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The Poet of Decay and Psychic Entropy: The Intersection of Surrealism and Science in J. G. Ballard's Fiction

Abstract

Images of decay, both psychological and physical, permeate much of J.G. Ballard's fiction, creating in effect a unique aesthetic that has acquired the eponymous description "ballardian." This imagery, stemming from the surrealist tradition, is more than aesthetic affectation; it is, as this article argues, the manifestation of an eschatological theme underlying much of New Wave science fiction. This article also addresses how scientific discourse, especially references to entropy, and surrealist aesthetics intersect in his novels (*High-Rise* and *The Drowned World*) to provide a metaphor for Ballard's frequent use of decay imagery. Though the surrealist component of his imagination has been well documented, what still invites closer scrutiny are the ideological assumptions linking Ballard's incorporation of surrealism with the work of other surrealists and the way Ballard develops this theme for his own purposes.

Keywords: J. G. Ballard, surrealism, entropy, decay

Both beasts and plants, cursed in the curse of man.
So did the world from the first hour decay.
John Donne, *An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary*

Haim Finkelstein in "Deserts of Vast Eternity" regarded J. G. Ballard as a "poet of decay" (52), whereas Kingsley Amis admiringly described the novelist and short story writer as "a poet of psychic entropy" (Ballard 2014: 206). Both descriptions aptly identify disintegration in its various manifestations as a prevalent theme in Ballard's work. When juxtaposed against the broader tradition of surrealism, this theme reveals itself to be more than an expression of the nihilistic worldview with which Ballard's work would come to be associated, but a continuation of ideas stemming from the work of such surrealists as André Breton. It is well established that New Wave science fiction, of which Ballard is perhaps the

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foremost representative, drew from this tradition,[1] as it drew inspiration from a variety of other established academic and artistic sources in an effort to shore up its uncharacteristically elitist aspiration of elevating science fiction from self-imposed literary exile. The air of surrealism pervading much of Ballard's work cannot be attributed solely to aesthetic affectation, as there are ideological and thematic similarities undergirding these two seemingly distant cultural phenomena. To further develop these similarities, the theme of decay, a mainstay in surrealist aesthetics as well as Ballard's work, will be examined with reference to one of the most prevalent tropes in New Wave SF — entropy.

Decay, whether it takes the form of urban disintegration or biological death, permeates Ballard's fiction, which is replete with corpses, car accidents, catastrophic climate events, violent events, murders, and suicides. There is a tendency to explain Ballard's preoccupation with death in biographical terms, pointing to Ballard's traumatic childhood experiences in war-torn Shanghai.[2] Ballard was never particularly reticent about the effect his childhood experience had on his later fiction, openly discussing this connection in the many interviews he had granted. Though such biographical explanations have their place in literary criticism, it is also important to see that they are part and parcel of a larger tradition, that is surrealism, of which Ballard is a continuator.

Surrealism is notoriously difficult to define or delineate, a difficulty reflected in the infighting among members of various surrealist groups regarding the direction the movement should take or the goals it should have. What further complicates these efforts is that surrealism has, since its inception, infiltrated a wide section of the arts, spilling over to literature, music, film, theatre, and even architecture, where it has taken on distinct, sometimes contradictory, characteristics. Depending on which particular genre is under discussion, a different version of surrealism emerges. Even if, for the sake of argument, we were to approach surrealism as a general movement in culture, we would still encounter such disputes concerning its cultural location, that is, whether it was revolutionary in its aims or merely reactionary in its stance, whether it stemmed from the high arts or drew inspiration from mass culture. Taking into account these difficulties, a tentative attempt should be made to provide at least a working definition of surrealism before proceeding to a reading of Ballard's fiction.

The most basic definition of surrealism, provided by André Breton in his "Manifesto" from 1924, is the following: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak" (14). Influenced by new developments in psychoanalysis, surrealists regarded their work as a means to jolt the viewer from habitual perception and "replac[e] our mundane existence with an appreciation of the marvelous" (Coverly 73). It is this aim of re-enchanting reality that betrays surrealism's romantic roots, but it is romanticism in its revolutionary impulse more than its emotional self-indulgence that best reflects the aims of surrealism. According to Robin Walz, "[t]he goal of surrealism was not simply to create an artistic movement, but to reconfigure human consciousness in objective accordance with this new and constantly changing reality" (Walz 3). This goal, therefore, requires surrealist art to undertake a controlled process of reformulation, in

1 Jeannette Baxter's *J.G Ballard's Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship* (2009) is to date the most exhaustive study of surrealist imagery in Ballard's work, though references to surrealism are scattered throughout the many interviews and essays collected in *Extreme Metaphors: Collected Interviews and Essays* (2014).

2 Though I refrain from using Ballard's biographical circumstances as a key to analyzing his literary output, it must be mentioned that his traumatic childhood in worn-torn Shanghai has received much attention from both critics (e.g. David Ian Paddy's *The Empires of J.G. Ballard* [2015]) and from the author himself in his autobiographical work, *Miracles of Life* (2008).

which previously established perceptual habits, through which we create an image of reality and give form to the protean associations that structure social coherence, are to be dismantled and later reformulated—all in the pursuit of achieving this "objective accordance with … reality". In so doing, surrealist art often delves into the illicit realms of violence and sexuality, i.e. the drives Freud famously described as being repressed by civilization. It moves away from made-man structures towards the organic and primordial, a realm from where the creative potential of the unconscious could be released.

To achieve these goals, surrealists availed themselves of an assemblage of techniques ranging from automatism, fragmentary writing, stream-of-consciousness, to non-linear narratives, all of which have since been utilized by writers who have little or nothing in common with the surrealist movement. These techniques, in their privileging of irrational and spontaneous impulses, naturally lend themselves well to the exploration of imagery that is unstructured, dismantled—images of decay, ruins, and psychological breakdown.

Such aesthetic sensibilities found fertile ground in New Wave science fiction. The case could be made that New Wave SF, which took form in *New Worlds* under the editorship of Michael Moorcock, would not have gained prominence had it not been for Ballard's contributions. Separating himself from Golden Age science fiction writers, who for the most part occupied themselves with escapist fantasies and scientific speculation, Ballard emphasizes in his work the psychological dimension of experience, especially with regard to the effects of technological and urban development. Such subject matter required literary methods and techniques previously shunned by traditional science fiction writers, who eschewed all forms of linguistic experimentalism, let alone avant-garde radicalism, as inimical to the purity of science fiction as a conceptual genre. In search of new artistic resources to refine the staid, though propitious genre of science fiction, New Wave writers looked for inspiration to the works of modernist writers (James Joyce), the Beat Generation (William S. Burroughs), visual arts (especially surrealism and Pop Art), and in cultural changes (especially those stemming from media culture of the Information Age, the 1960s drug culture) in effort to provide what amounted to a generally portentous social commentary on the potentially disastrous consequences of the current trajectory of technological development.

Apart from linguistic innovation, New Wave's apocalyptic pessimism also separated it from American science fiction, which had traditionally offered an encouraging take on technological development and the future in general. This optimism shifted in the 1960s to pessimistic reactionism, given form by the prevailing apprehensiveness about the direction Western culture was taking. Though Ballard's particularly gloomy brand of science fiction came under attack for what Bruce Franklin called its "doomsday mentality" (82), it, argues Baxter, is neither "self-indulgent nor isolated, rather it should be read as an example of an experimental strand of post-war writing (including Alan Burn's *Europe after the Rain* (1966), Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man* (1969), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969)), which responded to historical atrocity through the science fiction genre" (19). This defense is meant to reorient the popular (mis)conception of SF as vapid pulp fiction by suggesting that it is actively responding to serious cultural events. As Luckhurst notes, "for a brief moment, it seemed as if SF might do more than escape the ghetto, becoming instead the privileged mode of cultural representation for its era" (35). However, New Wave SF was a short-lived literary phenomenon, lasting about ten years, though its influence was to be felt beyond British SF, influencing dystopian esthetics in cinema as well as in literature for years to come.

That surrealism is a common point of reference for both Ballard and New Wave fiction writers is attested to by the author in an interview he gave to Jannick Storm in 1968, where he said that "I don't consider myself a science fiction writer in the same sense as Asimov or Arthur C. Clarke are science fiction writers. I regard myself as an SF writer in the way that surrealism is also a scientific art" (17).[3] Though seemingly worlds apart, New Wave science fiction and surrealism share a common goal and a common origin: they both exhibited an irreverently rebellious stance towards mainstream culture and they were both heavily inspired by psychoanalysis, popular culture, and science. In the case of surrealism, as Walz argues in *Pulp Surrealism* "[a]t the founding of their movement, the surrealists drew inspiration from currents of psychological anxiety and social rebellion that ran through certain expressions of mass culture, such as fantastic popular fiction and sensationalist journalism" (3). Popular culture (in mass journalism, newspaper sensationalism and pulp fictions) and surrealism were unlikely bedfellows in a war of attrition against the oppressive cultural conventions and social hierarchies legitimizing the institution of high culture. New Wave science fiction continues this alliance by adopting pop culture aesthetics. Ballard's work brims with pop cultural references, e.g. Marilyn Monroe in the *Atrocity Exhibition*, usually as a means of displaying the deleterious effects of commodification, but also as a way of displaying the sense of ontological dislocation, the impression of uncertainty as to the stability of one's reality. The shift from industrial production to consumer capitalism and the attendant focus on advertising, a much exploited medium for the surrealists, is also a staple in Ballard's fiction, raising questions as to whether reality is merely a mass-induced illusion (see "Subliminal Man") or whether there even is a reality outside one's subjective awareness.

Another similarity between surrealism and Ballard's work has to do with some shared internal paradoxes. On the one hand, surrealism is transgressive in its aggressive challenge to conventions, and, on the other, it appears to be reactionary in its nostalgic insistence on staving off the immediate threat of technological development. In many ways, New Wave science fiction could be seen as the continuation of the Surrealist movement not only because of the extent to which science informed their respective artistic endeavors, but in their shared misgivings concerning the potentially harmful effects of technological development (partly as a result of WWI in the case of Surrealism and WWII in the case of New Wave science fiction). American popular science fiction of the 1950s, dominated by optimism, survived the anxiety brought about by Hiroshima and the H-bomb, filling the pages of such pulp publications as Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* with stories about outer space, spaceships, and alien planets without much mind to psychological veracity or philosophical depth. To Ballard this made little sense:

> It seemed to me that they were ignoring what I felt was the most important area, what I called—and I used the term for the first time seven years ago – 'inner space', which was the meeting ground between the inner world of the mind and the outer world of reality. Inner space you see in the paintings of the surrealists, Max Ernst, Dali, Tanguy, Chirico. (Ballard 2014: 16)

In his reference to "inner space", Ballard was referring to his first editorial, "Which Way to Inner Space?", where he explicitly outlined the direction his literature was to take as distinct from mainstream SF, analogous to the direction taken by surrealists in their privileging of psychological indeterminacy

3 Psychology was not the only scientific source of inspiration for Surrealism. Discoveries made in theoretical science at the time by Bohr, Einstein, and Heisenberg corresponded with the anti-authoritarian emphasis Surrealism placed on relativity, pluralism, and multiple viewpoints.

over the stability of materiality. This marriage of inner space and outer space, i.e. subjective reality and objective reality, is itself a continuation of surrealist aims.

The theme which best draws together Surrealism and Ballard's fiction is that of decay. Ballardian landscapes readily bring to mind empty swimming pools, abandoned buildings and shopping centers being taken over by foliage, refuse strewn alongside motorways, derelict monuments to architectural modernity. Such images and motifs had already been on display in the Surrealist Exposition of 1938, organized by André Breton and Paul Éluard, with Marcel Duchamp as its curator. Exhibited there were works by Salvador Dali, Giorgio de Chirico, Paul Klee, Man Ray, Pablo Picasso, and Max Ernst, and Wolfgang Paalen. What accounts for their fascination with such imagery is an underlying belief in the fickleness of all conceptual structures based on rationality, whether they be social (civilization) or personal (identity). Decay represents the inevitable conclusion of a process of gradual disenchantment with such structures. Salvador Dali's *Rainy Taxi* (also known as *Mannequin Rotting in a Taxi-Cab*) showed an ivy-laced car with mannequins sprayed with water. Cadaverous mannequins were a recurrent motif in this exhibition, some dressed in strange and provocative attire. René Magritte's *Remembrance of a Journey* from 1951 presents everyday objects fossilized in stone, reminiscent of the ossified landscapes we find in Ballard's *Drought.* Wolfgang Paalen's installation called *Avant La Mare* consisted of an artificial pond with water, real water lilies and reeds, beneath Duchamp's ceiling of empty coal sacks. Such imagery can be found in Ballard's *The Drowned World*. Imagery of nature overtaking civilization can also be found on the cover of *Minotaure,* which published Benjamin Peret's photograph of a locomotive, a then powerful symbol of the machine age, immobilized by the jungle, entitled "La nature dévore le progrès et le dépassé". The idea of nature reclaiming dominion, thereby removing traces of human activity, is at the heart of Ballard's most important work.

Though the word "decay" has biological connotations, we should not limit ourselves to that narrow semantic field. Disintegration of conceptual frameworks which delineate our perception, disintegration of ideological determinants which structure our belief systems, and suspension of rationality as a mode of understanding are all fundamental ideological trajectories of surrealism. These movements towards the ineffable and incoherent entail the decomposition and decay of quotidian reality. In this vein, Freudian and Jungian interpretations have been exhaustively applied to both surrealism and Ballard, making use mostly of Freud's death drive and Jung's theory of individuation, which calls for a thorough disintegration of conscious identity.

New Wave SF expanded this theme of decay by way of a more scientific explanation, one that was more in line with the traditional roots of the genre. The Second Law of Thermodynamics states that in any closed system, such as the universe (or by extension a high-rise, a gated community), the transfer of energy always results in loss, leading to entropy, and eventually to the "heat death of the universe". In the 1960s, this technical term of entropy made its way to literature, where it became a fashionable term denoting the inevitable collapse of all order into chaos. This theme was variously used as an analogue to the perceived moral and social decomposition of civilization in general.[4] Rowland Wymer in his study of Ballard's "The Voices of Time" explains that this Law was so heavily used by Ballard and other science fiction writers, as

4 Some of the major authors who have used the concept of entropy include Asimov ("The Last Question") Philip K. Dick, J. G. Ballard, Pamela Zoline, Thomas M. Disch, Barry N. Malzberg, Robert Silvergerg, Norman Spingrad and James Tiptree Jr., Brian W. Aldiss. Outside of science fiction, Thomas Pynchon used images of entropy many times, especially in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Crying of Lot 49*.

"it acted as 'hard science' counterweight to the myths of progress which underpin a good deal of popular SF" (21). Entropy as a scientific explanation for inevitable decay served to substantiate the surrealist tropes revolving around decay and ruination.

Decay has various aesthetic manifestations in Ballard's work: we find organic imagery (e.g. *Drowned World*); there is architectural ruination (e.g. *High-Rise*, *Concrete Island*), as well as psychological disintegration (e.g. "The Enormous Room", "Subliminal Man"). The main cause of decay and ruination, whether it be psychological or physical, is however the same: entropy, a process outside our control, which nonetheless determines our fate. Fredric Jameson remarked that entropy finds expression even in the experience of the fall of the British Empire:

> Ballard's work is suggestive in the way in which he translates both physical and moral dissolution into the great ideological myth of entropy, in which the historic collapse of the British Empire is projected outwards into some immense cosmic deceleration of the universe itself as well as of its molecular building blocks. (Jameson 269)

However, Ballard warns us not to reduce entropy in his work to a representation of a nihilistic collapse of all order. Amis's description of Ballard as a "poet of psychic entropy" was predicated on the belief that his subject matter was psychological decay analogous to the loss of energy that occurs in physical systems. Ballard disagreed with this contention: "It's a misreading to assume that because my work is populated by abandoned hotels, drained swimming pools, empty nightclubs, deserted airfields and the like, I am celebrating the run-down of a previous psychological and social order. I am not. What I am interested in doing is using these materials as the building blocks of a new order" (Ballard 2014: 206). Ballard rejects the nihilistic worldview with which he is commonly associated by emphasizing a constructive goal of disintegration. At this point it should be clear that the link between surrealism and Ballard's work is not to be located exclusively in the many aesthetic similarities. There is also an ideological component to this similarity, one that resonates throughout Ballard's work as a reflection of the revolt surrealists staged against middle-class conformity and habitual existence, a rejection of an oppressive order so that another, new order, can take shape in its stead.

What follows is an overview of two selected works, *The Drowned World* (1962) and *High-Rise* (1975), in which decay and entropy merge. *The Drowned World* is part of what is now considered Ballard's disaster quartet, which dealt with the catastrophic impact of climate change on the survival of mankind (a genre that today is referred to as cli-fi). The other three novels include *The Drought* (1964), *The Wind from Nowhere* (1961), and *The Crystal World* (1966). In these works we see a more organic manifestation of decay, with the natural environment taking center stage in entropic disintegration. Much like in *High-Rise*, this novel also describes a synergetic relationship between the environmental events and the psychological state of the characters.

The Drowned World begins with a description of the apocalyptic demise of life on earth as a result of solar flares, which have raised temperatures, rendering most of the earth inhospitable to life. Melting ice caps have raised ocean levels, forcing mass migration towards the poles, where there is still land. Civilizations begin their inevitable decline, as cities become "beleaguered citadels, hemmed by enormous dykes and disintegrated by panic and despair" (Ballard 2012a: 32). Humans along with other mammals fight for survival in a world where amphibian life, considerably lower on the evolutionary ladder, is reasserting its dominance. Devolution, as the opposite of progress, begins to assert itself in the mind of the protagonist, Kerans, who is on a mission to find what he refers to as the "archaic" sun representing

"in symbolic terms, a quest for absolute, authentic being, for an ontological Eden" (Stephenson 49). Commenting on this work in his interview with Peter Rønnov-Jessen, Ballard said that Kerans "is looking for the source of things, the source of himself, moving down his own spinal column, realizing that the closer he gets to the source the less there is of him" (Ballard 2014: 203), further adding that "by the time you go back to the sources of your being in the amniotic soup, the primal sea, of course you find the truth about yourself but you lose your individuality by merging into the great undifferentiated source of life" (Ballard 2014: 203). At the beginning of the novel, Kerans is still fully engaged in the scientific mission of which he is a member, though there are already signs of his impending departure from social ties, as he begins to discern "a personality that had remained latent during his previous adult life" (Ballard 2012a: 14). He proceeds to succumb to the decay and entropic pull of his environment, as he makes his way south, inevitably towards his death, instead of north, towards the last bastion of civilization.

As is the case with all of Ballard's work, his detailed account of the environment serves as a means of projecting the "inner space" of the protagonists. As the environment is slowly falling prey to the catastrophic effects of the solar phenomenon, the remaining inhabitants begin experiencing strange dreams as well as the "biological withdrawal of all animal forms about to undergo a major metamorphosis" (Ballard 2012a: 25). The protagonists revert to a more primal disposition, making it possible for them to survive in this retrogressive environment; in this case the metaphor of submersion is especially evocative in how the world of civilization is slowly being consumed by natural forces, thus enabling a return to Eden. The world of civilization and rationalism is slowly receding, as "[m]onuments to Western systems of chronology, linearity and order, the clocks stand limp and impotent" (Baxter 23). The submerged and broken clocks are in themselves reminiscent of Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*, a point that was developed by Baxter (24). Further references to a submerged world, a strong psychoanalytical reference to the unconscious, are scattered throughout the text:

> Like an immense putrescent sore, the jungle lay exposed below the open hatchway of the helicopter. Giant groves of gymnosperms stretched in dense clumps along the rooftops of the submerged buildings, smothering the white rectangular outlines. Here and there an old concrete water tower protruded from the morass, or the remains of makeshift jetty still floated beside the hulk of a collapsing office block, overgrown with feathery acacias and flowering tamarisks. . . . Everywhere silt encroached, shoring itself in huge banks against a railway viaduct or crescent of offices, oozing through a submerged arcade like the fetid contents of some latter-day Cloaca Maxima. (Ballard 2012a: 66)

This imagery brings to mind the previously-mentioned Surrealist Exhibition of 1938, which in a like manner staged the encroachment of the fluid and inhuman on the concrete and recognizable. The resulting interstitial space, or what Ballard refers to as a "zone of transit," is a constitutive element of surrealism. Kerans reflects on "what zone of transit he himself was entering, sure that his own withdrawal was symptomatic not of a dormant schizophrenia, but of a careful preparation for a radically new environment, with its own internal landscape and logic, where old categories of thought would merely be an encumbrance" (Ballard 2012a: 25). The apocalypse that is unfolding in the novel is seen more in terms of paving the way for a new type of existence, one where "the terrestrial and psychic landscapes were now indistinguishable" (Ballard 2012a: 89). In order for this merging to be achieved what must first happen is a withering away of all that is solid. When discussing surrealist imagery in Ballard's work, critics tend to take stock of all the various references to surrealist works of art with which his books abound; however, it

is rather in the underlying theme of disintegration and decay, a theme which puts forward a parallax view of progress as devolution, that Ballard's work most fully embraces the surrealist movement.

High-Rise belongs to what Brigg's called Ballard's "urban disaster trilogy" (the other two novels include *Crash* and *Concrete Island*), which shifts attention to the dystopian possibilities of urban spaces and modern architecture. It depicts the chaotic internal decline of a modern high-rise from the points of view of three characters, each representing a specific social class: Robert Laing (middle class), Richard Wilder (lower class) and Anthony Royal (upper class). Though this gradual disintegration of the high-rise, along with its upper class residents, can be seen as reflecting the social breakdown of modern society in general and specifically as a commentary on "the social ills that overtook a variety of council estates and tower blocks throughout the late 1970s" (Duff 66), we will continue tracing the importance of the theme of decay. This theme overtly manifest itself in the gradual devolution of the social structure in the eponymous high rise, where within the walls of what at first appears to be a modern building occupied by law-abiding citizens social norms and civilizational structures begin to disintegrate, giving way to rampant animalistic behavior, tribal warfare, incest, and cannibalism. "A continuous decline had been taking place for some time, a steady erosion of standards that affected not only the apartment, but his [Laing's] own personal habits and hygiene" (Ballard 2012b: 122). No explanation for this turn of events is given other than fleeting remarks about "trivial disputes over the faulty elevators and air-conditioning, inexplicable electric failures, noise, competition for parking space" (Ballard 2013b: 25), inciting frustration among the residents, eventually leading to riots. Ballard refrains from providing any direct rationale as to the cause of this gradual disintegration of social standards. Furthermore, the matter-of-fact manner in which these events are presented reinforces their inevitability. This collapse of the moral structure propping up civilization takes place only inside the building, while its tenants maintain an outward appearance of normality as they leave for work every day. One possible interpretive perspective holds that the architecture responsible for the psychological consequences, with the high-rise "announc[ing] the failure of the promise inherent in the projects of classical modernism" (Spurr 226); however, such considerations are beyond the scope of this article.

With the veneer of socially-accepted behavior stripped, the tenants of the high-rise begin to manifest their latent savagery, propensity to violence and sex, much in the vein of surrealist iconoclastic exhibitions. The chaotic disarray on display in the Surrealist Exhibition of 1938 is reimagined in the high-rise: the man-made environment collapsing on itself, water leaking from the walls, fire consuming the rooms, corpses like mannequins strewn in the hallways, the high-rise alive with the nervous energy of people on the brink of a new experience. Also, the "recurrent imagery of darkness and obscurity", which Stephenson in line with his psychoanalytical approach views as "suggesting the encroaching mental and moral darkness of the inhabitants of the building" (83), is also evocative of a departure from rational thought, from the enlightenment toward a more primal experience of reality very much in line with the precepts of surrealist imagination. This is also found in the Exhibition of 1938, where "spectators walked along this dubious parade of provocative 'women' [mannequins] scanning each one with the hand-held torches that were provided as the only light source". The experience of darkness was fundamental to an experience devoid of familiar landmarks, requiring a more introspective approach freed from the constraints of rational thought.

This is why the collapse and internal anarchy in the high-rise is never presented in an unequivocally negatively light; the residents willingly return to this environment after work, they appear to be invested

in the process taking place in alternate reality of the high-rise. It would seem that external collapse of the building itself is reflected by the internal collapse of inhibitions, moral and societal rules. Much like in *Drowned World*, the changes taking place in *High-Rise* are only apocalyptic on the surface, presented as part of a larger process of transformation that goes beyond external manifestation—both natural and architectural. The conditions achieved as a result of this devolution are referred to as "new-found freedom" (Ballard 2012b: 206) and "new world" (Ballard 2012b: 207). The breakdown of the building and the social fabric are related insofar as they are manifestations of an underlying—entropic—process. This is brought together in the building being represented in terms of anthropomorphic characteristics with such descriptions as: "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" (Ballard 2012b: 51). Entropy does not distinguish between living matter and dead matter: all are subject to the same laws of physics. The end result of entropic decay is inevitably death, the end of things, which Ballard reframes in his fiction as a metaphysical break with material reality—not so much an end as a transmutation.

When viewed in the context of surrealism and entropy, decay takes on a more complex aesthetic dimension. The environmental decay presented in the two discussed works, although characterized by a certain apocalyptic inevitability, nonetheless holds a redemptive quality. Rather than presenting decay teleologically, that is, as directed towards an end, Ballard returns to the etymological meaning of apocalypse, which is revelation. There is in his work, as well as in the artistic endeavors of the surrealists, a Platonic assumption that decay and disintegration are part of a necessary process of stripping perception of pretenses and illusions, thereby revealing what Ballard referred to in an interview quoted earlier as "the building blocks of a new order" (Ballard 2014: 206). It is therefore both a revolutionary and a revelatory process that leads to the transcendence of quotidian reality. Such disturbances in the coherence of social narratives defining a sense of commonality and integration with other people provide a rupture through which a Ballardian protagonist is shown to achieve a glimpse of what lies beyond the self.

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