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Reading Science Fiction Novels As An Architectural Research Method: The Case Study Of J. G. Ballard's *High Rise*

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to emphasize the position that architectural discourse should systematize the social and spatial clues within texts. This theme is conceptualized -in the way to explore how it is- as reading the spatial elements within the texts of science fiction novels and particularly, reading that of J. G. Ballard's *High Rise* (Carroll & Graf Publishers NY, 1975) with the belief in necessity to convey the future predictions of science fiction to the realm of architectural discourse in a systematic way. At this point, it can be argued that people within the realm of architectural discipline refer to the mentioned spatial elements from time to time, but we can claim that this information should not be dispersed, but systematized for a scientific relationship between architectural discourse and this knowledge, because people tend to read in different ways in relation to their socio-cultural differences.

This study, taking language as a departure point, will take into consideration the notion of interdisciplinarity which expresses the relationship of modern research methods with several other disciplines without limitation to one. Pavel (1985) elucidates this necessity in terms of linguistics as follows:

Modern research on literary narratives developed in relation to several factors: the gradual abandonment of impressionism in literary studies in favour of more objective methods, the rise of modern linguistics, and the prevalent ambivalence of interdisciplinarity in the social sciences, which encourages methodological and conceptual cross-fertilization... The development of modern social science enhanced this direction, on the one hand by the growing willingness to share methodology, on the other hand by the realization that many problems encountered in one discipline cannot be solved without recourse to research in some other discipline. Thus, anthropology became tributary to linguistics, linguistics to cognitive psychology, text-theory to formal logic, etc... (Pavel, 1985)



This necessity that Pavel underlines for the social sciences to share their realms of knowledge with each other, is also valid for the realm of knowledge of architecture. In this way, the priority to interdisciplinary approach given by architecture, a discipline which intersects with various aspects of life, gains importance. Architecture has been establishing relationships with some branches of art. But aside from these traditional relationships, it is necessary to search for the possibilities of exploring new relationships with the art of literature. While it is discussed among literary theory that architectural and urban elements should be used by forming literary images in order to reinforce the narration, it is also possible to look for a reverse relationship in order to enrich the epistemological aspect of the architectural discipline. In the words of Basa (2000), language has always been a significant source for all disciplines. Without language it is possible to know something but it never turns into knowledge without being conceptualized or conveyed through words. Considering the realm of knowledge of architecture, to feed this realm it appears necessary to establish a strong relationship between language and architecture (Basa, 2000).

It is supposed that this relationship will make an architect gain knowledge by reading the literary text. At this point, it is important to state the reason to consider literary texts. The writer of a literary text notifies the relationship of the human being to its environment by extrapolating through language. As Tümer (1981) suggests, writers are sensitive people who make good observations. While conveying people's situation they also consider their spatial relationships (Tümer, 1981). Moreover, the human body which has a spatial component can only exist within a space. It has also been suggested that human identity is related to the phenomenon of place. According to Tümer (1981), it is a waste of sources not to benefit from such kind of products. We limit our area of research not to the texts of professionals (architects) but to literary texts to avoid pre-knowledge and prejudices of professionals. So in this case, it is possible to reach subjective evaluations and put on new perspectives. And also literary texts are primary sources read without the prejudices of the writer on space. Tümer resembles this research method to the reference scanning of the historians from the primary sources (Tümer 1981). To use linguistics as a medium also owes to the systematic structure of it. In Fowler's (1986) terms, the linguistic terminology is systematic. Saussure has already defined the language itself as the system of units and processes (Fowler, 1986). The necessity and significance to view language derives from its richness to demonstrate us things that does not exist. Language presents us some realities that we never experience. Thus, through language, we are transported to other realities.

In this respect, each discourse is supposed to form predictions and scenarios belonging to its discipline in the sake of calling itself into being. The images of the future reflect and reinforce the values of a discipline. Watching the future in this sense is also discussed among the responsibilities of the architectural discipline. Architecture has already been fed from utopias for ages, and science fiction can be considered as a counter utopia or dystopia, which represents the irony of utopia. This fact also supports our idea to examine science fiction literature but not the mainstream one. James explains the intense structure of science fiction rather than mainstream as follows:

The purpose of mainstream fiction is generally to express some perceptions about the human psyche; the purpose of science fiction is to speculate about the potentialities and possibilities of



human species and its place in the universe, either with serious extrapolative intent or playfully. Mainstream fiction usually takes the world of our own experience as its setting; science fiction alters the world of our experience in minor or major ways. (James, 1994)

A science fiction reading which necessitates such an effort comes out as a more intellectual activity. Moreover, some writers consider science fiction superior to the other forms of literature. Because it is the only genre to overcome the problems of this dangerous world. Science fiction thus allows the reader to interrogate his identity through the other. At this point, if we go back to the architectural realm, we can point out the “self” in two ways: firstly, the architecture itself, and secondly is the social self that architecture turns and looks for itself. In this sense, in relation to the first “self”, architecture will have the chance to interrogate itself by looking at different geographies and decors and also architectural formations. In relation to the second self, it will compare the present social phenomena with the alternative ones within the science fiction text.

2. Architectural Discourse

We are going to establish the relationship between literature and architecture through architectural discourse. The term that we define as the realm of architectural knowledge relies on a discursive plane. In this sense, we should emphasize also the existence of architectural practice not only on practical realm, but also discursive realm.

Discourses exist in order to form, effect or transform its object. As Foucault puts it, “Discourses are practices that systematically form their objects of which they speak. (Basa, 2000) In this respect, it is possible to suggest that the literature discourse can form the architectural product it mentions. The other role of discourse in Foucault’s discourse is that discourse is a vehicle to produce knowledge. Then architectural discourse can be considered as a sub-formation to provide knowledge to the epistemological realm of architecture. Language gives knowledge, and allows knowledge to be transmitted from person to person. But this knowledge is traditional, not innovative, for language is a stabilizing, stereotyping, mode of communication (Fowler, 1986). At this point discourse is the medium to transform the meaning within language. Discourse carries these traditional meanings, categorizes and systematizes.

Architectural discipline needs to have a discursive base since for a discipline to express itself, it needs to gain identity, discuss this and also to constitute a discussion platform. Basa proves this fact by asserting that architecture’s appeal to linguistics due to its structural, semantic and communicational nature grows when it encounters crisis of identity. The discursive authority of architecture plays an important role over its object. Basa (2000) explains the discursive necessity of architecture as:

It can be said that if discourses are theoretically present only with their discursive objects, they are practically present with their capacity to produce changes. However the following maps the situation that renders an implicit reply. Before anything else, i.e. the linguistic discourse’s ability or request of effecting, changing, transforming a field provides the primary discursive circumstances besides many other relations. It is on this basis that the discursive structure of linguistic discourse substitutes a theoretical



structure in the field of architecture; hence it begins to form its objects, activate them and, finally, cause discursive effects. (Basa, 2000)

3. The Spatiality of Literature

The narrated space in the novel is concretized as “literary space”. Literary space is defined by Manfred Jahn as “the spatial environment and the inventory objects created in the reader’s imagination on the basis of incomplete textual cues”. However this space is different from that of visual arts, because this space can never be presented but represented (Bolak, 1999).

We can argue that both novel is spatial and space is literary. Although it has been argued for a long time that literature is a temporal art, it is also possible to claim that it is a spatial art. Since many issues in social sciences are explained through spatiality, also literature which can be claimed as a social science, uses the phenomenon of space to structure its text, because spatiality provides literature to define its sociality. Fairclough (1999) explains the phenomenon of social space within texts as:

Texts are social spaces in which two fundamental social processes simultaneously occur: cognition and representation of the world, and social interaction. A multifunctional view of text is therefore essential. I have followed systemic linguistics in assuming that language in texts always simultaneously functions ideationally in the representation of experience and the world, interpersonally in constituting social interaction between participants in discourse, and textually in tying parts of a text together into a coherent whole (a text, precisely) and tying texts to situational contexts (e.g. through situational deixis). This multifunctionality of language in texts can be used to operationalize theoretical claims about the socially constitutive properties of discourse and text. Texts in their ideational functioning constitute systems of knowledge and belief (including what Foucault refers to as 'objects'), and in their interpersonal functioning they constitute social subjects (or in different terminologies, identities, forms of self) and social relations between (categories of) subjects. (Fairclough, 1999)

The sociality of the text comes from its contextuality. Seen etymologically, context means con-text with text, so in Halliday’s expression context serves as a bridge between the text and the situation in which texts actually occur (Halliday, 1989). Context is important since meaning is established through it. Halliday (1989) argues that there was a theory of context before there was a theory of the text. The term he uses refers to verbal environment as well as the situation in which the text was formed. He also believed in the necessity to provide more than the apparent context, but also the cultural contexts of the participants of the text. All these were necessary in the comprehension of the text (Halliday, 1989).

4. Ballard’s Position within Science Fiction Literature

Ballard is placed within the *New Wave* movement among science fiction branches, which we can call as soft science fiction. The leader of the movement, Michael Moorcock, has defined the role of science fiction as not predicting the future, but understanding it. Departing from this motto, Ballard does not endeavour to create new realities, but reads the situation of today in a future perspective. In fact, the near future that Ballard looks



into is nothing more than the criticism of the present time; this criticism is established on the exaggeration of the present situation to make the science fiction format.

There are several reasons to decide on Ballard as a case study. The first of these and the most important one is that what is defined as the “self” of architectural realm is the object of architecture itself and also the social coordinates that it looks in order to form this object. It is possible to mention that these two phenomena are equally used as vehicles in Ballard literature. It is also possible to explore physical environment definitions when we look at other science fiction products, but in Ballard’s case the definition of the physical environment is an obligation for the definition of the social environment. Ballard’s attitude is also related to the conjectural situation of the period (1970’s), which considers the social environment through several phenomena.

The second reason of directing the study to Ballard is the fact that the thinkers that architectural discourse includes and the discourse of Ballard intersects. For instance, it is possible to observe the “representational space” described by Lefebvre in Ballard’s literature. Taylor (2002) explains this fact as:

Much recent cultural geography owes a great deal to Lefebvre, who famously refused to collapse geography into the realm of material, insisting instead on the autonomy of the representational spaces in which imagined mental spaces blur into the lived ontologies of daily life and historical time. Numerous authors have explored the constitutive role of discourse in the representation and construction of landscapes. (Taylor, 2002)

Landscape is the key figure in Ballard literature. He perceives landscape as the formalization of space and time, and connects external landscapes to the interior states of mind. Because as the landscape changes in accordance with new environmental conditions, human subjectivities also mutate (Taylor, 2002). His characters appear as alienated bodies reacting against the new modern situation. In Taylor’s words, “the protagonists find themselves in situations where their subjectivity is altered by changes in the built environment.” (Taylor, 2002)

5. Case Study: Reading High Rise (1975)

High Rise is a small vertical city –in Ballard’s terms- with its 1000 apartments, pools, shopping malls, gymnasium, a small movie theatre, school, a private bank, fast elevators and other facilities, inhabiting 2000 urban dwellers at the outer boundary of London. The main structure of the novel is that the self-sufficient, perfect, peaceful vertical city later turns out to be a nightmare. As in his other novels, Ballard, in this novel, describes how outer landscapes transform the inner landscape.

Throughout the novel, the high-rise is used by Ballard as a social laboratory of the (near) future in which all the pretensions to stability and rationality of modern democracy are tested against a number of obsessions and speculations. Because of their lack of social awareness and their absolute dependence on the services provided by the condominium, the tenants of the high-rise block, who behave 'like an advanced species of machine in the neutral atmosphere' also '[thrive] on the rapid turnover of the acquaintances, the lack of involvement with the others were never disappointed' (Delville, 1998).



It is possible to establish parallelism between *High Rise* and Corbusier's modern utopia *L'Habitation* and -if we go backwards- to Fourier's *Falanster* as well. Ballard's dystopian houses would just be corporately owned as non-profit cooperatives as *L'Habitation* or *Falanster*. And in the same manner Ballard creates -as Corbusier and Fourier does- sports and other social and cultural facilities for the inhabitants of his satellite city. The only difference is that the formers describe this environment in a utopian manner, whereas Ballard does this in a dystopian manner. Ballard describes his *High Rise* dystopia as:

The massive scale of the glass and concrete architecture, and its striking situation on a bend of the river, sharply separated the development project from the run down areas around it, decaying nineteenth-century terraced houses and empty factories already zoned for reclamation...

The drive to the physiology department of the medical school took him five minutes, and apart from this single excursion Laing's life in the high-rise was as self-contained as the building itself. In effect, the apartment block was a small vertical city, its two thousand inhabitants boxed up into the sky.

For all its size, the high-rise contained an impressive range of services. The entire 10th floor was given over to a wide concourse, as large as an aircraft carrier's flight-deck, which contained a supermarket, bank and hairdressing salon, a swimming-pool and gymnasium, a well-stocked liquor store and a junior school for the few young children in the block. High above Laing, on the 35th floor, was a second, smaller swimming-pool, a sauna and a restaurant. Delighted by this glut of conveniences, Laing made less and less effort to leave the building...

The apartment had been expensive, its studio living-room and single bedroom, kitchen and bathroom dovetailed into each other to minimize space and eliminate internal corridors. To his sister Alice Frobisher, who lived with her publisher husband in a larger apartment three floors below, Laing had remarked, "The architect must have spent his formative years in a space capsule – I'm surprised the walls don't curve..."

At first Laing found something alienating about the concrete landscape of the project – an architecture designed for war, on the unconscious level if no other. After all the tensions of his divorce, the last thing he wanted to look out on each morning was a row of concrete bunkers..." (HR8-9)

The dark side of modernity is the unreliability of modern life, the isolation of the self and its disintegration in the society. The illusion of block to be seen as presenting a perfect urban life in itself, a completeness in itself is just the same as modern isolation:

With its forty floors and thousand apartments, its supermarket and swimming-pools, bank and junior school - all in effect abandoned in the sky - the high-rise offered more than enough opportunities for violence and confrontation. Certainly his own studio apartment on the 25th floor was the last place Laing would have chosen as an early skirmish ground. This over-priced cell slotted almost at random into the cliff face of the apartment building, ... (HR7)

While the high rise isolates people from each other, it isolates them from the nature as well. Because the physical conditions created are far from providing the needs of people in this term:



The spectacular view always made Laing aware of his ambivalent feelings for this concrete landscape. Part of its appeal lay all too clearly in the fact that this was an environment built not for man, but for man's absence. (HR25)

The physical structure of the block both affects human health and psychology as well, and at the same time creates new existences. Modern life is the rationalization process of social affairs according to Simmel as well as the physical environment:

All the residents he had met, on hearing that Laing was a physician, at some point brought up their difficulties in sleeping. At parties people discussed their insomnia in the way that they referred to the other built-in design flaws of the apartment block. (HR13)...

By the way, doctor, I'm planning to do a television documentary about high-rises, a really hard look at the physical and psychological pressures of living in a huge condominium such as this one.' (HR16)

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. (HR35)

Perhaps the recent incidents represented a last attempt by Wilder and the airline pilots to rebel against this unfolding logic? Sadly, they had little chance of success, precisely because their opponents were people who were content with their lives in the high-rise, who felt no particular objection to an impersonal steel and concrete landscape, no qualms about the invasion of their privacy by government agencies and data-processing organizations, and if anything welcomed these invisible intrusions, using them for their own purposes. These people were the most to master a new kind of Late twentieth century life. They thrived on the rapid turnover of acquaintances, the lack of involvement with others, and the total self sufficiency of lives which, needing nothing, were never disappointed...

In many ways, the high-rise was a model of all that technology had done to make possible the expression of a truly 'free' psychopathology. (HR36)

What made the tenants still live in this apartment was perhaps their reconciliation with it. Ballard's criticism here can be read as the consolidation of the idea of modernism with the unawareness of the subjects of it:

Most of their grievances, Laing noticed, were now directed at the other tenants rather than at the building. The failure of the elevators was blamed on people from the upper and lower floors, not on the architects or the inefficient services designed into the block. (HR38)

The balcony series in *High Rise* refer to the principle of rationality which is peculiar to the idea of modernity. Everything is the same and fairly ordered. In fact, each balcony refers to one apartment, one living space and one life. Consequently what is made similar and rationalized in *High Rise* are the 2000 lives in 2000 apartments:

Almost every balcony on the huge face of the high-rise was now occupied, the residents gazing down as if from their boxes in an enormous out door opera house. (HR41)



When he had parked Wilder kicked open the door and lifted his heavy body from behind the steering wheel. From his place on the perimeter of the parking-lot he carefully scanned the face of the huge building. At most glance everything had settled down. The hundreds of cars were parked in orderly lines. The tiers of balconies rose through the clear sunlight, potted plants thriving behind the railings. (HR42)

The characters in the *High Rise* are in fact making irony by commenting on the block as paradise, because later we encounter the metaphors of jail and zoo:

'You're favoured to have met him; Wilder said. I'd like to know why. An isolated character – I ought to resent him, but somehow I feel sorry for the man, hovering over us like some kind of fallen angel.'

In a sense, these people were the vanguard of a well-to-do and well-educated proletariat of the future, boxed up in these expensive apartments with their elegant furniture and intelligent sensibilities, and no possibility of escape. (HR81)

Without knowing it, he had constructed a gigantic vertical zoo, its hundreds of cages stacked above each other. All the events of the past few months made sense if one realized that these brilliant and exotic creatures had learned to open the doors. (HR134)

The multi-storey high blocks are so dominant to the urban landscape that they a kind of colonize the sky. Ballard's metaphor here as the colonization of the sky in fact refers to the colonization of the land. This colonization has been mentioned in *High Rise* as:

The high-rises seemed almost to challenge the sun itself - Anthony Royal and the architects who had designed the complex could not have foreseen the drama of confrontation each morning between these concrete slabs and the rising sun. It was only fitting that the sun first appeared between the legs of the apartment blocks, raising itself over the horizon as if nervous of waking this line of giants. During the morning, from his office on the top floor of the medical school, Laing would watch their shadows swing across the parking-lots and empty plazas of the project, sluice-gates opening to admit the day. For all his reservations, Laing was the first to concede that these huge buildings had won their attempt to colonize the sky. (HR19)

Ballard also touches the class differentiation, which is also a theme of modernism. The class notion in modern life defines a different kind of social relations than its equivalencies in pre-capitalist world, because this difference is emphasized with the arrangement of the physical environment, which modern life tries to dominate. The tenants of *High Rise* are also separated to class categories:

Reasonably enough the architects had zoned the parking-lots so that the higher resident's apartment (and consequently the longer journey by elevator) the nearer he parked to the building. The residents from the lower floors had to walk considerable distance to and from their cars each day - a sight not without its satisfaction, Laing had noticed. Somehow the high-rise played into the hands of the most petty impulses. (HR24)



The first half of the programme would examine life in the high-rise in terms of its design errors and minor irritations, while the remainder would then look at the psychology of living in a community of two thousand people boxed up into the sky - everything from the incidence of crime, divorce and sexual misdemeanours to the turnover of residents, their health, the frequency of insomnia and other psychosomatic disorders.

In effect, the high-rise had already divided itself into the three classical social groups, its lower, middle and upper classes. The 10th-floor shopping mall formed a clear boundary between the lower nine floors, with their 'proletariat' of film technicians, air-hostesses and the like, and the middle section of the high-rise, which extended from the 10th floor to the swimming-pool and restaurant deck on the 35th. This central two-thirds of the apartment building formed its middle class, made up of self-centred but basically docile members of the professions - the doctors and lawyers, accountants and tax specialists who worked, not for themselves, but for medical institutes and large corporations. Puritan and self-disciplined, they had all the cohesion of those eager to settle for second best. (HR52-3)

A complete hardening of positions had taken place, and there was now almost no contact between the upper, middle and lower groups. During the early part of the day it was possible to move freely around the building, but as the afternoon proceeded this became increasingly difficult. (HR75)

6. Conclusion

In terms of searching spatial clues within literary texts in an interdisciplinary manner, and trying to prove the affluence of socio-spatial knowledge within these texts to be systematically conveyed to the discursive realm of architecture, this study shows that such a research method is not only helpful in producing architectural knowledge, but also helpful in gaining an original point of view within discursive studies. In this respect, we tried to make an architectural research on the phenomenon of modernity reading the "literary space" throughout *High Rise*. We examined the context of *High Rise* as a social space in which the representation of modern life seen within the novel as unreliable, isolating, classifying and rationalizing, takes place. Ballard's modern life is defined by Delville (1998) as the emphasis of the process by which society enters the individual and establishes a fundamental separation between reason and impulse, thereby negating the all-pervading force of unconscious desire (Delville, 1998). We believe that Ballard's approach in *High Rise* should be taken into consideration in the formation of the future scenarios of architectural discourse. In this way, this research method inserts a further knowledge to the architectural discourse helping to structure the identity of it.



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