ballard 2012, 28) – yet despite his fascination with this unfamiliar branch of fiction he immediately felt as if the genre could have – and should have – had a completely different focus[5].

The greater part of the future imagined by the major authors he read about in those magazines was either already in the past or had already happened in radically different ways, and what was left to happen was at least unlikely to, because the immense scientific and technical advancements happening during those years mined the very foundations of the imaginative fabric of most of those works. It was rather impossible to imagine a space age of exploration and conquest in the likings of those depicted by Asimov, when space exploration had already started and – in Ballard's eyes – had gone completely undetected and ignored by the greater public, despite having been displayed on public television, already one of the revolutionary inventions only fathomed by the earlier exponents of the science fiction genre (Ballard 2012, 104). The focus on spaceships, inter-galactic wars, light-sabers, and distant alien species was to Ballard juvenile and unripe; a fun, yet unfaithful reading, and an almost complete waste of the true potentialities hidden within the genre.

For Ballard science fiction was, above all else, a form, rather than a genre; a form that had to put its focus not on distant worlds, but on the imagination not of the future, but of the present. In a bold statement made during a radio interview in 1974 Ballard argued that, for

[5] *https://www.jgballard.ca/non_fiction/jgb_new_metaphor_future1973.html*

what concerned his literary concept of science fiction, the future as a programmatic concept was to him outdated, because the present of immense technological advancements he lived within already contained and at the same time denied the seeds and possibilities of any conceivable future: 'The present is throwing up so many options, so many alternatives, that it contains the possibilities of any future right now. You can have tomorrow today'[6]. In this seemingly catastrophic vision, traditional science fiction's predictive capacity, albeit only in a literary sense, had been castrated by the constantly changing real world present, which assurged to be the only world worth looking at, even in what could be considered the most speculative genre in fiction. The reason why Ballard turned to science fiction in order to accurately depict his modern reality was precisely because of the immense imaginative power that could be harnessed through the form allowed by the genre.

The traditional novel – Ballard felt (Ballard 2012, 8) – was stuck in the mode of the nineteenth-century 'social novel' (Ballard 2012, 36), a form that could or would not adapt in such a way to allow a meaningful confrontation with the fragmented realities introduced by the overwhelmingly increasing mediatic integration into everyday life. Only a potentially boundless and theoretically limitless form such as the one provided by science fiction could allow him to explore such delicate themes, the present and its psychological and societal implications, in a faithful way. The present, not the future, is the ground on which Ballard laid the foundation on most of his writings. His way of reimagining the present in a science-fictional mode is not by reinventing possible futures, but by deploying the material of his contemporary world as his subject, in the attempt of discovering new pathways to interpret the reality that manifested to

[6] https://jgballard.ca/media/1974_CBC_radio.html

his eyes. Contemporary life, its popular technology, its colour TVs, modern vertical apartments, and seemingly endless motorways provided to him a wealth of material for exploration.

In his view, not only traditional science fiction but also the traditional role of the novel writer as a storyteller was rapidly becoming obsolete. Writers, Ballard posited, find themselves narrating a world that is spilling with imaginative material in the evolving media landscape; a single name is able to generate a pyramid of fiction so vaste that cannot be contained in the form of the traditional novel, and that by extension is, to him, far more interesting because it is based on actual, liveable experience[7]. By narrating contemporary life, Ballard felt, the present unfolds as a dynamic, infinitely changing field of narrative field of imaginative possibilities, impossible to be narrated with the help of traditional methods, but achievable by means of the boundless interpretative form and language of the science fiction.

To further emphasise the distance he wished to put between traditional science fiction and his literary production, Ballard took the widely known caption of 'outer space' and opposed to it his own concept, that of ‘inner space’ (Ballard 2012, 5-6). If that of uncharted galactic frontiers, space-ships, and metal suits worn by people imagined to be venturing the unforeseen dangers of remote universal ravines was known as outer space, his exploration of the gorges of the human mind and being immersed in the present societal tangible reality was to be called, in an ironical inversion of the concept, inner space (Ballard 2012, 26). In a parodistic and yet serious attempt to reverse the concept, and keeping in mind that in Ballard’s eyes the future was not something remote and unforeseeable, but something happening in the very moment he was writing about it, he posited that the inner space he wanted to write about was ‘the internal landscape of tomorrow that is a transmuted image of the past, and one of the most fruitful areas

[7] *https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1970_may_UKpenthouse_magazine.html*

for the imaginative writer [...] particularly rich in visual symbols [which] play(s) a role very similar to that of surrealism in the graphic arts'. In this reading, Ballard suggests that the exploration of the external space may correspond to a deeper exploration of the inner workings of the human mind; in other words, the ways in which the present world changes and interacts with the individual result in a modification and, when intensely analysed, an inquiry on the human psyche (Ballard 2012, 20). Following Ballard's statement, inner space is not really about the technological wonders, the sudden crashes and incidents, and the profound ecological modifications that take place in most of his works that interest him. Such events and environments are finely orchestrated settings that derive from his reading of everyday life and allow him to delve deeper into the workings of the modern individual in a way that traditional fiction does not allow.

In multiple interviews about his stance relative to his writing, Ballard posited that for science fiction to have a future as a genre and truly advance, writers have to start dealing with the profound exploration of the human mind in the same way and with the same depth as that infused in the description of outer space. Ballard often quoted surrealism as an indirect reference and inspiration in this regard (Ballard 2012, 28-29), to the point of making deliberate connection between his imaginative process and several paintings by Dali and Ernst – among others – as in his opinion surrealists have created a series of external landscapes which bear direct correspondences within our very minds, between the outer world of physical reality and the inner work of the human psyche[8]. Surrealist paintings are in Ballard's view a splendid way of accessing the inner landscapes formed within one's mind. By using the 'language' of the surrealist imaginary – albeit admittedly impossible to properly capture and recast the painting

[8] *https://www.jgballard.ca/non_fiction/jgb_time_memory_innerspace.html*

in a purely narrative form – Ballard tried to appropriate the 'mood' of such sceneries to create external external landscapes vivid enough to live up to the complexities of the internal states of his characters.

In Ballard's view, the artist's main task is to identify and distinguish the real elements of true fiction from what is not, in order to navigate the societal and mediatic narrative and extract their own fictionality[9]. Of course, Ballard's media landscape was one constituted of television, newspaper articles, magazines, and radio programmes; yet the concept of inner space and of his exploration seems almost to detonate when one thinks of its boundless applications in the contemporary media landscape, to which a plethora of new means and messages nowadays contribute. In the immensely mediatic reality in and of which Ballard wrote, the fictional elements present themselves with overwhelming potency, to the point of constituting their own reality. In this topography, Ballard mentioned – quoting Freud – that:

> When the fictional elements have overwhelmed reality, one has to distinguish between the manifest content of reality and its latent content. In fact the main task of the arts seems to be more and more to isolate the real elements in this goulash of fictions from the unreal ones (Ballard 2012, 20).

In his exploration of the workings of the modern human's mind, Ballard acknowledged that his creative work was galvanised by his own obsessions, his delving deeply and insistently on specific characters and topics that he saw as a fruitful means to truly explore and understand

[9] *https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1967_feb1_BBC3_radio.html*

the surrounding reality[10]. 'Presumably all obsessions are extreme metaphors waiting to be born. That whole private mythology, in which I believe totally, is a collaboration between one's conscious mind and those obsessions that, one by one, present themselves as stepping stones' (Ballard 2012, 197). Obsessions, in this reading, become a manifestation of the workings of the brain and can artistically result in what he described as inner space, the collision point between the outer world of reality and his interpretation within the human mind. Obsessions are what, in Ballard's work, oftentimes lead to psychotic psychological states in most of his protagonists and deuteragonists. Psychopathology is, to Ballard's characters, one of if not the best and most fit way to make sense of the world around them, to somewhat justify their presence and their 'role' in such a convoluted environment of which they appear to have lost the map. Ballard does not provide them with a map, but instead leaves them to figure out their own way out of it – or deeper in it – in the way that best fits the situations they find themselves in. In Ballard's fictional worlds, 'insanity' is seen as a form of truth, maybe even the most 'truthful' of all, because it is the only one that leads to some kind of answer, albeit in a clinically perverse way, with some characters trading on their own psychopathology.

> All my characters are trying to escape from whatever situation they find themselves in. [...] their way out is to construct a psychosis which dramatizes their own predicament, and to come to some sort of solution [...] psychosis is the most dramatic remaking of the mind that one can embark upon.[11]

[10] *https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1984_paris_review.html*
[11] *https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1995_kjb.html*

Ballard was profoundly fascinated with technology, not in the classical science fiction mode of fascination with avant-gardist technological impossibilities or as a tool of progress, but rather as an immense force that profoundly shapes and moulds the everyday human experience, both in society and individually. He was interested in the 'technology of everyday life' (Ballard 2012, 42) and in which ways it affects private and public behaviour[12]. For these reasons, technological matters in Ballardian fiction are portrayed not just to be inert items, but rather as proper living beings possessing their almost sentient nature. Not stationary placeholders for events and actions to take place on, but active participants in the evolutionary line of his characters.

A common motorway is in the beginning just a normal high-speed road, but it later becomes an impenetrable wall, and ends with transforming into a snake eyed giant coiling around Maitland in *Concrete Island*, both preventing his escape and safeguarding his newfound heaven from intruders. A premium apartments skyscraper is but an ominous building towering over the distant city at the beginning of *High-Rise*, but it later becomes a full fledged living being with elevators, electrical cables, and water pipes acting as its lungs and veins, whose spasmodic 'heartbeat' dictates the rhythm of its dwellers lives and their slow descend into madness and chaos.

In this disturbing reading of everyday life technology, Ballard frequently discusses the influence of media, mostly mass media and television, on our perceptions of reality. By his own admission, when he massively began writing towards the end of the 1950s science fiction was 'the only branch of literature which permitted speculative writing making evaluations of human reaction to the various upheavals, scientific, technological, political, which were

[12] *https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1970_may_UKpenthouse_magazine.html*

happening to them' (Ballard 2012, 86). It was only natural that, in order to give proper space to his will to document and examine the profound implications that technology and the media landscape had on reality, Ballard turned towards the genre. And yet, earlier science fiction was by definition the literature of technological optimism (Ballard 2012, 28, 86, 138), and this rose-coloured view did not fully align with Ballard's. What interested him was the strangeness and fascinating aspects that could be unveiled by scrutinising the present, and while the subject matter of most of his writings had remained – to a certain extent, at least – technological, Ballard's speculation was not future but present oriented. It was not about what effects television or life in a hundred stories buildings would have had fifty years from his time, but rather in what ways did they modify his characters perceptions of themselves, their societal context, and the environment they lived in.

The mass media, Ballard posited, 'have turned the world into a world where everything is perceived as pop art. Nothing is true. Nothing is untrue', and in which 'science is a new religion waiting to be born. Infinitely more important than literature, which is an old religion waiting to die' (Ballard 2012, 411). The man-made media landscape and input, shaped to accommodate the most common desires of the vast majority of people, in turn shapes back their unconscious desires, moulding the shapes and contours of their own imagination of themselves, ultimately leading to the creation of proper narratives that end up re-configuring their external and tangible reality. This, coupled with the later pioneristic acknowledgement of the limitless possibilities of the internet, seen as vastly more potent and innovative than television, prompted Ballard to define the media landscape as 'a kind of collective lucid dreaming' (Ballard 2012, 405).

Framed as such the nature of reality, in a world saturated with media and technology to the point that they help define the very identity of their users, is questioned by Ballard. His characters' psychologies are informed by their own perception of reality, and the psychotic states induced by such a troubled relationship actually impose on everyday reality to the point that, in this view, 'the imagination is both the condition of all possibility of such perversions, and the human mind's highest achievement' (Ballard 2012, 196). Psychopathologies are deployed by Ballard not only as narrative devices but as a lens through which to interpret modernity, to explore how technological advancements, societal pressures, and media reflections can lead to the forming of deviances never before explored.

Modern life is, in Ballardian fiction, 'inherently pathological' (Ballard 2012, 158), inescapably informed and shaped by consumerism, technology, and mass media, tremendous forces that prompt unheard forms of subjectivity and may lead to uncharted forms of alienation, disorientation, and to the erosion of classically intended moral contours. Life in a hundred stories building is not a new narrative take on a classical theme, but a brand new way of living that needs an accordingly brand new way to be described and interpreted. In the same way, to speed on a fast paced motorway can be seen as a direct evolution in the ways of travelling, but it also shifts the focus entirely on the driver who is at the same time an actor and spectator in the act of travelling.

In this interpretation of modern day reality, psychosis is both a response to and an attack on an uncharted external and internal landscape. This is why, when put in such extreme – and yet partially plausible – conditions, Ballard's protagonists delve deep into their psychosis

as a means to both escape and adapt to a reality they are trying to navigate, a reality that they have ceased to – or are unwilling to – understand. In works such as *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* Ballard coined and explored the concept of 'benevolent psychopathology'[13] to delineate this archetypal paradox where mental disease or aberrant conduct can be conceived as liberating or even beneficial under certain conditions, challenging traditional notions of psychotic behaviour by suggesting that some forms of induced disturbance are the result of – and can provide unique perspective and experiences of – modern day reality. This is how a character like Maitland in *Concrete Island* is able to take possession of a waste disposal area at the centre of a motorway intersection and claim it as his own possession, following through what has been – and has been felt by him as – a fever dream induced by the crash that initially confined him there.

Ballard's literary exploration of psychopathology underlines several implications for understanding not only his own production but also his interpretation of contemporary society. By portraying deviant and at times aberrant behaviours in most of his works, Ballard aimed to question the fabric of what constitutes sanity and normalcy in a world seen as increasingly fragmentary and complex. By directly tackling mass media culture and reality as a primary moulding force and active participant in his narratives, Ballard reasoned upon how the media landscape mediated his characters experiences and understanding of their world, influencing both their individual psychology and personality as well as their culture as a society[14].

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[13] Francis, S. T. (2013). *The Psychological Fictions of J.G. Ballard*. Bloomsbury Academic, p. 2.
[14] *https://www.jgballard.ca/media/2003_catalogue_for_beck's_futures_art_exhibition.html*

1.3 The Selected Novels

Now that the main ideas and concepts advanced by Ballard himself concerning his creative process have been tackled, it is easy to understand the parable underlining the selected works chosen for this examination.

In the first novel, *Concrete Island* (1974), technology presents itself to Maitland in the form of an immense motorway that acts firstly as the primary motive for his marooning on the waste space, secondly as an impenetrable wall that prevents his return to modern society, and ultimately as a shield protecting him from the menaces coming from the outside world he has renounced, while the natural element is present, visible, and hostile to him. In a complete reversal of the apparently clear-cut roles as shown in the beginning, nature in the form of the small waste zone becomes the source of Maitland's power and the means of his survival, while the modern motorway that initially connected the landmarks of his world is seen at the end as a confining force that both prevents his return to it and shields him from the many menaces he sees in it.

The second novel, *High Rise* (1975), is completely devoid of any natural element that is not artificially made. The building itself is seen as a living creature of its own, as its inhabitants descend firstly into social and secondly into psychological chaos. The skyscraper, a symbol of mankind's triumph over nature in its self-sustaining artificially regulated life, the pinnacle of modern technological life, starts articulating its dwellers' life rhythm and dictating their choice when their priorities begin shifting from living to surviving.

The third and final novel, *The Drowned World* (1962), depicts a near future in which because of an unforeseeable ecological crisis Earth has reversed to a primal state in which mankind not only is not the dominant species anymore, but has lost its grip on the technological elements that permitted its ascent in the first place. Technology is in here almost completely absent, replaced by a primitive landscape of which the protagonist, Kerans, tries to make sense of not in order to regain control of it, but aiming to understand his own psyche, altered by the immense heat, seemingly and increasingly more finely tuned with the surrounding environment from which he does not wish to escape, but in which he hopes to delve deeper.

Concrete Island may be read as a disaster novel about a man who, after experiencing a car accident while returning home, ends up wounded in a small waste disposal area enclosed by the motorway and, because of the fever resulting from the injuries he has suffered, ends up becoming insane and transforming into a modern Robinson Crusoe, or better yet a modern Kurtz. Yet landscapes are never just landscapes in Ballard's fiction, and psychotic states are often deployed in order to provide a new interpretative lens for characters who are either rendered unable or choose to refuse to understand what is happening to them. Ballard used *Concrete Island* to explore the theme of technologically induced social isolation within modern urban environments, and did so by placing its protagonist in the most unforeseeable, hidden and forgotten island of all:

> Most of us lead comparatively isolated lives. That being alone on a dune is probably a better description of how you actually lead your life than you realize [...] The city or the

> town or the suburb or the street [...] are places of considerable isolation. People like it that way, too. They don't want to know all their neighbours. This is just a small example where the conventional appeal of the good life needs to be looked at again (Ballard 2012, 10, 84).

Despite being places of considerable human aggregation, the areas of modernity and modern life – Ballard argued – are sceneries in which, despite being surrounded by fellow people, individuals experience profound isolation, a feeling immensely fostered by the rhythms imposed by the modern media landscape. By choosing to set his novel not just within the city, but in a hidden and forgotten fragment of the urban infrastructure, Ballard experimented with his urban landscapes' limits and deployed the unlikely scenario of a small, overlooked patch of wasteland to explore the theme of urban isolation.

Maitland's initially accidental marooning under a motorway overpass soon assumes totally different colours, as when he realises that he could leave anytime he wants his imprisoning is transformed into a self-imposed isolation, a chance for him to study himself and his will of being alienated from society by self-confining in an hostile environment where, if he lost considerable physical strength, in turn he found a psychological one. His fever induced state of madness leads him to understand that his supposedly accidental crash and subsequent marooning are in fact a mirror for his subconscious desire for a self-imposed exile from a life that has ceased to please him. Maitland's marooning is not accidental, but an external manifestation of his hidden psychological need to distance himself from the pressures of modern life.

Paradoxically, what allows him to become disconnected from modern technological life is precisely the locus of waste resulting from such societal life, namely the patch of wasteland hidden by the immense motorway. Ballard was fascinated by modern urban infrastructures that he saw as places possessing a great beauty precisely because of their artificiality and capability of enduring the passing of time, and he awarded them the same status an art critic would assign to a magnificent statue or a beautiful painting[15][16]. The overlooked and liminal space within the modern city, an area where technology abounds and yet nature finds a way to reclaim abandoned or neglected sectors, becomes an edgeland revealing Maitland's internal landscape. *Concrete Island* makes the familiar strange by forcing both its protagonist and readers to acknowledge and confront the unsettling desires lurking beneath the pristine, concrete surface of technological normality of everyday modern existence.

In *High-Rise* Ballard's interest in how modern technology and landscapes mould individual and collective psychologies and lifestyles is rendered manifest beyond any reasonable doubt. If in *Concrete Island* the modern element had the role of putting in motion Maitland's inner trajectory of personal discovery, the luxurious residential tower that hosts the narrative in *High-Rise* is a far more active and preponderant constituent. The physical distance between the highest floors and the ground and between the single dwellers, incredibly close and yet constitutionally distanced and separated in their apartment, sets the perfect technological landscape for Ballard to explore the theme of urban alienation so dear to him:

[15] *https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1974_CBC_radio.html*
[16] *https://www.jgballard.ca/deep_ends/drive_mag_article.html*

> I've been interested for several years now in new lifestyles which permit modern technology; skyscrapers have always attracted me. The life led there seems to me very abstract, and that's an aspect of setting with which I'm concerned when I write – the technological landscape (Ballard 2012, 92).

In *High-Rise* the paradoxical element of the abstraction and distance prompted by a building of which the very foundation seems to be designed to bring people together is appalling, as Ballard seems to be at the same time fascinated and distressed by the utopian ideals of modern urban architecture and planning. The high-rise building, a self contained microcosm in which the higher income share of population either buy or rent their way in in order to assure themselves an ordered and pristine life of luxury, a symbol of progress and refined community, instead soon becomes the theatre of societal decomposition in its most basic forms.

Whereas to Ballard modern day technology-dictated life is in itself inherently pathological, the enclosed environment of the high-rise building provides him with the perfect scenario in which to set his tale of urban isolation and artificially constructed structures and hierarchies, which exacerbate and culminate in the detonation of individual crisis and societal tension, leading to increasingly uncontrolled violence, chaos, and madness. The blatant savagery that takes place after the initial seemingly controlled confrontations leads to a reversal of social order to tribal behaviours, first, and to primal and individual survival, later.

As in *Concrete Island*, Ballard deployed this extreme scenery as a personal commentary on the fragility of modern civilised environments, in which like subterranean currents hidden beneath the surface of earth, primal instincts lie hidden behind the thin veneers of modern, steel

and concrete made society. The immensely advanced environment, designed to foster progress and communion, instead becomes a catalyst for the unconscious regression of its dwellers. Furthermore, Ballard's is not a mere variation on the theme already explored in his previous novel. Coming up with the ideas that would have led to *High-Rise*, his literary research pushed him to test the boundaries of his fiction yet again:

> I did research before sitting down to write. For example, in cities, the degree of criminality is affected by liberty of movement; it's higher in culs-de-sac. And high-rises are culs-de-sac: 2,000 people jammed together in the air [...] cut off from the rest of the world. In this kind of situation, all sorts can happen. Above all I'd like to examine the psychological modifications which occur without the knowledge of the inhabitants themselves, to see to what degree the mind of someone who drives a car or lives in a concrete high-rise has been altered. In the course of my investigations, I observed that there now exists a new race of people who are content in their little prisons, who tolerate a very high level of noise, but for whom the apartment is nothing more than a base allowing them to pass the night in comfort, as they're absent during the day (Ballard 2012, 92-93).

Unlike Maitland, this time Ballard's characters do not find themselves to be suddenly placed in a situation they are forced to make sense of. From the very first moment, they choose to live in an environment that apparently promises a very definite and luxurious style of life; yet, when 'all sorts' start to happen, not one of them decides to leave the building or publicly

denounce the atrocities happening within it. All the high-rise inhabitants, down to the last one, freely and deliberately choose not only to keep on living in an increasingly violent environment, but to actively take part in such violence as it unfolds, and even choose to protect their insanity haven from the outside world. In their vision it is not the building that has descended into madness, it is the outside world that has stopped making sense, and the high-rise has provided them with the perfect means to give way to all the instincts that modern life prompted them to suppress in order to conduct a peaceful, albeit uneventful, existence.

Ballard's choice to not single out an isolated narrator but to select a few individuals – each representing different pre-existing, now notwithstanding, societal positioning and income – to narrate the events unfolding into the building contributes to the idea that the societal dynamics explored in the novel are felt as a communitarian as well as a singular experience. Fostering the Ballardian concept that modern everyday life is a breeding ground for social isolation and psychological breakdown, the luxury high-rise becomes a petri dish for the birth and multiplication of tribal violence, first, and individual survival, later.

Later in the novel, violence ceases to be a means to ensure one's own survival, and instead is pictured as a form of leisure by itself, just for the sake of it. Ballard's neutral, cynical, almost clinical description of the escalating violence is deliberate, as yet again his idea that psychotic behaviour is but a response to the uneasiness prompted by the frantic modern life experience resurfaces. As for Maitland, the protagonists of *High-rise* quickly resolve to violence and self-isolation with unsettling ease, not only as a means of survival, but because their repressed desires detonate once they are removed from their traditional social constraints.

The Drowned World, the last of the three books examined in this dissertation, is set in a near future in which rising temperatures have transfigured the Earth into a primordial, tropical swamp. While other books in Ballard's future production have tackled the theme of the inner space in a more 'modern' way, *The Drowned World* – as well as his other novels of the 1960s concerning climate change – deals with the theme in a more direct way.

Dr. Kerans' fascination with and subjugation to the transformed landscape is total, and his increasing detachment from the fellow scientists in the expedition and from the other survivors, as well as from the remnants of civilisation submerged in the muddy waters of London, can be seen as a voluntary retreat in his own mind. Unlike Maitland and the dwellers in the high-rise building, Kerans does not face an inert enemy or an unseen force he cannot comprehend and confront. The end of his quest for sanity in his fever ridden days lies in a return to a long forgotten past, but in a gradual, complete immersion – both physical and psychological – in the changed environment that surrounds him.

While other characters in the novel deal with daily occurrences in such an hostile world by either trying to study or by subjugating it, Kerans' heart beats with the same rhythm of the solar waves that led the human realm to ruins, and his synapsis run deep along with the vines enveloping the derelict shores that were once monuments and buildings. As the world reverts irreversibly into a primitive state, Kerans experiences a mirror-like regression – or evolution – in his consciousness. In other words – or better yet in Ballard's words – Kerans' inner space coincides with the outer space, and only once he finally lets go of the last strand of resistance against this warped communion he can truly be free to roam this new world and his mind, both of which he finally 'understands'. Faced with overwhelming external change, the characters in

this novel can either resist and fight it in the way they see fit, or they can retreat in their own minds, seeking meaning and solace in the depths of the not-so-physical jungle depths of their subconscious. The external landscape adds tremendously to the similitude, mirroring and amplifying Kerans' emotional and psychological state.

It is much more difficult to isolate the climate concern expressed in the novel from the narration, especially if we compare it with other Ballardian novels in which the theme is much more subtly hinted at, and in which the potency of the possibilities of human progress is depicted with tremendously imaginative potential. Ballard's first long novel deals openly with and keenly anticipates current conditions and concerns revolving around climate change, but does so by dramatically emancipating both its characters and its readers from any responsibility for the climate catastrophe that has engulfed the Earth. The tremendous heat that has destroyed most of the world is not induced by humanity's lack of concern towards manifest and pressing ecological issues, but by a completely separate and unforeseeable event: a solar storm. Following Garrard's examination of the issue, Ballard's apocalyptic narrative in *The Drowned World* could be defined as being framed by a 'comic' frame of acceptance[17]. Comedy as a narrative frame conceives of evil – or apocalypse, in this context – not as the result of a faulty or guilty behaviour, but as the outcome of an unforeseen, incomprehensible error. The search for meaning in this decaying and morally corrupt environment, a leitmotif in the three selected novels, is here rendered with extreme potency because of this precise narrative premise.

When talking about his first novels – among which *The Drowned World* – Ballard often refused the label of 'disaster' narratives because of the inversion in the typical movement of the

[17] Garrard, G. (2023). *Ecocriticism* (3rd ed.). Routledge, p. 87.

genre; instead of having his protagonist fleeing the 'disaster', he made them see it as a transformative event and embrace it:

> I don't see my fiction as being disaster-oriented [...] People seem to imply that these are books with unhappy endings, but the reverse is true: they're books with happy endings, stories of psychic fulfilment. The geophysical changes which take place [...] are all positive and good changes [...] The changes lead us to our real psychological goals, so they are not disaster stories at all. [...] I use the form because I deliberately want to invert it, that's the whole point of the novels. The heroes, for psychological reasons of their own, embrace the particular transformation. These are stories of huge psychic transformations [...] And I use this external transformation of the landscape to reflect and marry with the internal transformation, the psychological transformation, of the characters. This is what the subject matter of these books is: they're transformation stories rather than disaster stories (Ballard 2012, 103).

This first chapter has helped me establish some of the main concerns of this dissertation, that is to say the intersection between inner space and ecological concern in the selected works of J.G. Ballard. Through this initial analysis of these novels I have outlined how the author specifically designed narratives in which the external landscape acts not only as a narrative device, but first and foremost as a psychological mirror and catalyst for the characters' internal transformation. Whether the environment Ballard chooses to set them in, his protagonists endure and experience immense transformative psychological shifts, prompted by such

environments and by their attunement with them, ultimately revealing the hidden mechanisms of subjects dear to his fiction; the changes brought about by modernisation and technology, and the frailty of social normalcy. Rather than rendering the landscapes as inert settings for the events to unfold on the backgrounds of, Ballard pioneered their active role in shaping his characters' human experience. By choosing to narrate not distant futures and alien worlds, but the present modern life and the pressing climate concerns of his planet, Ballard discovered new pathways to the ordinary and extracted the most uncanny elements from settings beyond any reasonable suspicion. 'We live inside an enormous novel. [...] The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent reality' (Ballard 2012, 489).

CHAPTER II

CONCRETE ISLAND, THE WASTELAND WITHIN

2.1 A Space of Transformation

Together with *Crash* and *High-Rise*, *Concrete Island* is part of what Briggs defined as an 'urban disaster trilogy,' a set of novels in which the driving narrative principle is the state of psycho-pathology characterising their characters, willingly part of or unwillingly prisoners of their own isolation, which can manifest in a gradual state of alienation.[18] In this frame, *Concrete Island* can be deployed to exemplify certain Ballardian themes and characteristics that I have outlined in the previous chapter.

The protagonist, Robert Maitland, a professional – an architect, one of the 'literary professions' dear to Ballard – already growing increasingly disillusioned about certain aspects of his life, finds himself trapped in a seemingly isolated traffic island after an 'unforeseeable' car crash. The feverish state induced by the incident in which his mind hovers over the course of the first part of the novel paradoxically acts as a contour to what can be considered some of the most rational actions he performs throughout the narrative – his multiple attempts to return to society and safety.

The meeting with the 'native inhabitants' of the island, a young runaway prostitute – Jane – and a mentally challenged former trapeze artist – Proctor – who, despite the initial

[18] Sanna, I. (2012, February 23). *The only truly alien planet is earth: J. G. Ballard, dalla fantascienza al mainstream tra romanticismo e surrealismo*. Iris.Unica.It. https://hdl.handle.net/11584/266358, p. 115-16.

distrust by virtue of which they treat him as a captive, eventually start to take a liking to and nurturing him, signals the turning point in the narrative and in Maitland's view of the island and of his role within and without it. His being welcomed amongst those excluded by the society he longed to return to, and his increasing mastery over his injured body as well as over the young girl and the tramp, determine the course of his actions from this point to the end of the story, signalling the end of his initial quest to escape his unlikely prison and captors and to rejoin his only apparently civilised life as an architect and married man.

However, in the feverish state and in the events that lead to his decision to ultimately remain on the island as an improvised dictator, Maitland starts exhibiting an insistent desire to let go of the shackles that tied him to the civilised society and to develop a 'will to survive, to dominate the island and harness its [...] resources'[19]. It is impossible not to draw a comparison between Ballard's Maitland and Defoe's Crusoe, Shakespeare's Prospero, or even Conrad's Kurtz. The Ballardian protagonist may not be a wizard or a dictator as cruel and deeply insane, and yet he shares with his literary predecessors some key features, all converging in the puzzling success of his small colonial enterprise. Like Prospero, he too first befriends and subsequently enslaves the original dweller of the island – his Caliban, Proctor – getting him to provide food and shelter for him while injured and weakened in exchange for cheap alcohol, to the point of transforming him into a human mount on whose back he will roam the island. On partly recovering – at least physically wise – Maitland starts giving in to his most basic needs and impulses, accepting and taking advantage of Jane's avances and increasingly yielding to a Kurtz-like self-assertion, becoming growingly aggressive towards her and Proctor, who, after

[19] Ballard, J. G. (2014). *Concrete Island*. Fourth Estate, p. 44.
Following quotations from the novel are from this edition.

being severely emasculated and humiliated, eventually starts serving and revering him as a godly figure.

Maitland's escape is ultimately achieved not in a physical, but in a conceptual sense. By establishing his mastery first over the island and his dwellers and subsequently over his past self, Maitland renounces the civilised world which he sees as a prison more binding and real than his actual, physical one. Being isolated forces him to adapt and transform in order to dominate not only the surrounding savage space, but himself as well. The island is a real and defined physical space, but it also acts as a reflection of Maitland's inner space; for him, to master the island equates to understanding himself, as the psychological transformation inaugurated by the incident and the resulting fever develop at the same pace as his physical recovery. It is also not casual that such revelations occur in such a liminal environment. Aligning with Ballard's understanding of modern urban life and architecture, the concrete island is a space of urban wasteland, a locus that can only exist simultaneously within and without the logic of modernity, and that at the same time can only exist because and at the boundaries of modernity as its direct byproduct. Maitland's crash acts as a real as well as a symbolic fissure between his modern civilised life and the wild, unregulated world of the island. The incident signals his abrupt entry into such a liminal world, and the only way for him to make sense out of it is to give in to its logic while undergoing a profound internal transformation.

2.2 The Multiple Faces of the Island

Ballard was interested in technology not in the classical intended way of traditional sci-fi, but as a tangible modern tool capable of affecting personality and behaviour. Technology in Ballardian fiction possesses an almost sentient nature; it is produced by mankind, yet in turn it moulds back the ways in which it sees and conceives life itself. The most powerful example of this Ballardian topos is urban geography and architecture, which – not only in his 'urban' novels – comprises both extremely prominent structures and barely noticeable outlines around which the lives and decisions of his characters revolve.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard postulates that contemporary society and individuality is shaped and characterised by what he calls the 'precession of simulacra', the process by virtue of which in the contemporary world of the 'hyperreal' the distinction between the tangible and the imaginary – what I identify with the media landscape in Ballardian fiction – has gradually dissolved. In other words, the material world has stopped producing meaningful truths, and has in turn delegated such tasks to its representations, which in turn provide the outlines by which society and individuals shape themselves[20]. Following Baudrillard's statement, Maitland's traffic island can be considered as a space pertaining to the hyperreal in that, despite being a concrete and physical location, its function and meaning are entirely defined by its deference to the surrounding landscape. The network of high-speed multiple lane motorways inherently ties it to the concept of a constant movement, yet the island itself is a stationary

[20] Baudrillard, J. (1995). *Simulacra and Simulation* (S. Glaser, Trans.). University of Michigan Press, p. 1-2. Following quotations from the book are from this edition.

place, while only existing and 'functioning' because of and at the service of its being a non-intended result of what surrounds it.

Maitland's previous life and social positioning become abruptly irrelevant, unreal, and ultimately inaccessible to him because of his marooning in this secluded place devoid of its own proper meaning. His isolation on the island highlights his loss of any point of reference – a 'liquidation of all referentials', as Baudrillard puts it (Baudrillard 1995, 2) – prompting him to embark on a journey, both internal and external, to take control of the island in the effort of endowing it with proper and meaningful contours, suggesting a blurring of inner and outer reality, a hallmark of both Baudrillard's hyperreal and Ballard's inner space. Maitland's increasingly delirious reasonings further emphasise the disintegration of a stable reality and the collapsing of his internal representation of himself and his own injured body into the external reality, acting as a mirror for the fact that, both in Baudrillard and in Ballard, the idea precedes and generates reality:

> Uncertain of himself and his ability to reason clearly, Maitland [...] looked round wildly at the island and its deserted motorway embankments. Was he still trapped inside his car? Was the entire island an extension of the Jaguar, its windshield and windows transformed by his delirium into these embankments? [...] These places of pain and ordeal were now confused with pieces of his body. He gestured towards them, trying to make a circuit of the island so that he could leave these sections of himself where they belonged. He would leave his right leg at the point of his crash, his bruised hands impaled upon the steel fence. He would place his chest where he had sat against the

concrete wall. At each point a small ritual would signify the transfer of obligation from himself to the island (CI, 45-48).

Adding to the theory that the island is both a physical place and a non-intended result of the actual world extending from the motorway onwards, Maitland's initial assumption that his crash is as real and relevant to the people outside as it is for him, and that the event took place in a functional system of rescue and assistance, is severely mutilated by his multiple failed attempts to leave the island by asking for help. The systemic indifference and deterrence displayed by the inattentive drivers is dictated by the hyper-efficient flow of traffic provided for and expected by the motorway, a system that provides connectivity and movement, but actively excludes idleness and unproductiveness. The traffic is a concrete manifestation of being within the movement of the societal system by which both the island and its dwellers have been severed from.

In this 'hypermarket' reality (Baudrillard 1995, 66-68) the urban infrastructure is designed with the sole focus of providing an efficient circulation of commodities, with the drivers speeding on the motorway acting as products in and of the workforce. By becoming estranged from this loop of functional exchange, Maitland's former identity is rendered meaningless and is divorced from his status in the urban hyperreal system of movement and consumption, rendering him an almost invisible nuisance in the eyes of those still pertaining to his old world. The involuntary expulsion from his previous reality determines Maitland's entry into a completely different structure, in which the conventional modes of communication and social interaction he was accustomed to have ceased to carry any meaningful functionality.

Baudrillard's theory of the implosion of meaning in the media and in the social landscape, by virtue of which the once distinct poles and oppositions have collapsed into a circular and self-referring system, can be useful to understand these passages. Maitland's increasing isolation leads to an implosion, deconstruction, and further reconstruction of his personal and social identity. Finding himself in a place not pertaining to the rules of a world he has ceased to – or has chosen not to – be a part of, his prerogatives have switched from the logic of social life to one of personal survival. His every effort, every single element of his life and personality is now solely devoted to survival. His social relationships with Jane and Proctor are rudimental and primal, based on a struggle for subsistence rather than being regulated on the complex social codes of his previous professional life. The island at once dictates and determines not only the course, but the modality and the ends of every action and act of communication. Following Baudrillard's theory, the island and its relationship with the outside world have produced a neutralisation and implosion of any previous meaning (Baudrillard 1995, 79-80).

Ballard's traffic island is a void space defined by traffic and anonymity, a place lacking its own and proper historical, relational, and identity forming significance within the world it occupies, located under the convergence of motorways but not leading anywhere, capable of hosting natural life and yet not suited for habitation or social interaction as the skyscrapers surrounding it. In Augé's terms, it is a 'non-place', as it 'mediate(s) a whole mass of relations [...] which are only indirectly connected with their purposes. [...] creat(ing) solitary contractuality'[21]. Following Augé's definition, the island is a space lacking direct inherent

[21] Augé, M. (2023). *Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (J. Howe, Trans.). Verso Books, p. 94. Following quotations from the book are from this edition.

connections and belonging, either in a historical or cultural meaning, to the places it confines with, as 'a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity [...] spaces which [...] do not integrate the earlier places: instead these are listed, classified, [...] and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position' (Augé 2023, 63).

Non-places, in their indefiniteness, contrast with what Augé defines as 'anthropological places,' by itselves places devoid of proper meaning such as non-places, yet capable of hosting 'concrete and symbolic construction of space' concerned with relations, history, and identity' (Augé 2023, 42). Maitland's past life as an affirmed architect, his relationships with his colleagues, family, and lover, are all symptoms of the qualities of the anthropological space, qualities that could not be replicated in the same way on the island. The relationship of mutual dependence – and only later veneration, as testimony of the perverse colonial logic taking place on the island – Maitland will establish with Proctor, and the sexual encounters he will share with Jane, all are but a pale reflex of the past life he led in London and that he will initially try to reconstitute on the island, albeit temporarily, in order to deliver it the status of 'anthropological place'. In order not only to survive, but to make sense out of his current and supposedly temporary predicament, Maitland tries to apply the same logic that allowed him not only to survive but to thrive in the external world. In other words, despite the initial, unintentional crash, Maitland starts inhabiting the island, depriving it of the status of non-place. By his establishment of routines and interactions with Proctor and Jane the island begins to configure a rudimentary form of story and relationality which, albeit dysfunctional, begins to reflect all the defining qualities of an anthropological place. The very act of claiming

the island as his own reflects, albeit in a distorted way, Maitland's attempt to imbue it (and himself) with a newly found form of identity:

> 'Where are we exactly – are we near the island?'
>
> 'The 'island' – is that what you call it?' (CI, 56)

One of the conditio-sine-qua-non of the non-places of 'supermodernity' that Augé describes is the 'spatial overabundance' (Augé 2023, 31-34), also a characterising element of the environment surrounding traffic island where Ballard set his novel. The existence of the island is possible only within and because of an intricate network of intensely developed communication and transportation routes, yet it is paradoxically excluded from and by its flow. The epitome of modern mobility and connectivity has produced a forgotten and overlooked blank space in this spatial excess, mirroring the condition in which liminal and shaded figures such as Proctor, Jane, and now Maitland find themselves in; inside the society that produced them, yet laughably excluded and forgotten by it. While just a few metres above, beyond the traffic rim, Maitland was an esteemed architect leading a successful life by most modern standards, inside the island such standards no longer hold any value, because he now pertains to a completely different geographic and cultural order of values. His attempts to signal for help are continuously frustrated by the sheer volume, speed, and carelessness of traffic, with the drivers either ignoring or blatantly laughing at him, highlighting this extreme, fictional and physical disconnection of the external, spatially saturated environment, and the island, its simultaneously alienated human and physical byproduct:

> Waiting for his breath to return, Maitland listened to the traffic moving above his head. The sound of engines drummed ceaselessly through the tunnel of the overpass. [...] Maitland waved his raincoat at the passing cars. However, the drivers were concentrating on the overhead route indicators and the major junction with the motorway. The towers of the distant office-blocks rose into the afternoon air. [...] Maitland could almost identify his own building. Somewhere behind the glass curtain-walling on the seventeenth floor his secretary was typing the agenda for the following week's finance committee meeting, never thinking for a moment that her boss was squatting on this motorway embankment with a bloody mouth' (CI, 8-9).

A close concept to that of the non-places and a fruitful framework for understanding Ballard's island is that of 'heterotopia' as framed by Foucault, described as a constant of every human group, produced by and in every culture and society without fail, albeit in varying forms. As opposed to utopias, Foucault's heterotopias are defined physical places existing within and being generated by the very existence of society as a concept. They are 'counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'[22]. In other words, a heterotopia is a locus of deviation from normalcy, an intersection point in space in which the normal rules defining the proper conduct of the pertaining society are either suspended or, in Foucault's words, inverted.

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[22] *Foucault, M. (n.d.). Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias. Mit.edu. Retrieved March 15, 2025, from https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf*
Following quotations from the source are from this link.

Framed in these terms, Ballard's island is configured as the textbook heterotopia. The liminal zone in which Maitland finds himself after his accidental displacement is a place apart, a bracket in which his previous social and cultural status and norms cease to apply. At the same time, the presence of Proctor, a 'mental defective' (CI, 48), and Jane, whose shady background and current conduct suggest a detachment from conventional 'proper' life, further solidify Maitland's sensation of being placed in a space outside of societal norms. Furthermore, in an ironic inversion of roles, it is precisely Maitland's arrival on the island that slowly causes the disruption of its own internal order. To the civil society outside of the island, Proctor and Jane are liminal figures, undesirable outsiders; yet they provide and care for each other, surviving and sustaining their private microcosmic non-place. When Maitland comes, literally crashes, into their world, the logic that supported their existence starts unraveling, culminating in Proctor's death and in Jane's flight, either directly or indirectly because of Maitland's actions and presence.

A key feature of heterotopias, according to Foucault, is the contiguity of normally incompatible spaces, its capability of 'juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' (Foucault). In *Concrete Island*, this feature is fictionally rendered on a macroscopic as well as on a microscopic level. The traffic island exists inside the highly organised and functionally charged space of the road system encompassing it, yet it is in itself a wild, unorganised, and chaotically centered space. Its nature is accidental and not designed, not preordained but destined to be transited on, not dwelt within. On a smaller and more local scale, the actual ground giving place to the traffic island is itself a host to a plethora

of different buildings; a *pastiche* of different epochs and traditions, mixed with the waste products found or discarded by the civil world towering above it:

> Maitland climbed on to the roof of an abandoned air-raid shelter. [...] Parts of the island dated from well before World War II. [...] With the churchyard and the groundcourses of Edwardian terraced houses. The breaker's yard and its wrecked cars had been superimposed on the still identifiable streets and alleyways. [...[Attached to these [...] the remains of a Civil Defence post little more than fifteen years old. [...] He crossed a succession of low walls, partly buried under piles of discarded tyres and worn steel cable. Around the ruin of a former pay-box, Maitland identified the ground-plan of a post-war cinema [...] Ten feet away, partly screened by a bank of nettles, steps ran down to a basement. (CI, 46-47)

What Foucault names as the 'fourth principle' defining his heterotopias is of great interest in this analysis, and it concerns their relationship with time. In the author's words, 'heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time' (Foucault), and in Maitland's case the traffic and the traffic island determine both a physical and a psychological fissure with his previous self. Being completely severed from its surroundings, the island represents a break in his normal way of experiencing time. The high fever, the delirium induced by the injuries provoked by the car accident, and the immoderate consumption of alcohol deployed both as a means of surviving and as a way of temporarily escaping his unfortunate predicaments, all contribute to Maitland's distorted sense

of time. He is forcefully removed from the usual linear progression of his professional and civil life, and thrusted into a cyclical existence governed by the immediate needs of survival in the wilderness. A less manifest textual element underlying Maitland's progressive loss of touch with his now outdated concept of time is his constant checking on his wristwatch during the first chapters. While gradually adapting to his present condition, confined in space and altered in rhythms by the island, conventional time as expressed by traditional measurements ceases to carry a proper meaning, and as such Maitland himself stops checking on it, perhaps having already unconsciously abandoned the idea of being saved, or even of escaping.

Finally, Foucault also underlines how certain heterotopias, which he names 'heterotopias of compensations', are born in the effort of creating 'another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled' (Foucault), almost crossing the frontier to what we would conceptually expect from utopias. While the concrete island is far from being perfect in the traditional utopian sense, Maitland's eventual adaptation and will to change it according to his needs, which develops conjointly with the parable of his internal journey of self-discovery and disowning of his past self, can be understood as a perverse means of compensation for what he perceives as failings, shortcomings, and constraints of his former life. His gradually more insane exertion of control over his island and the other dwellers begin establishing an enclosed and peculiar social and personal order, culminating with a morbose infatuation with himself through physical identification with the island:

> By now he ignored the nettles that stung his legs [...] accepting these burning weals in the same way that he accepted his own weariness. By doing so he found he could

> concentrate on whatever task lay in front of him [...] In some way, this act of concentration proved that he could dominate the island. [...] His success [...] had revived him, rekindling his still unbroken determination to survive. As he was already well aware, it was this will to survive, to dominate the island and harness its limited resources, that now seemed a more important goal than escaping. (CI, 40-44)

Not far from Ballard's understanding of contemporary life, Augé posits that modernity and modern urban infrastructure, in their proliferation of non-places resulting from the exclusion from the bubbles of anthropological places, can lead to the development of a 'solitary individuality' (Augé 2023, 42). In Augé's theory, this inclination to psychological individuality is prompted by an accumulation and excess of events, which in return prompts a marked tendency to isolation. To the extent that – in Ballardian fiction – modern life is inherently solitary and inclined to psychopathology, the insights of the controversial anti-psychiatrist R.D. Laing can provide an interesting context to analyse Maitland's way of interacting with the island and its inhabitants. In Laing's vision too alienation is the normal condition of modern men, among which the schizoid – such as Maitland is, or comes to be – occupies an intricate existential stance. He is 'an individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways [...] there is a rent in his relation with his world and [...] there is a disruption of his relation with himself'[23]. Maitland's accidental marroning on the island is portrayed progressively and insistently as a deliberate – albeit unconscious – withdrawal into the microcosm of the island. In this reading, his belonging to the civilised society is but a contract which becomes undone

[23] Laing, R. D. (1990). *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. Penguin Books, p. 17. Following quotations from the book are from this edition.

once the crash has happened, and as Maitland admits to himself – from the very start, I might add – 'he had almost wilfully devised the crash, perhaps as some bizarre kind of rationalisation' (CI, 3), as a means to distance himself from a life he had already ceased to be pleased with.

Laing's description of the schizoid, who, plagued by 'ontological insecurity' about the reality of his own existence, renounces social interaction in order to avoid what he perceives as a threat to the autonomy of his sense of self (Laing 1990, 46), seems almost tailored to fit Maitland, for it is only in perfect isolation that he can truly feel at ease. His carefully orchestrated fantasy of solitude, his deliberate cultivation of his freedom from his family and mistress – and later his island companions as well – his solipsistic tendency to objectify and depersonalise his fellow dwellers of the island in order to neutralise them as a threat to his own overarching personality (Laing 1990, 55), all seem to imply a deeply-rooted aspect of his personality. However, in Ballardian fiction this can also be read as a direct reflection of and response to the inherently alienating nature of the (ir)rational technological landscape in which he lives and – in the case of the island – is casted away on. Maitland internally negates the entirety of the world outside of his own enclosure, his private non-place, embodying the terminal stage of modern social entropy which will find its climax in *High-Rise*. The technological urban scenery in *Concrete Island* facilitates Maitland's tendency, as both the high-speed road and the city landscape repeatedly insinuate inherently inhuman distances and physical obstacles in the way of his regaining contact with the outside world. Naturally driven and artificially prompted to distance himself from society, Maitland reflects Laing's analysis of the schizoid in its entirety, whereas 'the withdrawal from reality results in the 'self's' own impoverishment. Its omnipotence is based on impotence. Its freedom operates in a vacuum. [...]

The self becomes dessicated and dead' (Laing 1990, 152). Having already, at first unconsciously and, by the end of the novel, consciously abandoned his old life and self, Maitland feels he has achieved a complete dominion over his island, and this coincides with Proctor's death and Jane's departure, leaving him to rule completely alone and devoid of any external intervention:

> He accepted the rules of the young woman's charade, glad of the freedom it implied, a recognition of their need to avoid any hint of commitment to each other. His relationships [...] all the thousand and one emotionally loaded transactions of his childhood, would have been tolerable if he had been able to pay for them in some neutral currency, hard cash across the high-priced counters of these relationships. Far from wanting this girl to help him escape from the island, he was using her for motives he had never before accepted, his need to be freed from his past, from his childhood, his wife and friends, with all their affections and demands (CI, 98-99).

2.3 The Non-Human Other

The narrative world of *Concrete Island* is exquisitely man made in almost every detail. The car crash inaugurating Maitland's 'journey' – a Jaguar, as he multiple times points the readers to, constantly reminding them and himself of his wealthy status – is the epitome of technological advancements when it comes to travelling within the urban scenery. The motorway junction surrounding the island, despite constituting an obstacle in the greater part of the novel, is in

itself a splendidly functional road system. The skyscrapers and the office blocks of which, thanks to his previous social position, Maitland articulated rhythms and modes are a symptom of a perfectly integrated professional life. However, the island is a glitch in the Matrix; it is a non-place, a heterotopia, a closed system in which the rules of the outside world do not apply, and in which a clashing of urban ruins, remains of past epochs, and modern waste byproducts coexist in creating a self sustaining environment, not intentionally suited to accommodate human life and dwelling in the modern sense, but capable of providing sustainment nonetheless.

As Serres suggests, the island possesses a hybrid nature in that 'global history enters nature; global nature enters history'[24]. The artificial fabric of the world Maitland belongs to is slowly being reappropriated by the very same ecological process that had been excluded from it in the first place. Despite being born from concrete, the island has evolved into a realm possessing its own distorted form of wilderness, influenced by human history and conversely influencing it, forcing Maitland to acknowledge and confront a nature that is both alien to and profoundly meshed with artificial creation. The key word here is 'forced', as for those liminal figures who have already renounced a life in the external world or conversely have been disowned by it – such as Proctor and Jane – life on the island is a possible and a relatively smooth process. For Maitland though the entry on the island is not intentional but accidental, and instead of living he is coerced to survive in a hostile environment. His relationship with the original 'owners' is purely transactional, as he relies on Proctor's *naivetè* and physical strength in

[24] Serres, M. (1995). *The Natural Contract* (E. MacArthur & W. Paulson, Trans.). University of Michigan Press, p. 4.
Following quotations from the book are from this edition.

order to freely move around the island, and takes advantage of Jane's knowledge and body once he is sufficiently capable of doing so.

However, in a complete inversion of the traditional survival narratives from which he drew the topos of the island and of the stranded survivor, Ballard's adventure dwells on the theme of a marked 'inverted Crusoeism'[25]. Maitland does not find himself marooned within a hostile natural environment; quite the opposite, the intrusive presence of nature within an otherwise completely artificial environment is precisely what allows him to survive, while the man-made components – such as metal nets, ruins of past walls, ect. – and not least other humans as well act as the hostile obstacles preventing his return to society, frustrating his attempts to signal his presence, and ultimately functioning as a deterrent in his choice to ultimately keep living on the island.

Albeit not being an overtly hostile element, nature in *Concrete Island* is not a pastoral and nurturing place of rebirth either. Following with its mixed nature of being a place set between urban and wild settings, its internal construction is itself mixed, hybrid; a patch of neglected wasteland slowly being reclaimed by organic growth that follows and engulfs the contours of the once solely man-made scenario. In a parallel parable, Maitland can't hope to 'dominate the island and harness its resources' (CI, 44) by exerting control over its nature; the only way he has to thrive is to stop treating it as a hostile environment, and it is only once the only truly unfavourable elements have been removed – i.e. Proctor, Jane, and his will to return to society – that he can dissolve into it, not dissimilarly from the artificial elements absorbed by

[25] Baxter, J., & Wymer, R. (Eds.). (2012). *J.G. Ballard: Visions and Revisions* (1st ed.). Palgrave Macmillan, p. 232-34.
Following quotations from the book are from this edition.

the overgrown patch. As to signify this achieved connection with the island, Maitland's reaction to his ultimate loneliness is one of almost mystical communion with what surrounds him:

> Maitland felt a sense of gathering physical strength, as if the unseen powers of his body had begun to discharge their long-stored energies. [...] He was glad that both Proctor and the young woman had gone. Their presence had brought out unwelcome strains in his character, qualities irrelevant to the task of coming to terms with the island. As well as this new-found physical confidence, Maitland noticed a mood of quiet exultation corning over him. [...] Maitland tore away the remains of his ragged shirt, and lay bare-chested in the warm air, the bright sunlight picking out the sticks of his ribs. In some ways the task he had set himself was meaningless. Already he felt no real need to leave the island, and this alone confirmed that he had established his dominion over it. [...] He stood up and gazed confidently across the island. He felt light-headed from hunger, but calm and in control of himself. He would collect food from the perimeter fence [...] In a few hours it would be dusk (CI, 122-124).

Nature as displayed in *Concrete Island* is itself a blurring of the defined boundaries between wilderness and urban sceneries; neither purely natural, as it can't produce anything by its own because of its being engulfed by the surrounding intersection, nor fully urban, as the once completely human elements have been invaded by the organic growth. If we follow Latour's reasoning, neither can thrive in the presence of the other, as for the 'modern' to properly establish itself it is necessary that a fundamental separation between what is natural

and what is urban takes place, through a 'work of purification'[26]. As such, to properly function the motorway system has to completely exclude the foreign natural element, which in return can only thrive in the absence of urban items. However, the island is configured as what Latour describes as 'hybrid', or 'quasi-object'; it does not pertain to a singular 'network', but instead operates in between, enacting a sort of 'work of translation' between the two (Latour 1993, 11). As such, the 'triangular patch of waste ground' (CI, 46) features traits of both worlds, being simultaneously natural and urban, thus defying the strict dichotomy between the two.

As a result, Maitland's coerced immersion in the 'non-human nature' of the island leads to a dissolution of his cultured existence and to a gradual communion with the wasteland. His attempts to dominate this hybrid place through exquisitely human acts such as marking messages with the help of modern tools, or trying to educate Proctor in order to accommodate his own needs, further underline the entanglement of the 'human culture' with the 'concrete wilderness'. The island can't be tamed according to human terms, and Maitland will find out at his own expense when the markings he had left will be erased and his attempt to educate the senile tramp will go to waste. In order to be understood, taken advantage of, and ultimately 'dominated', the island has to be met by Matiland on a middle ground. In typical Ballardian terms, Maitland soon realises that the ground on which he stands is far from being an inert surface for his marooning; quite the opposite, it is an active presence that influences and determines the course of his actions. This involves a gradual and constant process of adaptations, negotiation, and transformation; the island has already transfigured in order to

[26] Latour, B. (1993). *We Have Never Been Modern* (C. Porter, Trans.). Longma, p. 11.
Following quotations from the book are from this edition.

thrive in such a hostile environment, but Maitland has to undergo some kind of adaptation as well in order to survive.

In Latourian terms, this 'paradox' is described as a 'work of mediation' (Latour 1993, 32-33). Nature – as represented in the novel by Proctor and the island itself – and social order – Maitland – can only thrive while remaining absolutely distinct, as they are by definition respectively untamed and constructed, physically and culturally positioned in opposite and unmeetable poles. However, when the two poles start converging, nature becomes a partly artificial construction, while human fabrications escape their original intended purpose. Maitland, still part of his separate order and willing to return to it, has to negotiate his way between the natural obstacles provided by the island; this is what I might name an act of 'forced mediation', a contrast which does not bear any meaningful fruits. Being 'unequipped to carry out any but the simplest physical activities' (CI, 23) in this unfamiliar environment, the mastery he always presumed to have over an environment he never had to directly confront is rendered useless. His physical weakness and ineptitude vividly contrasts with the island's peculiar flora and architecture, adding to the 'Inverted Crusoeism' by subverting the traditional human dominance over nature and aligning with Serres' critique of 'mastery and possession' (Serres 1995, 38-39). Maitland's marooning forces him to fictionally sign a 'contract' with the island, one that dictates that a different kind of relationship has to be established in order to guarantee his survival: not one of forced mastery, but one of symbiotic similitude where 'knowledge would no longer imply property, nor action mastery, nor would property and mastery imply their excremental results and origins' (Serres 1995, 32-33). In other words, while Maitland is

indeed convinced that he is extending his mastery over the island, he is actually being slowly absorbed into its rules.

Proctor, on the other hand, has already adapted to the bizarre environment, embodying a completely different and definitely more integrated form of mediation. The language Ballard deploys to indicate Proctor's relationship with the island and his aversion to the external world is an important element in order to understand such distinction:

> Proctor gazed uncertainly at the concrete parapets around them. The magnified roar of the traffic unsettled him, and he seemed almost bemused now that he had left the sanctuary of the island and its green swaying ocean. [...] Living alone in this forgotten world whose furthest shores were defined only by the roar of automobile engines, the humming of tyres and squeal of brake linings. For Proctor, as Maitland had seen already, the deep grass was his vital medium. His scarred hands felt the flexing stems, reading their currents as they seethed around him (CI, 87).

The almost complete sensory engagement Proctor shares with the island is proof of a deep connection and understanding of the non-human element, if none other by virtue of a complete refusal of a world that has expelled him. The acrobat's way of interacting with the island and the other humans is based on direct sensational experience, rather than on abstraction, contrasting with Maitland's more intellectual attempts to come to terms with his predicament. His aversion to physical language as a means of communication – 'He never learned to read and write. He hates words of any kind' (CI, 70) – seems to add to his

construction as a more natural and primal figure, aligning with Serres' theory of the 'natural contract', according to which 'The old social contract, too, was unspoken and unwritten. [...] We don't know the world's language. [...] The Earth speaks to us in terms of forces, bonds, and interactions, and that's enough to make a contract (Serres 1995, 38-39). If Proctor is, according to Serres' reasoning, the proof of the validity of a non-verbal and sensory connection to the concrete nature of the island, at the opposite pole of the paradox Maitland's relationship with it is characterised by deploying a completely different vocabulary:

> They (the waving grass blades) were part of that conspiracy of the grotesque which had kept him marooned on the island [...] He thrashed at the grass in front of him, identifying its luxuriant growth with all the pain he had felt. The deep grass jostled around him on all sides like a hostile crowd. (CI, 85-86)

The architect's initial attempt to impose his presence and will on the island's ground can be viewed as a forced act of mediation, trying to make his presence literally legible within this new alien context. However, as to underline the agency of the non-human environment in resisting or altering artificial intervention, Maitland's intervention fails miserably when the island at once receives and transfigures his message:

> When he reached the embankment and searched for the message he had scrawled on the white flank of the caisson, he found that all the letters had been obliterated. [...] He stared at the remains of the message he had inscribed on the damp concrete. The letters

had been reduced to black smudges, the smeared rubber running to the ground at his feet. (CI, 44-45)

Resorting to Latourian terminology, the island is a small, isolated 'network' (Latour 1993, 86-90) inside of which the interaction between natural and artificial realms, usually starkly separated, is rendered possible by its 'hybrid' connotation, which emphasises the interconnectedness of its 'actants', both human and non-human, in shaping its reality. Physically wise this is rendered textually manifest in the mingling of human architecture and organic blooming, while on a more 'inner' level this is rendered in Maitland's gradual acceptance of the island, which is translated in a progressive shift in the set of words used to describe his relationship with the natural elements. The grass, initially seen as a 'hostile crowd', undergoes a profound conceptual transformation within Maitland's mind and starts exerting an even more active presence as a non-human actant within the island network. The same principle of pathetic fallacy can be applied to the other non-human elements as well, as Maitland comes to realise that the environment is not a passive backdrop, but an active force shaping his experience. Once the island starts being perceived as 'becoming an exact model of his head. [...] A journey not merely through the island's past but through his own' (CI, 47), the identification between the architect and the island becomes complete, further blurring the boundaries between the social and the natural contract (Serres 1995, 15), or – in Ballardian terms – between inner and outer landscapes. Finally, the island itself comes to be described and understood in Gaia-like terms, possessing a kind of semi-conscious sense of resilience and will to survive, apart from or together with human elements, according to its own conditions:

> The grass lashed at his feet, as if angry that Maitland still wished to leave its green embrace. Laughing at the grass, Maitland patted it reassuringly with his free hand as he hobbled along, stroking the seething stems that caressed his waist. [...] This triangular patch of waste ground had survived by the exercise of a unique guile and persistence, and would continue to survive, unknown and disregarded, long after the motorways had collapsed into dust. (CI, 46-48)

If Serres' insights informs my understanding of *Concrete Island* by suggesting that the protagonist's ultimate acceptance of and by the island is primarily due to his signing of a fictitious contract with it, my understanding of the figure of Maitland as configured by Laing's schizoid complicates this analysis further, as it introduces the concept of the deliberate disruption of his connection with his previous life in order to preserve his controversial 'sanity'. Furthermore, Maitland's shifting grasp of the island's nature as a growingly more communicative and sentient force cements my opinion that his adaptation is far from being merely physical, but indeed involves a deep psychological adaptation. His mastery over the island shifts to a voluntary submission to it, not because of a detached ecological process, but by virtue of its collapsing into his inner space, textually conveyed by fever and altered state of mind and translated in a blurring between self and environment, from architect to architectural product. It follows that, if nature seems to gradually respond to Maitland according to his progressive acceptance of his own predicament, it is because Maitland's mind begins to reconfigure the surrounding reality, informing and shaping how he experiences the island. The

key question, then, becomes: is Maitland actually integrating into it, or is he being reduced to being a part of it?

In this reading, Morton's understanding of nature can be useful in decrypting Maitland's final and controversial act of identification with it. Morton argues that 'nature', as seen in the context of ecocritic and ecocritical readings, is an inconsistent term 'useful to ideologies of all kinds in its very slipperiness, in its refusal to maintain any consistency'[27]. To see it through a dichotomous lens, to put 'something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar' (Morton 2009, 13) is not only unfruitful, but damaging in any possible reading. Roughly echoing Augé's non-places and Foucault's heterotopias, in the context of *Concrete Island* the natural force Maitland encounters is precisely what Morton defines while discussing what he coined his concept of 'dark ecology', that is to say the physical embodiment of the acknowledgement of the impossibility to escape the paradoxes of humanity's contemporary relationship with the environment (Morton 2009, 192). The 'non-nature' of the traffic island is far from the pristine, bucolic, regenerative wilderness found in similar 'island narratives'; it is a forgotten landscape of human construction and waste, slowly being repurposed by its non-human hosts.

Under this lens, Maitland's final identification with its structure takes on a completely different meaning. Throughout most of the second part of the novel, Maitland progressively puts himself in discussion by acknowledging his shortcomings in the civilised outside world. The hybrid island Maitland identifies himself with toward the end of the novel might not symbolise his rebirth as a different or of his renewal as a better man, but the culminating

[27] Morton, T. (2009). *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Harvard University Press, p. 25.
Following quotations from the book are from this edition.

recognition of his own imperfections, just as his initial refusal to acknowledge the implications of his predicament can be seen as a denial of the entirety of his personality. By the end of his adventure he is no longer, how Morton puts it by drawing on a Hegelian concept, a 'beautiful soul' who 'washes his or her hands of the corrupt world, refusing to admit how in this very abstemiousness and distaste he or she participates in the creation of that world' (Morton 2009, 23). His final melting with the island can be interpreted as a mental representation of his definite moving away from his initial detached idealisation of his own self, toward a more entangled – although uncomfortable – relationship with the island. Rather than keeping on romanticising a perfect reunification with his past, pristine self, which he has come to understand to be nothing more than a distorted perception, Maitland's embracing of the island might stand for his complete acceptance of himself. Following this gradual shift in the understanding of the island, Maitland's vocabulary modifies to reflect this internal change; the external landscape, finally, coincides with his inner space: 'He spoke aloud, a priest officiating at the eucharist of his own body. 'I am the island.' The air shed its light' (CI, 48). Mirroring this newly achieved apprehension, not giving any precise indication as to whether it led to a propositive return to the external world, the last pages of the novel show Maitland reflecting one last time on his conflictual condition:

> In a clear voice, Maitland spoke to her for the last time. 'Jane, don't call for help. I'll leave the island, but I'll do it in my own time. [...] Already he felt no real need to leave the island, and this alone confirmed that he had established his dominion over it. [...]

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. (CI, 122-24)

2.4 Overturning the Topos

I believe this brief analysis of Ballard's Island would be far from satisfactory if I did not consider the relevant colonial theme underlying the narrative. Albeit not making it its central point, Ballard's *Concrete Island* is a novel that defies traditional travel and imperial leitmotifs by unconventionally revolving around the topos of the coloniser stranded on the unfamiliar island, which he ultimately comes to dominate through the exertion of either brute force or what is deemed to be a superior culture.

Drawing from Said's analysis of the imperial culture in literature, we can say that 'Robinson Crusoe is virtually unthinkable without the colonizing mission that permits him to create a new world of his own in the distant reaches of the [...] wilderness'[28], which I would translate as: without the conquest there would be no narrative. That being said, the wasteland on which Maitland's (dis-)adventure takes place is nothing like the traditionally distant and exotically populated atol, always seen as the perfect space for domination and civilisation Far from being bent to the will of its unlikely 'coloniser', the island ends up engulfing him and reversing the canonical topos by exerting its influence on Maitland, who eventually is the one being modified by his involuntary enterprise. This does not mean that Maitland does not try to

[28] Said, E. W. (1994). *Culture and Imperialism*. Random House, p. 64.
Following quotations from the book are from this edition.

impose his own order on the island; but, instead of enacting the 'Cruesoe myth', he undergoes its inversion in that he is instead 'colonised' by the island.

If the core constant of the imperial narrative is the hierarchical relationship of power and moral superiority exerted by the 'metropole' onto its 'overseas territories' and their inhabitants (Said 1994, 106), Ballard's island by contrast presents the reader with a scenario where the 'oversea territory' is set well within the urban landscape of the 'metropole' itself, not in some remote location, and its 'natives' are outcasts coming from the very dominant culture that originated the island as well. By positioning Maitland's struggle in the core of the supposed centre and by collapsing the genre's inherently distant periphery within it, *Concrete Island* displaces the familiar imperial dynamic as posited by Said. Furthermore, if the centre is legitimised to assume a colonising role by virtue of a 'structure of attitude and reference' established by its geographical location, while by the same principle the periphery is seen as rightfully 'subordinate and dominated' (Said 1994, 75), the very placement of the world beyond within the dominant centre of the metropole undermines the very foundation of the power underlying the imperial discourse.

Literary colonial fantasies often feature a typically wealthy European protagonist helping bring control over a foreign territory and its people, and – despite not acting as an agent of the Empire – Maitland too is a professional figure of distinct privilege and dominance within the metropolitan society he is a part of. His gradual loss of control in facing a hostile environment within his own world, a leak in the 'imperial' structure, a situation he is not culturally, physically, nor mentally equipped to deal with, can also be seen as a complete inversion of these conventional power dynamics. Maitland, the exponent of the dominant

culture, is dethroned and thrown into a state of powerlessness akin to that of the colonised subject by none other than the island itself, the very place he sought to dominate. If, as Said posits, colonisers' narratives depict their conscious power by positioning themselves as the 'principal authority, an active point of energy' (Said 1994, introduction, xxi), Maitland's emasculation by being placed as a figure of urban 'principal authority' within a context where his 'energy' and agency is severely compromised by the indifferent nature of the environment constitutes a radical subversion of the theme.

When thinking of literary imperial narratives, one cannot opt out of considering that one of the primary alleged motives behind colonial enterprises is its justification under the notion of a 'civilising mission,' of the salvation and redemption of the corrupt realm of supposedly 'backward' regions, either through the imposition of religion, instruction, or industrialisation, not casually oftentimes coupled with dominion (Said 1994, 132). In order to sustain such a perverse narrative, the imperial enterprise dwells on a fundamental division between 'us', the Europeans, and 'them', the natives, 'each quite settled, clear, unassailably self-evident'. Such distinctions are necessary and inherent to the possibility of subduing and exploiting a similar 'other', Said argues, leading to 'illusions of omnipotence and misleading self-satisfaction' (Said 1994, introduction, xxv), under the weight of which Conrad's Marlow felt his world crumble in realising the falseness of his presumed mission and the true reasons behind his presence in Africa.

On a completely opposite pole, Maitland's entry into the island is not deliberate nor dictated by any precise motive; yet, in order to survive and escape from it, he indulges in similar exploits. His growing aggressiveness towards 'them' is not sustained by any kind of supposed

civilising intent, and the motive behind the establishment of his dominion over the island is not dictated by any reason other than his will to escape from it and from himself. More than any other, Proctor falls victim to this mechanism and, as an urban, much less poetically inclined Caliban, in his inability to discern Maitland as a perilous other he can't help but submit his strength and knowledge of the island to him. The climax is reached when, in the umpteenth attempt to leave the island, Maitland resolves to teach Proctor how to write only to make himself visible beyond the reach of the guardrails:

> 'You need me to ration it (the wine) for you, Proctor – don't forget that. I've changed the whole economy of your life. Wine with your meals, you dress for dinner – you're all too eager to be exploited...' [...] He snapped his fingers, charged with the sudden conviction that he would soon escape. Lifting the crutch like a schoolmaster, he pointed it at Proctor. 'Proctor, I'm going to teach you to read and write' (CI, 104-5).

Without the conquest there would be no narrative, and in *Concrete Island* there actually is a conquest, but not in the canonical, 'island narrative' sense. Maitland eventually transforms his accidental marooning into a territorial conquest and subdues the 'natives' by making Proctor his 'beast' and Jane his concubine, reshaping the wasteland's structure in order to fit his needs. The progressive domestication of the island and its inhabitants indeed follows a colonial logic, with the turning of a wild and derelict space into a personal dominion, Maitland's forced domination, and the negotiation of his position as the self-proclaimed emperor of the island. And yet it is precisely by doing so that Ballard seals the inversion of the Crusoe archetype. The

island is ultimately but a scrap of abandoned modernity, and Maitland's mastery over it is rewarded with the dissolution of his own identity. His conquest is hollow, the ultimate frustration of the island narrative, as he is left 'to rove forever within the empty city of his own mind' (CI, 99).

CHAPTER III

HIGH-RISE, THE VERTICAL ABYSS

3.1 The Implosion of Civilisation

It comes as no surprise that, much like *Concrete Island*, its unofficial 'sequel' deploys urban scenery as well. Yet *High-Rise* takes a step forward in all regards, first of all by normalising the dystopian element underlying the narrative from the very beginning, as one of the protagonists, Dr. Robert Laing, a not-so-subtle homage to the homonymous anti-psychiatrist and yet another Ballardian doctor – as well as one of the young Ballard's medical inspirations – 'sat on his balcony eating the dog [...] now that everything had returned to normal'[29]. In the case of *High-Rise*, chaos and reversion to a primal state are not the ending point of the narrative, but the incipit to a 'normal' state of being.

In a long flashback comprising the whole novel, the reader is taken to one of five identical luxury apartment buildings built on the outskirts of the city. As to both take proper distance from *Concrete Island* and eerily hint to its thematic continuity with it, Ballard suggests that the building has been constructed 'on a bend of the river, sharply separated [...] from the rundown areas around it, decaying nineteenth-century terraced houses and empty factories already zoned for reclamation' (HR, 3). The luxury building is displayed and sold as a seemingly utopian living environment, built and conceived by its architect – Anthony Royal, also one of

[29] Ballard, J. G. (2014). *High-Rise*. Fourth Estate, p. 1.
Following quotations from the novel are from this edition.

the novel's protagonists and the top-living tenant of the condominium – for a homogeneous *ensemble* of wealthy professionals who wish to put a distance from the 'disturbed', schizophrenic reality of the city, such as Laing and Richard Wilder, a documentary filmmaker and former rugby player, the last and probably the most proactive of the protagonists.

Despite the seemingly pristine premises, life in the building soon triggers a severe societal breakdown within the enclosed, modern architectural utopia, a precipitous dive down from minor neighbourly disputes over shared amenities to blatant tribal warfare, metaphorically crumbling into a perpendicular battleground. The descent into chaos is meticulously documented by its inhabitants, who display largely different reactions to the events taking place within it, while at the same time all developing an indefatigable and morbose affection to life in the building.

The heavenly luxury condominium, 'a huge machine designed to serve, not the collective body of tenants, but the individual resident in isolation (HR, 6)', slowly begins configuring as the unnamed, silent, invisible, and immanent fourth protagonist; a concrete crucible for its inhabitants' despair. The immense structure of cement and steel begins configuring as an organism hosting its hundreds of tenants, who gradually revert to a primal state of territorial confrontation, laying the perfect case study for the Ballardian inquiry into the erosion of modern personal identity in a situation of coerced collectivity. Once again, Ballard depicts how the very same design of the modern environment and self-sufficiency of the building constitute their inherent flaws, providing the desired self-isolation while at the same time inadvertently dismantling the larger social structures that regulate the desirable collective and personal behaviour within and without it. As Wilder reflects later in the novel:

> The more arid and affectless life became in the high-rise, the greater the possibilities it offered. By its very efficiency, the high-rise took over the task of maintaining the social structure that supported them all. For the first time it removed the need to repress every kind of anti-social behaviour, and left them free to explore any deviant or wayward impulses. It was precisely in these areas that the most important and most interesting aspects of their lives would take place (HR, 44).

The marked descent from a exaggeratedly festive, almost delirious enjoyment of a secluded life of parties and luxuries granted and provided by the circular, complete isolation of the building, 'forty floors and thousand apartments, its supermarket and swimming-pools, bank [...] all in effect abandoned in the sky (HR, 1)', begins from a series of minor malfunctions in the building's regulating system, giving place to seemingly trivial irritations. However, the initial 'low-level bickering' gradually paves the way to flamboyant inter-floor antagonism, reiterating the crude re-emergence of a seemingly surpassed social stratification within the vertical landscape of the building. Life in the condominium starts re-enacting a past, long-forgotten stage of human life prior to and outside of it, with the high-rise effectively and spontaneously enacting a division into upper, middle, and lower classes, accommodating and fostering the inherent differences and turmoils between its tenants. Not only does the building act as a lens for the larger society outside of it – focusing on its most basic and instinctual personal desires – but it actually prompts the emergence of a completely separate social-life form and structure within it. As Laing notices, mirroring its author's understanding of modern

life as ‘inherently pathological’, ‘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’ (HR, 43). Once again, in a perfect Ballardian sense, the not-so-fictional modern environment acts an active force in shaping its tenants actions and thoughts. The building slowly rises as the self-regulating mechanism underlying its tenants' rhythms and behaviour, as life outside of it, both in a professional, social, and personal sense, quietly shades into nothingness:

> Already his attention was fixed on the events taking place within the high-rise, as if this huge building existed solely in his mind and would vanish if he stopped thinking about it. [...] As he walked across the parking-lot Laing looked back at the high-rise, aware that he was leaving part of his mind behind him. [...] The steady amputation of limbs and thorax, head and abdomen by teams of students, which would reduce each cadaver by term’s end to a clutch of bones and a burial tag, exactly matched the erosion of the world around the high-rise. During the day [...] he thought continually about the apartment building, a Pandora’s box whose thousand lids were one by one inwardly opening (HR, 42-43).

The high-rise becomes the sole means and meaning of existence for those within it, whether in the low or in the high floors, as its perimeter begins configuring as more real, meaningful, and ‘sane’ than the external reality in which ‘London belonged to a different world,

in time as well as space,' and, ironically, 'the ragged skyline of the city resembled the disturbed encephalography of an unresolved mental crisis (HR, 4)'. Just as Maitland found his answers in the liminal patch of wasteland within the heart of the city, the high-rise actively provides Laing and Wilder with a separate, functional, self-sustaining reality, 'a model of all technology had done to make possible the expression of a truly 'free' psychopathology' (HR, 45).

As the internal organisation of the building and the psychological integrity of the tenants deteriorates beyond control, Ballard depicts a discomforting, yet quiet acceptance of the chaos; a tranquil surrendering to the internal logic and will of the high-rise itself, to the point that the tenants actively prevent any outsiders from interfering with the self-regulating and self-referential life that has developed within their personal and social world. This 'growing defiance of reality' no longer surprises anyone, and even the random deaths and deliberate beatings are not met with an understandable shock, but with a chilling indifference and acceptance. Paradoxically, the absolute breakdown of services and the exponential increase in confrontations become a perverse source of unity, swinging the social logic inside of the building to and fro predatorial isolation and tribal aggregation.

The novel grimly culminates in a state of near-total social and personal collapse, with the high-rise, once the epitome of technological urban advancement and sophisticated living, regressing into a pre-societal stage where 'the new order had emerged, in which all life within the high-rise revolved around three obsessions—security, food and sex' (HR, 193). The narrative returns to the present day, with Laing cooking the neighbours' dog on his balcony with the intention of serving it to the women with whom he has formed a small tribe. As a power failure happens in one of the twin luxury buildings, Ballard's bleak vision is condensed at

once in Laing's final thought, watching 'contentedly, ready to welcome them to their new world (HR, 248)'.

The novel shares with its unofficial predecessor some key themes, such as the unlikely imprisoning of its protagonists, their accidental and subsequently self-imposed alienation – or aggregation – and the slow descent into a state of delirium. Although it might seem but a simple change of setting on the cover, *High-Rise* takes on precise Ballardian fictional tenets and delves deeper and deeper into them by paradoxically broadening the human and physical spectrums involved. Whereas *Concrete Island* was concerned with the isolation of a single man in an urban and wild setting, *High-Rise* takes Ballard's theme of modern social solitariness literally to the next level. The luxury building becomes not a personal but a collective hell, as it exponentially fosters egoism and self-assertion by trapping hundreds of people not in a horizontal, but in a vertical plane.

The motorway intersection and the patch of wasteland below it provided Maitland with a spatially circular, enclosed space for him to unravel his personal desire of freedom from an overarching societal life. On the other hand the building, in its inherent verticality, which through the novel proves to be not only spatial, but social as well, prompts its inhabitants to undergo a similar experience in a much more condensed, fast-paced, and above all combined way. The passage is not between one form of concrete to another, but rather from a personal desert to a collective – or, better yet, collaborative – gorge. If the island reminds of a circle, in a closing spiral movement the building, signalling its internal turmoil to no other than itself, cannot be associated with anything else but a lighthouse, the most central point of the island. The spatial movement culminating with *High-Rise* is indeed a vertical one, with every book

fictionally layering on top of the same themes in an upward sensory crescendo, from the street to the sky, 'loosely but consciously re-enacting the classic Dantean structure of *The Divine Comedy*'s three canticles: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*' (Baxter & Wymer 2012, 124-25). The horizontal abandonment in a 'naturally' hostile environment provided Maitland with a rather personal and enclosed space. On the opposite pole, the luxury building is a completely and above all deliberately urban space, specifically designed for human comfort, despite its paradoxical outcome.

Following Ballard's classical trajectory, this movement from involuntary abandonment to deliberate suffocating proximity acts not as an indirect prompt, but as a complete and deliberate detonation. Perhaps more than any of his other 'urban' novels, *High-Rise* reflects its author's morbose interest in the collapse of modernity due to its inherent incongruencies, from within rather than from the outside, especially in assumed civilised environments. As Ballard himself put it, most of the building's appeal lies in its being 'an environment built, not for man, but for man's absence (HR, 28)'. Again, urban living in yet another of its faces and facades becomes the literary experiment, with the building assurging as its protagonist. Echoing the architect's unfortunate adventure, the building leads to disintegration as well, in a continuum of collapse from the personal to the social dimension.

3.2 Postmodern Totality

It is impossible to divorce the postmodern and architectural setting in *High-Rise* from its core themes. As the motorway system and the urban wasteland did for Maitland, the skyscraper as an active, overarching, immanent presence plays a pivotal role in prompting Laing and Wilder's development – or involution – as characters as the novel unravels. If the debris island, a *pastiche* of natural and urban, past and present, constituted a half-breed environment, the high-rise is structured and devoted as a whole to a totalising logic of supermodernity. It is a self-sustaining and self-referential structure, within which individuality, sociality, work, services, and leisure can be experienced in their fullness – for a price – without owing any debt to the outside world. It is a microcosm made into a macrocosm; individuality brought onto the stage of sociality.

In other words, recurring to a Jamesonian terminology, the high-rise may be interpreted as the literary physical embodiment of a late capitalism societal and architectural structure[30]. The social space within the building, allegedly designed by its overarching architect Anthony Royal as the ideal place for an only apparently homogeneous collection of high-income professional people, soon cedes to chaos as issues arise in its internal organization, revealing itself as nothing more than a luxury container – a zoo, as its creator names and understands it – for a way more traditional societal division based on capital and self interest. Above all – at least in the first part of the book – power within this enclosed, literally pyramidal structure is bestowed onto the tenants relatively to their floor positioning, demarcating the persistence of the typical Jamesonian social stratification within the late capitalist system based on class and

[30] Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism*. CL. Duke University Press, Introduction, p. X.
Following quotations from the book are from this edition.

capital, and further reinforcing such divisions by means of the physical structure of the building.

Especially considering the ways in which the building is conceived and perceived by its tenants, and of course the ways in which it exerts its influence upon them, the high-rise seems to trace Jameson's 'postmodern hyperspace' (Jameson 1991, 38-39, 44) step-by-step; a strictly urban space so vast, complex, and out of an understandable human logic that it transcends the possibility for the individual – and in the case of the high-rise, I might add, for the community – to cognitively orient oneself. As Laing observes in first person, even from a purely sensory point of view, 'the dimensions of the forty-storey block made his head reel. [...] The immense volume of open space [...] unsettled his sense of balance. [...] a ferris wheel permanently suspended three hundred feet above the ground' (HR, 3), mirroring Jameson's understanding of the 'latest mutation in space', prompting an 'alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment' (Jameson 1991, 43).

This does not happen solely because of its inherent vastness, but because by lacking – in this case, better yet, collapsing in a single point – any recognisable landmark, this 'late capitalist hyperspace' is structured in such a way to disregard conventional modes of representation and understanding. The high-rise provides such a puzzling and disorienting experience first and foremost because of its inherent verticality, organising once separated and incompatible environments into a single, integrated structure. With its 'supermarket, bank and hairdressing salon, a swimming-pool and gymnasium, a well-stocked liquor store and a junior school [...] a small vertical city, its two thousand inhabitants boxed up into the sky' (HR, 4), the building seems to deliberately urge the tenants less and less to leave. Gradually losing either the necessity

or the will to leave the cement embrace of this 'glut of conveniences,' Laing and his fellow inhabitants become lost within the internal logic of the high-rise, with their life and rhythms, movements, and interactions dictated by the design of the overarching structure.

Following Jameson's reasoning, the high-rise marks a severe break from the comprehensible logic of any external reality. By divorcing its tenants' need for basic necessities, luxury, work, sociality, and individuality from the actual effort conventionally required to achieve such targets, the building simultaneously provides for and alienates them from the external world that, as Laing perceives, 'each day [...] seemed slightly more distant, the landscape of an abandoned planet receding slowly from his mind' (HR, 5). As Jameson claims, this new late capitalism type of space involves the 'suppression of distance [...] and the relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty places, to the point where the postmodern body [...] is now exposed to a perceptual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering layers and intervening mediations have been removed' (Jameson 1991, 412).

If, expanding on Jameson's reasoning on Mandel's theory of the three fundamental moments of capitalism, the high-rise constitutes the epitome of late capitalism architecture, life within it as framed by Ballard is but the 'purest form of capital', by virtue of its 'prodigious expansion [...] into hitherto uncommodified areas' (Jameson 1991, 36). Jameson's analysis eerily traces Ballard's consideration of technology not as a 'real' distinct element or a literary topos, but as a simultaneously overarching and underlying feature of modern life, capable of modifying the experience of communities and individuals in hitherto unseen fashions. It follows that the cultural, mental, individual, and societal shifts prompted by and associated

with postmodernism as framed by Jameson simply cannot be divorced from their integration with and deference to the surrounding environment.

In a more Ballardian terminology, technology – in its most 'basic' architectural form, in the case of the high-rise – prompts a melding of the outer with the inner landscape; a collapsing of the public into the private, of the physical into the uncorporeal, resulting in a proportional – when not complete – mental unmappability of both outer and inner landscapes. In this spatial and social collapsing onto itself in full discontinuity with the 'real' world, the only means the tenants have to 'un-alienate' themselves is to reconquest a proper sense of place, to reconstruct and rearticulate a new form of 'reality' following an alternate trajectory, mirroring as well as perverting their perception of the outside world, while simultaneously re-mapping their understanding of themselves as a resulting entity of these processes. This is how contrasts, treated as minor acrimonies in the outside world, end up conjuring personal and social fissures within the high-rise, albeit taken to extremes and in a fictionalised form. Framed as such, the dystopian urban scenery of the hyperspatial high-rise constitutes the perfect ground for Ballard to explore his understanding of modern life as inherently pathological; in this fictitious and yet realistic landscape, his characters are fully and consciously enabled to express 'a truly 'free' psychopathology' (HR, 45).

Long before its tragic ending even begins to configure as such, Ballard provides the reader with a plentiful list of the events contouring the slow descent into ruin of the building and of its tenants. As Laing puts it, 'the high-rise offered more than enough opportunities for violence and confrontation' (HR, 1). Chaos ensues not following just the altercations resulting from a coerced community life, but the boisterous inversion of night and day resulting from a

life of never ending parties after the building has achieved critical mass. The first passage in the complete fissure with the outside world relies on the relationship with the external time, completely severed by the building's internal clock. The analysis brought about by Foucault's reasoning on heterotopias is extremely poignant in this case as well, as the high-rise relates to completely separated consideration of time (Foucault). Laing himself observes that 'The internal time of the high-rise, like an artificial psychological climate, operated to its own rhythms, generated by a combination of alcohol and insomnia' (HR, 9). Incidentally, this condition does not pertain to a single tenant, but it involves all the residents ; almost as 'another built-in design flaw of the building', insomnia is yet another common ground for the collective breakdown of this enclosed society. As a direct result, Laing, Wilder, and the other tenants slowly but steadily sacrifice time spent in the outside world in favour of a more attractive and self-referential life, completely devoted to the high-rise.

They undergo, in Jamesonian terminology, a 'weakening of historicity, both in (their) relationship to public [...] and in the new forms of our private temporality, whose 'schizophrenic' structure [...] will determine new types of [...] relationships' (Jameson 1991, 6). Laing, Wilder, and the other tenants are slowly becoming unable to perceive themselves in a temporal structure capable of linking their past and any possible future outside of the building, losing their capacity to 'organize past and future into coherent experience' in 'a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory' (Jameson 1991, 25). The internal clock of the building, articulating time among boisterous parties and blatant rivalries among the tenants, underscores every event taking place within it with a 'primacy of the present'. Parties, rivalries, beatings, and related events are experienced with an extreme, 'indescribable

vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming' (Jameson 1991, 27). In other words, the tenants have begun perceiving temporality in a synchronic rather than diachronic way, with the high-rise providing a disrupted and incoherent experience of temporality no longer linked to a formal logic, but rather to a collective and individual delirium, entirely devoted to the maintenance of the internal regime of the building.

In a complete inversion of roles – and in a typically Ballardian fashion – the high-rise, initially conceived as 'a never-failing supply of care and attention that a century earlier would have needed an army of tireless servants' (HR, 6), has now reclaimed the tenants as servants of its own in order to nourish itself. The 'overwhelming perception' underscoring life in the high-rise is textually rendered multiple times throughout the novel, with Ballard underlying the 'euphoria', the 'high, intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity' (Jameson 1991, 28) by virtue of which Laing and the other tenants experience events conventionally conceived as brutal, pulp:

> During the previous hour a few trivial incidents had occurred – the middle-aged wife of a 28th-floor account-executive had been knocked unconscious into the half-empty swimming-pool, and a radiologist from the 7th floor had been beaten up among the driers in the hairdressing salon – but in general everything within the high-rise was normal. As the night progressed, the sounds of continuous revelry filled the building. Beginning with the lower floors, the parties spread upwards through the apartment block, investing it in an armour of light and festivity. Standing on his balcony, Royal listened to the ascending music and laughter, [...] the hundreds of crowded balconies.

> Anyone seeing this ship of lights would take for granted that the two thousand people on board lived together in a state of corporate euphoria. (HR, 127)

Not including the state of 'corporate euphoria' that engulfs the building as a whole, what baffles the most is the tenants' blindness when it comes to acknowledge the fact that their behaviour has crossed any reasonable boundary of human decency. Following the first initial quarrels, beatings, killings, rapings, and felonies of any kind are on the agenda in the building, which the inhabitants actively hide from any external intervention in order to preserve their safe haven in which to 'unwind' undisturbed. Inhabiting the building brings with it a shift from being persons, professionals, and other further distinctions which held value only in the external world, to tenants – to what I would personally call a 'hive mind' in the context of the high-rise – a collective ensemble converging in an individual body of which individual characters such as Laing and Wilder are but limbs.

Again, the Jamesonian and Ballardian vocabularies come to help in describing this phenomenon. The tenants undergo what I understand to be a key feature shared by Ballard's tendency to psychopathology and Jameson's postmodern culture. It is a 'waning of affect' (Jameson 1991, 10), a weakening of the individual's capacity when it comes to the qualities inherent to feeling and emotions. The inhabitants certainly feel they have become free from the individual anxiety they felt as a weight in the civil society, yet conversely they also inadvertently divorced themselves from every other kind of feeling as actual members of a proper society as well. To be more precise, it is not as their capability of experiencing feelings and emotions has disappeared completely. What is taking place in the building is rather a dramatic shift in the

nature and intensity of the way in which the tenants used to conceive feelings as individuals in relation to a civil society. Drawing on Jameson's reasoning, what the tenants experience are 'intensities', 'free-floating and impersonal, [...] dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria' (Jameson 1991, 16). Individuality, sociality, temporality, spatiality – a whole lot of subjective and objective categories through which the modern subjects used to be able to orient themselves – have been completely subverted in the transformative experience provided by the high-rise.

Laing, Wilder, and more generally the tenants' way of experiencing life as conventionally intended in the outside world has become gilded, superficial, and fragmented. Underneath it is not individuality, but predatory instinct; not sociality, but tribality. The last step in the plunge in this 'depthlessness', as Jameson names it (Jameson 1991, 6, 9, 12), is metaphorically and physically rendered by Ballard as the last remnants of meaningful social and verbal interactions crumble. Laing notices how 'even his language had begun to coarsen' (HR, 139), while Wilder realises how 'the sound of himself speaking, however coarsely, introduced a discordant element' (HR, 184). Language as a means of communication, perhaps the most human at that, has at last ceased to provide and convey any meaning whatsoever. It is in the complete dissolution of what once made them human in a modern sense, once every ounce of what linked them to their past – in a temporal as well as in a spatial, social, and subjective way – that Laing and what remains of the tenants feel they can effectively and meaningfully start rebuilding their relationship with the outside world anew – on a personal, social, and professional level – albeit attuned to a Ballardian taste:

> Laing thought about his good fortune as he sat on the balcony [...] now, it no longer mattered how he behaved, what wayward impulses he gave way to, or which perverse pathways he chose to follow. [...] His affection for the two women was real, like his pride in keeping them alive, but this in no way interfered with his new-found freedom. On the whole, life in the high-rise had been kind to him. To an increasing extent, everything was returning to normal. Laing had begun to think again of medical school. He might well pay a visit to the physiology laboratory the next day, and perhaps take supervision. [...] He had noticed two women neighbours sweeping the corridor. It might even be possible to get an elevator working. Perhaps he would take over a second apartment, dismantle the barricades and begin to refurnish it. (HR, 246-48)

3.3 Surveillance, Discipline, and Control

If the high-rise operates as a postmodern hyperspace, severed from the outside world and responding to none other than its own internal logic, it follows that said logic needs some structurally solid tenets on which to build itself. Hence, those who chose to live – and keep living – within it need not feel they have submitted to an external and alien reasoning; they need to perceive the building and its distorted nature as coherent, unobstructed, aligned with their views and needs.

To this extent, the concept of Panopticism as illustrated by Foucault[31] is extremely useful to interpret the events unfolding in Ballard's condominium, as well as the reasons behind them. Building on Bentham's design for a modern prison, structured as a circular round of cells at the center of which is placed a central control tower, the Panopticon provides the perfect means to exert control. In this imaginary structure, each and every cell can be effectively monitored from the tower, while at the same time the inmates – placed in perfect isolation, each in their own cell – can never actually be sure whether they are being watched, all while being perfectly conscious of their condition of being potentially visible at all times.

While not textually explicit, the similarities between Foucault's Panopticon and Ballard's High-Rise are striking. If the central watchtower of the Panopticon is a physical, structural piece in the design of the modern prison, within the system of the high-rise power is exerted not in a tangible, but metaphorical way. While the building is effectively designed by Royal to benefit the tenants of the highest floors – and a great part of the novel indeed seems to adhere to the architect's initial project – eventually it becomes clear that surveillance and the exertion of power never came from a specific point in the building. It is rather the accumulation of architectural as well as human elements that provides Ballard's novel with a structure where surveillance is not centralised in the hands of an invisible, overarching puppeteer, but is dispersed, internalised, and ultimately reconfigured as a social feature. Laing and the other residents are from the very beginning – and more intensely throughout the novel – acutely aware of their neighbours. The physical stacking of individualised lives in a vertical manner with its unspoken hierarchy, the presence of communal places of leisure and commodity where

[31] Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and Punish*. Random House.
Following quotations from the book are from this edition.

everyone is able to monitor their neighbours, while at the same time being conscious of undergoing the same process; everything and everyone in the building contributes to a constant sensation of being observed, and to be empowered with the same possibility. It is not about a central point of power and control; in Ballard's building, such features are internalised and rendered much more subtle and pervasive. Drawing on Foucault's reasoning, both the Panopticon and the High-Rise are the eerie embodiment of:

> An architecture that is no longer built simply to be seen [...], or to observe the external space [...], but to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control – to render visible those who are inside it; in more general terms, an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them. (Foucault 1979, 172)

The 'alteration' undergone by the people inhabiting the building is textually manifest from the very beginning. In this panoptic heterotopia, Laing, Wilder, and everyone else transform, shift, adapt or perish in the transformation from professionals and individuals to tenants – or 'inmates'. While they all 'corporately owned the building, which they administered themselves' (HR, 4), the high-rise does not foster any sense of community, as is starkly displayed by the extreme violence ensuing after even the minor incident in the communal areas, such as the supermarkets or the pools. Furthermore, as Laing himself reasons from the very start, 'the dimensions of his life were space, light and the pleasures of a subtle kind of anonymity' (HR, 4),

and, as his sister stresses, 'You could be alone here, in an empty building' (HR, 6). The parties and events where the protagonists aggregate are not planned with the intention of encouraging and promoting a shared fruition of the endless possibilities provided by the building; on the contrary, they provide yet another potential for observation by neighbours, contributing to the effective creation of a form of mutual surveillance.

The one person partially 'escaping' this panoptic logic, Wilder – although perhaps more than any other tenant yielding to the breakdown of social norms – dramatically resolves to gather recordings of the events unfolding in the building in order to dismantle Royal's perverse experiment from within. Of course, his resolution soon yields to a more than complete adherence to the very same logic he was trying to pull apart, but what is important to me is the tone by which he refers to the high-rise. While all the other tenants, Laing included, gladly indulge in the savageries to which the building is already accustomed to, Wilder finds a temporary purpose and resolves to 'shoot some footage for the high-rise project – another prison documentary' (HR, 57). While eventually incurring in perhaps a more dramatic ending than most of his fellow 'inmates', Wilder's understanding of the building eerily echoes the isolated cells of the Panopticon as he envisions his documentary:

> From the balcony he watched the huge, Alcatraz blocks of the nearby high-rises. The material about these buildings, visual and sociological, was almost limitless. [...] in his mind's eye he could already see a long, sixty-second zoom, slowly moving from the whole building in frame to a close-up of a single apartment, one cell in this nightmare termitary. [...] The remainder would then look at the psychology of living in a

> community of two thousand people boxed up into the sky. [...] The psychology of high-rise life had been exposed with damning results. [...] On the basis of his own experience, Wilder was convinced that the high-rise apartment was an insufficiently flexible shell to provide the kind of home which encouraged activities, as distinct from somewhere to eat and sleep. Living in high-rises required a special type of behaviour, one that was acquiescent, restrained, even perhaps slightly mad. (HR, 68-69)

Even if Wilder seemingly – and only temporarily – escapes the logic of the building, while Laing consciously visualises the evident problems steeply arising within it, eventually all tenants subdue to the internal rules of their new, enclosed life. What strikes the most is not the hurried pace by which they succumb to it, but rather how lucidly they adhere to a radical reorganisation of their lives according to a wholly different system. From professionals and individuals pertaining to the external society, they all peacefully stream into their new status as tenants. Again, Foucault's analysis comes to help in decrypting such a tremendous shift. In my understanding of the mechanism of the Panopticon concerning the human adaptation to a system of constant surveillance and subtle control, life in the high-rise produces what Foucault names 'docile bodies', a body that can be 'subjected, used, transformed and improved' (Foucault 1979, 136). In this reading, docile does not necessarily mean resigned or fatalistic; on the opposite, the key word here is 'improved', as in Foucault's reasoning docility does not pertain to weakness, but to efficiency, as the textbook tenant is trained to perform his role in the system at the best of their possibilities, while their potential for resistance is simultaneously diminished.

All this is possible thanks to the panoptic structure of the building, as first and foremost 'discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space [...] enclosure, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself' (Foucault 1979, 141). Indeed, the forging of a docile body within Ballard's system is feasible firstly because of its fragmentary spatial organisation, 'designed to serve, not the collective body of tenants, but the individual resident in isolation' (HR, 6). Furthermore, the internal flow of time and activities follows the same logic, pigeonholing the tenants within an artificial scheme and creating individuals who, slowly but steadily, adhere and conform into a series of 'habits, rules, orders' by an 'authority that is exercised continually around him and upon him, and which he must allow to function automatically in him' (Foucault 1979, 128-29).

Broadly speaking, the residents in Ballard's condominium already embody a form of pre-instated docility, shaped by the logic of the 'affluent, professional' society they were a part of. In my reading, the novel displays a passage from a pre-existing – and more clearly perceived – form of discipline provided by external social structures, demanding a certain degree of regulation and conformity, to a further – much more finite – framework of self-discipline dictated by the panoptic structure of the high-rise. This seemingly flawless passage, coupled with the building taking over 'the task of maintaining the social structure that supported them all' (HR, 44), enhances in the tenants a distinct passivity and dependence – as shown by the inert reaction of most of them to the unfolding events – contributing to their potential as 'docile bodies'.

It is in this context that 'normalisation', the process by virtue of which norms and rules of a social structure are forged – and 'one of the greatest instruments of power' (Foucault 1979,

184) – takes place. Within Foucault's inquiry into the dynamics of power inside different social structures, to normalise a set of norms equals to imposing homogeneity not by sheer force, but placing the individual against a range of unspoken laws concerning behaviour and aptitude, while also individualising any kind of deviancy from said rules (Foucault 1979, 184). Deviancy from the accepted and 'normal' way of being does not constitute a crime per se, yet it justifies an exclusion from the relative social structure abiding by those rules.

Within the system of the high-rise, the pre-existing social structure operated with both implicit and explicit norms pertaining to social, professional, and class distinctions. By the same token – as Royal observes as chaos ensues in his human menagerie – the once 'civilized and self-possessed professional men and women were moving away from any notion of rational behaviour' (HR, 128). In a transformation not dissimilar from the passage from one panoptic structure to another, the tenants adapt to the new social framework in which 'all life within the high-rise revolved around three obsessions – security, food and sex' (HR, 193). In a Ballardian fictitious reversal of the Foucaultian normalising process, the high-rise showcases the fluidity and context-dependence of social norms even under extreme conditions. In order to survive to 'the perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant', the tenants have to adapt to a system that 'compares, differentiates, hierarchises, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalises*' (Foucault 1979, 183, emphasis in the original text) .

The only apparent newfound freedom of the tenants still operates within the harsh imperatives of their confined environment, albeit in its disintegration; the growing 'incidence of crime, divorce and sexual misdemeanours', albeit perhaps initially classifiable as deviation from the pre-existing norms, become integrated into the evolving social and cultural landscape of the

building. If in the outside world adaptation meant thriving – especially within the social and professional context of the affluent tenants – in the high-rise it equals to surviving and assurging to the top of the 'food chain' of the building, by the end completely immersed into tribal barbarism.

3.4 Embracing Psychosis

Within the high-rise, order is constituted by means of an internalised social discipline and is provided because of the systemic interference of the building's 'nature' with the tenants' lives. Yet this does not explain how, instead of fearing and resisting the shift towards a complete implosion of their former reality, the inhabitants seem to welcome the physical and metaphorical collapse of the building with happiness, almost bliss. Again, the novel displays the Ballardian principle by which – as Maitland did – Laing and Wilder harbor this extreme melding of external and inner landscapes as a liberatory, groundbreaking, personal and – in this case – social experience. As such, collapse is reconfigured as a performative, celebratory, symbolic, and most of all desirable event. In perfect tune with the Ballardian tenet, 'the expression of a truly 'free' psychopathology' (HR, 45) is made possible not because of but thanks to the high-rise; not as a failure, but as a sublime and liberating revolution of the self, through a destructive self-assertion within the context of forced, 'unnatural' sociality. Collapse is not viewed as an accident, but as a means of becoming; a performance of liberation by means of the rejection of what the characters feel as socially constructed norms.

Initially, this 'virtually homogeneous collection of well-to-do professional people', 'the kind of people you ought to meet', exhibiting shared 'tastes and attitudes, fads and styles' (HR, 6), especially considering the sophisticated nature of the building, all hint to a shared desire and an induced need to project a precise image of success and respectability. What is not so subtly implied is a certain social and performative expectation, hence the numerous parties through which the tenants can easily get to inspect their neighbours, and make sure they do not deviate from such unspoken social bonds. Furthermore, the class division prompted by the tenants' position in the different floors clearly mirrors their role in the outside world. This 'separation' is textually evident from the very start, and becomes even more so once familiar and individual structures start crumbling in favour of a tribal manner of coming together. This is furtherly reinforced by the building's inherent structure, prompting a physical and social stratification between the tenants; in other words, albeit they all 'corporately owned the building, which they administered themselves' (HR, 4), their position within the high-rise reflects first and foremost their class and occupation, but also their assigned role within it once things start falling apart, mirroring the wider context of the professional and social world of which the high-rise represents a microcosmic reproduction in an extreme vertical fashion. Nonetheless, as Laing's internal reasoning reveals, acting as a spokesperson for the 'hive mind', the actual quest hidden under this facade of high-class sociability is not one of professional networking, but indeed one for the 'pleasures of a subtle kind of anonymity', and above all – in my reading – an extreme attempt to construct a detached existence, 'as self-contained as the building itself' (HR, 4).

Recurring to a Laingian terminology – from the psychiatrist homonymous to Ballard's physiologist – what Laing, Wilder, the whole lot of the tenants – as well as Royal, in a sense –

are trying to escape from, their 'normality', is the 'product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection [...] radically estranged from the structure of being' (Laing 1990, 73-74). Until the moment in which they became tenants, Laing and Wilder had developed and projected into the world their own 'false-self system', that is to say a defensive mechanism deployed in order to navigate a world perceived as threatening, a facade persona protecting them from their most vulnerable – or, better yet in this context, authentic – inner self. In other words, the professional and social normality whose mask the tenants used to wear was but a product of the repressive world outside, 'adjusted to our alienated social reality'(Laing 1990, 119). The high-rise, Ballard's technological catalyst for the internal journey of his characters, at once leads the whole lot of the tenants together in an overwhelming and suffocating social environment, and reveals how much of a poor tool for navigating it their individual and collective 'false self' is. As the building's infrastructure begins to crumble, the tenants' carefully curated facades begin to crack and stop functioning, as social tensions escalate and reveal their most primal aspects, in their surrendering 'to a logic more powerful than reason' (HR, 80). Once the last layer of civilisation sheds its skin, leaving its 'professional small-talk' behind and revealing the underlying 'hard mantle of personal rivalry', this large scale enactment of a 'false self system' stops being deployed and, as Wilder's insight beautifully reveals, it is almost as 'he had discovered a second building inside the one that he had originally occupied' (HR, 87).

If, for Ballard, 'inner space is an imaginary realm in which on the one hand the outer world of reality, and on the other the inner world of the mind, meet and merge' (Ballard 2012, 26), and technology – which as I posit in my analysis can take the form of an urban scenery in his 'urban novels' – can act as a catalyst for the 'imaginative change' occurring in his

protagonists, this transformation more often than not takes on the form of a full falling apart, not in the classical intended sense of mental illness, but as a 'new conceptualisation of psychopathology, where you're getting a real liberation of the apparently deviant, but merely an expression of certain sort of universal quirks' (Ballard 2012, 133). Framed as such, Ballard's inner space and the Langian liberation from 'normality' become mirror images. In the context of the high-rise, the journey towards inner space can be understood as the discovery of one's own reality within the socially accepted and imposed one. That is to say, in Langian terms, 'madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be break-through. It is potentially liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death' (Laing 1990, 110). Laing frames the descent into madness not as a coming apart, but as a journey 'into inner space and time', a full reappropriation of a personal, 'sane' identity – at least in the Ballardian and Langian understanding of the term – separated and divorced from the 'normality' that prompted the development of the 'false self system'. And *High-Rise* indeed is a journey inwards, for Laing as well as for Wilder, whose decision to rise to the top of the building to confront Royal mirrors in his physical actions his process of delving deeper and deeper inside his own mind.

To Laing – the psychiatrist as well as the fictitious physiologist – the full acceptance of inner space as a place of rebirth through deconstruction is not a one way ticket to madness. If anything, to stop the process and put an end to Royal's experiment would signify a complete invalidation of the regenerative development started with the breakdown and ending in a newly found sanity. For those who survived, the experience of the high-rise has proven to be far from a destructive one. In other words – referring to the sombre ending of the novel – insanity can prove to be the only way back to sanity. Mirroring this voyage circling the self and the outside,

Laing too finds himself somberly reasoning on the fact that the power failure happening in one of the neighbouring buildings – similar to the one that inaugurated the events on his own – is not to be feared, but instead welcomed. 'Psychiatrically', Laing posits, 'this would appear as ex-patients helping future patients to go mad' (Laing 1990, 106). As a modern, improvised Virgil in the building's fall into the depths of personal and social hell, Laing observes 'contentedly, ready to welcome them to their new world' (HR, 248).

3.5 The Missing Other

If Maitland's transfigurative experience, his personal melding of external landscape and internal reality, happened because of the hybrid nature of the physical place accommodating such experience, the same cannot be said about Laing and Wilder. To the tenants in the condominium, the inner journey towards their personal and collective transformation is one made of sole concrete and steel. Their trigger is to be found in accumulation, not in dispersal; in deflagration, rather than in serendipity. In other words, whereas for Maitland it was the introduction in an alien environment that prompted his journey within, in the case of the high-rise there is no visible prompt. As Laing himself notices, 'he was surprised that there had been no obvious beginning, no point beyond which their lives had moved into a clearly more sinister dimension' (HR, 1).

The alien element, in Laing's case, is to be found within the high-rise itself, a concrete mirror for the psychological collapse of the self and of the community. If anything, in my

reading, the intrusive element is to be found in the absence of a clearly distinguishable other, so to speak; the entire novel is built in a paradoxical and perfect circularity between its beginning and its conclusion, from one form of psychosis to another. The high-rise is 'an environment built, not for man, but for man's absence' (HR, 28); at once it inglobates and excludes the human element, but does so in perfect self-reference. The concrete island, a concrete environment hybridised with an intrusive wilderness, was a fragmented space in which man and nature intertwined. The sealed, exclusive, vertical totality of the high-rise, by contrast, provides his tenants with a completely artificial ecosystem which is not entered by accident or met with serendipity, but in which Laing and Wilder literally and intentionally bought their way in, signing a 'ninety-nine-year lease'. Ballard's parable in these selected novels is one of a progressive intensification in the alienating features of physical space; from a still partially natural world to a fully synthetic, no longer hybrid, architecture.

What is lost in the modernising process his protagonists go through is not just plain greenery; it is nature as a fully fledged category as classically conceived. Yet Ballardian fashion relies on the fact that the high-rise does not simply identify nature as a category other than the building; it perverts it through technology. The condominium provides a mechanised climate, enabled by virtue of its structure and according to the will of its inhabitants to regulate time, light, temperature, movement, and sociality. Reinterpreting the physical, still concreteness of the building, Ballard describes it accordingly to its vigorous intervention and role in the life of its tenants in a poignant passage in which they are seen as a single, living entity:

> She referred to the high-rise as if it were some kind of huge animate presence, brooding over them and keeping a magisterial eye on the events taking place. There was something in this feeling—the elevators pumping up and down the long shafts resembled pistons in the chamber of a heart. The residents moving along the corridors were the cells in a network of arteries, the lights in their apartments, the neurons of a brain. (HR, 49-50)

Framed as such, the ecosystem of the building is not unnatural, but post-natural, and the collapse of the social fabric within it can be read as a mirror for an ecosystem reaching complete entropy. The synthetic realm of the high-rise does not provide a return to the civil world, but self-phagocytosis, leading not back to society but ending on a sombre note of becoming something else. Some form of adaptation has occurred within and without; survival has ceased to be the priority, and transformation, mutation towards a new conceptual figure capable of welcoming this new world has taken its place. The human system of thought presiding over the previous structure has stopped functioning and is not being restored or mourned but, as Laing's contentment beautifully demonstrates, has been quietly discarded.

In my reading, the high-rise is but a conceptual prelude to the flooded Earth that will follow, functioning as an incubator – or better yet a pressure tank – preparing and propelling its inhabitants towards what lies beyond the human and the concrete.

CHAPTER IV

THE DROWNED WORLD, BEYOND THE HUMAN

4.1 A Frame for the Final Descent

The sensory and thematic crescendo started with the physical displacement of *Concrete Island* and continuing with the vertical ascent of *High-Rise* would presumably culminate in a dystopian setting where mankind and machinery have inextricably melded and Ballard's bleak vision about the present and the near future finally condense in one grim, cautionary tale about the hidden deceiving of modern life and tools. Instead, I have chosen to conclude this analysis of these few selected novels by turning back to one of Ballard's first 'long' works, a cycle of four novels – a 'quartet of end-of-the-world disaster novels', as Sellars defined them (Ballard 2012, introduction, 1) – narrating the Earth of the present day not through 'modernist' settings and tenets, but through the lens of ecological disaster.

All the selected novels are set within the urban boundaries of London, depicted from different angles to reflect the shifting narrative perspectives streaming beneath them. Perhaps more than any of the previous 'urban novels', *The Drowned World* provides the reader with the most extreme and pristine example of 'inner space'. Like the perfect stillness before or after a great flood, the novel depicts a world in which everything has already happened, the future has completely collapsed within the present; time has stopped being a measuring instrument, and instead it has become a separate entity not to be fought and be confronted with, but simply to

be acknowledged. As the protagonist Dr. Robert Kerans – yet another Ballardian doctor – posits, 'Is there any point? We know all the news for the next three million years'.[32]

If *Concrete Island* narrated the entrapment of modern human beings within a hardly recognisable hybrid environment, and *High-Rise* dealt with the collapse of a completely artificial and self-referential vertical totality, with *the Drowned World* mankind faces the sole 'enemy' left: itself. Ultimately, the novel is not about confrontation; it is about a sublime surrendering to forces far greater and deeper than Kerans or any other of the novel's characters can hope to comprehend. The only thing left to do is to take a cold plunge – or a hot one, in this case – and delve deep into a depiction of a nature that no longer reflects humanity in any form, and a human self that no longer can – or feels the need to – resist its pull.

This final chapter will not focus on any kind of societal collapse or critique of modernity, as neither are the centre of Ballard's narrative anymore. What is depicted in this final novel is a profound ontological shift from humanity within an anthropocentric system to a residue of itself, little more than a memory. Within his submerged world Ballard no longer needs to critique society nor modernity; he simply leaves them behind.

The narrative realm in *The Drowned World* is one that has already undergone a rapid and drastic environmental shift. The atmosphere and climate are now characterised by relentless heat and oppressive humidity, while dense, tropical vegetation, coupled with fierce, primordial fauna have reclaimed former urban areas. Together with the other members of his expedition, the biologist Robert Kerans is entrusted with the task of cataloguing and studying the local flora varieties of the vast lagoon and swamp that has engulfed what once was London, while

[32] Ballard, J. G. (2024). *The Drowned World*. Fourth Estate, p. 15.
Following quotations from the novel are from this edition.

what is left of humanity has migrated to the North and South Poles, by now the only places left on Earth in which human life is still climatically sustainable, albeit extreme.

Ironically, places such as Maitland's island have now become the bottom of this new Earth's perennial ocean, while there is nothing left but the derelict domes of tall buildings such as Laing's skyscraper. Almost no one who is alive when the novel takes place retains any memory of the world before, and it is striking to observe how Kerans acknowledges this newly found reality, a fully fledged normality to him. His is not a world of swarming traffic or of overcrowded buildings, but a silent realm of prehistoric flora and fauna, a world that no longer pertains solely or primarily to humans. In his own terms, the cities resemble 'reluctant Venices to their marriage with the sea [...] their charm and beauty lay precisely in their emptiness, in the strange junction of two extremes of nature' (DW, 21). The submerged past civilisation lying below leaves him rather indifferent, acting as a mere 'elaborate pedestal' for the present reality.

Within this primordial setting, the few humans left are far from immune to the extreme climate conditions that instead seem to favour the planet's new hosts. The unbearable heat and frequent thermal storms, with the sun no longer being a 'well-defined sphere', but an 'expanding ellipse [...] a colossal fire-ball' (DW, 1), all seem to be actively trying to erase the precise contours defining the boundaries between man and environment. Everything is moving and seething, evolving according to a logic divorced from human comprehension. Time itself seems to have slowed and thickened in order to accommodate this new era; as the planet itself, it has receded in a place other than human, it has stopped scanning tempo, but instead has started pulsating according to the sun. Kerans and the others are unmoored from any defining point, drifting in a primordial broth, deprived of their sleep and reason, hallucinating within a

constant dream, in the grip of a memory that had come long before them and will undoubtedly survive them.

One of the team members, Dr. Bodkin, provides Kerans with his personal understanding of the physiological process being experienced by the survivors – among which himself – that he names 'Neuronics', or the 'Psychology of Total Equivalents' (DW, 44). He posits that as the external world is geophysically regressing into an earlier epoch, human consciousness is spontaneously undergoing a corresponding psychic involution towards the earlier stages of human life on the planet, informed by the millennia in which they have been the dominant species. The ever present dream-like state in which Kerans is confined is here rephrased as walking down an 'amniotic corridor', an unconscious act of moving back through 'spinal and archaeo-psychic time'. According to Bodkin's 'metabiological fantasy', the feral reptiles and deadly venomous vegetation are not the only beings that have been brought back by the world's submersion. The rising temperatures and expanding solar waves have prompted a long forgotten mechanism within the human mind, a far from tranquil recollection of the landscapes coming from 'drowned seas submerged beneath the lowest layers of your unconscious' (DW, 74).

Before long such psychic regression, so far clearly manifesting only in dreams, ends up occupying a significant part of Keran's time awake by means of insomnia and hallucinations. If for some of the characters such visions are a source of fright and dismay, on the contrary Kerans seems to welcome the gradual melding of his internal reasoning with the external, sombre rhythm of the solar waves, reverberating through the waters:

> Booming distantly, (the sun) sent dull glows pulsing across the lagoon, momentarily lighting the long limestone cliffs which had taken the place of the ring of white-faced buildings. Reflecting these intermittent flares, the deep bowl of the water shone in a diffused opalescent blur, the discharged light of myriads of phosphorescing animalcula, congregating in dense shoals like a succession of submerged haloes. [...] As the great sun drummed nearer, almost filling the sky itself [...] beating within him like his own pulse, Kerans [...] stepped out into the lake, whose waters now seemed an extension of his own blood stream. As the dull pounding rose, he felt the barriers which divided his own cells from the surrounding medium dissolving, and he swam forwards, spreading outwards across the black thudding water... (DW, 70-71)

Perhaps the apical point of this intense melding with the external landscape, fostered by the physical elements adding to Kerans' sensory experience, is the ambiguous dive down within the submerged planetarium, surrounded by 'exploding pulses of ideation in a neuronic jungle', and where 'the entire ransom of the Unconscious is waiting' (DW, 101). Here, the last remnants of what feels like an adversary environment dissolves and unfolds completely for him. The physical descent into the water soon assumes metaphysical contours as the water, 'the foetid embrace of some gigantic protozoan monster' (DW, 104), transforms in amniotic fluid, with the planetarium no longer being a forgotten building, but becoming in Kerans' eyes an 'immense submarine temple', the 'grey sweet mother of us all'. While for the scavengers waiting outside the planetarium only offers a wealth of lost treasures to be found and rescued, to Kerans this 'huge velvet-upholstered womb in a surrealist nightmare' increasingly echoes with the 'immense

tidal pulse he had heard in his dreams'. Gradually, the confines between his own body and the building seem to become undone, his bloodstream aligning with the water swirling around him, the lack of air making him lose consciousness, as the building becomes an 'immense placenta'- a 'cradle – and the planetarium shows him a nebula of 'uterine night':

> Eventually even their light was dimmed and he was only aware of the faint glimmer of identity within the deepest recesses of his mind. [...] He pressed on through the darkness alone, like a blind fish in an endless forgotten sea, driven by an impulse whose identity he would never comprehend... Epochs drifted. Giant waves, infinitely slow and enveloping, broke and fell across the sunless beaches of the time-sea, washing him helplessly in its shallows. He drifted from one pool to another, in the limbos of eternity, a thousand images of himself reflected in the inverted mirrors of the surface. Within his lungs an immense inland lake seemed to be bursting outwards, his rib-cage distended like a whale's to contain the oceanic volumes of water. (DW, 110)

Kerans' identification with the surrounding environment is profound, if not total. To me, Ballard's fascination with surrealist art is displayed with extreme potency in this novel more than in any other, as every scenery he depicts seems to remind of distant, distorted sceneries that seem to come from mind and dreams, rather than from tangible reality. Here more than ever, his tenet of inner space as the 'imaginary realm in which on the one hand the outer world of reality, and on the other the inner world of the mind, meet and merge' (Ballard 2012, 26) is made pristine and legible. If in Surrealism, as Ballard posits, the postmodern condition by

virtue of which the external environment is remade by the mind and external reality becomes a fiction, in *The Drowned World* it is made into tangible writing. The catastrophe that has engulfed the Earth is to Kerans – in my reading – the perfect example of the externalisation of his subconscious; a journey back and forth his mind and the external world, constantly informed and remade in a mutual exchange.

This submerged world, this place of displacement reminiscent of Ballard's days in Shanghai's imprisonment camp, this 'huge, surrealist canvas with the normal logic of everyday life suspended' (Ballard 2012, 247) is extremely focused on Kerans' internal response to the altered reality he is immersed in. In this next 'evolutive step' – compared to Maitland and Laing – he does not try to flee or restore order, as characters such as Riggs and Strangman would want to. To alter the world would mean to betray himself as well. The only sensible choice is to 'embrace the disaster' and to perceive the 'system of imaginative possibilities represented by the disaster' (Ballard 2012, 217). And yet – as opposed to the tenants in *High-Rise* – not all the characters react to this internal turmoil in the same way. If for some of them, like Kerans and – even before him – Hardman, the transformative experience provided by the transfigured planet is something to be embraced and welcomed as a precious means of diving deep within their minds, for others – such as Riggs and Strangman – the scorching Earth is nothing more than a nuisance to be tamed and controlled.

The most noticeable example of this specimen is certainly Strangman, whose literally Kurtz-like self-assertion leads him to drain the whole lagoon in order to 'salvage' the submerged city. His actions are ostensibly practical – while completely insane – yet in absolute discrepancy with what is happening around him. It is almost as if such characters incarnate the vestiges of

the past human society, operating according to rules tied to the worth of the treasure lost underneath the ocean, seen not only as valuable per se, but as means of re-mapping the land and reclaim their place as apex species of the planet once again. Strangman's actions have a profound impact not only on London lagoon's delicate ecosystem, but on Kerans and Beatrice – his lover and a scientist of the expedition – as well. This fully fledged colonisation of the dreamlike world of the city is also perceived as a complete perversion of the mental state of those who have managed to adapt to it.

The draining of the lagoon exposes the city as it was before the flood, and while most of the expedition members and of Strangman's crew rejoice at the sight of the city re-emerging from its sodden ashes, Kerans and Beatrice feel violated. In stark contrast with the magical calm of the flooded world, London is depicted as 'hideous', 'obscene', a 'nightmare world', a decaying 'resurrected corpse'. The most powerful example of this perversion is the planetarium itself, re-emerged along with the other buildings, but having completely lost its symbolic power. Its significance was not inherent in its structure per se, but in its submerged state and in the way in which it accommodated Kerans' psychic journey into 'deep time' and his unconscious. 'No longer the velvet mantle he remembered from his descent, it was now a fragmenting cloak of rotting organic forms, like the vestments of the grave. The once translucent threshold of the womb had vanished, its place taken by the gateway to a sewer' (DW, 127).

The only natural reaction Kerans feels he can resort to is to flood the city anew, as an act of re-assertion of the flowing stillness, of the chaotic state of being that characterised the environment and resonated with his psychic landscape. When the waters have submerged London once again, Kerans finally abandons the lagoon and his comrades and ventures South –

as Hardman did before him. This final movement towards the equator and the most intense heat, flooding, and chaos – in my reading – signifies Keran's final abnegation to the 'total, neuronic time' of this new world. His ultimate choice is physical as well as symbolic, a complete melding of the drowned landscape with the internal sea of the mind, a conscious choice of staying with the trouble, to persevere in a reality that is made of nature and instinct, rather than cling to the stale remnants of the old, rational world. In order to search for 'the forgotten paradises of the reborn Sun' as 'a second Adam' (DW, 175), Kerans consciously and deliberately self-dissolves within it.

The Drowned World does not lament the end of the civilisation, nor it nostalgically remembers it as a precious lost past. As Ballard himself put it, while taking on its form, the novel does not configure itself as a fully fledged disaster story, because 'I don't see them as having unhappy endings. The hero follows the logic of his own mind; and I feel that anyone who does this is, in a sense, fulfilling himself. I regard all those novels as stories of psychic fulfilment' (Ballard 2012, 63). The very same climatic apocalypse that has transfigured the Earth is not displayed as humanity's fault, but explained as something that simply took place, an event divorced from anything else. As a direct extension, Ballard imagines a world in which civilisation is simply no longer relevant, as it wasn't to the events that led to the present state of being. It is, as the ruins looming underneath the lagoon, but a submerged, fossilised remainder of what once was and no longer is.

Ballard's vision is not one of catastrophe or apocalypse, but one of a potential and profound transformation of the self, and of the narrative itself. Some characters, such as Kerans, can accept the nature of their reality, and choose to – literally and figuratively – immerse within

this transformative experience. Others, such as Strangman, are unable to see its potential for 'redemption', and instead choose to resurrect the 'decaying corpse' of the past civilisation which, while not in Ballard's narrative, possibly led to such a chaotic state. Kerans' journey is not backward nor forward, but inward and downward, as the world in which he roams is no longer a mirror for the human element, but has instead exceeded and absorbed it, willingly or not.

4.2 The Non-Human Temporality

On one hand *The Drowned World* deals with the concept of apocalypse not in the traditional eco-critically oriented way, but in a Ballardian fashion, highlighting the complete incapacity and ultimate impossibility of human reconciliation with and within a far more complex system of being. On the other hand it also conversely underlines the potency of such a system in undermining its characters' agency in managing it. Ballard's unorthodox ecological collapse is not described as a discrete event, something that either silently and invisibly or loudly and suddenly is happening or is going to happen; it is a present and all-encompassing condition that renders mediation not only futile, but meaningless as well. Ballard's vision renders the ecological totality displayed in the novel impervious to dramatised resistance and survival, sealed off from cautionary modes of storytelling, cutting individual and societal human agency at the root. His protagonist cannot and will not fight the surrounding world; he just disappears into it.

The way in which *The Drowned World* does this is peculiar. The whole novel is an absolute departure from both the 'ordinary' setting and modes of representation Ballard accustomed his readers to, especially in the novels previously analysed. Here more than ever, sci-fi as a genre is the most precious tool used to engage with present and near-future themes that conventional narrative usually fails to grasp. By broadening the spectrum from a single individual or social group, a single place or city, to the entirety of the Earth and the human species undergoing a horizontal and simultaneous cataclysmic event embroiling a planetary scale narration, Ballard's novel stretches beyond description in order to embrace imagination. In other words, *The Drowned World* is the crowning achievement of Ballard's 'tinkering' with sci-fi; not to deal with an improbable future, but to use its imaginative form in order to engage in fruitful communication with the events surrounding us in the present day. If in the 'previous' novels these events were concerned with the incongruencies of modern life and society, in this earlier novel they are all about the elephant in the room, the actual environment hosting all narratives and stories.

Framed as such, *The Drowned World* acts as a literary bridge between Ballard's inventive flux on a formal level and Ghosh's critique of realism on the narrative one[33]. By setting his novel in a planet, a climate, and a perception of time that are no longer recognisable by means of ordinary ways of understanding, Ballard demonstrates how literature, especially in the fashion of modern novels, can still achieve a connection with large-scale environmental change involving not only a complete revolution of a rigorously human way of understanding it, but also embracing the indispensable role of the non-human. The transformed realm of the submerged

[33] Ghosh, A. (2017). *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. University of Chicago Press. Following quotations from the book are from this edition.

London – in full continuity with the Ballardian way of narrating his environments, be them urban or natural – is far from a mere setting; it is an active, palpable, 'tangible' force, shaping and directing not only actions, but dreams and thoughts as well. While on paper this altered reality might seem to be pertaining more to an alarmist climate activist's slogan, Ballard's use of science-fictional language and recurrent linking it to the surrealist imagery makes this kind of 'prodigious happenings' plausible, present even.

While the modern novel, in Ghosh's reading, fails to depict the high degree of improbability inscribed in the extreme climate events of our time, in *The Drowned World* 'nothing is really far away'; as Ballard's dramatically transfigured world and Kerans' melding with the submerged Earth beautifully display, improbability can be embraced and addressed even within the 'deliberately prosaic world of serious prose fiction' (Ghosh 2017, 26). This extreme, transformed environment is the exact representation of the variety of improbable climate cataclysm that Ghosh deems hard to accommodate by the form of the modern novel, and that Ballard's wise use of 'alien' form and language allows for. If, as Ghosh maintains, the modern novel is the literary form that more than any other prioritises the ordinary, banishing the improbable and the prodigious through 'the relocation of the unheard-of toward the background, while the everyday moves into the foreground' (Ghosh 2017, 17), Ballard's novels reverse this movement altogether. By relocating the stuff of the everyday – its norms, persons, events – into the horizon and rendering it little more than background noise, and by making the improbable and the probable switch places, Ballard shows that the form of the novel can still allow for a proper representation and understanding of the world under a completely different lens, one that merges the contemporary concerns about climate with 'serious' fiction.

As Ian Hacking puts it, within Ghosh's reasoning, Ballard's novels can be read as a 'manner of conceiving the world constituted without our being aware of it' (Ghosh 2017, 16), with Maitland, Laing, and finally Kerans being their author's spokesmen in his narratives set in a world that has conversely stopped being aware of them in the ways conventionally displayed in such form. The emphasis Ballard puts on the potency and the pervasiveness of all that is not human, on what is active – powerful, even – if compared with the often meaningless actions of his protagonists, vividly contrasts with the aptness Ghosh associates with modern literature in its putting a focus on a 'literary imagination [...] radically centred on the human' (Ghosh 2017, 66), actively severing the non-human from its realm. Following Ghosh's reasoning, the essential step that led 'toward the silencing of nonhuman voices was to imagine that only humans are capable of telling stories'[34], not only within the confines of the modern novel, but in modern literature altogether. Ballard's novels – from their urban setting to a completely natural environment – rely instead precisely on the narrative premise that what is conventionally deemed as the 'background' is endowed with a peculiar potency, one capable of moulding actions and thoughts of the presumed 'protagonists' in unforeseen ways.

As such, *The Drowned World* displays how it is still possible to imagine a narrative centred on a non-human agency, on an almost complete rejection of the anthropocentric storytelling Ghosh identifies as the main issue in modern literature. Kerans' development throughout the novel is certainly due to his stronger attunement with the displacement brought about by the climate perversion, but it is undoubtedly possible because of the tremendous influence exerted by the terrestrial womb surrounding him. The lagoon, which only scratches

[34] Ghosh, A. (2021). *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*. University of Chicago Press, p. 190. Following quotations from the book are from this edition.

the surface of the hidden world lying beneath, is the actual and far-from-silent protagonist of Ballard's novel, in which the Earth's vitality is pictured in such a way to provide an imaginative restoration of the 'agency and voice (of the) non-humans' (Ghosh 2021, 194). A London in which vegetation can seal off a perimeter, where the sun is a tangible and fearsome force, and where humans as a species have become a minority and must navigate a relentless landscape teeming with the dominant non-human life forms, it all serves to the crucial task highlighted by Ghosh; to restore the narrative – and, by extension, the real – influence of the non-human world.

The very concept of recollecting 'archaeo-psychic time' (DW, 74) – Dr. Bodkin's understanding of the feverish dreamlike state in which most of the characters seem to be hovering above – points to a deeper, non-anthropocentric history that is reasserting itself, with or without the no more active presence of humans. This 'deep time', this recollection of ancient landscapes, sensations, and emotions is to Kerans a more meaningful explanation for this 'uterine odyssey', this 'metamorphosis taking place in his mind' (DW, 44-45), than the conventional claim – sustained by characters such as Riggs and Strangman – that life would and could continue unchanged within and unfaded by these new perimeters. In my reading, the notion of 'Neuronics', of the profound physical and psychological reorientation brought about by the environmental change – and, broadly speaking, by the environment altogether – strongly resonates with Ghosh's understanding of the Anthropocene as a groundbreaking historical period presenting a challenge 'to our commonsense understandings and beyond that to contemporary culture in general' (Ghosh 2017, 9).

The present planetary crisis, Ghosh argues, confronts us with the necessity of reimagining, rewriting, understanding anew the past, current, and future 'other forms of human existence' (Ghosh 2017, 128). In this regard and in my understanding, this is exactly what Ballard's narrative and inner space have made possible; not to 'reproduce the world as it is', but to reimagine it in a mutual exchange of reality and fiction, of imagination and realisation. Recurring to a Ghoshian terminology, Ballard's narrative style allows his readers to 'approach the world in a subjunctive mode, to conceive of it *as if* it were other than it is', partially restoring 'the great, irreplaceable potentiality of fiction (to) make possible the imagining of possibilities' (Ghosh 2017, 128, emphasis in the original text). Kerans' regression and further evolution towards a primeval state, his journey in the exploration and the experiencing of 'submerged neuronic continents' or drifting in the 'time-sea', it all engages in open conflict with linear conceptions of time and space, embracing the nonlinear temporalities and the groundbreaking psychological impact of the extreme environmental shifts that Ghosh underlines as crucial features of the Anthropocene way of experiencing reality.

Finally, Ghosh's concept of 'the great derangement' can be most useful in decrypting part of the message hidden beneath *The Drowned World*. It is a locution used by its author to describe the contemporary humanity and literature's collective failure to adequately describe and picture, acknowledge and respond to climate change not only in the fashion of extreme events as narrated by Ballard, but more generally suggesting a cultural and political inability or unwillingness to come to terms with its reality and implications (Ghosh 2017, 11). In Ballard's novel, while most of the characters cling to extreme and – to some extent – insane attempts to maintain a lost order or retreat to safe zones, only a few – such as Kerans and Hardman – are

shown to be willingly undergoing a tremendous personal shift, even at the cost of their own lives. And yet, despite their attunement with the external world, the present reality is no longer the commodified realm humanity has known for the few centuries, and their transformation is alternatively met with an embrace or is swept back by the environmental changes.

However, if Hardman chose to leave the only safe harbor he was still clinging to, Kerans' choice not only to remain within it, but to actively defend it from Riggs and Strangman's subversion, their attempt to restore a reality that simply has ceased to be and can no longer be reinstated at the same conditions, can be understood as a profound awareness and a physical as well as 'moral' counterpoint to the 'derangement' Ghosh details. In other words, Kerans' actions, his willingness to 'stay with the trouble', suggests a peculiar form of either psychological adaptation or tranquil surrender to the immense change that conventional ways of thinking – and narrating – simply cannot grasp. As such, I really think that *The Drowned World* explores a possible human response to the 'unthinkable' scale of urban, social, and finally environmental transformations brought about by the Anthropocene.

As Ghosh phrases it, in an eerie and faint recollection of Ballard's understanding of the contemporary reality, 'it is as though our earth had become a literary critic and were laughing [...] mocking *their* (the writers') mockery of the 'prodigious happenings' that occur so often in romances and epic poems' (Ghosh 2017, 26, emphasis in the original text). But these prodigious happenings are no longer relegated to the world of romances, fantasy, and science fiction; as Ballard puts it, 'We live inside an enormous novel. [...] The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent reality' (Ballard 2012, 489), or, as Ghosh maintains – in a more eco critically

oriented way – 'the writer will have to work hard to make it appear persuasive' (Ghosh 2017, 24):

> The tacit assumption made by the UN directorate – that within the new perimeters described by the Arctic and Antarctic Circles life would continue much as before, with the same social and domestic relationships, by and large the same ambitions and satisfactions – was obviously fallacious, as the mounting flood-water and temperature would show when they reached the so-called polar redoubts. A more important task than mapping the harbours and lagoons of the external landscape was to chart the ghostly deltas and luminous beaches of the submerged neuronic continents. (DW, 45)

4.3 Entropic Intimacy

If on one hand Garrard's insights inform my understanding of the apocalypse displayed in *The Drowned World* not as a physical but as an imaginative event, and on the other Ghosh's reasonings help me frame Ballard's narrative within the Anthropocene temporality, then Morton's concept of 'dark ecology' provides me with the conceptual ground on which to confront the novel's culminating and most disquieting movement; not the bare representation of collapse, but the internal experience of a feeling of irreversibility, coupled with a quiet and grim acceptance of coexistence with it. This device is deployed by Ballard not only in order to bring a closure to his narrative, but also for the purpose of endowing Kerans' internal trajectory

with some sort of awareness, existential and personal as well as ecological, coming after the puzzling trial brought about by his inner metamorphosis and attunement with the external environment.

Within Morton's conceptual framework, this ecological awareness does not reveal itself suddenly as a clarifying epiphany but leaks and infiltrates the mind as a recursive, melancholic, and uncanny condition that, as much as Ghosh's Anthropocene temporality, radically unnerves the modern subject's sense of disjunction from the world it inhabits. This dark ecology, or recurring to a Mortonian terminology this 'ecognosis'[35] is thus described by its author as a riddle; not in the sense that it has to be solved or unpacked, but in the acceptance of something that cannot be revealed by means of conventional terms and measurements . It does not lie in knowing or understanding in a scientific, active, and rational way; it is rather more about 'letting be known [...] something like coexisting. It is like becoming accustomed to something strange, yet it is also becoming accustomed to strangeness that doesn't become less strange through acclimation' (Morton 2018, 5).

In other words, according to Morton and in relationship to *The Drowned World*, the process of ecological awareness does not involve an ontological separation from the environment, but lies in acknowledging that the 'strangeness' surrounding us is something inherent and not causative; it is not something to be fought, but something to become accustomed to. Framed as such, ecognosis is the pivotal moment in which humans realise they are not the craftsmen of their narrative about the world, but are – at best – their spectators and, most of all, part of it. As Morton puts it, 'the darkness of ecological awareness is the darkness of

[35] Morton, T. (2018). *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. Columbia University Press, p. 5. Following quotations from the book are from this edition.

noir', passing through the realisation that humanity as a species is 'part of an entity that is now *a geophysical force on a planetary scale*' (Morton 2018, 9, emphasis in the original text). By its very nature, Morton's ecognosis involves the dissolution of a presumed homogeneous space made of separate realms, giving place to the emergence of the 'uncanny', that is to say the nonhuman dimension. It is the process of becoming aware of oneself as one of the possible existing species; not as the narrator, but as a part of an all-encompassing narration. In the sublime darkness of Morton's ecology, the precise contours between human and nonhuman quietly become undone, as they are revealed to possess equal and independent validity and power, all interwoven into the fabric of a shared existence.

Within this interpretative framework, Kerans' metamorphosis trajectory can be better understood as coming to terms with this precise shift in awareness. Dr. Bodkin's explanation of his dreams, framed as a descent into deep time and sea in which the human mind lies in the recollection of ancient landscapes, is not a mere intellectual exercise but a complete 'reorientation of the personality'. Kerans does not fight, but instead welcomes this transformation. He enters a 'total, neuronic time' no longer calibrated by means of conventional measurements, but set against the enormous scale of the events surrounding and enveloping him. He is no longer uniquely focused on the anthropocentric 'space', and his awareness is instead informed and shaped by his immersion in and understanding of the primordial environment and perverse climate. Within Ballard's novel, Morton's ecognosis is textually rendered precisely in Kerans' inner pull towards and immersion in this 'deep time', this strange, altered, 'uncanny' environment. He is no longer trying to know or understand; he is 'letting be known'. As Maitland put it before him, 'I am the Island'.

As Kerans' internal trajectory as narrated by Ballard displays, the process of a complete (ecological) awareness does not come smoothly. Similarly to the stages of mourning, in Morton's words, in order to achieve it it is necessary to pass through what he calls a stage of melancholia – the 'true ecognostic dark night of the soul' (Morton 2018, 135). It is the moment in which the realisation that human and nonhuman merge in an interwoven plain of coexistence comes into play, a state that transcends horror and ridicule, guilt and shame, in order to accommodate trauma as a shared experience. It is the space in which the human subject realises that the nonhuman 'menaces' to his realm possess a 'vibrant life of their own' (Morton 2018, 147).

In order to graphically explain this phenomenon, Morton deploys the image of the Disney-Pixar animated garbage-collecting robot Wall-E, which accumulates gadgets and trinkets, remnants the past human society left as trash that, in a world that has stopped applying such differentiations, become for the protagonist a source of marvel and joy, albeit in silent sadness and solitary melancholia (Morton 2018, 146-147). I would like to add a further step and bring in this analogy *Yokohama Kaidashi Kikou* (1994-2006)[36], an innovative manga by Japanese artist Hitoshi Ashinano, located in a tranquil, post-apocalyptic world where humanity is slowly dying following an unexplained environmental catastrophe. Yet, rather than fighting against its unwelcoming fate, the diminished population has silently embraced the end of the human era, together with a quiet acceptance of everything that is not human and that, fostered by the already significantly risen sea levels, has gradually meshed with it. To put it differently, within and beyond this melancholia – this sadness – lies beauty, longing, and finally a controversial form of joy.

[36] Ashinano, H. (2022). *Yokohama Kaidashi Kikou: Deluxe edition*. Seven Seas Entertainment.

In *The Drowned World*, Kerans too undergoes a similar and growing sense of detachment from his role as a scientist and the actions of his comrades. This feeling is coupled with his transformation traversing what is textually described as a 'tragic loneliness' – not Kerans', but of the 'haunted Triassic swamps'. By extension, the transformed, submerged world itself can be seen as a scarred or traumatised entity, enduring the wounds of environmental catastrophe. Kerans' melancholia lies precisely in his psychological state, his eerie feeling of disconnection from his previous reality and his subsequent immersion in deep time and reality. His troubled experience reflects what Morton calls the 'imprint of coexistence' (Morton 2018, 135) with the drastically transformed Earth surrounding him, which will culminate in a complete reorientation of his being towards what Ballard will describe as 'a second Adam' (DW, 175). Kerans' descent in the planetarium further underlines this traumatising and sublime passage point, again highlighting the theme of being overwhelmed and transformed by the elemental and the nonhuman, suggesting what is at once a loss and a gain of identity in his immersion. Perhaps more than anything, Ariel's song from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is useful here to crown Kerans' transformative experience through a state of mutually wounded coexistence:

> Full fathom five thy father lies;
>
> Of his bones are coral made;
>
> Those are pearls that were his eyes;
>
> Nothing of him that doth fade,
>
> But doth suffer a sea change

Into something rich and strange.[37]

Kerans' final descent in this world anew, in which every distinction between human and nonhuman, time and history, personal and global identity has disentangled and dissolved really is a deep dive within a surrealist scenery. It is mental, rather than physical; it is not human or even post-human, but other-wordly and sublime. If for Ballard such a state is named 'inner space', for Morton it is called the 'Spectral Plain', the 'uncanny region' in which every difference 'flattens out [...] the liquefaction of lineation' (Morton 2018, 112). The last step of the plunge in ecological awareness is precisely this, to take place in this spectral plain, in which 'there are no subjects and objects anymore, just various kinds of specter' (Morton 2018, 147). Ballard's drowned world conjures precisely this genre of surreal environment, a landscape that is simultaneously familiar – with its sodden city and structures – and yet unmistakably alien, while Kerans' internal compass guides him not towards order, but indeed towards the 'ghostly deltas and luminous beaches of the submerged neuronic continents' (DW, 45), deploying an explicitly 'spectral' idiom in order to properly describe an internal landscape that has stopped even mirroring the external one – and vice versa – but has slowly and completely merged with it. Ballard's description of this intimate intensity lends it an almost unreal, ghostly and shimmering quality, parallel to the presence of the 'specters' Morton names.

'Being interested means I am in charge. Being fascinated means that something else is' (Morton 2018, 149). As Morton understands it, being aware is a process of distinction becoming dissolution. It evolves through a stage of melancholia, but that is not its 'natural'

[37] Shakespeare, W. (2024). *The Tempest: The New Oxford Shakespeare* (L. Working & R. Loughnane, Eds.). Oxford University Press.

culmination. A fully realised ecological awareness goes beyond, towards an 'anarchic, comedic sense of coexistence' (Morton 2018, 160). In my reading, this is exactly what Kerans is trying to achieve with his final gesture before departing. His active defiance of his comrades, and his choice to re-flood the liberated city, signifies a complete acceptance of the chaos brought about by the climate collapse. It is a voluntary abandonment of his need for mastery, an open act of embracing indecision, allowing himself to be 'fascinated' and letting the environment – and not the man – 'be in charge'. Quoting Donne, Ballard reflects and hints at this quiet form of existence and coexistence within the larger, fragmented wholeness of the planetary scale lagoon, a silent entering into 'something rich and strange': 'World within world, each man an island unto himself, swimming through seas of archipelagoes' (DW, 115).

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has explored the ecocritical voyage embedded within a selection of novels by J.G. Ballard, by decrypting the multifaceted manifestations of his core concept of 'inner space' and how it relates to several other main tenets dear to him, such as everyday modern life, urban alienation in society, and fully fledged environmental collapse. Following the chosen thematic and conceptual arc unfolding throughout the selected novels, my inquiry has shown how Ballard's fiction does not merely depict crisis as a detached and chronologically structured event, nor does it deal with it in a cautionary mode. Instead, the crisis is narrated as a progressive and intensely personal experience; it is a quiet and grim unraveling of human subjectivity as an elite category within human and ecological narration. Within this framework, catastrophe in all its guises is not an event to be overcome, but is reframed by Ballard as a spatial and – above all – psychological condition to be understood, welcomed, and finally dwelled in.

The fragmented hybridity of *Concrete Island* has shown how the modern subjectivity is enmeshed within a liminal space where nature and artificial elements come to collide, while not offering itself in a complete intelligibility, but giving space to potential transformation. The initial, involuntary imprisoning brought about by the island leads – in *High-Rise* – to the inevitable implosion of the completely artificial and self-regulating luxury community of the skyscraper, to and by means of which the external realm of nature in all its forms is at once rendered inaccessible and devoid of meaning. Finally, the trajectory reaches its natural conclusion in the muddy depth of *The Drowned World*, in which symbolic and ontological

completeness are ultimately achieved. Ballard's London and planet have evolved in order to reclaim spatial and conceptual dominance in a parallel parable with its protagonists, for whom the only meaningful gesture left is not one of 'heroic' resistance, but one of a quiet, intimate coming together with an environment which is no longer shaped by external logics.

The modern self – in Ballard's fiction – is not put on a pedestal, it is not redeemed, nor sanctified; at the end of each narrative lies not salvation, but understanding, a complete merging within a different structure of 'alien' relationships. What is surfacing is not a morality tale, a story of redemption, nor a dramatised and heroic apocalypse. Ballard's is a literature of anti-humanism in the sense that the human is no longer the central focus, not the savior to either urban crisis or ecological disaster. His is not a narrative of resistance, but of drifting. Maitland, Laing, and Kerans' descent into the altered landscapes of their city or of their own minds is met with the suspension of both personal identity and general causality, in which the self – the human self, that is – is not seen as the main current, but is reconfigured as only one of the possibilities within a much broader and ultimately inscrutable, planetary scale flow.

As such, this thesis has tried to demonstrate that 'inner space' can be seen not as a personal commentary on reality, or as a retreat into self-referential modern subjectivity. Like water, it permeates and leaks through every conceivable category as an estranging, transforming, personal and all-encompassing experience. What remains after the deluge – of islands, skyscrapers, cities, and selves – is not clear, but spectral; not apocalyptic and frightful, but strange, beautiful, and sublime.

Those days when the whole world had been like a festival slowly calmed down. The gentle time that will later come to be called the 'Age of Calm Evening'. Let me show you that brief moment before night comes. Sitting once more on the warm concrete... The night of humanity... May it be a peaceful age. (Ashinano 2022)

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