Adaptations: High Rise

Discussion Points:

• The filmmakers have used the device of an audible narration in the film, this does not always work in film, do you think it works in this instance? Is Laing a reliable narrator?
• The story when first published was science fiction, why do you think it resonated so much with the filmmakers today?
• Director Ben Wheatley decided to make the character of Richard Wilder Welsh and although it is not specified in the novel, the actor Luke Evans had prepared a cockney accent. What difference do you think it makes with this choice?
• What significance should we place on the characters’ names in High Rise, particularly the character Robert Laing and Royal?
• Chris Hall stated in the Inner Space discussion at the British Library that “In Ballardian space characters become the building they inhabit” and Ballard himself said “architecture is a stage set” how would you agree that this is the case with High Rise?
• “Whilst the 20th century was mediated through the car, the 21st century will be mediated through the home... in 100 years people will be so immersed in their own private worlds that social contact will be absent... (leading) to a world with no human emotions or values.” How does this statement by Ballard impact your reading of the film?

For further info, you may find the Guardian Reading Group thread useful.
http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/mar/02/jg-ballard-high-rise-march-reading-group#comment-70013394
Why JG Ballard’s High-Rise takes dystopian science fiction to a new level
by Chris Hall
http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/03/jg-ballards-high-rise-takes-dystopian-science-fiction-to-a-new-level

Whether mazes, blocks or bunkers, Ballard was drawn to the psychology of enclosed, brutal environments. This inner space, rather than outer space, was his SF realm. JG Ballard’s High-Rise, published 40 years ago and soon to be seen on cinema screens in a film adaptation directed by Ben Wheatley, begins with one of the most arresting first sentences in 20th-century literature: “Later, as he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous three months.”

High-Rise is the final part of a quartet of novels – the first three are The Atrocity Exhibition (1970), Crash (1973) and Concrete Island (1974) – with each book seeded in the previous one. Thematically High-Rise follows on from Concrete Island with its typically Ballardian hypothesis: “Can we overcome fear, hunger, isolation, and find the courage and cunning to defeat anything that the elements can throw at us?” What links all of them is the exploration of gated communities, physical and psychological, a theme that is suggestive of Ballard’s childhood experiences interned by the Japanese in a prisoner-of-war camp on the outskirts of Shanghai in the 1940s. It was, he always claimed, an experience he enjoyed.

The built environment is not a backdrop, rather it is integral and distinctive in its recurring imagery – from abandoned runways, to curvilinear flyovers and those endlessly mysterious drained swimming pools. Perhaps more than any other writer, he focused on his characters’ physical surroundings and the effects they had on their psyches. Ballard, who died in 2009, was also interested in the latent content of buildings, what they represented psychologically. Or, as he once obliquely put it, “does the angle between two walls have a happy ending?” – by which he meant that we project narrative on to external reality, that the imagination remakes the world. In Ballard’s fiction, nothing is taken at face value.

In High-Rise and Concrete Island especially, Ballard examines the flip side to what he called the “overlit realm ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography” that The Atrocity Exhibition and Crash mapped out. Under-imagined or liminal spaces, such as multi-storey car parks and motorway flyovers, act as metaphors for the parts of ourselves that we ignore or are unaware
of. His characters are often forced to assess the physical surroundings and, by extension, themselves rather than to take them for granted.

Ballardian space – what he called “inner space” to differentiate it from the science fiction that concerned itself with distant planets and space rockets – is in fact a fusion of inner and outer space. There is no “out there” totally separate from his characters; just as there is no exclusively private, isolated inner life. His most psychologically fulfilled characters look to transcend their physical surroundings, however hostile, by embracing them.

The obsessive manner in which Ballard came to use the built environment in this way began with his short story “The Terminal Beach” in 1964, in which a man called Traven finds himself on an abandoned atomic testing site on a Pacific atoll after his wife and young son have died in a car crash. The abstract lexicon in the story evokes a prison – there are mazes, blocks, bunkers, cells, corridors, aisles. His mind jumps from one fractured event to another in a kind of short circuit. Time becomes “quantal” just like the blocks on the island. There is no past, no future – just an endless, eventless present. He chooses to stay there with the ever intensifying hallucinations of his dead family rather than be rescued, and he hides from a search team when they come on to the island. Traven doesn’t so much embrace his surroundings as become them.

In *Concrete Island*, Ballard maroons the architect Robert Maitland, Crusoe-like, in a triangular interzone of a motorway intersection, armed only with “a tool-kit, some architectural journals and six bottles of white Burgundy”. The situation he finds himself trying to escape is an extended metaphor for Maitland’s personal life, trapped in the dead space between himself, his wife and his mistress.

Ballard kept repeating his mantra that “In a totally sane society, madness is the only freedom”. In the chilling novella *Running Wild* (1988), set in a suburban gated community in Berkshire, the lives of the residents are a paralysing middle-class carousel of ordered sterility. Ballard details how this terminal boredom leads affectless children to kill their parents – and get away with it.

In *High-Rise*, over the course of three months, a 40-storey tower block housing 2,000 residents – “a small vertical city” – descends from civilisation to tribalism to hunter-gatherer savagery (there is even a suggestion of cannibalism), in a kind of mass psychosis where they retreat from the outside world. Though Ballard was not a political writer in a narrow party sense, it can certainly be read as a premonition of the selfish Thatcherite society to come – a man-eat-dog society as well as a dog-eat-dog one.

*High-Rise* has a clearly Freudian element to its three main protagonists. Richard Wilder (played in the film by Luke Evans) represents the id; Dr Robert Laing (clearly referring to RD Laing, the author of *The Divided Self*, and played by Tom Hiddleston) is the ego and the building’s architect, Anthony Royal (Jeremy Irons), who lives in one of the penthouse apartments, is the super-ego. The tower block and the wider city are conceived of as living organisms, of having a consciousness of their own. “Like a huge and aggressive malefactor, the high-rise was determined to inflict every conceivable hostility upon them.” The calming lines of the rectilinear tower contrast with “the ragged skyline of the city” which “resembled the disturbed encephalograph of an unresolved mental crisis”.

At this psychodynamic level the residents actually enjoy the breakdown of the building’s services, and the growing confrontation between the floors. But this is no class war – the residents are all middle-class professionals – it’s territorial, atavistic. *Defensible Space: People and Design in the Violent City* (1972) by Oscar Newman, an American professor of urban planning, was a big influence on Ballard. Newman, like Jane Jacobs before him in *The Death and Life of Great American
Cities (1961), argued that urban violence can be mitigated by designs and layouts that exploit the natural surveillance of open spaces inside and outside buildings, something that high-rise buildings notably lack.

There were many architectural inspirations for High-Rise – Le Corbusier’s Cité Radieuse in Marseille, the Montparnasse tower in Paris – but the closest model is probably the brutalist Balfron tower in east London, not far from where Ballard puts his cluster of five tower blocks (more or less in present-day Canary Wharf). Its architect, Erno Goldfinger, like Royal, lived in one of the penthouse flats shortly after its completion but moved back home to Hampstead after only a few months. Not only did Goldfinger end up as the sinister Royal in High-Rise, but as an arch Bond villain – his Willow Road neighbour Ian Fleming objected to this modernist house, which was supposedly out of keeping with the street’s Georgian housing.

High-Rise’s producer Jeremy Thomas had been trying to get the novel filmed for nearly 40 years. An early Paul Mayersberg script set it in the middle of the desert in Arizona, and a more recent adaptation for the director Vincenzo Natali had it located on a floating Burj Khalifa-like megatower – all of which, curiously, was to miss the central point that the building is mentally, rather than physically, cut off from the city; the structure turns its back on the metropolis by choice not circumstance.

For film-makers it’s a challenge to convey Ballardian space not only because of the technical difficulties in rendering “inner space” but also because all the author’s fiction is in a sense set in the near future – what he called “the next five minutes”. David Cronenberg’s Crash (1997) has probably managed this best, successfully relocating the Westway, a dual carriageway in west London, to an anonymous Toronto.

Encouragingly, Wheatley’s new film, scripted by Amy Jump, is set in London in the 1970s (though filmed in Bangor, County Down) when the book is set. “It’s a moment in design that looked to the future and was still excited about it,” he says. “Now we mainly see dystopia or a white, shiny iPod future. The idea of a book looking to a future that has already happened and making a film looking back to the past to show a possible future was interesting.”

The screenwriter and director Bruce Robinson, best known for The Killing Fields and Withnail & I, really went to town on the Freudian view of High-Rise in his little-known 1979 script, which he subtitled An Analogy. “I wrote it from the perspective of the building itself going insane,” he says, “with the superego in the penthouses, the middle floors as the ego and the id in the underground car park. The brain of the building goes nuts. Architecturally, the thing that interested me was the pre-stressing technique with cables. As you put on each new floor, the weight and the stress on the cables gets more and more until by the final floor these cables are so stressed that the whole building has a monstrous concrete migraine – it just wants to explode anyway.”

Reading Robinson’s script, it’s interesting to see how the writer and director of Withnail & I, with its brilliantly manic vernacular, has dealt with Ballard’s rather measured, abstract tone. “Ballard was such an innovative and interesting writer but his prose style wasn’t something I loved,” explains Robinson. “But High-Rise is an amazing piece of work, an extraordinary story.”

In both Withnail & I and High-Rise the characters must adapt to their harsh new surroundings. When the two main characters of Withnail go “on holiday by mistake”, they arrive at Uncle Monty’s cottage in the Lake District and have to improvise cooking a chicken without a roasting tray, propping it up astride a brick. There are moments of culinary ingenuity in Robinson’s High-Rise, too, when Laing (here renamed Lovall) cooks his bacon by ironing it, and the guests at one of the decadent penthouse parties tuck into seagull and gin.
These cloistered, self-enclosed environments such as the high-rise building were taken up again at the end of Ballard’s career in another tetralogy of books: *Cocaine Nights* (1996), *Super-Cannes* (2000), *Millennium People* (2003) and his final work of fiction, *Kingdom Come* (2006). Here, Ballard looked at gated communities and the “nerve tonic of violence” that he claimed was needed in order to shock his characters out of the boredom brought about by consumer capitalism, where our most difficult moral decisions involve choosing which colour kettle to have. These leisure complexes, business parks and shopping malls were now not just self-enclosed but often fortified, too.

Ballard argued that “people aren’t moving into gated communities simply to avoid muggers and housebreakers – they’re moving in ... to get away from other people. Even people like themselves.” In this way, Ballardian environments actively select for psychopathic traits and it’s the egocentric Laing who is best adapted to the high-rise who ultimately survives all the tower can throw at him. At the end of the novel he finds contentment as all the lights go out in another of the five towers, “ready to welcome them to their new world.”

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**Nearly normal: JG Ballard's High-Rise and the 'uncanny valley'** by Sam Jordison
http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/mar/15/uncanny-valley-jg-ballard-high-rise-reading-group-tower-blocks

Doctors, lecturers, architects run amok in Ballard’s tower blocks, capitalising on our fear of the weirdness that walks among us. The “uncanny valley” is a phrase coined to describe our revulsion for things that seem very nearly human, but are not quite “right”. The term, proposed by engineering professor Masahiro Mori in 1970, is normally applied to human responses to animations, robots or computer imagery that is so recognisably like us that any tiny difference is all the more noticeable, and disconcerting or even horrifying. It’s territory in which JG Ballard seems to have spent a lot of time.
Among the unsettling things about High-Rise, Ballard’s 1975 novel, is how close it comes to our normal human experience, while skewing it. We can, for example, recognise that the setting has foundations in reality. We know about tower blocks: malfunctioning lifts, power outages; the petty inconveniences of life in the building seem all too familiar (and presumably had even greater resonance when the book was first published).

The people, too, are instantly recognisable: 70s sophisticates, partygoers, social climbers. They are aspirational, middle-class, everyday. Ballard emphasises their normality by labelling them according to professional type – doctors, TV presenters, architects and lecturers. Partly, he shows them as respectable, successful people because there’s a thrill of dissonance in observing the gulf between their working lives and their activities in the tower.

Partly also, it’s funny to see the thrusting middle classes living in their own mess. It’s a joke that works especially well because it’s at our expense. Ballard’s readers are more likely than most to see something of themselves in those university-educated, chattering-class hooligans. He chose these people because he knew they would resonate most strongly with his intended victims: us.

We Ballardians, chatterers, readers of broadsheet newspapers and speculative literary fiction can’t help but feel kinship with the inhabitants of High-Rise. He holds up a mirror. When Royal, the architect designer of the dysfunctional building, sprouts horns, so does our reflection. When everyone begins to run amok, it feels all the stranger because it is happening in our world.

High-Rise contains enough that is (in a phrase Ballard repeats throughout the novel) “matter-of-fact” to make the fantasy seem more lurid. The book’s realism makes it uncanny.

Perhaps “reality” is the wrong word. Ballard often maintained he was “surreal”. “The essence of the surrealist imagination,” he told a German magazine, “is its ability to translate the apparent forms of the world, the outer forms, into inner ones, into mental forms. The surrealist painter doesn’t seek to interpret the outer world as the classic schools of painting did … the surrealists recreate the outer world, completely in fact. And this was exactly the right method for SF, which needs something very similar. I used this concept of ‘psychological space’, and that again I found in surrealist paintings. I thought, that’s exactly what I need in science fiction.”

That idea can clearly be applied to the strange conditions whereby the High-Rise building seems to have a mind of its own and the real is so out of kilter. Ballard was a surrealist. High-Rise is strange, disturbing and disconnected from most normal experience. Yet the novel draws much of its power from ‘the real world’ and historical fact. Ballard suggested it had direct inspirations.

In 1978, he told Jon Savage (then a young punk journalist writing for Search & Destroy) that he first had the idea for High-Rise thanks to “the most incredible triviality” of the arguments that used to break out in a luxurious block of flats near his parents house in Victoria. There, Ballard said, the residents “spent all their time bickering with one another, complaining about small things constantly: ‘Who’s going to pay for the maintenance of the potted plant display on the 17th floor landing?’”

He went on to tell a story of renting a flat on the Costa Brava (near, he enjoyed pointing out, to “Dali’s place”). Most of those in the resort were middle-class French: “they all had their bloody boats”. And they, too, spent an “enormous amount of their time” bickering about nothing. One of the residents filled in the hours “with his back to the sea” training his camera on Ballard’s 12-storey apartment block.
Ballard at first assumed the man was a “peeping Tom” because, he said “my girlfriend was walking around in the nude”. But the author eventually realised the man was taking photos because of “an enormous amount of antagonism between the people of the lower floors and the people in the top”. He was snapping people dropping cigarette ends and other rubbish from the upper floors on to lower balconies. The man announced this, eventually, by putting up a sign threatening to shame the litterbugs by pinning his photos on a noticeboard. “Who would believe it? A holiday in this expensive block, and here’s this guy so upset with the misbehaviour of those people on the 12th floor, that he stands with his back to the sea, with his camera, waiting to catch somebody in the act. Some guy who’s probably a dentist, so obsessed with the sort of hostilities that are so easily provoked.”

So far, so High-Rise, and funny. But there’s a crueller reality. The novel might have drawn some immediate inspiration from this bickering and rivalry on the Spanish Costa, but the violence and extremism had another source. Ballard had experienced confinement, isolation and societal breakdown in the second world war, when he was interned in a Shanghai prisoner of war camp. Physical imagery from this experience coloured his writing (the dried-up and discoloured swimming pools were something he saw in Shanghai). He had also seen the moral abdication of middle-class professionals – including his own parents – when cast adrift and thrust into a fight for survival.

Possibly the most upsetting thing about the sense of the uncanny valley in JG Ballard’s book isn’t where the novel deviates from humanity. It’s where there’s a deeper reality behind the fantasy; where the apparently strange acts of his protagonists have historical precedent. Where the unlikely starts to feel all too familiar. Where we realise that truly frightening people walk among us. That they might be you and I.

Would JG Ballard have liked the film version of High-Rise? By Will Self
http://will-self.com/2016/03/24/4702/

Of the film adaptations that had been made of his work during his lifetime, JG Ballard vouchsafed to me that he liked Jonathan Weiss’s version of The Atrocity Exhibition the best. It was hardly a surprising verdict; the movie, released in 2000, eschews any of the easy certainties of narrative for a
furious collage of extreme images – urban wastelands, nuclear explosions, penises rhythmically pumping in and out of vaginas – all to the accompaniment of a voice-over comprising near-verbatim passages from the quasi-novel. And as the book is a furious collage of extreme images, the film is of the highest fidelity imaginable.

Ballard also liked Steven Spielberg’s adaptation of Empire of the Sun, although more, one suspects, because of the opportunity he got to be an extra in a party scene that was set in a simulacrum of his parents’ interwar home in Shanghai. So tickled was he by this Möbius-looping of reality and the imagined that Ballard wrote about the episode in another roman-à-clef, The Kindness of Women. When it was announced in the early 1990s that David Cronenberg was to adapt Ballard’s apocalyptic tale of autogeddon, Crash, and moreover set it in Toronto, I was so exercised that I phoned the writer. “You can’t let him do that, Jim,” I protested (or words to that effect). “Crash is one of the great London novels. The city demands that it be set right here!” He was having none of it and gently talked me down: the point of the novel was to describe a global phenomenon, one Ballard termed “the death of affect”. It was quite irrelevant which city the film was set in – the important point was that Cronenberg’s affectless vision and planar cinematography, all lit at operating-theatre strength, strongly resonated with Ballard.

Again, I rather suspect he liked the furore that surrounded its release – the late Alexander Walker having conniptions, screening bans all over the shop – rather more than he did the film. It would be a very absurd counterfactual indeed to try to imagine what Ballard would have made of the latest adaptation to enter the lists – but then, I’ve never worried about appearing ridiculous. For my money, Ben Wheatley’s film of High-Rise, scripted by his partner, Amy Jump, is a superb piece of work but how far it conforms to Ballard’s notoriously minatory vision is another matter.

I suppose I could be credited with an infinitesimal contribution, as Jump came to see me when she was working on the screenplay. She wanted, she said, to speak to someone who had known the writer personally, but whether she managed to get much of use out of me, I have no idea. All I can recall saying is that she and Wheatley had their work cut out, given that the novel has no proper plot to speak of, being, in essence, a series of flashbacks from a scene neatly encapsulated by the book’s opening line: “Later, as he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous three months.”

Ballard had an impressive strike rate as a prognosticator. His early apocalyptic novels fried, drowned and blew the world apart, anticipating the environmental depredations to come, while his acute apprehension of what he saw as “the marriage of nightmare and reason which has dominated the 20th century” made him sensitive to both the rise of mediatisation and its associated pseudo-events, and also to the peculiar forms that anomie takes in societies that are characterised by material abundance and spiritual poverty.

In Ballard’s novel, the eponymous high-rise is presciently sited where One Canada Square, the iconically dull centrepiece of Canary Wharf, raised its ugly, pyramidal head a decade or so later; and although the notion of a war between social classes occupying higher and lower floors of a giant tower block might, in the mid-1970s, have seemed to be taking flight from the perceived problems of brutalist public housing, Ballard’s tale anticipates the London skyline of today, with its row upon row of “luxury” apartment blocks, inflated into salience by global gusts of flight capital.

It is difficult to locate the site of Wheatley’s and Jump’s high-rise precisely – the film was shot on location in the old Harland and Wolff shipyard in Belfast but there is a teasing ambiguity in the medium and long shots, with London seemingly ever hovering on the smoggy horizons. Perhaps the
boldest decision that the film-makers have made, however, is to set their adaptation not in the near-future of 2016 but in that of 1974. Ballard once said that he was only interested in what will happen in “the next five minutes”; and it is undoubtedly this enthusiasm for the inchoate that gives his tales their air of the unexpected. By reverse-engineering an imagined future in which men with handlebar moustaches ply cine cameras while saturnalian suburbanites trash their futuristic pads, Wheatley and Jump have introduced a perverse note of humour to what is otherwise a very grim series of events.

Towards the end of his life, Ballard said to me that he regretted not having been able to write in a more ludic, or even comic vein. I remember remonstrating with him: Millennium People, his penultimate novel, had just been published and I thought it was suffused with the tinder-dry wit that was present in the rest of his oeuvre, but only faintly. Now comes an adaptation of High-Rise that brings that dry wit to the fore. It may not be everyone’s idea of a laugh-out-loud film but, frankly, who cares what everyone thinks? I don’t – and nor, quite obviously, did Ballard.

Inside High-Rise by Mark Sinclair for Creative Review

For Ben Wheatley’s new film, High-Rise, graphic artists Michael Eaton and Felicity Hickson designed a wide range of props, from books and cigarette packs to the entire contents of a supermarket. Here, they reveal how they worked with production designer Mark Tildesley to help cement the look and feel of 1970s apartment living – with a dystopian edge. High-Rise, looks at mid-70s Britain through the prism of an ultra-modern tower block. Adapted from JG Ballard’s 1975 novel by Amy Jump, the film follows Dr Robert Laing (played by Tom Hiddleston) as he adjusts to his new life as a tenant on the 25th floor and explores the relationships between the building’s various social groups and the tribal mentalities that emerge as the tower gradually descends into chaos. While working families live on its lower levels and aspirant professionals reside halfway up, a wealthy elite is confined to the uppermost floors – a structure that does not last long.

To help realise this unique world, envisioned by production designer Mark Tildesley, graphic artists Michael Eaton and Felicity Hickson created a legion of objects and products and several type treatments for the film’s locations: one for the high-rise itself, with its supermarket, gym, spa and swimming pool; a house font for the building’s architect, Anthony Royal; and signage for Laing’s
place of work, the School of Physiology. Eaton has previously worked on four seasons of Game of Thrones and the Hercules film, while Hickson has been a graphic artist on Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy and The Counselor, before working as motion graphics art director on The Martian. Here, they explain the process behind their latest work for High-Rise, which is out in UK cinemas on March 18.

*Creative Review: How did you get involved with High-Rise?*

**Michael Eaton:** I’d heard from a friend that High-Rise was happening in Bangor; I live in Belfast. I’d seen Ben Wheatley’s other films and just really wanted to work on it. I’d worked with the supervising art director before, so I had got in touch with him and asked if I could put my portfolio forward for an interview. I had a back catalogue to show them, but this is the most ‘futuristic’ thing I’ve done. I’d made medieval work on Game of Thrones and Hercules, it was all ‘old world’. But I love the 1970s, the style of it, and so I was keen to get on [the film], not just because of the subject but also as it was a new time period for me.

**Felicity Hickson:** Through previous experience your name gets out there. I went to Belfast and met the director and the designer and they said that they needed someone specifically looking at the supermarket. It was a massive undertaking. They didn’t have anything, just an empty supermarket to dress. We went to see the location and they said that we’d have to dress all the shelves with new products; every one has to be different. Then the scale of what was expected suddenly dawned on me.

*CR: What research do you do for a film like this, set in the recent past?*

**ME:** It was a really fun one – from a design point of view, everything just looked so cool from that time. One of the first things I did was the Learn French book [which Laing picks up in the supermarket, shown above]. I looked at old 70s school textbooks. And quite early on with Felicity, we worked out what the main fonts of the film would be.

We had fonts on the office wall that Ben and Mark Tildesley, the production designer, liked – certain things would have their own font; the high rise itself, the supermarket and everything had a sort of ‘brand’ within the building. So from the start, you were aware of how you could stick to a certain aesthetic. Then you’d be given your task by the set decorator [Paki Smith] from the script.

**FH:** We had a few references, but [for the supermarket] Paki had the wonderful idea of using colour as the main graphic; so you’d have these blocks of colour. We did blocks of products, so as you went down the aisle, rather than seeing individual products you saw bold, graphic shapes. It wasn’t a line of ten different brands on the shelf, you had all these own-label ‘Market’ brands. It was a ‘stylised’ view of dressing.

**ME:** We realised when we saw the shelves just how much it would take to fill the space. We looked at references for that – Andreas Gursky’s shots of supermarkets with loads of repeats of the same packaging, that was the starting point. We also looked at old images of phone books, any kind of instructional manual, toy kits.

We looked at covers of things, such as Penguin books and magazines. Also, the buyers on the film would be out buying props and every so often they’d come in with, say, a box of comics, or TV guides from the 70s. So we had all this great stuff lying around the office we could look through.

*CR: Typography was a starting point for your design work, but were you given a specific brief in terms of the look and feel of the film?*

**FH:** So each location had a particular font – [Ben] was very particular about the font. He had a few fonts in mind that he showed us, I think from a few of Stanley Kubrick’s films that he liked. And then we showed him five fonts and we picked a few for the different locations.

I showed him a few for the supermarket and he picked one straight away, which was brilliant. So I knew my font for the supermarket was already chosen. [Then] I produced maybe four or five layouts of various products and also the signage – we set a few colours that we showed him. He pretty much liked what we were doing and he said just go for it. It was pretty easy. I wasn’t designing each
product and then asking ‘Is this approved?’ I was designing ten in a row and then showing them. Ben kept on saying ‘Keep going’ so I was making products every day.

ME: Eurostile is the font of the building. I think it’s actually in the leisure centre where the film’s offices were based. There was a sign Ben put on Twitter in November 2015 saying ‘Speculators’ – a sign from the building we were in. I think it was the DoP, Laurie Rose, who’s into fonts as well, he showed us a website where you can take a picture of a font and it works out what it is.

FH: I also went to a supermarket and looked at all the products and wrote them all down – ‘I’ll do one for that, one for that’ etc. Basically, what was needed in a real supermarket, the standard products that would have existed back then, rather than the luxurious ones. There’s a really good product museum – the Museum of Brands in Notting Hill. I’d been there before and went again, used that as a reference. We were also looking online. The nature of our work means that we often have to produce things quite quickly, we don’t have weeks and weeks of prep time. And so once I’d set the design in motion – as you can see, they’re all quite simple – I can just do a quick few drawings and layouts to get the right size and shape.

CR: They have the feel of Sainsbury’s own-brand packaging from the 1960s and 70s.

FH: They’re brilliant, I love the simplicity of the designs, they say a lot about the period and the quality of available printing methods at the time.

ME: Yes, the key for the supermarket was super simple. It would be a line with the name of the thing and a picture of the thing on it. Our set decorator liked the idea of this repeated image of the packaging, that’s why there are rows of the repeated image. It just looks awesome when you see it lined up.

CR: And the supermarket features throughout the film, particularly when things start to go wrong....

ME: Yes, you can see the degradation of everything there ... from those pristine shots, it just becomes quite darker, grimmer and grubbier.

CR: How did you physically make the products? Does someone else come in and work on that part?

FH: Yes, they’d buy 200 of something and we’d wrap them in labels. What was brilliant about the supermarket was that most of it was background, apart from the ‘hero’ [objects] – cat food, dog food and paint pots. Anything that was scripted was well-printed and well-designed. All the paint pots were really carefully put together. But the sage and onion packets, it’s background dressing and there’ll be rows and rows of it – you stick it on quickly and move on.

A number of dressing props were brought in just to do the supermarket as well. Hundreds and hundreds of cans of beans and cheap soup were bought – then we’d make 500 labels. It was making things en masse: taking the labels off, cutting the new ones out and sticking them on. All day.

ME: With most of the books, you print the cover and wrap an existing book. You’d do repeats in case someone gets fake blood on it or whatever. Then you hand them over to the standby guys. They’ll know when to use it on the day.

CR: What was it like where you were based? Did you have your own office or studio space?

ME: There was always stuff up on the walls. You can go round and study the work that had been done so far, the research and the storyboards – and we were in the same room as Ben as well, which is really rare. It was in an old leisure centre; the room was a disused dance studio with a big mirror on one wall. We were all in that same room, at our own desks – you were always party to what was going on. So everyone was on the same page. You could ask ‘What about this?’ and show people things.

CR: How does your job sit within the wider team? And how do you work from the script – do you take notes and work out what’s needed?
**ME:** It’s very collaborative. You’ll talk through an idea with the set decorator. You would get the script and go through and highlight anything that you would think was your remit. Then it’s a case of talking to the set decorator and the designer – they’re on the same page as well having read the script. So you flag things up and pick out the things from the script that you would be taking care of. We sat together; we’d made notes ourselves. We’d [divide it up]. I’d never worked with Felicity before but it was great and we’ve now worked together again since.

**CR:** Michael, can you tell me about some of the objects you were responsible for? You worked on the record sleeves, book covers and posters?

**ME:** Yes, the record sleeves were great to do. I do artwork for some musicians – I love anything like that. We got to sift through 70s albums. In some cases you’ll get stuff handed down, but we would usually come up with fake band names.

Then you need to get everything like that cleared; so even with those books you have to get the title and the author’s name cleared, even the publisher’s symbol if you have one on there. Someone from production – you email your list to them, they deal with a clearance person – checks that there isn’t an album or book with the same name. You have to be aware of that.

With the film posters – there are lots in [the character] Richard Wilder’s flat. It’s the same again, Mark and Ben gave us a list of desired posters – clearance would then say what we could and couldn’t use.

**CR:** Were you asked to reflect some of the more ‘atmospheric’ aspects of the film – its oppressive air etc – or was it more about reflecting a time?

**FH:** Both really. The ‘oppressiveness’ was in the fact that the products were pretty standard and generic designs that were quite quickly produced. I guess if everyone [in the block] has got the same thing, then that helps the feel of that era – and particularly what Ben was trying to create in that building.

But we do that on all films – every one that Michael and I have worked on, we create things that help fit into the environment rather than stand out. We’re both on [the film] Assassin’s Creed at the moment, we just finished that together.

**CR:** Do you work on the set as well? How does your role change once the filming starts?

**FH:** That’s often the hardest part of the job, to keep the standbys happy. Also, when you’ve got specific graphics and props you have to have some ‘repeats’ – maybe you need 12 repeats for props to do different takes. Anything could happen.

**ME:** It would be a mix of being at the desk, then occasionally going out to put a sign up, then there’s loads of people who helped with the supermarket, putting labels on bean tins. They’d do that all day. But the supermarket was a big thing, a lot of people involved.

**CR:** One of the first ‘graphic’ elements the audience notices is the ‘Welcome’ pack for the building. Can you tell me about that?

**ME:** Yes, Ben had said he wanted a booklet that would go into almost crazy detail on all the appliances in the building. It was about schematics – you could take it really far; stuff on how to attach your shower nozzle, that kind of thing. It was a fun one to do.

We knew what the shape of the building would be, so we put that in, then it was just a layout of the room and what each area would be. The idea was you got this pack, ‘Welcome to your new home’, and it describes what your life will be like in there. Lots of cool references for that. It was a nice one from a design point of view, like an Ikea furniture manual.
CR: And cigarettes also seem to play an important role?!
ME: Yes! There was to be a certain style of pack for each person. You had your obvious references – old Marlboro and Camel – but when you get into the lesser known ones, there’s just some amazing designs knocking around. Also the adverts from the time – we’d spend hours [watching], there’s so much online. You find some stuff you like and adapt it, take an aspect of it.

CR: There are so many little elements – the ‘Vikair’ name badges for the air stewards, who appear in one sequence, for example.
ME: Yes, there are always little things like that which are just as important as you don’t know what will be picked up on screen. Again, you do a few versions and then get one approved. But it’s nice to know you noticed that, even though it’s such a flyaway thing.
I was watching the trailer with my girlfriend and I’m going ‘I did that wallpaper!’ It’s something that wouldn’t necessarily catch your eye at first glance. I love it when someone’s coming out of the lift or whatever and they’re holding a book or something that you weren’t sure would make an appearance.

CR: In terms of a design role, being a graphic artist on a film sounds like a dream job. Do you ever think of it in that way?
ME: I love it. It was great on that film. I love things from that time period and it was great to look at your list and think, ‘OK, today I have to do a book, a record and a comic’. It’s a nice thing to look into if you’re into design like that. Looking through all these old things and finding the weirdest thing and seeing if you can take some inspiration from it. If you’re into fonts, in this film – everything has its own code. It makes it seem more real. It looks as if, in this fictional world, people have had a meeting about what font to use in their building.

CR: Is the variety of what you create on a film part of the attraction?
FH: Yes, definitely. On Assassin’s Creed, we’ve been in 15th-century Spain and modern day Madrid. One minute Michael would be doing something for modern day and I’d be working on a 15th-century painting. Due to tight shooting schedules it’s quite normal to have to work to strict deadlines; the greatest challenge is to eloquently create what is asked of you in as quick a time as you can manage it. I think most graphic designers – who don’t know about ‘film’ graphic design – if they were to come into the office and see the speed we work at, they would think it was really fast.
Since the early 1970s Ed Ruscha has been an admirer of the British writer J.G. Ballard’s fiction. The text in this painting is from Ballard’s 1975 dystopian novel ‘High-Rise’. The work juxtaposes a beautiful landscape and serene skyline layered with the dark and unsettling quote “The Music from the Balconies Nearby Was Overlaid by the Noise of Sporadic Acts of Violence”. Ruscha could be said to be enacting an act of violence himself in this painting, overlying the tranquil landscape with the wordy Ballard quote.