The Interaction of Space and Violence in J. G. Ballard's High-Rise

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Abstract: *The purpose of the present paper is to explore the relation between architectural space and violence in J. G. Ballard's High-Rise. It uses Henri Lefebvre's (1991) spatial theories and argues how the principles used in designing and developing urban spaces and societies are in conflict with lived spaces resulting in confusion, violence, animosity, and division. This paper elaborates on the concept of spatial violence and argues that space and spatial interactions are both necessary to develop a space whether stable or not. It is taken for granted that social relations are substantial parts of any given space and their role in establishing and developing a spatial structure is apparent. It explores Lefebvre's ideas on the relation of violence and spatial development in Ballard's High-Rise as an instance of a planned space. It examines how violence reconstructs a social space, while at the same time it is the production of it. The paper concludes that the relationship between social and spatial elements formulates the development or decadence of a spatial construction.*
Keywords: *Ballard, Lefebvrean Space, Social space, Spatial practice, Spatial violence*

I. INTRODUCTION

Many literary works of the post World War deal with the modern architectural practice which was the dominant fashion in designing and constructing the residential spaces. By simulating the real world spaces in their stories, writers scrutinize the flaws of space and its influences on human's experiences, life, and relations. Several features of space affect the planned space of designers and urbanists in a way that a totally new space is formed. These features of space can be traced in J. G. Ballard's *High-Rise* which is set in an ultramodern skyscraper. The present article deals with two questions: firstly, it examines the spatial issues that are responsible for social conflicts and may lead to violence; the second question analyses the new spatial practices that are the consequences of these contradictions and conflicts. Both questions are applied to Ballard's *High-Rise*.

Experts in the field of space point to the mutual relation between space and the upcoming conflicts. Petural believes that conflicts are "inevitably spatial and space often leads to conflict" (qtd. in Mishra, 2015: 2). After World War II and the popularity of Brutalist architecture, politicians made use of spaces in order to achieve their strategic and political goals. Skyscrapers were, by then, home for people who had lost their houses during the war. However the story went further and by 1960s and 1970s the extraordinarily designed tower blocks which provided the whole requirements of their inhabitants, acted as the means for manipulating and enslaving people. The main objective was developing the spaces that were extensible to broader urban areas, but they transformed into thresholds to tension and social conflicts. In his *Urban Revolution*, Lefebvre writes that in cities that are planned on the basis of centrality, conflicts are started from differences which recognize and test each other. Therefore, the planned central space includes a set of contradictory elements that give rise to social and spatial conflicts. He argues that these contradictions are also mutually connected (2003: 96). According to Lefebvre, the elements of a centralized space are "mutually exclusive because they are diverse, and inclusive because they are brought together and imply their mutual presence" (ibid, 119). Thus, he distinguishes between the central and peripheral spaces (1991: 54). He defines the peripheral space as the dominated, oriented space which is produced to be a medium that conveys the hegemony of the central space to the occupants (ibid, 181). The peripheral spaces are controlled and watched carefully by surveillance, policing, and wall fences (Graham, 2011: 63-77) or by inducing the idea of isolation through the physical features of the space (Ballard, 2012: 11).

The illustration of Lefebvre's conception of urbanization and spatial practice in *High-Rise* indicates the confrontation of the central and peripheral space that gives rise to conflicts and violence. Space, for Lefebvre, is not a product but a process of production that depends on the spatial practices of a society. Besides, it is a dynamic entity which has been (re)constructed through time. It also provides a proper platform for social interactions that produce and are produced by the space simultaneously (1991: 50). This paper primarily focuses on the representations of these contradictory spaces in the novel: How are the opposing spaces implemented together and interact with each other? Then, it analyses the conflicts arising from the contradictions between the central and peripheral spaces in the novel. Finally, violence and its representations are studied in actions and reactions of the tenants, and their relation with the space is investigated.

II. Discussion

Spaces, especially the residential ones, are dynamic entities which are initially designed to promote a particular hegemony to the inhabitants. The residential spaces of the 1950s and 1960s are resemblances of this context implemented by the designers and planners. Initially, they try to design a perfect central space, suitable for the governmental interests. However, the features of their planned central space are not always similar to the ideals of peripheral space. "The dominant form of space . . . endeavours to mould the spaces it dominates (i.e. peripheral spaces), and it seeks, often by violent means, to reduce the obstacles and resistance it encounters there", Lefebvre says (1991: 54). The peripheral or lived space is often in conflict with the ideals of central space and establishes a perfect context for conflicts is established by these contradictions.

This centrality is illustrated in Ballard's *High-Rise* through a building which has been designed as a self-sufficient entity (1977: 130) that serves its inhabitants with aestheticism (ibid, 138), physical comfort, and mental pleasure. The self-sufficiency of the building resembles in some aspects the human body with the occupants as its vital organs. This notion of body "becomes important as the individual's and collective's changing relationship to the space of the building can be read through the marks and scars created during the confrontations" (Larose, 2006: 24). The occupants find the environment an intelligent entity which has power over them (1977: 64). Royal refers to it as a "moribund, [whose] vital functions [are] fading one by one" (ibid, 117) and still tries to live longer by providing water supplies for the tenants as its organs (ibid, 129). This centrality of the building makes the tenants needless of the outside world. At the beginning, the tenants start a new life in accordance with the central space's requirements. They have access to facilities, hold parties, break with the past, and live a completely new lifestyle in a tower block with mechanical objects that substitute the master-servant relationship and lifestyle (ibid, 123). However, despite the building is designed to house the selected, well-educated members of society who establish a homogenous society of elite, the moral, rational, and civilized manners last for a very short time. Thus, morality and immorality, rationality and irrationality, and logical and illogical behavior form a "double logic" (ibid, 103) in the high-rise[1]. The tower block has primarily been designed in line with the governmental strategies to reduce costs (ibid, 89) and its central space is supposed to provide the occupants with physical and mental comfort. The central space does not satisfy the occupants and is in conflict with the lived space. This two-sided nature of the block and its occupants is another contradiction which may cause problems.

Based on Lefebvre's theories this centrality brings together whatever exists in a space (2006: 291) with its advantages and disadvantages. However, the whole utopian environment cannot satisfy the tenants' demands. From a Lefebvrean point of view, people have a "right to the city" that allows them to testify the conditions that are not in line with their desires and advent new forms that serve them best (1996: 161). In *The Production of Space*, following the ideas of Gramsci concerning the influence of hegemony on the production of space he argues that "hegemony implies more than an influence, more even than the permanent use of repressive violence" (1991: 10). Therefore, as the space constructs and controls the daily life, desires, and dreams of its inhabitants, it is also influenced by their suppressed desires. Lefebvre believes that high-rises are one of the best instances that represent this feature of space. The events of Ballard's *High-Rise* demonstrate the various aspects of this mutual interaction and its consequences masterfully. Although the facilities are apparently designed in order to provide comfort and satisfy their demands, they manipulate the mental status of the tenants indirectly. The building cannot satisfy their desires and it seems that they do not belong to the tower block at all. For instance, the narrator notes that Wilder "was real enough, but hardly belonged to the high-rise" (1977: 34). Moreover, Helen Wilder comments on the frightening atmosphere of the building after the tensions between the tenants: "It's almost as if these aren't the people who really live here" (ibid.). Other characters, as well as the narrator, refer to this alienation throughout their discussions, criticisms, and comments regarding the fact that the tenants are not the identical elites who were supposed to occupy the building.

Oppositions start from the arguments between the wealthy dog-owners and the lower class child bearers. After the first black out the drowned body of an Afghan dog is found in the tenth floor swimming pool and Laing strangely feels that "the dog's drowning had been a provocative act, intended to invite further retaliation in its turn" (ibid, 40-41). He links the accident to the behavior of dog-owners in the elevators, corridors, and parking. Later, the narrator reveals Wilder's intentions through his thoughts:

He was sure that he had drowned the Afghan, not because he disliked the dog particularly or wanted to upset its owner, but to revenge himself on the upper storeys of the building. He had seized the dog in the darkness when it blundered into the pool. Giving in to a cruel but powerful impulse, he had pulled it below the water. As he held its galvanized and thrashing body under the surface, in a strange way he had been struggling with the building itself. (ibid, 86)

Wilder's action implies Lefebvre's theory concerning the rivals that arise from the space and develop to the point that can be controlled neither by the occupants nor by the designers (2003: 120). This violence, in Kitchin

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[1] This coexisting of paradoxical behavior is also traceable in Ballard's *Supper-Cannes* and *Cocaine Nights*.

words, "seems to emanate not from some deep flaw of human nature, but from a reaction to the architecture and enforced community of the high-rise building itself" (2005: 99). In *High-Rise* the characters make the situation out of control and the building itself provides them with equipment.

Soon after the first black out, failures occur and the public facilities stop working. The air conditioning system is out of service; the garbage chutes are blocked by unusual garbage like curtains and furniture; elevators are either out of service or have been taken over by the occupants of a particular floor or newly established tribes. Lefebvre believes that the imperfections and deficiencies of urban spaces provoke the occupants to take the ownership of food, facilities, and the physical spaces of their living environment, whether violently or not (2008: 106). Consequently, the tenants of the high-rises start to occupy or take control of the public spaces. The first signs of the desire for ownership are observed when the upper floor occupants who "[encourage] encouraging their pets to use them as lavatories" (1977: 41). A stronger and more aggressive sign is obvious in Royal's manner with his white safari-jacket and Alsatian dog living in the penthouse like a "fallen angel" (ibid, 28) and watching his kingdom from his throne. This sense of considering the block as his territory becomes stronger when he decides not to leave the place.

The tower block has been designed so as to prevent the outsiders from entering the building. This restriction then becomes epidemic among the occupants, since they do not let people from other floors enter their lobbies. For instance, the residents of the thirty-seventh floor ban Wilder's way when he tries to enter their territory, hit him violently, and leave him outside the building among the garbage (1977: 112-13). The staircases are blocked by furniture and protected by the residents who are armed with wooden clubs (ibid.). A more serious attempt to take the ownership of the space can be traced in the tenants' disruption with the world on the other side of the tower block's walls. They do not leave the block to the extent possible, and when they are obliged to leave it temporarily for work their mind is busy with the ongoing events that happen in their absence. Furthermore, they do not let any stranger to enter the building. Even after the suspicious death of the jeweler, nobody call the police. This disruption reaches its peak when they become united in enjoying the malfunctions of the building and refuse to let the health agent deal with the garbage piled up in the parking.

Therefore, the contradictions between the services provided by the tower block and the tenants' desires lead to conflicts and violence based on Lefebvre's theory about the source of the conflicts. In his meeting with Royal or journeys up to the roof, Laing refers to the inhumane nature of the tower block and believes that it is not made for human presence:

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 . . . The cluster of auditorium roofs, curving roadway embankments and rectilinear curtain-walling formed an intriguing medley of geometries -- less a habitable architecture, he reflected, than the unconscious diagram of a mysterious psychic event. (1977: 44-5)

Other characters have the same feeling towards the building as it is obvious in Talbot's pessimistic words about "a quickening pulse in the air" which she wonders if it has "anything to do with good humour or fellow-feeling? Rather the opposite, I'd guess" (1977: 55). Mrs. Steel refers to these influences as if the building

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 neurones of a brain (ibid, 68).

Similarly, Wilder feels that the building presents a physical challenge to him. He "[is] constantly aware of the immense weight of concrete stacked above him, and the sense that his body [is] the focus of the lines of force running through the building, almost as if Anthony Royal had deliberately designed his body to be held within their grip" (ibid, 83). He concludes that "[t]heir real opponent was not the hierarchy of residents in the heights far above them, but the image of the building in their own minds, the multiplying layers of concrete that anchored them to the floor" (ibid, 98). Thus, conflicts arise from the contradictions between the building's characteristics and the residents' desires. The conflicts then lead to more violent acts and signs of violence, therefore, are seen in the tower block. Regarding the conflicts and differences that has become widespread in the building, Lefebvre claims that force and violence are the only solution to eliminate the contradictions. He notes that "*there is a violence intrinsic to abstraction*, and to abstraction's practical (social) use" (1991: 289; 308). In case of *High-Rise*, the chaos starts after the black out in ninth, tenth, and eleventh floors which house the lower class: people rush towards the elevators and staircases, a woman is found frightened in the elevator as if having been raped, and a dog is drowned in the swimming pool (1977: 33-37). This chaotic situation gets worse when the facilities are out of service and those who live in the lower floors decide to make a change in their living conditions. Since the apartments of the middle and upper floors are still in better condition and are safer than the lower floors, they are determined to start their journey to reach there and stay in those apartments. Then the building is divided into two poles that act violently against each other (ibid, 52) and people reveal the hidden layers of their characters. Rape, damaging the elevators, privacy invasion, indifference towards public affairs or deaths, tribal wars, and physical attacks become mainstream and common among the tenants. Finally, the

apartments are transformed into strongholds that protect the owners from their fellow-citizens' attacks. Laing, for instance, "strode down the long bookcase in the sitting room, pulling his medical and scientific text-books on to the floor. Section by section, he wrenched out the shelving. He carried the planks into the hall, and for the next hour moved around the apartment, transforming its open interior into a home-made blockhouse" (ibid, 168). Others block the staircases, and manipulate the elevators so that they are not available for other residents. This new lifestyle and the behavior of the tenants are the outcome of the features of the tower block. In Laing's eyes the building is like a "Pandora box whose thousand lids were one by one inwardly opening" (ibid, 61). Besides, "[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". This new social type is easily adapted to any condition and even "[welcome] invisible intrusion" for his own intersests (ibid, 61-2). The collapse of the building is good for them since 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. Secure within the shell of the high-rise like passengers on board an automatically piloted airliner, they were free to behave in any way they wished, explore the darkest corners they could find. In many ways, the high-rise was a model of all that technology had done to make possible the expression of a truly "free" psychopathology. (ibid, 63).

So this carefully designed architectural space invites the tenants to make their dreams come true through the spaces which have been planned to be utopias. However, the whole space is transformed into a new entity. At this point, Lefebvre says, the existing space is transformed and a new space is established that is more satisfactory in the tenants' eyes. He gives the residents the right to announce the differences as well as their desires and requirements. This permission is based on Lefebvre's theory about "right to the city". Thus, changes are inevitable because of the dynamic nature of space.

The dynamic nature of space descends the high-rise to an anarchic state that establishes a new social structure. Beckman suggests that "only arbitrary and violent events that stand outside the efficacy of perfection can create any signs of real life" (2013: 4). Despite of the chaotic conditions which are in contrast with the utopian nature of the building, people are more determined to stay there. Now, they identify themselves with the tower block. Although they are in war and have established three "coexisting armed camps", they are living in peace superficially (1977: 128). They unite and cut any connection with the outside world. Not capable of living outside the tower block, the violence within their front makes them feel alive. Laing, for instance, cannot leave the building and the construction is the god of safety for him:

Within ten minutes he had returned to his apartment. After bolting the door, he climbed over his barricade and wandered around the half-empty rooms. As he inhaled the stale air he was refreshed by his own odour, almost recognizing parts of his body -- his feet and genitalia, the medley of smells that issued from his mouth. He stripped off his clothes in the bedroom, throwing his suit and tie into the bottom of the closet and putting on again his grimy sports-shirt and trousers. He knew now that he would never again try to leave the high-rise. He was thinking about Alice, and how he could bring her to his apartment. In some way these powerful odours were beacons that would draw her to him. (1977: 173)

Even Royal who has decided to leave, assumes that "they would not be leaving either the following morning or any other" (ibid, 133). The society of elites, have established a unity that is totally different from their dignified, rational, and honorable personality. Royal feels that a "new social order [is] beginning to emerge around him" (ibid, 120). However, he does believe not that the collapse of the tower block is a sign of failure, but takes it as a mark of success.

The civilized behavior of the tenants is no longer normal and disturbs other people and they cannot tolerate the "excitements of the world outside" (ibid, 172). In contrast with first days of occupying the tower block, the upper floors are now providing a more comfortable space for "free and degenerate behaviour . . . as if encouraged by the secret logic of the high-rise" (ibid, 199). Finally the ultramodern building is descended into a tribal jungle where people cook over fire (ibid, 245). They search for food and water supplies (ibid, 197) and conquer the abandoned apartments (ibid, 203). People die and dogs eat their bodies (ibid, 297). The most important idea is that those residents, who had not left the tower block, have accepted the new situation and are living peacefully. The point is that Royal's block is not the only construction that is dealing with anarchy and violence. Although the story deals with a particular tower block, separated from the outside world in any aspects, but through Laing's vision, the reader sees the neighbor apartment building captured by the same evil forces:

[O]nly two hundred yards from the neighbouring high-rise, a sealed rectilinear planet whose glassy face he could now see clearly. Almost all the new tenants had moved into their apartments, duplicating to the last curtain fabric and dishwasher those in his own block, but this building seemed remote and threatening. Looking up at the endless tiers of balconies, he felt uneasily like a visitor to a malevolent zoo, where terraces of vertically mounted cages contained creatures of random and ferocious cruelty. A few people leaned on their railings and

watched Laing without expression, and he had a sudden image of the two thousand residents springing to their balconies and hurling down at him anything to hand, inundating Laing beneath a pyramid of wine bottles and ashtrays, deodorant aerosols and contraceptive wallets. (ibid, 171-2)

The novel ends with the picture of Laing looking towards a nearby apartment block:

Laing looked out at the high-rise four hundred yards away. A temporary power failure had occurred, and on the 7th floor all the lights were out. Already torch-beams were moving about in the darkness, as the residents made their first confused attempts to discover where they were. Laing watched them contentedly, ready to welcome them to their new world. (ibid, 184)

Thus, through characters and events the novel conveys Lefebvre's theories about the revolutionary acts that rise from the physical features of the building. According to him, the inevitable changes that occur as the result of dissatisfaction imply the quest for revolution. The process of transformation is related to the peripheral space and its confrontations with the central. The peripheral tends to overcome the central space and this ends in violent revolutionary acts. Although the whole process has been started to establish a better urban society, there is no guarantee that it does not descend into a dystopian world, as the case is in Ballard's *High-Rise*.

III. Conclusion

This paper examined the elements of Lefebvrean theories concerning the urban space in Ballard's *High-Rise*. The spatial features that Lefebvre considers vital in social relations and (re)production of spaces are traced and analyzed in the novel. Ballard has set his story in a tower block that perfectly represents the process of production and reproduction of space in urban societies. The present paper specifically concerned with the signs of violence that are linked to the space and spatial practices. Particularly it elaborated on the mutual relationship of violence and reproduction of space.

By tracing the relations between the spatial features of the high-rise's physical and social environment, it is concluded that the events that happen in the high-rise are rooted in the physical design of the construct that influence the residents' mental status. Initially designed to be a utopian residential space, the block fails to satisfy its occupants. According to Lefebvre's theories this failure is the result of the eternal relation between the space and the residents. He gives the residents the right to complain and this leads to protests that are accompanied by violent acts. Amidst the walls of the tower block, these acts range from graffiti to symbolic murder and from projection to alienation. In the final run, the confrontations, contradictions, violent acts, and isolation of the tenants establish a new form of space which is inferior to the previously constructed one, but accepted by those who have decided not to leave their territory. Ballard illustrates the fact that the interaction between people and their society is not temporal and static. Also, when the protagonist is looking towards the nearby tower blocks he discovers the early signs of chaos which he had witnessed before. This way, Ballard indicates that the decency of human being is an international stream that is not limited to time and place.

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