

Mark Fisher

'Revolt of the elites'

What really happened in the 1970s? The dominant narratives about the decade tell of entropy and exhaustion. In the UK, the propaganda that the Saatchis produced for the Conservative Party in 1979 has long provided what has amounted to the 'official' story of what happened in the decade. The notorious imagery of endless queues of the unemployed, of unburied bodies and uncollected rubbish, fixed a memory of the 1970s as a time of inevitable collapse. The Saatchis – whose own rise heralded the newly crucial role that libidinal and reality engineering would play for neoliberal capitalism – popularised what would soon become folk-political 'common sense': social democracy was unsustainable, only unfettered capitalism is realistic.

Some of the most important recent works of cultural history (in the UK, Andy Beckett's *When the Lights Went Out* (2009) and John Medhurst's *That Option No Longer Exists 1974–76* (2014); in the US, Jefferson Cowie's *Stayin' Alive: The Seventies and the Last Days of the Working Class* (2010), Penny Lewis's *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiviet Movement as Myth and Memory* (2013) and Carl Freedman's *The Age of Nixon: A Study in Power* (2012)) have not only challenged the right's story; they have begun the crucial work of actively constructing new narratives and countermemories. In the UK, however, perhaps the most influential rewriting of the popular understanding of the 1970s has come out of the revelations about Jimmy Savile. These have exposed a political, media and entertainment establishment whose systemic abuses put capitalist realism's representational protocols under intolerable stress.

It is here that we can turn to Ben Wheatley and Amy Jump's extraordinarily timely adaptation of J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise*. The commonplace has it that SF's projections of the future tell us more about the present from which the fiction emerged than any actual future. Wheatley and Jump's approach to Ballard's novel inverts this: they tell us about our present by returning to the past, and their success suggests that a turn to the near-past might now be a more fruitful resource for science fiction than a near-future which has seemed all used up for some time now. Wheatley and Jump have not updated Ballard's novel; rather they have set it in a fantasmatic 1970s, a redreamed 1970s. In doing so, Wheatley and Jump have escaped the impasses that have locked so much twenty-first century culture into pastiche and disavowed repetition, and returned to the popular modernism exemplified by Ballard and his *New Worlds* contemporaries.

From the sixties until 1973, Ballard had gone through a series of popular modernist styles: the elaborate Conradian cadences of *The Drowned World*; the coolly disturbing quasi-scientific neutral tone of *The Atrocity Exhibition*; the oneritic traumatic geography of *Crash*, perhaps his last extended exercise in stylistic experimentation. By the time *High-Rise* was published in 1975, Ballard had adopted the functional, even perfunctory, prose style that he would retain for the rest of the career. The interest of *High-Rise* lies not in its literary texture, nor in any formal innovation, but in its concept, its fictionalising of a social-libidinal apparatus. As such, and in common with many of the novels Ballard wrote since the mid-1970s, *High-Rise* reads like a film treatment, awaiting the right directors and screenwriters.

According to Andreas Killen's *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol and the Birth of Post-Sixties America*, the year 1973 was a threshold moment, akin to the change in human character that Virginia Woolf said happened some time in December 1910. Killen convincingly makes the case that it was in 1973 – the year of Watergate and of the first reality TV show – that the promises of the sixties finally soured, and the world in which we still live first emerged. The pioneers of this new age were Warhol and Nixon – Warhol, who sublated outsider-awkwardness into cool camp, his blank persona a 24/7 performance art of poised ambivalence, and Nixon, who had transformed his own awkwardness into an enduring populist appeal, and whose paranoia and duplicity set the tone for the Hobbesian politics of the neoliberal era. Warhol and Nixon were famously obsessed with taping, themselves and others, a practice that becomes an obsession of *High-Rise's* Richard Wilder. Wilder's weaponised wielding of his cine-camera, his commitment to recording his own psychic 'journey', anticipates by some thirty years some of the dominant modes of twenty-first century TV. Like everyone else



High-Rise: Richard Wilder (Luke Evans) and his weaponised cine-camera. Photo by Aidan

Monaghan courtesy of StudioCanal / Hanway.

in the high-rise, Wilder already belongs to Tom Wolfe's 'Me Decade' – although it would turn out to be less a decade than a thirty-year era – MyTime? – only now showing signs of coming to a close.

As Christopher Lasch drew out in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) and *The Minimal Self* (1984) – the latter's analysis of the 'flickering world of commodities' drawing extensively on Ballard – the narcissism attributed to the 1970s was more complicated than it first appeared. Although narcissism certainly draws upon grandiose fantasies of self-sufficiency from early infancy, the condition is defined by a self unable to determine its own outlines. Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection because he does not recognise it is his own image. In line with the psychedelic argot of the sixties, Ballard and the other *New Worlds* writers talked about exploring the terra incognita of 'inner space'. But according to Jean Baudrillard – an admirer of both Ballard and Warhol, and perhaps the thinker who showed most fidelity to their insights – it is the very distinction between inner and outer, between private and public which can no longer be sustained in late capitalism's ecstasy of communication. As Baudrillard observed as long ago as *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), the injunction to participate, to transcend the spectacle by producing our own media content, would not challenge the logic of media but deeply embed it. Devoid of any telos beyond its own circulation, the communicative drive becomes a kind of psychic carcinogen, mutating consciousness and sociality so that they all came to instantiate the *promotional form* – a form that has long since superseded the commodity form.

In the film, the children find themselves abandoned by parents on an endless self-discovery trip – a 'journey' that leads them only deeper into a narcissism that increasingly resembles schizophrenia (in his original essay on narcissism, Freud had in fact drawn parallels between narcissism and schizophrenia). An exchange between a mother and her now feral child – one of many mordantly hilarious moments of dialogue in the film – sees the parent asking the child to look after his brother. 'Why?' the child responds with the icy clarity of the desocialised, 'you made him.'

It doesn't really need the explicit invocation of Margaret Thatcher at the end of the film to underscore the political significance of all this. As a semi-outsider in relation to the English bourgeoisie, and as someone who saw how fragile expat colonial politesse was, Ballard's work has always been closely attuned to the sublimated violence, the surrealistic ritualisation, as well as the precariousness, of English bourgeois culture. Jump and Wheatley have made this central to their adaptation of *High-Rise*. Filmed like some combination of a Helmut Newton photo shoot and the Saatchis' party political broadcasts of the late 1970s, their *High-Rise* anatomises the insouciant savagery of the English bourgeoisie like nothing since Lindsay Anderson's *If ...* (1968). Inevitably, the film is in dialogue with another popular modernist precursor, Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange* (1972). *Clockwork*

Orange traced back the violence that erupted in sixties and seventies English society to proletarian gangs threatening the bourgeois home. The Soviet-slang-speaking droog was of course a conflation produced by bourgeois fantasy (the left might actually have been much more successful if it had been capable of synthesising the energies of Pop, Soviet modernism and street gang culture in the milk bars of the early seventies). Jump and Wheatley reverse Burgess and Kubrick's emphasis: the real sources of violence in English society, especially since the 1970s, lie with the deadly psychopathologies of the bourgeoisie. Their *High-Rise* recognises that the neoliberal era has been what Lasch called 'a revolt of the elites' – a flight from any pretence of *noblesse oblige* and into an embrace of Sadean self-advancement.

On the face of it, figures like Nixon, Reagan and Thatcher belonged to the party of the superego – they stood *against* libido, and specifically against the libidinal outpourings of the counterculture, which they promised to dam. Yet the superego throbs with its own libidinal pulses, and – as the Savile investigations are beginning to disclose – the problem for neocon/neoliberal reaction was not libido as such, but the failure to maintain a certain duplicity. What appalled the reactionary right was the new visibility, the public shamelessness, of countercultural libido. In *The Age of Nixon*, Freedman explains how the disgraced president combined anality (the same 'profound anality' that Ballard attributes to Reagan in *The Atrocity Exhibition ...*) with a vicious *ressentiment* (directed against practically everyone). There are eerie parallels with Margaret Thatcher, who shared Nixon's background (they were both children of shopkeepers, the archetypal petit-bourgeois profession), his ferocious work ethic, and his loathing of sleep. Like Reagan after him, Nixon's restoration of the Father (against the various Promethean/ parricidal challenges of the counterculture) did not simply involve a return to an older form of symbolic authority. Nixon's duplicity returned to, and insisted upon, the primordial doubleness of the psychoanalytic Father: *Père Jouissance*, the father who enjoys without limits, is only the obscene underside of the solemn law-giver and patriarch. (Just as Jimmy Savile's sadistic assaults were cloaked by his persona as charity fund-raiser extraordinaire.) The reactionary political formation that Nixon embodied, and which was if anything ultimately strengthened by Watergate, was about restoring the rights of *Père Jouissance* at least as much as it was about restoring law and order. From now on, the New Right's wink to their allies in the petit-bourgeoisie suggested, it will be law and order for the lower orders, but a jubilee-without-end for us, a bonfire of the regulatory apparatuses, a glorious shedding of all obligations to the poor and the vulnerable.

The masses have got above themselves – time to put them back in their place. This was the rallying cry that brought together the disparate forces of reaction whose alliance has brought remarkable success for capital and its preferred class since the 1970s – a success that perhaps only Nixon, Reagan and Thatcher would have

dreamed of at the end of the sixties. The bohemia that saw the children of the bourgeoisie defecting from their class destiny en masse has been remorselessly destroyed. If 'we are all middle class', it is only because the upstart working-class culture that fed into popular modernism has been forcibly suppressed. Now, everyone is an entrepreneur not because they want to be, but because they have no choice. There is no agency anyone can count on to look after them. Business leaders now enjoy the acclaim once reserved for rock stars. Meanwhile, the most successful rock groups went to private school, their music functioning much like the chamber muzak playing in the background of the party in the high-rise, an accompaniment to supine shopping and capital accumulation. Moguls once again rule the recording industry. Grinning neoliberal historians cheerfully tell us that the Victorian era never ended, as if the steampunk montage of iPhones, food banks and homilies to hard work is something we should be glad about.

The high-rise is the image of a bourgeois insularity so total that the poor no longer even register in it, even as objects of loathing. The inhabitants are concerned only with each other, their former obligations to those outside forgotten as they fall into a fugue of compulsive competitiveness – sociality reduced to a baboonery plus status symbols. An interminable lust after what those on the level above possess is the inevitable flipside of an equally endless struggle to protect from the grasping hands of those below the signs and territory one has acquired. This world without apparent solidarity, the callousness and brutality of the English boarding school liberated from any masters, is the fantasy space of the new bourgeoisie – a fantasy space which has served as the template for the neoliberal remodelling of actual social relations.

Once the violence really starts, some of the inhabitants of the high-rise wonder why the police ever come to the development. But their naïveté betrays their origins on the lower levels of the building. These neophytes, now locked in a territorial and semiotic struggle for status with the established superstar architects, film stars and big-name consultants who occupy the top levels of the building, initially still believe in something like Law. Those at the top, relishing the gloves-off battle with the new upstarts from the lower floors, understand that there is one rule for inside the high-rise, one rule for those outside it. The police in *High-Rise* don't investigate the rioting and the homicides in the exclusive tower block, just as – in our world – they don't look too deeply into accusations of ruling-class paedophilia, or arrest any bankers after the financial crisis of 2008. Instead, the party just carries on behind closed doors. There is, after all, a form of solidarity amongst the residents. Anything goes in the high-rise, provided the outside isn't alerted.

In exposing the libidinal basis of the neoliberal reaction, *High-Rise* has something in common with Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). However, the inhabitants of the high-rise do not indulge in the gaucheries which mark out Jordan Belfort as a tasteless arriviste. They do it the English way:

appearances are always to be maintained, at least to some extent. Some of the naïfs still expect the high-rise's resident newsreader to blurt out something about what is happening in the building when he is reading the news. But he doesn't falter. The news is always elsewhere. Those inside the high-rise must be allowed to destroy themselves in their own way.