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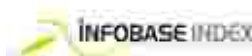
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'Projections of Megalopolis' in J.G. Ballard's *The Concentration City & Billennium*

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Abstract

J.G. Ballard's The Concentration City and Billennium are both short stories that depict an utterly dystopian vision about the future of urban development. The Concentration City provides a glimpse of an overgrown, gigantic city with no limits whereas Billennium presents a perspective of the burden of living in an overpopulated society. Both stories are projections of the megalopolis as coined by philosophers Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford. These thinkers have outlined the notion of megalopolis as the final stage of development before necropolis, city of the dead. This paper explores how and in what ways Ballard's vision of megalopolis is reflected in The Concentration City and Billennium. To that end, the effects of megalopolis on the individual, nature, society and government institutions are revealed. In addition, the paper also demonstrates that human liberty is restricted on all accounts as a consequence of the conditions created by the megalopolis. Finally, as put forward by Geddes and Mumford, regionalism is proposed as an alternative to prevent excessive urban development which is destined to lead to megalopolis and ultimately, collective downfall.

Keywords: J.G. Ballard, The Concentration City, Billennium, Megalopolis, Patrick Geddes, Lewis Mumford, Dystopian Fiction

Introduction

A pioneer of the new wave of science-fiction movement, J.G. Ballard produced works within a wide spectrum of postmodern, biographical, transgressive and climate fiction. The majority of his fiction however, remained within a dystopian context. *The Concentration City* is a short story that was published in the *New Worlds* magazine in 1957 whereas *Billennium* was published in the 1962 edition of *Amazing Stories*. Both short stories reflect a dystopian setting in the distant future. *The Concentration City* depicts the portrait of a gigantic city lacking frontiers and open spaces. *Billennium* on the other hand presents a vision of an extremely overpopulated society where space has become the most valuable commodity. Both stories reflect Ballard's dystopian vision of urban development gone beyond control. Both works converge on the lack of and longing for space.

Ballard's urban dystopias demonstrate the results of excessive urbanisation on the society and on the individual. Thereby, it could be asserted that *The Concentration City* and *Billennium* display the Megalopolis stage, which is the final stage before the necropolis, the city of dead. Thus, this article aims to analyse Ballard's stories through the perspectives put forward by influential philosophers of urbanisation and town planning: Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford. Both intellectuals have coined the particular stages of city development and maintained that after the industrial revolution, urbanisation is diverted towards the wrong direction. This article contemplates to interpret Ballard's stories from the window of Geddes' and Mumford's views, in specific, the megalopolis.

Patrick Geddes and the birth of *The Megalopolis*

Patrick Geddes (1854-1932) was a Scottish philosopher whose work maintained a wide range from biology to sociology, history and town planning (Baigent 688). Geddes used the term

megalopolis (1927) to indicate the stage of urban development in a particularly negative context. In his notable work, *Cities in Evolution*, Geddes stated: “the expectation is not absurd that the not very distant future will see practically one vast city-line along the Atlantic Coast for five hundred miles, and stretching back at many points; with a total of ... many millions of population” (48-49). However, he ascribes negative features to these gigantic urban centres: “depressing life . . . [with] disease and folly . . . vice and apathy . . . indolence and crime” (Geddes 86). As a visionary of urban planning, Geddes was the first intellectual to envision, foresee and warn the society of the consequences of extreme and disproportionate urbanisation. He was also the first to combine the notion of megalopolis with degeneration and economic abuse (Baigent 689).

Geddes established a noteworthy categorization of cities which he put forward in six stages: “village – town – city – metropolis - megalopolis and finally – necropolis” (Meller 117). Whether Geddes was associating this with the present or future is ambiguous but on the other hand, it is obvious that he envisioned a dystopian, nightmarish, and bleak outcome for the future of urbanisation. As a biologist, Geddes likened the city to a living organism and claimed that after a certain phase of development, they would die due to their organic nature (696). As one of the greatest city planners in history, Geddes acknowledged and foresaw an utterly catastrophic tendency alongside extreme urban development. Hellen Meller expressed that for Geddes: “Megalopolis was the manifestation of an imbalance between organism - human society - and the environment it was creating for itself. Inherent in this approach was the possibility that if interaction between organism and environment were better understood then urbanisation in the future, since it was man-made, might create a great civilisation, an inspiration to all. 'Megalopolis' would only lead to 'necropolis' if no heed were taken of this” (117).

To that end, Geddes argued that the relationship between human beings and the environment ought to be better acknowledged and taken into serious consideration as a necessity in creating an exemplary civilisation. In case this was ignored, megalopolis would only lead to necropolis; death and destruction. Another point that Geddes made was that the industrial revolution caused a burst of population which could not be dealt with and emphasized life quality over quantity; bigger cities do not provide better living standards for humans (Meller 118-119). Thus, rather than scale and proportion, Geddes focused on the quality of life as early as the 1920s and coined three essential factors that he deemed imperative for urbanisation: balance, culture and personal development (119). Balance referred to the balance between urban and rural regions, the city as a vital receiver and embodiment of culture and individual quality as the basic determiner of culture and civilisation (120).

All in all, Geddes was an advocate of high-quality living standards who predicted overachieving urban growth to become a serious threat for humanity. Therefore, Geddes promoted regionalism as the alternative to disproportional urbanisation. Geddes' ideas and notions were to be taken up and continued by his disciple, Lewis Mumford. Both Geddes and Mumford's views have contributed to the domain of urbanisation but remained in the shadow due to the upcoming two world wars (127).

Lewis Mumford's *Megalopolis* and *Regionalism*

Lewis Mumford (1885-1190) was an American philosopher, sociologist, historian and literary critic. A disciple and colleague of Patrick Geddes, Mumford was noted to continue Geddes' work, particularly in the field of urban concentration. Geddes once said to Mumford: “Remember, I have none like you, but you, to be my heir . . . so you must take over much of my further Sociology (Renwick and Gunn 59). Despite being involved in a wide variety of disciplines, Mumford was often associated with city planning and architecture (60). Among his most credited works were *The Culture of Cities* (1951) and *The City in History* (1962).

While Mumford was an ardent scholar, the extent of the influence of Geddes and his works was truly immense. Mumford picked up and continued Geddes' works and even referred to him as his

master. In accordance with Geddes, Mumford also set forward six stages of urban development: “eopolis – polis – metropolis – megapolis – tyrannopolis – necropolis” (Baigent 689). Thus, Mumford's formulation of urban development was quite alike Geddes' but the only difference he maintained was his certainty about the downfall of the megalopolis. Geddes wrote about this in a more ambiguous, doubtful context compared to his follower (689). Mumford was convinced that the megalopolis represented the last phase of urban development that would eventually lead to self-destruction which he deemed was inevitable (690). Therefore, his opinions were more in line with a dystopian sphere. According to Mumford, overdevelopment and overgrowth was destined to be doomed. He openly expressed his catastrophic predictions in *The Pentagon of Power*: “Every overgrown megalopolitan centre today, and every province outside that its life touches exhibits the same symptoms of disorganization, accompanied by no less pathological symptoms of violence and demoralization”. [as did imperial Rome before its fall] (Mumford 277-278)

Mumford's prediction not only validates Geddes' work but also consolidates his precursor's theories. In *The Culture of Cities*, Mumford openly describes the megalopolis as the beginning of downfall. He points out that the city is under the large impact of capitalist tendencies of greatness and display of power which results in the prioritisation of richness and flamboyant, unnecessary vanity. He adds that economic hegemony of capital narrows down and gradually destroys other life supplies such as agriculture and finally brings about the standardization of culture and mechanization of government institutions (Mumford 289).

In short, Mumford associates the megalopolis with notions such as excessiveness, greatness, bigness, vanity, overgrowth and tyranny. Mumford is highly convinced about the megalopolis' inability of setting up positive living standards for its citizens. According to him, the problems caused by its overgrowth cannot be overcome and only lead to worse conditions. Mumford traces the roots of megalopolis to the metropolitan civilisation which he regards as a complete fiasco (Mumford 300).

On the other hand, the disaster of the metropolis has given rise to a response against the mechanistic, automated tendency. This response defends an organic worldview which favours organic life forms over other non-organic constructs. According to Mumford, all organic life forms ought to be integrated to the society (301). Favouring the organic over the machine is to highlight quality over quantity (303). Mumford argues that humans must be integrated in nature and reject all isolation from the natural environment. For this reason, regionalism is proposed as a solution to prevent the megalopolis: “Regionalism served to emphasize compensatory organic elements. [...] In its acceptance of natural diversities as well as natural associations and uniformities; in its recognition of the region as a permanent sphere of cultural influences and as a centre of economic activities, as well as an implicit geographic fact-here lies the vital common element in the regionalist movement.” (Mumford 305-306)

As a proponent of organic life, Mumford defends the organic over the machine, the local over the mainland, the natural over the artificial and integration over isolation. Moreover, regional communities will claim ownership and usage of the land for their own well-being (328). This will result in the mutual ownership and supervision of natural resources (329). As a result, the community will make the last decision over the use of resources and provide equal distribution amongst their people. This will cause a better and sustainable relationship amongst the members of the society as well as with organic life and the environment.

The Concentration City & Billennium: Ballardian Visions of Megalopolis

As an author with a distinct dystopian style of writing, J.G. Ballard wrote countless works of dystopian fiction. *The Concentration City* (1957) and *Billennium* (1962) are two of Ballard's dystopian short fiction which share common themes and characteristics. Both stories deal with the theme of space shortage and explore Patrick Geddes' and Lewis Mumford's vision of the Megalopolis. Ballard reflects the future of urban development in these works of fiction and exposes the burden of

human life in an overcrowded and overexpanded city.

The Concentration City focuses on the adventures of Franz, a 20 year old physics student who dedicates himself to the quest of finding 'open space'. As with most of Ballard's fiction, the plot structure of this story bears little significance in comparison with the setting and underlying themes. *The Concentration City* is set in a gigantic overexpanded city comprising endless streets and mega structures. The city basically has no limits and is isolated from all natural and organic wildlife, including trees. In this city, the most precious commodity is space which is sold a dollar a cubic foot. Ballard's use of excessive language is striking: "Millionth street, West Millions, thousand levels, 3,000 levels, 568th Avenue, 422nd Street" (Ballard 1). Then, Franz sees a dream: "I was suspended in the air above a flat stretch of open ground, something like the floor of an enormous arena. My arms were out at my sides, and I was looking down, floating-" [...] All around me there was free space. That was the most important part about it. There were no walls. Nothing but emptiness. That's all I remember." (Ballard 3)

Franz's longing for flying and eventually finding open space reflects his ultimate craving for freedom. The city, with its never ending buildings has extended to such an extent that the inhabitants have become captive in their own giant prison facility. Human beings yearn for open space and nature to regain their sense of freedom which they have lost with this immense city. Thus, a setting with no walls, building and as simple as it may seem, open spaces have become the subject matters of dreams and fantasies. This reveals the deviation of growth and development into the wrong direction and sets the setting for the downfall of civilisation.

To that end, *The Concentration City* depicts a Ballardian vision of Geddes and Mumford's megalopolis. Ballard's city is no different than the megalopolis and comprises all the features indicated by Geddes, one of which is instability between human society and organic environment. In the story, there is no mention of trees, forests, animals or any organic life. Therefore, human society has isolated itself from the natural sphere. The only sphere left is that of the city with its unending walls, buildings and massive structures. As outlined by Geddes, Ballard depicts the beginning of the decline of civilisation. In addition, the Ballardian megalopolis emphasizes quantity over quality as all excessiveness has become a common feature of daily life whereas no attention is paid to the quality and comfort of life. Greatness, bigness, excessive numbers and buildings are all that matters in this dystopian vision. Moreover, the city's dystopian context owes its bleakness to the density which marks the number of people in relation to other cities and to the number of apartment blocks that increases density (Tuna Ultav 26). Consequently, it is the extreme population density which brings about the circumstances that result in an utterly gloomy atmosphere in *The Concentration City*.

In accordance with his mentor, Lewis Mumford argued that the megalopolis would bring about standardisation of culture and mechanisation of state institutions (Mumford 289). In Ballard's story megalopolis has drastically reshaped and reduced culture to a limited extent: "over 75 percent of the student enrolment was in the architectural and engineering faculties, a meagre 2 percent in pure sciences. The physics and chemistry libraries were housed in the oldest quarter of the University" (Ballard 5). Thus, engineering and architecture have established hegemony, leaving no space for science, art, literature or other social sciences. In the following pages Franz takes the elevator up 150 levels to 677-98 to reach the bureau of the Precinct Estate Office. This reveals the government's reluctance to provide public service and its aspiration for unattainability. Probably the only mention of nature in this story is when an elderly man talks to Franz: "They say they're going to build gardens and parks for us, even heard they might be able to get a tree. It'll be the only tree in the whole county" (Ballard 7-8).

As the old man claims, parks, gardens and trees are the examples of utmost fantasy in Ballard's megalopolis. On the other hand, open space has become the ultimate obsession for Franz as he is determined to give up on everything to reach space and fulfil his dream. Due to his obsession with open space, the doctor tells that Franz should see a psychiatrist. At the end, after traveling on the train,

Franz realises he ends up where he had begun his journey. Upon this realisation, the doctor states: “I prefer the accepted view that the City stretches out in all directions without limits” (Ballard 19). Thus, it took Franz three weeks to travel around the city, ending up back where he had started and thus proving the pointlessness of escaping the city.

Bilennium is another Ballardian story that deals with the extreme shortage of space in a futuristic, dystopian setting. In accordance with *the Concentration City*, *Bilennium* also focuses on the need for space, but this time as a result of overpopulation. The story centres on the adventures of John Ward and Henry Rossiter. As the world's population has reached 20 billion, people are forced to live in very small spaces called cubicles. As with most of Ballard's fiction, the plot structure is simple with relatively little action. Ward and Rossiter are close friends who discover an empty room in their house which they rejoice over at first sight. At the end, the friends bring over their girlfriends who in turn bring over others as the room quickly fills up to become no different than the rest of every other location.

Geddes' and Mumford's Megalopolis is manifested in *Bilennium* as well. The city with its overpopulated areas represents the stage before necropolis. Ballard's vision of Megalopolis in *Bilennium* is consistent with Geddes and Mumford's formulations as the emphasis is placed on overpopulation, overgrowth and excessiveness on all domains. The immense restriction of freedom is a natural result of megalopolis in *Bilennium*: “over a hundred people lived in the top three floors of the old rooming house. [...] He had shared a room with seven others on the ground floor of a house on 755th Street” (Ballard 125). Queues, locks and jams have become the common elements of everyday life. In addition, privacy and personal items are symbols of luxury. This becomes more obvious when they find a Victorian wardrobe which they are forced to give up in the end due to lack of space.

Bilennium reflects Mumford's prospect of an overgrown, overdeveloped, plethoric society that tortures its citizens every single day. This overgrown society is regulated with mechanic measures and strict punishment. The lack of space not only limits personal belongings but also seriously restricts and annihilates the presence of nature, animals and all non-human organic life forms. In *Bilennium*, the city has grown to such an extent that some vital buildings and natural areas have to be taken down so as to create space for people. The excessive population density has severely transformed and devastated human lives. On the whole, Ballard's second vision of megalopolis is more dystopian, bleak and claustrophobic compared to its predecessor.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Concentration City* and *Bilennium* are both Ballardian visions of the megalopolis which project a dystopian outcome for the future of humanity. Both stories share common characteristics and are different varieties of Geddesian and Mumford's megalopolis. As it is the case with most Ballardian fiction, the author does not propose or formulate any type of solution or alternative for the current situation. Thus, Ballard aims at shocking the readers with the utmost dystopian visions and warning the public for what might one day become reality. While Geddes and Mumford propose and defend organic life and regionalism to avoid such scenarios, Ballard, on the other hand pushes readers to reflect on the growth of societies and urban centres. *The Concentration City* and *Bilennium* are both representations of Geddes' and Mumford's megalopolis. These works expose how and to what extent urban overgrowth reshapes, restricts and eventually ruins human life. In these stories, Ballard openly demonstrates that the megalopolis eradicates Geddesian elements of balance, culture and personal development. As Ballard's stories are open-ended, it can be inferred that conditions in both settings are likely to aggravate and living standards are bound to degenerate. Therefore, the growth of the city is in the inverse ratio with human rights and liberty. The more the city grows, the more human conditions degenerate. For this reason, urban consciousness needs to be achieved and it must be acknowledged that constant growth does not necessarily lead to a better

society. All in all, despite powerful premonitions, Ballard's short fiction did not receive widespread attention as urban development gradually continues to grow towards the very direction that Geddes and Mumford had envisioned.

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