

[HOME](#) [ABOUT](#) [BALLARDOSPHERE](#) [INTERVIEWS](#) [REVIEWS](#) [FEATURES](#) [BIBLIOGRAPHY](#) [ARCHIVAL](#) [PASTICHE](#) [CONTACT](#)

'You are Hochhaus!': Ballard in Berlin

Author: [Dan O'Hara](#) • Jan 9th, 2008 •

Category: [WWII](#), [architecture](#), [audio](#), [dystopia](#), [entropy](#), [fascism](#), [film](#), [gated communities](#), [interviews](#), [urban decay](#), [urban revolt](#), [urban ruins](#), [utopia](#)



Image from *Hochhaus*, © Paul Plamper & Niklas Goldbach, 2008.

An Interview with Paul Plamper and Niklas Goldbach
by **Dan O'Hara**

In July on the roof terrace of the Ludwigsmuseum, the major museum of modern art in Cologne, I attended a 'screening' of a radio play. I say 'screening' because a film had been made to accompany the play, the combined effect of audio and film a little like Chris Marker's *La Jetée*. Called *Hochhaus*, the play was a three-part adaptation of J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise*. A faithful rendition in terms of plot and themes, it transposed the action of the novel to Berlin in the near future. The programme described the play as follows:

Berlin, 2013. A star architect has built in the capital the tallest residential building in Europe. There he wants to create a social Utopia: the Neokommune K 13. Nothing is wanting in this autarchy, a completely self-sufficient closed system. But the high-rise becomes a pressure cooker of neighbourhood enmity and rampant, uninhibited class warfare. In the blink of a camera's eye, this modern super-community regresses into a biotope of primitive lifeforms. Based on J. G. Ballard's science fiction novel, Paul Plamper has produced a horror radio play of pressing sociological relevance, which could take place in every German home. "Never forget: You are Hochhaus!"

With the Kölner Dom looming behind the roof terrace, and a panorama of the city stretching away towards the west, some fifty or sixty people settled down to listen for three hours to the German version of *High-Rise*. At nine in the evening, the sky was at first still too bright for the audience to see much of the film, so many of them sat with their heads down or eyes closed, concentrating on listening. In any case the film appeared to be merely a static image of a huge skyscraper, a carbuncle of a compressed city, a futurist mockery of the Gothic Cathedral at our backs.

As the sky darkened above and as I followed the familiar opening patterns of Ballard's novel, it became apparent that the film projected in front of us was not static at all, but almost imperceptibly changing. The audience only realized that the image in front of them had altered when they raised their heads or opened their eyes – and what became clear was that the slow-motion metamorphosis on screen mirrored the actual transition

from dusk to night. Over the space of the first hour, the film zoomed into the skyscraper, the image darkening until all that could be seen were the lights of the high-rise; and in uncanny synchronicity, this was also all we could see of the Cologne skyline to the west.

There were some very interesting angles taken in terms of adaptation – the film was made in parts of the old GDR, and there were persistent echoes of and references to Nazism, Speer's social engineering through architecture being one of the more telling ones. I spoke to the author, Paul Plamper, and his colleague Niklas Goldbach, a video artist who made the accompanying film. Radio plays or 'Hörspiele' are hugely popular in Germany – the original broadcast, on WDR in November 2006, reached around 100,000 listeners – and Ballard is relatively unknown, so this radio adaptation would introduce Ballard's name to an audience that had hitherto encountered him only through Cronenberg and Spielberg's films. I wanted to find out why Plamper and Goldbach had chosen to adapt *High-Rise*. What relevance did Ballard's 1975 novel have, in their view, for the Germany of the near future?

Dan O'Hara teaches English & American Literature at the University of Cologne. He is currently working on a monograph on J. G. Ballard.

NOTE: Performances of Hochhaus are due to restart on 12 January 2008 at the Theater Mannheim. See the endnote for more information.

DAN: Can I ask you first of all why you chose to adapt *High-Rise*? Because, as far as I'm aware, Ballard's not very well known in Germany.

PAUL: No, he's not that well known, actually. At least not when I was searching for a German translation of *High-Rise* a few years ago. There were some rare copies of an old edition being traded on the internet. I got hold of one of those and was immediately attracted. In Germany, the cultural establishment builds up a strong frontier between what they call 'culture' and what they call 'entertainment', and I think some, uhm, stupid intellectuals put Ballard more in the 'entertainment' Schublade, the entertainment category. But on the other hand you also have thinkers like **Heiner Müller** being admirers, so...

DAN: Really? I didn't know about that. Heiner Müller, the 'Hamletmaschine' author?

PAUL: Yes, the dramatist. He liked science fiction and he liked crime literature. So, as you see, you find Ballard in different cultural circles. The science fiction and fantasy communities read him, and from time to time an open minded intellectual. That's what I like about Ballard, he's not easy to put in just one bracket.



Image from Hochhaus, © Paul Plamper & Niklas Goldbach, 2008.

DAN: So what was it particularly about this one novel? What did you have in mind when you adapted it?

PAUL: Well, concerning the themes, I was looking for material for a 'horror' radio play. I wanted to do a monster radio play without monsters, but with humans. I discovered that Ballard is rather

a specialist in this subject, and that his well-cultivated and very sensitive paranoia really makes him somewhat of a prophet; you know, he wrote the novel in 1975, and now the novel is being slowly caught up by reality. He was paranoiac enough to know what was going to happen.

I'm also looking for interesting acoustical situations for my radio plays. In *High-Rise* there's a small society in a very condensed space. If you just look at social interaction: when it's silent, you hear your neighbours in your room. The wall is something that separates you from them but the level of audio is really what separates you the least. You don't see them but you hear them. So the sort of social pressure which has to be related is really well-suited to a radio play. I'm always searching for interesting topics, but most of all for subject matters that *must* be a radio play and no other medium, film, or whatever.

DAN: You move the action to future Berlin; I'm very intrigued by this shift.

PAUL: Well, since Ballard wrote *High-Rise*, things that happen in the novel now really happen in the middle of society, in public, in the media. So we thought, we won't put the building in a suburb, as Ballard does – in the novel it's in the outskirts of London, hidden away, where these terrible things can happen because nobody takes notice of it. We put our house right in the middle of Berlin, and it's a prestigious project run by an architect who is a very adept publicist. He's played by Martin Wuttke and we named him Philip del Ponte, a character like Daniel Libeskind or similar, you know, people who make grand architectural gestures and yet who are at the same time extremely clever in developing cute ideas to sell their architecture and to be in the public eye. We moved the whole story to the border of the Spree – this is actually 100 metres from here, where I live. Where before, there was the Wall, now there's a gap at the river, and there are vast areas where a new centre is being developed for the media, MTV moved there for example. And there are gated communities. They're like a virus spreading in Berlin. They have all these phony names like "Prenzlauer Gärten". Well-to-do creative people start these projects like community projects; everybody has his financial interest, buys part of the building and thinks he invests in a social project.

NIKLAS: But there's a new meaning to 'social' for these people. It doesn't have anything to do with the social vision of Ballard or anyone in the '70s for example...

DAN: It's not to do with community?

NIKLAS: No. Well, maybe it is, but not with the idea of a social system where the stronger help the poor, for example. I don't think you could find anything like the social system Ballard presents in *High-Rise* nowadays in Berlin.



Image from *Hochhaus*, © Paul Plamper & Niklas Goldbach, 2008.

DAN: When I think of gated communities in England, the ones that Ballard's talked about for example in *Running Wild*, his 1988 novel, in which some children living in a gated community kill their parents, such gated communities are very upper-middle class, and people choose to live in them apparently because of fear. These are high-security environments with surveillance cameras, private security guards... I wonder if it's the same sort of thing in Berlin?

PAUL: We're talking about something new. This certainly exists, but what interests us right now even more is that you have such gated communities combined with the fact that you can buy being a 'good person'. You can purchase a good feeling by moving into a living community of house owners. In the 60s and 70s there was the start of the *Kommune* in Germany, Kommune Eins and so on. Now it's part of the market, and there's no contradiction at all. Communal feeling has been absorbed by the market. It goes together with the fact that, yes, of course these people live gated, because they say "ok, I'm moving near Kreuzberg, how exciting, a *real*

ghetto, so I have to protect our stuff a little bit. Generally I'm open minded, come on, I was punk in the 80s, but still, I don't want to get robbed." They're not really frightened, they think they're just rationally pragmatic.

NIKLAS: And also I think what's kind of key for Berlin, I mean, you live Dan in Cologne, right?

DAN: I do now, yes.

NIKLAS: Cologne has a completely different structure as a city from Berlin, obviously, because of the separation and the Wall. Berlin was for such a long time a kind of playground for people to try out new social structures, but lately there's this gentrification process in Berlin that's really overwhelming. In Kreuzberg, which was or which still is an alternative quarter of the city, now there are rich people moving in and all these condominiums being built. I saw one house where you can park your car in front, on the same level as your apartment, to make it safer for you. So there are all these weird architectural ideas popping up, and then there are other areas like Prenzlauer Berg which is in former East Berlin, where you have a real gentrification melting point, where only families live and everybody behaves as if they live in a small village. So especially from that point of view, it makes total sense to put *High-Rise* in Berlin. Where else in Europe right now? Probably in East Europe soon, but right now this is the place where most of the gentrification is happening, or where it's visible. A lot of money moved to Berlin because it's the capital, and there are so many *real* gated communities: there's one right in the middle of the city for example, next to a park, the 'Volkspark Friedrichshain'; and they have a doorman. You can only get in if you pass the doorman, and then you have a street, and a pool, and little houses, like a suburb. And this is happening in 2007 - in the center of Berlin; Paul makes *Hochhaus* happen in 2013, not that far away. And I don't think it's that much of a utopia.

PAUL: We have a doorman called Weingarten in the radio play, played by an old actor from the East who I met at the Berliner Ensemble, Heinrich Buttchereit. He has a Stasi pass in the play; he's been hired by del Ponte because he has the best techniques in surveillance and security... They're just very well trained. At one point, when there's an escalation of the situation in the house, Weingarten says: "it's just as before: we don't have the Wall in a vertical sense anymore, now it's horizontal, in the house, between the upper class and the lower class." He says "ok, now I have my Wall back!"

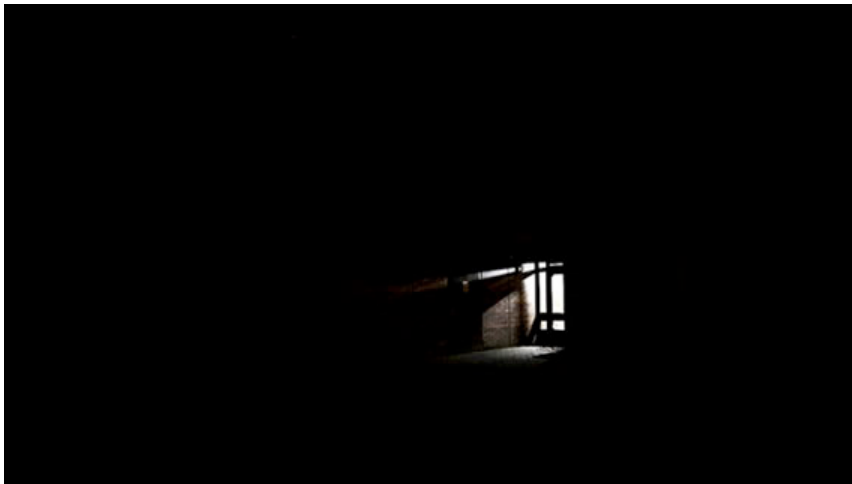


Image from Hochhaus, © Paul Plamper & Niklas Goldbach, 2008.

DAN: There's a great deal of political content in your adaptation; and with these references to Weingarten being ex-Stasi and, also, Niklas, I think you said you'd filmed some parts in the ex-GDR, was that right?

NIKLAS: Yeah, that's true.

DAN: There are echoes – deliberate echoes? – of the GDR, of the Stasi and of Nazi Germany. What's the point of these echoes for your audience? What are you trying to say to them?

NIKLAS: Well, Berlin has changed so much, at least for me. My background is that I'm a visual artist, a video artist, and most of my work is about the role of the individual in a world on the edge of dystopia. Maybe this is a very pessimistic view – let's say it's an artistic view, it's maybe not only my personal view. I'd worked with Paul before, on another radio play called Release that actually took place in a prison. He told me about his new play, and invited me to a pre-listening session, and I thought about images that could occur within the three acts of the audio play. First of all I went straight to the point where Paul's fictional high-rise would stand, between Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain, right on the border where the Wall was. I went and took photos. It's a vast area, and I thought, well, what kind of architecture could be in this area?

All the three parts of the radio play are filmed in the former GDR, there's not a single West German building. I think there are several reasons for that, but one reason is for example that the GDR system seems like a mixture of dystopia *and* utopia to me – it started as a utopia – of a social project. Del Ponte, the architect in the radio play, his idea is to make a social project that combines different classes of people. And this is actually what the GDR system had in common with del Ponte – maybe. His idea is to get rid of classes in this building; and that was also an idea of the GDR – West Germany never had that idea.

PAUL: You know, Ballard puts a big focus on the social classes in his novel, and at first you think, oh, the social classes, nowadays those concepts sound really seventies, but actually my thoughts are the exact opposite. West Germany since WWII has tried to have this *soziale Marktwirtschaft* – a social market economy – and until the beginning or the middle of the '90s, it worked quite well. Do you have this expression, the 'social scissor'? It's a like a scissor that's wide or narrow: you have the classes drifting apart from each other or closer to each other. Up to the '90s, the scissor was half closed, but in the last ten years, this has been completely, outrageously reversed. Now you have the underprivileged again; you have a small upper class getting richer and more powerful. I thought that we had to start talking about classes again. Ballard wrote about them in 1975, and now it's back, it's a very hot topic again.

Part two of the radio play is really about this. And at the same time it's like a fast-forward history of the extreme Left in Germany. From the initial spontaneous protests in the sixties, the fun **Sponti** actions, up to the **Red Army Faction** in the late seventies, which got to be rather violent and militarily organized. The camera-man Andreas Lang – in the novel he's called Wilder – lives on the ground floor. Lang, played by Milan Peschel, is accused of having killed the first human in the house, the second victim after the dog. Lang's first reaction to the accusation is to gather people around him, to play *Skat*, a card game. As an act of political protest, they play cards in front of the supermarket on the 23rd floor, and then their protest gets more violent. Lang moves from being a buddy of the underprivileged, to being their leader. He leads a *Feldzug*...



Image from *Hochhaus*, © Paul Plamper & Niklas Goldbach, 2008.

NIKLAS: Like a battle, a campaign.

PAUL: They go up the high-rise, trying to burn the food stores of the upper class. Barricades have already been built from sofas and so on, so that there's no access to the upper floors anymore. Lang and his followers succeed in burning the food stores, and in a very irrational moment they announce hunger for the whole house.

NIKLAS: Their slogan is "Solidarity with the hungry people in this world".

DAN: When I'm looking at your original blurb for the Ludwigsmuseum, it's called a 'Horror Hörspiel'. And yet...

PAUL: A sociological horror Hörspiel...

DAN: ... yes. And yet there's a huge amount of political content here.

PAUL: Ballard is a political author for me. Many pages in the novel are about the class system. I like his political content; but at the same time I fear that we sound like a couple of humorless Germans now, who do heavy, grey, intellectual type stuff, but don't get us wrong, the radio play is meant to be pure entertainment; it has the rhythm of an action movie...

NIKLAS: This is what we said in the beginning about Ballard himself, that this is an entertaining book which also has the quality of political comment. It's supposed to be entertaining, but

there's obviously a deeper meaning to it. For example, look at the function of del Ponte, the architect, as opposed to Andreas Lang, the leader of the revolution. Especially in 2007, I think a lot of different types like del Ponte are out there, you know, private people or private investors who take over functions of the state. He's a private person sponsoring the lower class like, for example, some celebrities or rich people today give some of their earnings back to the lower class. So it's a bit ambivalent, what he's doing. To the outside world he looks like he's a really good guy but in the end, he's the one who's living in the penthouse.

DAN: I wondered if you also had a sense of the fact that, in the book, there's a very specific relationship between Wilder and Anthony Royal – between Andreas Lang and del Ponte in *Hochhaus* – there's this Oedipal backstory in the novel. In a sense it's as if Ballard's using that psychological backstory to make a political point.

PAUL: Well, we have the same two characters – the big antipodes – and we pretty much go along with Ballard's narrative. In the end, Andreas Lang, our Wilder, when he's already quite animal-like, mounts to the upper floors and kills del Ponte. It's almost the same story. And then he gets eaten by the women, by the Matriarchat.

When I read the novel, I felt that Ballard really likes to develop the characters and their steps in a psychologically logical order. He has plenty of time to explain what could be the psychological background of Wilder doing what he does, and of his regression into animal status and so on. But in a radio play you don't have that much time; and also I had the sense that in 2006 you don't have to explain why people freak out, it's so obvious, that utopia is, I don't know... I have the impression that Ballard still felt some sort of friction with a positive utopian vision of a society, and so he described its regression into a barbarian state. Sometimes I thought that Ballard in the novel places his figures in a kind of sociological chess game. This figure moves from here to there because of this and that. I didn't feel it necessary to explain so much in our radio play. The dynamic is a musical dynamic.



Image from Hochhaus, © Paul Plamper & Niklas Goldbach, 2008.

DAN: I can see that perhaps you don't need so much narration. But you did introduce a narrator, didn't you? There's an extra-diegetic voice.

PAUL: Yeah; the great Volker Spengler is the narrator. You might know him from his films with Fassbinder. Like in Greek tragedy where you have the person who sees things and advances them, his narrator seems to know everything. He's the transcendent voice. Volker just does it merely by his great personality and his destroyed voice, which breathes a lot of what he has lived.

DAN: Yeah, he has a wonderful voice. What specific narrative changes did you make in the adaptation? You introduce an external narrator; you shift to a straight chronological narrative...

PAUL: A listener can't grasp 30 people like in the novel, he has to concentrate a lot to get to know even 10. So my co-author, Kai Hafemeister and I tried to take as few characters as possible, so that we still could see this as a small society that evolves. We have eight or so main characters, and not many very small parts, because I personally have a big aversion to this 'protagonist and many small parts' thing. We try to create an emotional involvement with each character. We wanted to have characters that you want to get to know better with each episode, because they were broadcast on three consecutive Fridays. So we had to make you want to continue to spend your time with these horrible people.

DAN: And what function does the voice-over narration serve?

PAUL: He's telling as much as is needed, as seldom as possible. When we call it a sociological horror radio play, he's the horror part – supported of course by the soundtrack, which is by **SchneiderTM**. Spengler's voice... It's so difficult to describe it. Like a field in which an atomic bomb exploded... He has a post-World War Three voice...

DAN: It reminded me of Vincent Price or Christopher Lee...

NIKLAS: He's the same kind of character...

PAUL: At the end-credits, Volker always says, 'And remember: You – are High-rise...' This is an allusion to **a recent campaign** of the CDU government in Germany. They wanted to try to impose more national feeling on us. You had all these stupid billboards – saying 'You Are Germany' everywhere. So Volker concludes each part – they get more and more horrifying – with 'You Are High-rise'.



Image from *Hochhaus*, © Paul Plamper & Niklas Goldbach, 2008.

DAN: Are you concerned about nationalism at the moment? In Ballard's latest novel, **Kingdom Come**, he's turned his attention towards specifically English nationalism.

PAUL: Yeah, I understand that. We recorded our radio play right before the soccer World Cup in 2006. There were young Germans with flags and the national colours on their faces, a new kind of 'pop nationalism'. After what happened in the Nazi era, Germans thought they could finally show an non-violent national feeling, just as in other countries. They had the feeling that everybody steps together, that we are a stronger society. This also infected our way of telling *High-Rise*, that people are trying to create this new community. And then you see what happens to it. Which would lead you, as a society as a whole, to the next war. In *High-Rise*, it leads you to the terrible end. I don't know; I look at history as something cyclical, and not so much as a regression into a barbarian state. We tell the story of only one high-rise, and in the end we put a bigger accent on the fact that the women take over, as after WWII it was the **Trümmerfrauen**, the 'ruin women', in Germany who rebuilt society, and really started the German **Wirtschaftswunder**, the economic miracle. After WWII, it was the women who cleaned up the men's mess. Like the Matriarchat in the novel. We emphasized this; you see there's a new order evolving; it starts again, a cycle.

We have a saying, *vor der eigenen Tür kehren* – to take the brush and clean in front of your own door – and that's what Kai and me are trying to do. We're trying to tell the story as close as possible to us, as if it could happen next to us, as if it could happen within us. Of course that's something that is much bigger than the rise of nationalism right now. It's like *High-Rise* being an image for a deliberate prison, and this prison which is self-chosen just displaces your view of another prison, which is Homo sapiens not getting out of his monstrous skin. Homo sapiens has this trait of this monstrosity; let's face the fact. It's a very Ballardian thought. Goya once said 'I don't fear witches, or poltergeists, or ghosts, or braggers or giants, or evil men; I fear no creature but one – the human.' He said that in 1790, and I think Ballard could have said the same thing. It's really about human nature, *High-Rise*. All these allusions in *Hochhaus* to the downfall of the socialist system, or how they killed their own ideals in socialist realism – all of these elements are products of, and evolve from, human nature.

DAN: I don't know if you came across **Concrete Island**, the novel before *High-Rise*? For a later edition, Ballard wrote a new introduction in which he refers to both **Crash** and *High-Rise*. He says something very close to what you're saying, and what Goya said; he writes: "[A]s well as the many physical difficulties facing us there are the psychological ones. How resolute are we, and how far can we trust ourselves and our own motives? Perhaps, secretly, we hope to be marooned, to escape our families, lovers and responsibilities. Modern technology, as I tried to show in *Crash* and *High-Rise*, offers an

endless field-day to any deviant strains in our personalities.” Which is precisely the point you’re also making, no?

PAUL: Yeah. And he also talks in *High-Rise* about the *suppression* of anti-social behaviour; the anti-social as something we have to suppress. But regarding Philip del Ponte, our architect, why he’s called that. It’s because there is an original for *High-Rise*. It’s called the Ponte Tower in Johannesburg. This is why in the beginning I was talking of Ballard as a prophet, because in Johannesburg you had in reality what Ballard’s story depicts. The Ponte Tower is 173m high, 54 floors high, with 2500 people living there and 470 apartments, and it was founded in the seventies too, as the most prestigious tower in town. Up to 2004 it was the biggest building south of the equator. In Johannesburg, you can see it from everywhere. It’s round, and in the middle you have this cylindrical space; it’s like a gigantic trash bin. After a while the Ponte Tower was full of drugs, gang wars and people throwing themselves from the floors – many, many people killed themselves by jumping into the building, into the middle – and everybody threw his trash in the middle so that there was three floors of trash. The whole building stunk terribly. Things were out of control at the Ponte, completely out of control. People trying to hire other people who owned guns to go out and do their shopping for them, because it was too dangerous; the elevators not functioning; child prostitution – it was incredible. You think, ah, Ballard must have known about this, but then the Ponte was founded in 1976 – Ballard wrote *High-Rise* only one year before. So our architect is called Philip del Ponte because of this tower; though he has an aristocratic ‘del’ in front of the ‘Ponte’...

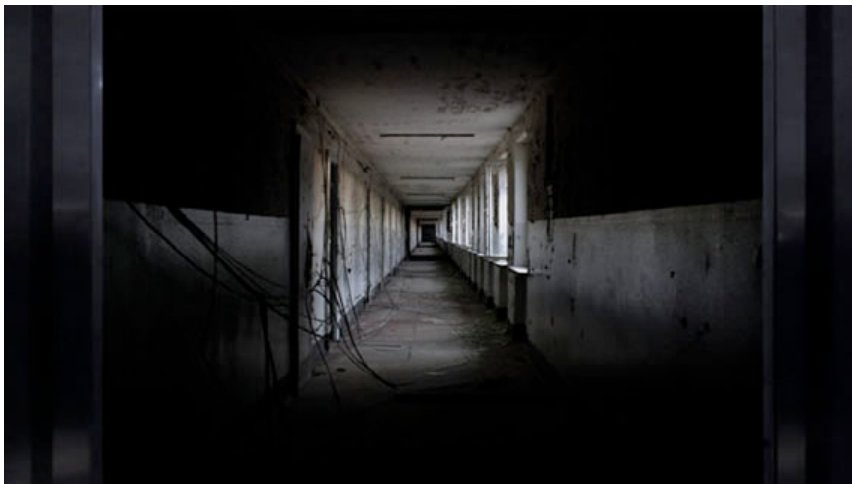


Image from *Hochhaus*, © Paul Plamper & Niklas Goldbach, 2008.

DAN: To correspond with the ‘Royal’ of Anthony Royal, I suppose, yes?

PAUL: Yes.

DAN: It’s an unusual format; a radio play with a film accompanying it. Is this part of a bigger project, or a general direction you’re taking with your own work?

PAUL: We did the radio play first, and then I thought of how to present it in public because I thought it could be interesting to show it at the Hörspielzentrale, in a series of radio play events at the Hau, a theatre in Kreuzberg. Then of course I thought of Niklas, because he’s a specialist in architecture. We should describe the videos, no, Niklas?

DAN: I did want to ask you about the film for the first episode. There’s a sentence in *High-Rise*: “They would film the exteriors from a helicopter, and from the nearest block four hundred yards away – in his mind’s eye he could already see a long, sixty-second zoom, slowly moving from the whole building in frame to a close-up of a single apartment, one cell in this nightmare territory.” Which is more or less exactly your first film, no?

NIKLAS: Yeah it is. But to be honest this is a coincidence... When Paul asked me to join *Hochhaus*, my first intention was to read the book, and then we decided, maybe it’s better if I don’t read the book... So instead I tried to concentrate on the characters in Paul’s version of *High-Rise*. And, as Paul said, most of my work is about the human environment and urbanism, and it has some formal characteristics. In my video work, for example, one of the characteristics is the manipulation of time and the control of the image, and the use of post-production. It’s mostly about personal feelings of alienation or mass cultural fantasies; the key themes of the latest works are the contradictions between public and private spheres. I try to examine how this comes down to a personal level, and try to use video – this is a cheesy metaphor, but maybe it’s allowed – to use video as a temporal microscope, trying to capture the moment where the subconscious shifts objectivity. This is why I was completely blown away when I listened to the first version of *Hochhaus*, because what Paul had done on the audio level was actually what I’m trying to do on the video level in my work, because *Hochhaus* is highlighting the political

tensions between these visions of utopia and the subjective experiences of individuals. Also, I think that humans mostly use architecture to express their power, in every form of society, and some of my videos are about the failure of architecture, about the failure of a utopia and its turning into a dystopia.



Image from *Hochhaus*, © Paul Plamper & Niklas Goldbach, 2008.

DAN: Could you describe the three films, which accompany the three episodes?

NIKLAS: Ok. The first one, where you just said that there's this zoom that's described in the book. First of all it was a weird process to visualize this building because it should be mostly in the head of the audience, you know, you should imagine this building and it could have all different associations, but then I found the buildings at Ernst-Thälmann-Park, which is a socialist building park in former East Berlin. **Ernst Thälmann** was the leader of the Communist party during, I think, much of the Weimar Republic and his buildings are actually like a small version of what's described in *High-Rise*. They were like small high-rises, but with a park around them and the buildings were on a hill so that everyone who was living in that building had a very good view, which is a kind of social idea. Obviously there are also bigger apartments on the very top and you had to be member of the socialist party to live in them, so there's again this hypocrisy; I guess it's a very hypocritical way to invent a social structure, when there's power involved, anyway. I went first of all to the area where Paul's version of *High-Rise* was supposed to take place, and Paul had already said that it's close to this area where MTV and other big companies have started to have their flagship stores or their company buildings. I took pictures of one vast area where there was previously a club, and where now they're building a big, multi-functional stadium. This is right where our imagined high-rise is, in the image in the first video. So what I did is I went to Ernst-Thälmann-Park and just stacked the buildings there on top of each other. This is obviously a metaphor: stacking these socialist buildings on top of each other to get a bigger idea of the whole thing.

PAUL: He did it almost like a plastic surgeon – from one house he makes a Tower of Babylon; it's beautiful.

NIKLAS: It changes a lot of the content, I think. Regarding the technical aspects: at the beginning, the zoom, it's a digital zoom, because the whole building itself is a Photoshop building. It's combined with video in the background: the sky that's shading from daylight into night is real; and also you see the skyline of Berlin, you see the TV tower in the background of the video, just to make the whole thing look a bit more real but also a bit like a comic. It looks like a fantasy building but it has this weird mixture of reality because it's made from real images. The concept of the first part is that it begins in daylight, whilst in the radio play we're listening to a TV show where the architect is talking about the building. He's describing what you can see in the video; you look at my building, and listen to what Del Ponte says about his building. There are some parts where it's really fitting and some others where it's not fitting, which is good because then you have the idea that this is not *the* building: it's just a placeholder for the building, in a way. When the first part of the audio play ends, it ends in the dark, at a party, and the first human dies. But this is happening at night, and so as the video image slowly zooms into the building, you end up at the entrance hall of the building, so metaphorically by the end of the first part you're *in* the nightmare. It starts as a TV show, and in the end you're in complete darkness, surrounded by the light of the windows - and you're part of that building.

PAUL: Yeah, and the camera is right in front of the building, you know, in the entrance where the first dead person is thrown from the top floor...

NIKLAS: ...out of the window...

PAUL: ... that's where the image ends...

NIKLAS: ...yeah. And the people in the audio play are also looking out of the window, so they look down to the ground. This is where you find yourself at the end of the video.



Image from Hochhaus, © Paul Plamper & Niklas Goldbach, 2008.

The second part was filmed in a building on the German island Rügen, a Nazi seaside resort. I think it's the longest building in Europe: it's 4.5 kilometers long, and it was the KDF building, which was built by the Nazis. It was part of the Nazi 'Strength through Joy' programme. It was supposed to be a hotel for so-called 'good Germans'. It was never finished; it actually ended up as a ruin, but then after WWII the GDR used it as an army barracks, where the army of the GDR was stationed. And then after the Wall came down it was used as a youth hostel, and it still is – they had stopped using it as a youth hostel, but I read recently in the news that it's re-opened, which is such a weird idea. When you listen to the audio play, the second film corresponds to what is really happening *in* the building, whereas the first film is derived just from the structure of the audio play. The first part introduces us to the house and the people, whereas the second part is where everything is turning from a utopia into a dystopia, or from a funny audio play into a horror scenario. In the audio play when a new chapter starts, you hear the sound of the elevator. So, in the second film, the audience is actually stuck in this elevator that you hear all through the audio play. It's actually spectating what's happening in the building, and you can see how everything's falling apart literally in the image, when there's this very slow fade from the intact floor of the building, which was actually Photoshopped, to how the building in Rügen looks today. So it fades from a fictional image into a real image, whereas the audience is just stuck in the elevator, and through the elevator doors, they're forced to watch the process of decay.

PAUL: There are several buildings in Prora-Rügen, that are exactly the same size and so on. Some are well-kept, because there's the youth hostel inside, then there are others which are just ruins, at least on the inside, you have all these cables sticking out. I think Niklas broke into one of those...

NIKLAS: ...yeah, I did break in, I brought an axe...

PAUL: ...to film the ruin, and so you see in 50 minutes a fade from a nice long, intact, well-kept floor, to the same floor as a ruined chaos of cables. The video does nothing but that.

NIKLAS: But in fact I used three images, because the floors that are intact where the youth hostel was don't look as nice as the high-rise should look before the revolution or the battle starts. So I photoshopped it; the very first image when the elevator opens in the video is pure photoshop. And then it goes to the real image: how the intact floors look today. And then I fade into the parts of the building that are completely falling into disrepair.





Image from *Hochhaus*, © Paul Plamper & Niklas Goldbach, 2008.

DAN: And then the third film, which reminded me of bits of Chris Marker, or Tarkovsky...

NIKLAS: I was really happy when I read that, because both of these visionaries are like real heroes of mine. So thank you for that...

DAN: Well, it's a very clear visual echo. Ballard himself is a real fan of Chris Marker.

NIKLAS: Yeah, I can totally believe that. So, the third part is filmed in Rechlin. It's a very, very small village in the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania), so also former GDR. The houses you can see in the video were model houses for Germania, built by Albert Speer. They're four or five-storeys high, and they look like miniatures of high-rises. You find them completely abandoned in the woods, and there are no signs for how to find them. I knew about the buildings from a documentary, so I went with a car, and I really had to search. There are no signs because there are still a lot of mines in that area from the war. What happened is that the Nazis used the buildings as test buildings, and they dropped bombs on them, because the buildings themselves were a mixture of a house where people were supposed to live and a bunker. They're massive, made out of concrete. So that was their function; and now you find these four buildings in the middle of the wood, completely abandoned.

There's a wild garden on top of the filmed ruin – and the end of the audio play is also taking place on the roof – this is where the women build a new society, a Matriarchat. But the video actually starts in the ruins of the building, whereas the audio play starts in this Circus Maximus arena, when Andy Lang is fighting against all the others and becomes the leader of the lower class by physical violence. Then the architect, del Ponte, comes downstairs and says, well, if you are a gladiator, I am Caesar. So there are all these references to ancient Rome; and these ruins in the film, if you look really close at them they have a similar kind of patina. But when you zoom out you see that they are part of a vision of another time in history. The building on Rügen and Speer's buildings were part of a vision that didn't include the human being. So for me they are an architectural metaphor of a society, or a reference to a model of society in which the human actually can't survive.

PAUL: Because Niklas uses these extremely slow-motion fades, you look at the image, but you don't see the change. It's a very dramatic change, but it's not obvious when you look at it in real-time. You feel that something changes, but you can't really grasp it. It's so perfidious, it's subtle, and it's absolutely not Hollywoodesque. It has a different kind of tension. Because the radio play is so dense – yet the videos give you the freedom to have your own image of the characters. At the same time the videos show the big process, what I talked of as the evolutionary cycle.



Image from *Hochhaus*, © Paul Plamper & Niklas Goldbach, 2008.

NIKLAS: When I made the videos, there was this question about how you do a video to a radio play and not turn the whole thing into a movie. When I first listened to the radio play I wrote down a lot of images, but they're all just details. In the end there was the decision to in fact just show one image in each video that's slowly changing. 55 minutes is quite a long time for a video – and I think if you just use one image, and look at it for a long time, it kind of disappears and gets replaced by other images. Warhol said that if you look at one image and you think it's boring, just look at it for ten minutes and if it's still boring, look at it for like 20 minutes and so

on... In our case, you're looking at one image for 55 minutes, and there's a change happening, but you also have the audio that's guiding you through a completely different world. I noticed that some people during the shows were closing their eyes; it was fun for me to watch their reaction when they opened their eyes again because all of a sudden the video was at a completely different point. I think some people thought, oh, it's just one image, I don't have to look at that, and then after a while they noticed that a lot has changed.

DAN: Absolutely. I actually rather enjoyed the fact that, during the first part, it got dark on the video as it was getting dark in Köln.

NIKLAS: Yeah, it was. I was really happy that the screen itself was not on the side of the Dom, because that would have been really tough competition...

Dan O'Hara, 2008

*Hochhaus is currently touring Germany; the next dates will be on the 12 January 2008, **Theater Mannheim**, and in February 2008 at the **Kampnagel Hamburg**. Eventually it will be available to buy at Paul Plamper's future outlet for radio plays, **Hörpark**.*

...: **MORE INFO**

+ **Paul Plamper**

+ **Niklas Goldbach**

Author: **Dan O'Hara**

Find all posts by **Dan O'Hara**

One Response »

1. scot on **January 12th, 2008 at 5:54 pm:**

What an excellent article. Lets hope the work makes it outside Germany.

However one small error of fact mentioned by your interviewees:

"Up to 2004 it was the biggest building south of the equator. "

Centerpoint in Sydney is over 300 metres. The MLC Tower is 228. There's no way that Ponte tower was ever the largest lower in the southern hemisphere (residential tower, maybe) - Centrepont and the MLC centre are 1970s builds.

Leave a Reply