

High-Rise: A film version of J.G. Ballard's novel

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Directed by Ben Wheatley; written by Amy Jump, based on the novel by J. G. Ballard

Directed by Ben Wheatley, *High-Rise* is an adaptation of the 1975 novel by J. G. Ballard. Ballard is associated with “dystopian” science fiction, although “science fiction” is something of a misnomer. For the most part, Ballard drew out of present social and technological developments some of their most extreme and even dire implications (automobile crashes and celebrity culture in *Crash*, highway design and modern isolation in *Concrete Island*, etc.).

Like Ballard's novel, the film (also set in the mid-1970s) begins with its central character, Dr. Robert Laing (Tom Hiddleston), calmly sitting on the balcony of his 25th floor apartment eating roast dog, his appearance and bloodstained clothing suggesting that he has passed through traumatic events.

We then return in time three months. Laing, who teaches at a medical school, moves into the exclusive, 40-story tower block located a few miles from the center of London. He begins a relationship with Charlotte (Sienna Miller), a single mother with a son. He also befriends Richard Wilder (Luke Evans), a rough-and-tumble documentary filmmaker, and his pregnant wife, Helen (Elizabeth Moss).

Tensions emerge between those who live on the lower floor, like the Wilders, and the residents of the high-rise's upper reaches, including the building's architect, Anthony Royal (Jeremy Irons) and his wife, Ann (Keeley Hawes), actress Jane Sheridan (Sienna Guillory), a television news anchor, Cosgrove (Peter Ferdinando) and a gynecologist, Pangbourne (James Purefoy). One of the first confrontations occurs when the “upper floors” attempt to ban children, whose families mostly live toward the bottom of the structure, from using the swimming pool.

Laing attends a party on the 40th floor, where the Royals maintain an opulent roof garden and even keep a horse. However, the event turns out to be an 18th century costume party, and some of the guests, including one of Laing's students, Munrow (Augustus Prew), ridicule his ordinary dress. Laing revenges himself on Munrow soon after when

he informs the latter, falsely, that a brain scan has turned up a problem.

Life in the high-rise rapidly descends into chaos and even madness. The garbage chutes become blocked, little or no water comes out of the tap, the supermarket runs short of food. Power outages darken entire parts of the building. Violence erupts, along with alcohol-fueled, orgiastic parties and other kinds of desperate behavior. The residents organize themselves into gangs related to their respective positions within the building's pecking order.

The elite few on the top floors identify Wilder as a leading threat and order Laing to lobotomize him, and threaten Laing's life when he refuses. Wilder, for his part, undertakes to avenge himself on his enemies, real or imagined. The police are kept out by Royal's bland assurances.

Things go from horrible to even more horrible. The corpses pile up, along with the refuse, and Laing more or less loses his mind.

The early portions of Wheatley's *High-Rise* are coherent, if not inspired. One is intrigued by the architecture and workings of the wondrous building, a “crucible of change,” in Royal's words. There are possibilities here—for social criticism, for analysis of the 1970s and its convulsive changes, for a look at certain human types. The costume party is the film's most effectively done scene. It successfully brings out the peculiar nastiness of British upper middle-class snobbery and makes us feel the sting of Laing's humiliation.

Ballard's novel has many internal contradictions, but it depends on the appearance of startling and gradually more menacing events and facts, often on the edges of the action, for its effect. And that effect, dark as it grows, is often dryly quasi-comical. The influence of surrealism on Ballard is obvious. But his precise, well-punctuated approach is entirely absent in Wheatley's heavy-handed, all too literal film. On more than one occasion, the filmmakers represent the building's and its residents' transformation by the lazy method of short, wordless sequences. We are suddenly,

inexplicably, plunged into an inferno almost from one moment to the next. It is not at all clear why people are behaving as they are, or the explanations are simplistic.

High-Rise, the film, tends to make Wilder into a sort of angry, young working-class man. In an interview, for example, Luke Evans, who plays the part, explains that he “related to him” because of his own Welsh, working-class background. He describes Wilder as someone “living through the beginning of the Thatcher reign,” and like members of Evans’s family, having “a chip on [his] shoulder.” This does not make any sense. Wilder may have relatively humble origins, but he is a television documentarian.

The “high-rise” in question is a luxury condominium, including its lower floors. Ballard is explicit: “The two thousand tenants formed a virtually homogeneous collection of well-to-do professional people—lawyers, doctors, tax consultants, senior academics and advertising executives, along with a smaller group of airline pilots, film-industry technicians and trios of air-hostesses sharing apartments.”

The novel is most insightful and accurate, frankly, in so far as it concerns the extremely bitter struggle for privilege and status *within* those middle-class layers. Ballard’s social antennae were working to that degree: one can reasonably argue that he was registering, perhaps intuitively, the drift toward self-involvement and hedonism of portions of the petty bourgeoisie by the mid-1970s, those who would help Margaret Thatcher come to power a few years later.

He writes, for example, that Laing soon recognized “the extraordinary number of thinly veiled antagonisms around him. The high-rise had a second life of its own ... never far below the froth of professional gossip was a hard mantle of personal rivalry. At times he felt that they were all waiting for someone to make a serious mistake.”

When Laing meets Charlotte in the novel, he invites her to a meal in the building’s restaurant, “but as they sat down at the table she said pointedly, ‘Look, I only want to talk about myself.’”

The social “polarization” of the building in Ballard’s book is real, but it involves the efforts of the relatively privileged to gain more privileges and strengthen their positions vis-à-vis those just beneath them on the social ladder: “Laing had noticed that he and his fellow tenants were far more tolerant of any noise or nuisance from the floors above than they were from those below them.”

As for the “rebellion” of Wilder and his allies against “the discreet oligarchy of minor tycoons and entrepreneurs, television actresses and careerist academics, with their high-speed elevators and superior services, their carpeted staircases,” the former had little chance of success, writes Ballard. Why? “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 first 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.” This is well expressed.

Ballard is an odd figure, a respectable middle-class Briton, who lived in the suburbs for half a century, but who admired surrealism and William S. Burroughs enormously and famously penned a short work, “Why I Want to F*** Ronald Reagan,” published as a pamphlet in 1968 (and later subject to censorship). Apparently, he changed his mind about Reagan as the years went by and also later claimed to believe “in the mysterious beauty of Margaret Thatcher,” in his own words, and “expressed a fervent wish to have American nuclear missiles stationed at the bottom of his garden in Shepperton,” according to *The Spectator*.

Above all perhaps, Ballard, as that last-named publication understatedly suggested, was “a little pessimistic about the human condition.” In any case, his concisely written, somewhat chilly works—at least some of the earlier ones—have a genuine, modest appeal.

Chilliness is one thing, gratuitous foulness is another. The Wheatley-Jump adaptation of *High-Rise* renders nearly everyone as deliberately detestable as possible. It grows wearying to be in the company of these characters.

Hiddleston holds our attention even when things begin to fall apart. Irons too is a lifeline the viewer clings to. But, in the end, even intelligent and very human actors cannot save *High-Rise*, whose last hour is a near-complete disaster. One feels that the director and screenwriter, above all else, are simply way over their heads.



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