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“Vertige de l’hyperbole”: the humours of the *High-Rise*

Of what kind is the humour of J.G. Ballard? Of what tenor is it? How might we characterise it in relation to contemporary humours? Ben Wheatley’s frequently amusing adaptation of *High-Rise* prompts such questions from its earliest scenes. A caretaker cleans a floor by skating across it in feet clad in cloths; Laing splits the skull of an overtly Monster FX cadaver with a gory schlock sound; the joke that Laing is “the best amenity in the building” is made twice; residents of the upper floors are clad in tracksuits that unfortunately (or deliberately?) recall the outfits of the moustachioed caricatures from the television advertisements for the British online directory service 118 118; sets and costumes pastiche 1970s interiors and styles, the period in which Ballard’s novel was written but not, perhaps, the period in which it was set. In this context even the explicitly Ballardian sentiment of Laing’s remark that an architectural model looks like “the unconscious diagram of a mysterious psychic event” comes in quotation marks: “I might use that,” responds Royal.

Considered in isolation from its source text there is indeed much pleasure to be found in Wheatley’s *High-Rise*. The performances are strong. Tom Hiddlestone plays the well-mannered surgeon Laing with expensively-educated worldliness and ambiguously school-boyish eagerness. Sienna Miller gives Charlotte Melville considerably more box-office sex appeal than Ballard gave her in the book. Luke Evans, recognisable as Bard the Bowman from *The Hobbit* series, almost steals the show playing Wilder with a distinctly Oli-Reed-intensity, all rugby-playing, hell-raising drive, while Jeremy Irons is reliably vulpine as Royal, the architect of the building, barking when cornered. Formally, we are treated to *mise-en-abîme* in a mirrored elevator; a repeat of the kaleidoscope used to such potent effect in *A Field in England* – a nod to Kenneth Anger, rather than Kubrick, perhaps; and lavish CGI of the building itself, its towers cast against roiling skies from a multitude of angles.

We can’t, however, consider the film in isolation. The name of the author of the original text performs a very particular function, unavoidably so when that name has become adjectival. Wheatley and the cast have spoken freely of their affection for some kind of Ballard, but he’s not one I recognise.

There’s a heavy tendency at the current time – acknowledged in the Chapman Brothers contribution to the 2010 Gagossian Gallery *Crash* exhibition of a cut-up paperback entitled *BANGWALLOP* – to emphasise Ballard the comedian, which is not entirely wrong-headed.¹ Ballard was delighted when readers noted his humour, but this tended to happen with greater frequency around the late work, when he turned up the volume on his set-ups: middle-class cultists blowing up the Tate Modern or shopping centre entertainers becoming militia leaders. He was careful to qualify the nature of his humour. Interviewed in 1997, he remarked that he found William Burroughs’s writing ‘hilarious’. The interviewer responded: “You’re both often misunderstood. You’re both read as darker, more sombre writers and not often given the credit for the humour in your work. Is this because of the subject matter?”

Ballard replied:

My humour is rather different. It’s much more deadpan. I suppose there’s an element of tease in my writing. I mean, I’ve never been too keen to show which side of the fence I’m on [...] I try to maintain a fairly ambiguous pose, while trying

¹ J & D Ballard, *BANGWALLOP* (2010).

to unsettle and provoke the reader to keep the unconscious elements exerting their baleful force.²

Typically, this is both direct and understated. Deadpan might well be the correct term, but applied to a novel rather than a quip it's a form of humour that requires considerable nerve: the ability to see something through to its conclusion without blinking. This puts into play an intriguing temporality: we register the absurdity of a situation as it is established but from that point onwards it follows its own logic; we are being invited to laugh at the same time as we are denied the opportunity so to do. The kicker is crucial: those "unconscious elements."

Martin Amis, a tyro critic at the time, grasped this of *High-Rise*, writing in *The New Statesman* that "Ballard is neither believable nor unbelievable, just as his characterisation is merely a matter of 'roles' and his situations merely a matter of 'context': he is abstract, at once totally humourless and entirely unserious."³ Like a surrealist painting, perhaps, or a pop-art collage that juxtaposes a photograph of a war atrocity with a bikini-clad model. Totally humourless and entirely unserious is a difficult balance to strike in a cinematic adaptation and it is a balance that Wheatley's adaptation has disregarded: this *High-Rise* leans heavily towards the latter half of the pairing and there is a considerable cost in that.

That cost might be most keenly illustrated by comparing what has been excised from the novel and with what it has been replaced. In Ballard's *High-Rise* as the skirmishes between residents increase in frequency and many characters cease to leave the building, Laing is visited by his sister Alice, who lives three floors below on the 22nd with her alcoholic husband:

Laing put his arm around her shoulders, steadying her in case she lost her balance. In the past he had always felt physically distanced from Alice by her close resemblance to their mother, but for reasons not entirely sexual this resemblance now aroused him. He wanted to touch her hips, place his hand over her breast. As if aware of this, she leaned passively against him.⁴

Later that day Laing collects Alice from her apartment where she has already packed her suitcases. Without a backward glance she moves in with her brother and they establish a relationship that exhibits starkly Oedipal tendencies:

Laing enjoyed her wheedling criticisms of him, as he tried to satisfy her pointless whims. All this was a game, but he relished the role of over-dutiful servant dedicated to a waspish mistress, a devoted menial whose chief satisfaction was a total lack of appreciation and the endless recitation of his faults.⁵

Alice is absent from the film and Laing instead takes up with Wilder's pregnant wife Helen. Kinky, perhaps, but not quite as ripe as Ballard's Freudian exploration of the "perversities created by the limitless possibilities of the high rise." Ballard's sex is driven by unconscious

² Richard Kadrey and Suzanne Stefanac, 'J. G. Ballard on William S. Burroughs' Naked Truth,' in Simon Sellars, Dan O'Hara, eds. *Extreme Metaphors: Interviews with J. G. Ballard, 1967-2008* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), pp. 352-3.

³ Martin Amis, 'Up!', *The New Statesman*, 14th November 1975, p. 618.

⁴ J.G. Ballard, *High-Rise* (London: Flamingo, 1993; Jonathan Cape, 1975), pp. 98-9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

urges and deep, primal scents, satisfying for its participants only at the level of psychic experiment; Wheatley's sex is a good old romp with SiSi on the balcony.

In another scene, a new character has been introduced: a horse kept by Royal's wife in her Little Bo-Beep roof garden. It is suggested by knowing looks that this animal is to be put to stud with the harem on the upper floors. Not only does this apparently outré sexual suggestion fail to capture the calmly explicated transgression of a normalised incest, with its attendant exploration of familial dominance and submission, but it replaces it with knowing, grand guignol farce. Even in this it is impossible to escape the periodization that pervades the film, distancing it from the contemporary. *Animal Farm* (1981), the notorious pornographic bootleg featuring 'Animal Lover' Bodil Joensen was compiled from late seventies clips, smuggled into the UK in 1981 and became the stuff of playground legend in the mid-1980s. One suspects that this is the reference point for Wheatley's horseplay. In the days of industrialised internet pornography that evidences the boredom Ballard so frequently predicted would characterise the "sex times technology" formula of the near future, the portrayal of zoophilia as bawdy seems insufficiently thorny.

What are the formal differences between these distinct registers of humour? I'm tempted to follow Ballard's lead, and route into Freud. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) Freud had noted the proliferation of comic effects in his patient's dreams. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, published five years later, focused primarily on a catalogue of specific jokes – he was drawn particularly towards traditional Jewish jokes – but it yields insights that might be useful to us, particularly in terms of understanding Ballard's rarefied form of the deadpan. In an opening literature review, Freud noted characteristics of the comic observed by, among others, Jean Paul Richter and Kuno Fischer: that caricature was concerned with revealing concealed ugliness; that joking finds similarity between dissimilar things. He quoted from Richter:

It might be that from aesthetic freedom there might spring a sort of judging released from its usual rules and regulations, which, on account of its origin, I will call a "playful judgement" [...] Freedom produces jokes and jokes produce freedom [...] Joking is merely playing with ideas.⁶

Joking as playing with ideas fits the Ballardian mode, but perhaps also accommodates Wheatley. Freud's concern was to push beyond these theories. He had noted similarities between dream and joke: specifically that the processes of condensation, displacement and indirect representation through which the residue of the day was transformed by the dream-work into the manifest content of dreams were shared by jokes. He also wanted to interrogate the notion of jokes as a kind of play:

Jokes during their development at the stage of play (that is, during the childhood of reason) are able to bring about these pleasurable condensations and that, on the other hand, at higher stages they accomplish the same effect by plunging the joke into the unconscious. For the infantile is the source of the unconscious, and

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Pelican Books, 1976), p. 41.

the unconscious thought-processes are none other than those – the one and only ones – produced in early childhood.⁷

This is particularly useful in assessing Ballard's humour because regression to the infantile is a theme of *High-Rise*: "For the first time since we were three years old what we do makes absolutely no difference," remarks one resident of the building; the gynaecologist (what else?) Pangbourne specialises in "computerised analysis of recorded birth-cries," and as he gains in authority within the building he gives vocal rendition to these birth-cries, training others in uttering them.⁸ *High-Rise* is a long-form joke-work in the dream-work: here we have form and rationale, the abstract setting in which images and archetypes stand, as noted by Amis.

The infantile is incidental to Wheatley's adaptation, barring Charlotte Melville's illegitimate son with Royal, who plays us a sample of a Margaret Thatcher speech at the close of the piece, which seems to invite us to think the hierarchies of the building in terms of the neoliberal economics Thatcher championed. This is the apogee of the periodization in the film and for me it strikes a particularly unfortunate note. Ballard located Thatcher also in his psychoanalytic schema, inclining towards Jung this time:

JGB: I've always admired her enormously. I always found her extremely mysterious and attractive at the same time. I think she exerts a powerful sexual spell, and I'm not alone [...] There are elements of La Belle Dame Sans Merci—the merciless muse, in her. Also the archetype of the –

MP: Medusa.

JGB: Yes, the Medusa. She taps a large number of deep responses which people express in present-day terms. She's the nanny, she's the headmistress, and she's school-marmy as well. I think her appeal goes far beyond . . . it's a very ambiguous appeal. She represents all these sort of half-stages—half-conscious, primordial forces . . . that she certainly tapped.⁹

One suspects that Ballard would have preferred Thatcher as a character within the high rise, a participant in the experiment rather than a contextualising motif. So there is considerable divergence from the source text at the level of what we might want to call latent content.

What kind of humour, then, is the humour of Wheatley's *High-Rise*? Paul de Man, who wrote compellingly on irony, and about whom it has been observed that he conspicuously ignored Freud, argued that irony was co-incident with the novel form; that it relied upon what Baudelaire had described as *dédoublement*, giving the example of a man falling over, and being aware in the same moment of the comic nature of his fall.¹⁰ Its temporality was split, defined by distance. "At the moment that the artistic or philosophical, that is, the language-

⁷ Ibid., p. 227.

⁸ Ballard, *High-Rise*, p. 40, p. 83.

⁹ 'JGB interviewed by Mark Pauline, 1980s,' in V. Vale, ed., *J. G. Ballard: Conversations (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 2005)*, pp. 127-159, p. 134.

¹⁰ See Richard Klein, 'de Man's Resistances: A Contribution to the Future Science of deManology', in Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz and Thomas Keenan, eds., *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp.285-297.

determined, man laughs at himself falling, he is laughing at a mistaken, mystified assumption that he was making about himself.”¹¹

We certainly might think *High-Rise* as a fall narrative – a fall upwards, perhaps, or as a fall fetishized in the slow-motion collision of the jumped-up young surgeon Monroe with a car – and were we to do so, we might observe that Wheatley’s *High-Rise* repeatedly shares with its audience its awareness of that fall: frames it for them in an unambiguous fashion. Baudelaire went on to observe that irony had a tendency to run away with itself, becoming hyperbolic: “irony is unrelieved *vertige*, dizziness to the point of madness.”¹²

In a later lecture de Man picked more closely at irony, discussing Kierkegaard, Schlegel and Benjamin. Working towards a (non)definition of the trope, he observed that “irony consoles and it promises and it excuses,” functions performed by the humour of Wheatley’s *High-Rise* but explicitly disdained in Ballard’s desire for “baleful forces.” De Man also observed that “a spirit of irony pursued to its absolute ends can dissolve everything, in an infinite chain of solvents.”¹³ I can’t help but think that Wheatley’s *High-Rise* speaks to us unconsciously of an anxiety over this dissolution in the universal acid of irony, condensed and displaced into the figure of Laing multiplied *ad infinitum* in a mirrored elevator.

¹¹ Paul de Man, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality,’ in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 187-228, p. 214.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹³ Paul de Man, ‘The Concept of Irony’, in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 163-184, p. 166.