

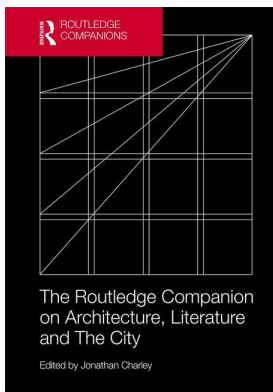
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.93

On: 21 Jan 2019

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature and The City

Jonathan Charley

Taking the measure of the incommensurable

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315613154-2>

Louise Pelletier

Published online on: 17 Aug 2018

How to cite :- Louise Pelletier. 17 Aug 2018, *Taking the measure of the incommensurable from: The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature and The City* Routledge

Accessed on: 21 Jan 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315613154-2>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Taking the measure of the incommensurable

Architectural representation of the improbable

Louise Pelletier

In the beginning was the word

In *The Great Wall of China*, a short story published posthumously in 1931, Franz Kafka explains that when the wall was being built, some speculations arose about the purpose of such a gigantic construction. According to the narrator, an old man from a southern province who claims to have worked on the colossal structure, various hypotheses were put forward, from political reasons to spiritual quests, evoking even the biblical story of a failed attempt to reach heaven. If the Babylonian tower had failed to reach its goal, a scholar explained, it was due to the weakness of the foundations and he suggested, “the Great Wall alone would provide for the first time in the history of mankind a secure foundation for a new Tower of Babel.”¹ Before its construction began, China was a boundless country where time was extended in such a way that the present of Peking was “the historical past of the south.” Thus, the king endeavoured to establish a unifying link throughout the territory that would enable him to traverse “the souls of almost all the provinces,”² – a boundary that would unite the country under a common name – making the half-circle of the wall a spiritual foundation for the new tower. Hence for Kafka, the building of this gigantic infrastructure and the unification of a territory symbolized the dream of a universal language that would ultimately be attained by the technological achievement of its construction (Figure 1.1).

The biblical allegory of the Tower of Babel is an archetype that has fuelled artistic pursuit since the early days of our civilization. Its tale, however, is not only about the arrogant dream of man to conquer heaven, as has often been claimed. The text of Genesis (II: 1–9) describes the purpose of naming a bounded place, of defining the limits of the world, and of delineating a horizon – the ultimate encounter between the earth and the infinity of heaven.³ In fact, early Western representations of the construction do not primarily describe an existing space or structure; rather they provide a few details about the appearance of an archetypal building. The unfolding of the story takes precedence over a formal rendering of the tower, putting the emphasis on the narrative structure of the event – that is, the building of the tower followed by God’s punishment.⁴ It is later in the Renaissance that the tower itself became the

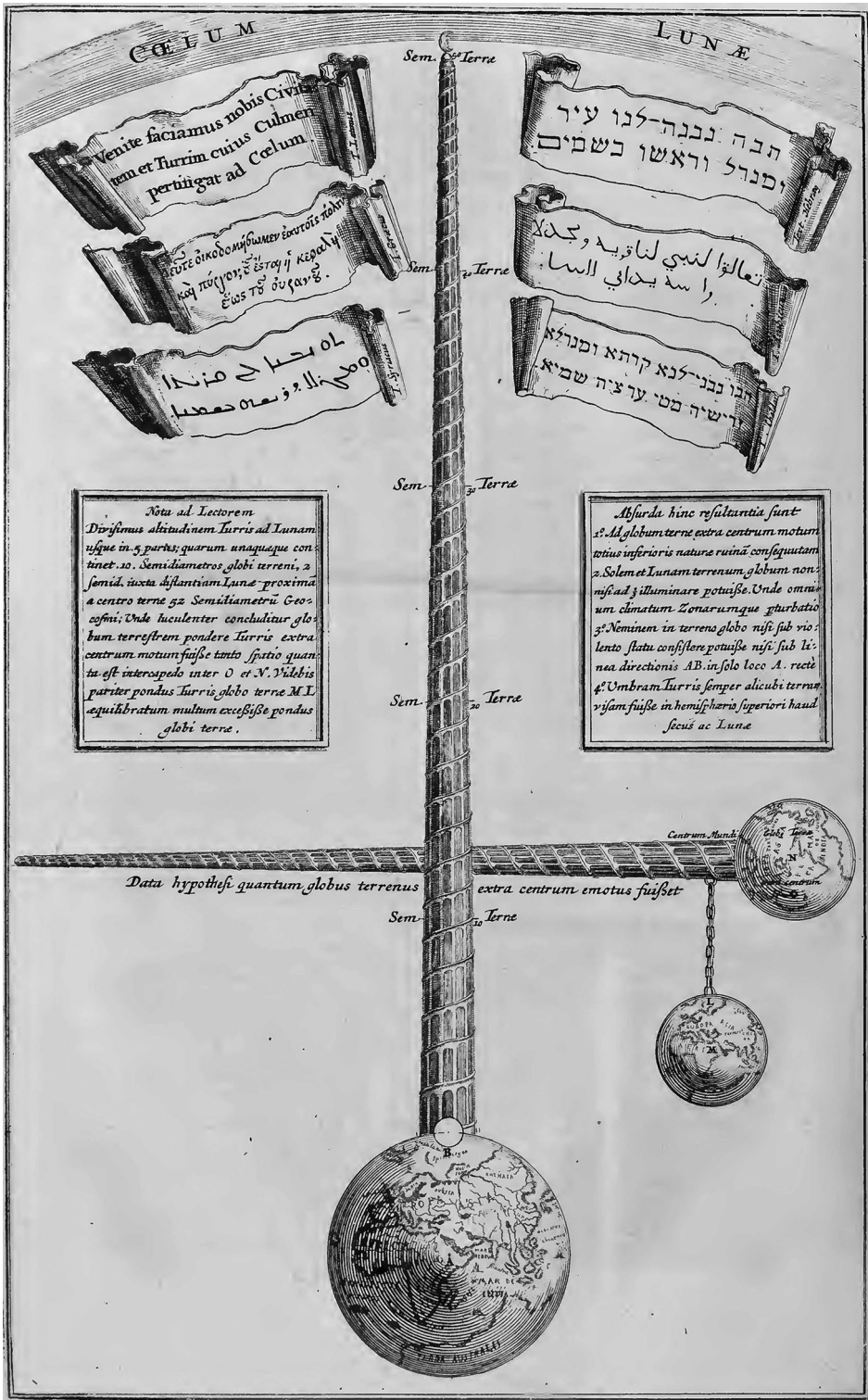


Figure 1.1 The tower of Babel from Athanasius Kircher, *Turris Babel* (1679). Public domain.

primary subject of representations of the biblical allegory. Then in the last decades of the seventeenth century, Athanasius Kircher used objective tools of representation to demonstrate the impossibility of the tower's existence. In *Turris Babel* (1679), he substantiates a scientific refutation of the tower that makes its destruction unnecessary.⁵

Kircher's engraving shows a tower cantilevered from the earth, whose centre of gravity has been shifted off balance by the mass of the impracticable structure. Using a complex mathematical calculation, Kircher proved the foolishness of Nimrod's ambition:

In order to reach even the lowest heaven, that of the moon, the tower would have had to be 178,682 miles high, necessitating some three million tons of substance. Beside its economic impossibility, it would have had the effect of pulling the very earth from its place in the centre of the universe, causing cosmic ruin.⁶

Thus the objective tools of architectural representation and the scientific authority of mathematical calculations succeeded in disproving the possibility of its construction, invalidating the very existence of the tower.

Since the beginning of modernity, questions of representation have become central to architectural discourse, a process in which the tools of basic representation have become increasingly objectified. Our current obsession with controlling the final output has led the profession to develop an elaborate protocol requiring every minute detail to be planned, drawn out, corrected and annotated in order to make sure that it matches perfectly the architect's original intent. Yet, this comprehensive account leaves no space for the intangible to be revealed. In the realm of architectural representation, even the infinite and immaterial void above our heads – otherwise known as the sky – sometimes needs to be reduced to a conceptual vault postulated at 100 kilometres above ground zero in order to meet the requirements of computer-generated images. The meeting of the sky and the earth at the horizon is reduced to a fine line that divides the picture plane at infinity, inaccessible to the embodied observer. The horizon also collapses in the tracing of an architectural section, where the skyline is assimilated to the earth in a dark line, thus depriving the liminal condition from its potential thickness.⁷

For the architect, drawing, mapping and other means of documentation are tools designed to eliminate the improbable, avoid the unlikely and insure that no possible interpretation could lead to unfortunate misunderstandings that inevitably end in litigation and assignation of responsibility. This fear of reprisals and ensuing lawsuits has led to an ever-increasing codification of the design process and the output often remains hermetic to all but the highly specialized building trades. This ultimate objectification has led to some aberrations where the very inhabitants of projected spatial experimentations are barely welcome and sometimes even precluded from appropriating the place. For parametricists, for example, convinced in the well-founded basis of object-oriented ontology, a building's existence can do away with the presence of human dwellers, giving priority to some patterns determined by meta-data, or through eliminating windows so as not to spoil the monolithic integrity of a conceptual construct. Is it surprising then that some places appear to entirely deny our very presence?

As a counterpoint, mapping, documentation and various forms of description of architectural spaces in fiction highlight human presence charged with psychological obsessions, political ambitions or even artistic longings. Architectural representation in literature offers a potential alternative to imagine, describe and realize ambiguous places loaded with latent possibilities. In order to address the dilemma of a world where representation tends to ignore the crucial involvement of the inhabitants of spaces either built or imagined, the fictional

naming of bounded places, or the narration of the limits of the world provide fruitful alternatives to document the encounter between earth and sky. Issues of representation in fiction reveal a dimension of architecture – often political, sometimes psychological, but always embodied – usually unacknowledged by the assumed objectivity of the architect’s tools.

Moreover, mapping and documenting the incommensurable is a way of taming the threatening nature of the infinite, preventing the otherwise doomed enterprise of extending endlessly toward the sky, the horizon or the underworld. In this essay, I will look at three contemporary novels, J.G. Ballard’s *High-Rise* (1975), Michel Houellebecq’s *The Map and the Territory* (2010) and Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000), where the protagonists attempt to capture through various forms of representation – mapping, photography or documentary films – constructions of immeasurable amplitude and focus on the potential of fictional architecture to convey the social, political and even psychological critique of the context in which they are set.⁸ It may serve as a point of departure to help reflect on the ethical role of the architect and grasp the limitations of conventional tools of architectural representation.

Documenting the ascent

In Ballard’s *High-Rise*, the evocation of the archetypal structure aimed skywards, but interrupted by a brutal confrontation of biblical magnitude, is set from the very beginning with the unsettling image of the opening scene. The main protagonist, Dr Robert Laing, is sitting on his balcony on the twenty-fifth floor “eating the roast hindquarter of the Alsatian [dog] before setting off to his lecture at the medical school.”⁹ This juxtaposition of an act of barbarism (eating a domesticated animal commonly qualified as man’s best friend) with the daily activity expected from a well-bred individual reveals the collapse of social conventions, which has already occurred in this place fraught with “opportunities for violence and confrontation” where all the amenities of modern life that usually indicate a harmonious cohabitation of a community – from the supermarket and swimming-pools, to the bank and junior school – are “all in effect abandoned in the sky.”¹⁰ Contrary to the biblical story, however, destruction will not come from above, but from within as a result of confrontations between the upper and lower floors.

On a first level of interpretation, *High-Rise* depicts a condition of modernity and urban life typical of the glorious years of the mid-1970s, as two thousand tenants cohabit in a luxury high-rise building, striving to establish their social status by rising toward the upper floors. But impending doom is looming and undoubtedly the structure also symbolizes the shattering of humanity and a return to barbarism, as the story unfolds and life in the high-rise descends into chaos. In many of Ballard’s early novels, architecture is often reclaimed by nature in a post-apocalyptic world – one may think of the submerged cities of northern Europe and America after the melting of the polar ice-caps in *The Drowned World* (1962), or the crystallizing jungle of *The Crystal World* (1966). In *High-Rise*, the building also has been returned to some kind of a primeval nature after a social cataclysm. Evoking a troglodyte habitat, the apartment of the protagonist is “slotted almost at random into the cliff face of the apartment building”, which has become an immeasurable background, part of a natural occurrence, a mountainous landscape. The signs that betray the collapse of society and the bafflement of its social structure are everywhere. It is explicit from the start in the bonfire of telephone directories used to roast the Alsatian dog: and now that the tenants of the Tower, who had sought to build a city *to make a name* for themselves, have been alienated and crushed, the unifying brick of directories has become the consuming fire of barbarity and their ashes can be “scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”¹¹

The story begins three months earlier while a party is going on a few floors above Robert Laing's apartment, on the thirty-first floor. The initial cross-level interaction occurs when a bottle of sparkling wine crashes down on his balcony after ricocheting off an awning as it tumbled downwards. While this potentially fatal incident goes unnoticed by the inhabitants of the upper floor – “people in high-rises tended not to care about tenants more than two floors below them”¹² –, it outlines the precariousness of his position, located just above the mid-point of the forty-storey tower. Confined to his over-priced cell, the sense of isolation is pervasive, not only within the building but also in its urban context. The great distance that separates the apartment towers of the new development contributes most directly to convey the loneliness of modern dwelling:

The immense volume of open space that separated the building from the neighbouring high-rise a quarter of a mile away unsettled his sense of balance. At times he felt that he was living in the gondola of a Ferris wheel permanently suspended three hundred feet above the ground.

The complex is made of five towers set in a mile-square area, his own building – the first to be completed and occupied – overlooking a forthcoming artificial lake, currently left in a state of incompleteness, “an empty concrete basin surrounded by parking lots and construction equipments”¹³.

The sense of isolation also translates in the daily routine of the protagonists and a chosen form of anonymity. Because of the wide range of services offered in key locations in the building – “the entire tenth floor was given over to a wide concourse as large as an aircraft carrier's flight-deck, which contained a supermarket, bank and hairdressing salon, a swimming-pool and gymnasium, a well-stocked liquor store” –, Laing's life in the high-rise is “as self-contained as the building itself. In effect, the apartment block [is] a small vertical city, its two thousand inhabitants boxed up into the sky”¹⁴. The abundance and variety of amenities and the sense of security provided by the infrastructure give its inhabitants a feeling of completeness denied by the hostile world outside to such an extent that from his apartment on the twenty-fifth floor, Laing feels that “he [is] looking down at the sky, rather than up at it”¹⁵.

Despite the incomplete surroundings left in a perpetual state of on-going transformation, the massive scale of the architecture made of glass and smooth concrete contrasts with the rundown and decaying areas of the city visible in the distance. Laing's own building is the only part of the complex that has been completed, and he grows psychologically more distant from the land below, as if the tower keeps expanding skywards: “Each day the towers of Central London seemed slightly more distant, the landscape of an abandoned planet receding slowly from his mind”¹⁶. Throughout the story, while everyone pretends that all is normal, the ominous shape of the city in the distance translates the unacknowledged state of mind of the tower's inhabitants, the ragged skyline of the city resembling “the disturbed encephalograph of an unresolved mental crisis”¹⁷. This analogy of the building with a psychic event is a recurring one throughout the novel, emphasizing that the true dimension of the high-rise cannot be measured objectively, but can only be apprehended through some kind of introspection “as if this huge building existed solely in his mind and would vanish if he stopped thinking about it”¹⁸. This dimension of architecture, intricately linked to the psychological state of mind of its inhabitants, is also a recurring theme of the other two novels I will be examining.

The completely functional building was designed to take into account every need of the well-to-do professionals that constitute a highly individualistic population. Using a

well-known analogy from architect Le Corbusier, Ballard writes: “the high-rise was a huge *machine* designed to serve, not the collective body of tenants, but the individual resident in isolation”.¹⁹ The building itself seems to have a life of its own, responding to an internal time and conditioned by “an artificial psychological climate”. Moreover, this vertical city also imposes on the two thousand tenants a distinct sense of order and social hierarchy by enforcing a natural segregation between upper and lower levels, literally transposing in its physical organization the traditional social subdivisions of the lower, middle and upper classes:

The 10th floor shopping mall formed a clear boundary between the lower nine floors, with their ‘proletariat’ of film technicians, air-hostesses and the like, and the middle section of the high-rise, which extended from the 10th floor to the swimming-pool and restaurant deck on the 35th. This central two-thirds of the apartment building formed its middle class, made up of self-centred but basically docile members of the professions [...]. Above them, on the top five floors of the high-rise, was its upper class, the discreet oligarchy of minor tycoons and entrepreneurs, television actresses and careerist academics, with their high-speed elevators and superior services, their carpeted staircases.²⁰

Hovering over the tenants like a fallen angel or a demigod, Anthony Royal, the architect of the entire complex, lives in the penthouse.

In *High-Rise* – as in *House of Leaves* that will be discussed later – one of the tenants feels the need to record the internal life of the building by making a documentary, as if fixing the image of the place was the only way to truly grasp the measure of the unruly structure. Provoked by a decision of the tenants from the upper levels to exclude children from the pool on the thirty-fifth floor, Richard Wilder, a TV producer living on the first floor with his wife and son, launches into an irreverent crusade that gradually takes him higher and higher, all the way to the top floor where the architect is waiting for him. Together with some of his neighbours, and using his documentary as a point of entry, Wilder starts his ascent, punctuated by recurring attacks on his fellow denizens from the upper floors.

From the inconsiderate disposal of garbage to the interminable wait for the elevators, the seemingly menial disturbances of high-rise living eventually spark violent confrontations among the tenants. This state of turmoil is in stark contrast with the unperturbed concrete slabs that rise defiantly against the sky, challenging even the sun for the prevailing position. The confrontation between the man-made structures and the rising sun timidly appearing between the legs of the tower, “raising itself over the horizon as if nervous of waking this line of giants”, results in the victorious attempt by the high-rise in “colonizing the sky”.²¹ The surrendering of the sun to the dominating power of the high-rise becomes manifest through the recurrent blackouts that plague some of the lower levels, usually accompanied by random acts of violence, sexual assaults and other altercations between residents. In one such incident, the body of an Afghan hound was found in the tenth-floor swimming pool. This profanation of the chlorinated water causes all residents to stay away from it, and the abandoned fluid remains completely still, except for an occasional ripple across its surface, “as if in its pelagic deeps an immense creature was stirring in its sleep”.²²

Laing suspects that the dog’s death was not accidental, but an act of provocation that would no doubt be met with further retaliation. Most of the fifty dogs or so living in the building belong to owners of the ten upper floors, while most of the children live on the lower ten floors. The event of the dog’s drowning only confirms the blatant rivalry that had been brewing between the dog owners of the upper floors and the parents of young children

on the lower levels, the middle storeys acting as a kind of buffer. Laing's suspicion is later confirmed when Wilder admits to himself "he had drowned the Afghan, not because he disliked the dog particularly or wanted to upset its owner", but as he held the thrashing body of the animal under water, "in a strange way he had been struggling with the building itself".²³

As the story develops, the high-rise and its surrounding constructed landscape becomes an increasingly autonomous entity where man's presence is almost incidental: "Part of its appeal lay all too clearly in the fact that this was an environment built, not for man, but for man's absence".²⁴ The self-sufficient structure thus could do away with the presence of any inhabitant and Wilder's failed attempts at scaling the structure becomes a rejection by the building itself.²⁵ His determination to make a documentary is in part "a calculated attempt to come to terms with the building", but deep down he knows that the driving force is the pressing desire to dominate it.²⁶ Wilder had developed some kind of phobia about the high-rise:

He was constantly aware of the immense weight of concrete stacked above him, and the sense that his body was the focus of the lines of force running through the building, almost as if Anthony Royal had deliberately designed his body to be held within their grip.²⁷

As the building becomes an increasingly autonomous entity, the individuals within it are assimilated to its building blocks.

Royal's dream of a new social order has disintegrated and he witnesses with some fascination the rebellion brewing within the moribund project and the breakdown of what symbolizes a prison of good taste typical of high modernism, which "had transformed everything in [the] apartments into an ideal marriage of function and design".²⁸ Thus through the allegory of an ambitious project gone array, a project gradually shedding its human inhabitants, Ballard warns the reader against the pitfall of dominant, self-sufficient projects that take a life of their own and leave behind their primary responsibility of sustaining human interaction.

Surveying the unmapped territory

In Michel Houellebecq's novel *The Map and the Territory*, the Babylonian reference is also explicit from the very beginning. It starts with the description of a painting by Jed Martin, a fictional artist and the main protagonist of the novel, which depicts Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, two pillars of contemporary art, in what appears to be a confrontation of opposing world-views. The architectural setting of *Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons Dividing Up the Art Market* is a luxury hotel in the Arab Emirates, and behind them a window frames the view of a "landscape of tall buildings that formed a Babylonian tangle of gigantic polygons that stretched across the horizon".²⁹ As opposed to Ballard's gigantism that expands skywards in *High-Rise*, in Houellebecq's novel, the infinity of space extends towards the horizon.

A realistic painter with a dislike for photographers, Jed Martin began his artistic career by documenting mass-produced objects emblematic of the industrial revolution. His intuitive desire "to embark on an artistic representation of the world"³⁰ would take various forms, but the first breakthrough occurred shortly after his graduation from the School of Fine Arts. It had happened during a car trip while driving with his father through rural France. Just before arriving at the commune of La Souterraine (literally The Underground), Jed had stopped at a gas station and bought a Michelin road map of the area. "It was then, unfolding the map, while standing by the cellophane-wrapped sandwiches, that he had his second great aesthetic

revelation”.³¹ Houellebecq describes the sublime beauty of the 1/150,000-scale map, “rich in emotion and meaning”, that represents human lives, “some destined for damnation, other for eternal life”.³² Again, the biblical analogy, even if devoid of religious connotation, is made explicit and actualized through the scientific metaphor of systematic and universal technical apprehension of the world. Through the endeavour of the century old French tyre manufacturer, the dream of unifying humanity is made possible by the systematic mapping of every small locality.

The first solo exhibition that results from this aesthetic revelation is entitled: *The Map is More Interesting than the Territory*, a play on the known formulation “a map is not a territory” by Polish-American intellectual Alfred Korzybski, whose general semantics theorized human interactions with the environment.³³ The works presented in the exhibition consists of a series of Photoshop layerings of Michelin maps combined with very low camera angle shots of the area taken with an extremely high depth of field to which he applied a blurring filter on the background and a bluish effect on the horizon.³⁴ The effect is remarkable and the critique is dithyrambic. In the novel, a review in *Le Monde* links the point of view of the maps to that of God: “Not without gallant audacity, [the artist] adopts the point of view of a God co-participating, alongside man, in the (re)construction of the world”.³⁵

Coincidentally, Jed’s success launches a renewed interest in the production of the mapping magnate, pushing sales of road maps in general by seventy per-cent. As a reward for the financial benefits to the company, Michelin decides to sponsor and actively promote Jed’s work. But the ensuing expansion of the mapping empire coincides with the collapse of Jed’s love life – his girlfriend Olga is an executive for Michelin, and gets reassigned to a new office in Russia – and as a result he starts destroying his working material for the map series. He puts all the prints in garbage plastic bags, “then slowly, meticulously [dismantles] his photographic camera before putting away the bellows, the ground glasses, the lenses, the digital back, and the body of the apparatus in their travelling cases”,³⁶ the omnipotent gaze of the creator asserting its power not only to create, but also to terminate the all-encompassing representation of the world.

The next phase in the artist’s development is marked by a return to painting with the ‘Series of Simple Professions’, followed seven years later by the ‘Corporate Professions’, which begins with *The Architect Jean-Pierre Martin Leaving the Management of His Business*. Jed’s father, who is an architect and by then has retired, plays a key role in Houellebecq’s novel insofar as he becomes a catalyst that allows the author to formulate some critical views on architecture. Like his son, Jean-Pierre Martin has experienced a number of radical reorientations during his career. In his youth, he adhered to the socialist counter-currents of the 1950s, but pressure from the market and the need to make a living eventually forced him to accept commissions that ran against his beliefs, becoming an expert in the design of five star resorts. Nonetheless Jean-Pierre Martin openly dislikes several of the most influential figures of the modern movement. In his view, Le Corbusier has confined mankind “to circumscribed modules of habitation” in a totalitarian and brutal way, much like Anthony Royal, the architect of Ballard’s *High-Rise*. In direct opposition to the capitalist ideals of modernism, as a student Jed’s father believed in the precepts established by Charles Fourier, a nineteenth-century French philosopher and early socialist thinker. Fourier had devised a self-sustaining utopian community involved in an agricultural project, known as the Phalanstère. Designed to receive about four hundred families per unit, each playing a specific role in the organisation of production, Fourier’s system was intended to be reproduced all over the world.³⁷ With a group of like-minded students, Jed’s father had “defended the idea that a complex, ramified society, with multiple levels of organization, like that proposed by Fourier, went hand in

hand with a complex, ramified, multiple architecture that left space for individual creativity".³⁸ But Fourier's Phalanstère also bears much resemblance to Jed's own artistic ambition to encompass the totality of the Earth's population. While his own endeavours to systematically document every inhabited land with the Michelin map series, and methodically record every human activity with his series of simple and corporate professions, Fourier's construction of a socialist utopia was meant to house the totality of the earth population.

The series of Corporate Professions ended after eighteen months with Bill Gates and Steve Jobs Discussing the Future of Information Technology. Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons Dividing Up the Art Market would have completed the series, but after unsuccessfully trying to capture on canvas the essence of both characters, and prompted by his inability to go beyond the surface of Koons' deceiving appearance of a "Chevrolet convertible salesman", Jed grabs a palette knife and destroys it.³⁹ This single act of destruction marks the next important turning point in his career as an artist, ending his series of paintings of professions. Then and there, he decides that his attempt to document human activity has reached its conclusion and proposes to his agent a retrospective exhibition of his work, the first one in almost a decade. For the occasion, Michel Houellebecq is invited to write an introduction to the exhibition catalogue.

In the novel, the new acquaintance between the artist and the fictionalized character of the author himself begins with Jed flying to Ireland to meet the famous French writer, who has been living there for the past three years – in reality as in fiction. Beside the fact that Houellebecq becomes a key character in his own novel, the description of the journey depicts a heroic period in architecture, the Thirty Glorious years following the Second World War when air travel had become a symbol of the modern technological project. The ambition of those years is palpable in the description of the gigantic scale of Shannon Airport, a structure out of proportion, which "had visibly been planned for five times more traffic".⁴⁰ The passage through the cloud ceiling while crossing the sea, however, far from indicating a mystical approach to the upper spheres is more akin to "an infantilizing and concentration-camp-like experience you prayed would be over as soon as possible".⁴¹ By contrast, his return to Paris is marked by an experience of limitlessness of a very different nature. As he dozes off in the airport Estuary Café, he dreams of a white, boundless space with no horizon inhabited by blocks of text made of black letters slightly raised from the floor. This immeasurable expanse, he eventually realizes, is in fact a book in which he is standing, thus transforming the tangible object of the writer's trade into a ground that contains the span of the artist's life.

Jed Martin's relationship with Houellebecq, however, ends abruptly with the gruesome murder of the French author and the mysterious disappearance of his portrait. The literal death of the author in Houellebecq's fiction appears as a pun on Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" (1967), in which the French literary critic and theorist argues against a form of literary criticism that relies on the identity of the author, his or her political views, religious convictions, psychological character or racial bias to extract meaning from a text. Instead of uncovering "a single *theological* meaning (the "message" of the Author-God)", Barthes argues, the reader discovers that a text is "a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original".⁴² Indeed, this lack of originality epitomized by the absence of the author becomes predominant in the last phase of Jed's artistic production. After spending the last thirty years of his life documenting apparently random scenes of nature taken at the spur of the moment in an attempt to simply "give an account of the world", filming for hours and collecting daily recordings, Jed extracts some photograms that he then montages, capturing the movement of plant tissues, a work later qualified by future art historians as "without any doubt the most successful attempt, in Western art, at representing how plants see the world".⁴³

The novel ends as it had begun, with a Babylonian reference and its confrontation with modernity. Jed is forced to go to Zurich to recover the body of his father who, unable to suffer the pain of living, went to a clinic in Switzerland to be euthanized. The clinic is located only a few metres away from Babylon FKK Relax-Oase, a neo-Babylonian building boldly decorated that houses a brothel.⁴⁴ The aseptic clinic, a white concrete building in the purest modernist tradition, clearly wins the contest since it claims to satisfy the demands of at least one hundred clients a day, while the Babylon FKK appears almost deserted. Thus the victory of the modern movement signals the fall of earthly pleasures as “the market value of suffering and death had become superior to that of pleasure and sex”.⁴⁵

Unsurprisingly since “capitalist ideology [...] has accorded the greatest importance to the author’s ‘person’”, according to Barthes, the death of Houellebecq in his novel coincides with a renewed criticism of capitalism. In an extended epilogue, the murderer of Michel Houellebecq is found by coincidence, being himself a murder victim. After recovering his last painting, that of the author, and entrusting it to his agent for resale, Jed goes back to his father’s house to recover about thirty portfolios of the architect’s early work. The first project is somewhat disconcerting for Jed who is suddenly confronted with the remnants of his father’s artistic quest. Departing from the modernist ideals of his time, the drawings show “a sort of neural network, where inhabitable cells were separated by long curved passages, covered or in the open air, which branched out in a star shape”.⁴⁶ The cells had no windows, but transparent roofs, keeping the inhabitants in isolation from each other, a theme already recurrent in Ballard’s *High-Rise*, while the organic network recalls the underground paths of Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, apparently two recurring themes of immeasurable modern spaces. The description of internal spaces, circular or oval in shape, devoid of furniture, and made possible by the modulation of floor levels resemble the architect Frederick Kiesler’s theoretical project for the Endless House (1947–60), and his concept of correality: “sleeping zones were rectangular excavations, forty centimetres deep; you descended into your bed rather than getting up into it. Similarly, the bathtubs were big round basins, the edges situated at floor level”.⁴⁷ As he keeps going through the portfolios of his father’s work, the projects become more and more “imaginary, multiplying the levels, the ramifications, the challenges to gravity, imagining, with no concern for feasibility or budget, crystalline and improbable citadels”. The final drawings no longer look like inhabitable buildings, or at least none that would be fit for human habitation. “Spiral staircases climbed vertiginously to the heavens, joining tenuous, translucent footbridges, which brought together irregular, lanceolate buildings of blinding white, whose forms reminded you of certain cirrus clouds”.⁴⁸ Again, many projects of the early 1970s come to mind, such as the conceptual projects of Archigram like Instant City or Walking City, which far from being intended for literal realization, were a form of social criticism of consumerism brought about by the domination of capitalism.

The figure of the architect is common to both Ballard’s and Houellebecq’s novels, yet their outlook on life and on their profession could not be more distant. In *The Map and the Territory*, Jean-Pierre Martin dreamed of building an egalitarian commune inspired by Fourier’s Phalanstère that extended over the land with a height of no more than four storeys. The ambition to construct a structure that could encompass the totality of the Earth’s population carries an explicit political message, in this case related to a utopian form of socialism. In *High-Rise*, Anthony Royal also had a particular interest in large structures, but in his case he favoured those soaring toward the sky. His fascination for tall buildings was combined with his desire to design zoos and aviaries “where the birds would be free to move about in those sections of the sky that were their true home”.⁴⁹ Ironically, he had designed one zoo that was a high-rise. By equating the function of the menagerie with the structure of the high-rise, Royal came

to realize that “he despised his fellow residents for the way in which they fitted so willingly into their appointed slots in the apartment building”.⁵⁰ Thus in both novels, the ambition of the architect is not incidental but has a direct ethical influence on the fictional world that develops throughout. In *House of Leaves*, as we will discuss in the next section, the architect is unknown, but the house self-constructs as the owner begins to explore its hidden passages.

Probing the hidden labyrinth

House of Leaves by Mark Danielewski is more than a novel; the book itself is an elaborate graphic work with multiple typefaces, unconventional page layout, some pages containing nothing but a few words or lines, while others include several layers of text, sometimes inverted or upside down, with abundant footnotes referring to real or fictional books and articles, some of the footnotes themselves are footnoted. One primary narrative is a pseudo-objective description of a fictional documentary, a narration of apparently recorded events – a representation of a representation – framed within a mysterious context of an unexplained death, a found manuscript, and a series of lost films. The interwoven nature of the book in some ways reflects the complexity of the improbable place in which the central story is said to have taken place, a house in the country that happens to be a quarter of an inch larger on the inside than on the outside with a wall thickness that inexplicably expands to encompass ever-increasing hallways that eventually lead to the deepest recesses of an ungraspable, infinitely vast, dark space. In common with the two novels previously discussed, there is an obsession to measure, map, narrate and fix, in this case on film, the movable nature of this un-circumscribed entity.

The story of the house and its unsuspecting new owners is told through *The Navidson Record*, a manuscript found in the apartment of a recently deceased blind scholar Zampanò, that tells of a documentary film, which itself is suspected to be fictional within the novel. Much has been said – and written – about the intricate nature of the book, its puzzling structure, internal contradictions and sometimes undecipherable connections. It would exceed the scope of this essay to do justice to the entire work, but *House of Leaves* remains an unavoidable example of a fiction that deals with the measuring of incommensurable spaces. Therefore, I have extracted only one strand of the story to focus on the documentation of this beastly construction and the desire of several characters to measure it in order to stop space from expanding.

From the outset the assumed author of the documentary, a prize-winning photojournalist who had made his career following the most explosive events in war-torn countries, Will Navidson confesses that his only intention was to create a record of how he and his family moved into a small country house they had recently bought.⁵¹ For that purpose, he had mounted a series of Hi-8 cameras in every corner of the house, equipped with motion detectors to record any activity. Besides the daily activities of every member of the family and innocuous events recorded on film, the transformation of the house itself begins to appear through the discrepancies recorded by the Hi-8 cameras. The physical integrity of the house is challenged, as it appears to expand and transform without the direct intervention of its inhabitants. Such inconsistencies are carefully documented, at first in a seemingly objective way, but as the story progresses, the narrator insists on drawing parallels with the “physical incarnation of Navidson’s psychological pain” as he confronts unresolved marital problems and – as in *High-Rise* – the building becomes a manifestation of a troubled psyche.⁵²

The authenticity of the documentary film that resulted from Will Navidson’s editing of this systematic recording is debated at length within the novel, pitching against each

other various fictional scholarly articles, some claiming even to have seen a projection of the untraceable flick. However, at the heart of the story is the power of fiction itself: “Zampanò knew from the get go that what’s real or isn’t real doesn’t matter here. The consequences are the same.”⁵³ This questioning of the authenticity of the document and the veracity of events raises a more fundamental concern: “whether or not, with the advent of digital technology, image has forsaken its once unimpeachable hold on the truth.”⁵⁴

It is during a brief absence from the house by the Navidson family that the first incongruities become apparent. Upon their return from a four-day trip, they realize that a small room the size of a walk-in closet has appeared between the master bedroom and that of the children. The walls of the new growth are smooth and black with no visible outlets or mouldings, closed on either side by a white door with a glass knob. Troubled by this peculiar addition, Will starts doubting his memory and questions his own perceptions until his wife Karen unearths some photos predating their trip that confirm the absence of a door on the bedroom wall. Unsure how to go about explaining this oddity, they first acquire the architectural blueprints drawn up by former owners who were seeking permission to build some *addition* to the house. Although the plans do not indicate the newly found room, they do confirm the presence of an unexplained crawlspace running between both bedrooms.⁵⁵ Will then get a measuring tape with the intention of mapping out the internal space, but is even more baffled when he realizes that objective measurements do not match the experience of the place. A careful appraisal of the actual building reveals that the width of the house measured on the inside exceeds its outside dimension by a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch.⁵⁶

Again doubting his own calculations, Navidson double checks his measurements, pierces the outside walls to assess their exact thickness, runs a fish line across the bedrooms and the new space, but the result remains the same. The house is wider on the inside than on the outside. In desperation, he calls upon his estranged twin brother Tom who happens to be a carpenter to help resolve the enigma. Unfortunately, Tom’s expertise confirms that the interior of the house is not only $\frac{1}{4}$ inch wider, it exceeds the exterior by $\frac{5}{16}$. Confronted with the limitation of their analogue tools of measurement, they enlist Billy Reston, a paraplegic engineer with a laser level and distance meter, to help find a rational explanation for the discrepancy. Puzzled by the inexplicable situation, even the engineer starts referring to the incongruity as “a goddamn spatial rape.”⁵⁷

One evening, alerted by the echo of their children’s screams coming from a great distance, far beyond the expected perimeter of their family home, Karen and Will discover that a doorless hallway has appeared on the outside wall of their living room. *The Five and a Half Minute Hallway*, a short film documenting Will’s first exploration of the dark corridor, reveals a space that is well over sixty feet deep. However, before entering the creepy space, one continuous shot circles the doorway to demonstrate the physical impossibility of what the scene is about to reveal. The camera first focuses on a door before exiting the house through the window on its right. It then makes a one hundred and eighty-degree rotation to show the cladding on the outside wall, before re-entering the living room through a window on the other side of the door. When Navidson’s hand appears in frame and pulls open the door, everyone in the background remains speechless as it reveals a narrow black hallway. The five and a half minute documentary proves, “beyond a shadow of a doubt, that insulation or siding is the only possible thing this doorway could lead to.”⁵⁸ The remaining six hundred plus pages of the novel describe the probing of this impossible space.

The unlikely nature of the space revealed beyond that door takes various incarnations according to whoever is exploring the space. Threatening and violent for some explorers, children could perceive its playful dimension,⁵⁹ while pets simply ignored the oddity of the

new addition and ran through it from the living room straight outside to the garden.⁶⁰ For most adults entering the hallway, however, the hidden labyrinth is a dark, cold, windowless, unstable place made of successive doorways that appear and disappear, leading to alternate passageways or chambers, a staircase, all denying visual perspective:

No matter how far Navidson proceeds down this particular passageway, his light never comes close to touching the punctuation point promised by the converging perspective lines, sliding on and on and on, spawning one space after another, a constant stream of corners and walls, all of them unreadable and perfectly smooth.⁶¹

One particular junction point that connects horizontal and vertical movement gives us a clear sense of the enormity of the place. As *Exploration #3* reveals, an expedition reaches a giant spiral staircase measuring two hundred feet in diameter. After descending for seven hours, they realise that the diameter of the spiral staircase has increased to about five hundred feet and “a dropped flare still does not illuminate or sound a bottom”.⁶² It takes the explorers over eleven hours to go back to the top of the stair. Throughout the various expeditions that descend further and further into the “tenebrific” space, one fact remains constant, that is the impossibility of producing a proper visual image of the place:

Whether chemical clots determining black or video grey approximating absence, the images still remain two dimensional. In order to have a third dimension, depth cues are required, which in the case of the stairway means more light. The flares, however, barely illuminate the size of that bore.⁶³

Only embodied experience and naming the place succeed in grasping the true nature of this apparently endless well. And as he remains confined to the living room to comply with the request of his wife not to enter the ominous hallway, what most frustrates Navidson is the feeling of being “deprived of the right to name what he inherently understands as his own”.⁶⁴

A number of adventurous explorers will take their chance in probing the expanding labyrinth growing inside the house, hoping to reach its outer limits and overtake the beast within by measuring its progress. Eventually, the house will swallow whole some of its intruders, spitting out a lucky few, and transforming forever anyone who passes its threshold. One lesson to be drawn from this unstable labyrinth is that unlike any maze where one can find a way out by keeping one hand on a wall and walking without interruption in one direction,

where the house is concerned, this approach would probably require an infinite amount of time and resources. [...] In order to escape then, we have to remember we cannot ponder all paths but must decode only those necessary to get out.⁶⁵

As in Ballard’s and Houellebecq’s novels, the perfectly objectified space of modernity is challenged and ultimately defeated by the ever-changing and highly subjective space of embodied experience.

Conclusion

The obsession to measure, document and assign some kind of limits to the unbound world that characterizes the physical environments described in the three novels is an explicit attempt to oppose the technological project of modernity, which assumes the infinity of

time and space, the same presupposition that constitutes the basis of contemporary tools of architectural representation. The failure to match objective measurements with the protagonists' experience of the created fictional environments points to the larger implications of architecture, loaded with ideological and emotional intent in these constructed worlds. Whereas Ballard criticizes the hierarchical structure of capitalism with the architecture of *High-Rise*, an environment that expands upward, placing the architect on top in the penthouse with all his minions inhabiting the upper floors and the plebs and families with children populating the lower levels, Houellebecq explores the liberating ideals of an egalitarian society that spreads horizontally, made explicit with his reference to Fourier's Phalanstère intended to house the population of the earth. The socialist political project also is conveyed through the artist's mapping of recomposed landscapes and the equivalent documentation of everyday objects and professions. For Danielewski, on the other hand, the exploration of limitless underground spaces reveals the psychological ramifications of trying to homebound an adventurous photojournalist and his personal investigations of a marriage on the verge of collapse.

In all three novels, architecture begins to have a life of its own, existing as an expression of a certain psychological condition of its inhabitants (*House of Leaves*), a social criticism of modernity (*The Map and the Territory*) or behaving as a moribund entity (*High-Rise*). In his novel, Houellebecq even compares the act of writing to the setting of concrete where the author is only allowed to witness the construction process:

A book is like a block of concrete that has decided to set, and the author's freedom to act is limited to the fact of being there, and of waiting in frightening inaction for the process to start by itself.⁶⁶

Even though the tools used to design and modulate our physical environment are assumed to be objective and increasingly universal in architectural practices, the fictional constructions imagined by the three authors reveal that the spaces we inhabit are all but neutral. They are coloured by our moods, they affect our well-being and they respond to the intentionality of the architect – sometimes unacknowledged, but always present.⁶⁷ In *The Bow and the Lyre*, Octavio Paz writes “The human world is a world of meaning, one that *tolerates ambiguity, contradiction, madness, or confusion, but not lack of meaning*”.⁶⁸ And the way in which the essential meaning is initially perceptible both in literature and in architecture appears as “a *coherent deformation* imposed on the visible and the habitual”.⁶⁹ In their own ways, the three novels discussed here bend the expectations of reality: that of a neutral high-rise, a literal mapping of the land, or the finite perimeter of a house. They challenge the reality of Cartesian space and the assumption that the world can be reduced to a coherent and systematic image. They establish a site for the poetic imagination to take hold, the very site that meaningful architectural projects should cultivate.

Notes

- 1 Franz Kafka, “The Great Wall of China,” tr. W. and E. Muir, in *The Complete Stories and Parables*, ed. N.N. Glatzer (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1983), 238–9.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 247.
- 3 See for example the version from *The Book of J*, also known as the Five Books of Moses or the Torah, probably written in Jerusalem in the tenth century B.C.E. *The Book of J*, tr. D. Rosenberg with an introduction by Harold Bloom (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 73–4.

- 4 I have written elsewhere about the historical transformation in the depiction of the archetypal building: L. Pelletier, "The Building of a Horizon," in *Chora 1, Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*, ed. A. Pérez-Gómez and S. Parcell (Montreal: McGill & Queen's University Press, 1994), 189–216.
- 5 Massimo Scolari, "Form and Representation of the Tower of Babel," *Rassegna* 16 (1983): 6.
- 6 Jocelyn Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher: A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 35.
- 7 Pelletier, "The Building of a Horizon," 192.
- 8 I also have explored these issues in a fictional form in the novel *Downfall, The Architecture of Excess*, (Montreal, RightAngle International Publishing, 2014).
- 9 Ballard, *High-Rise* (New York: Harper, 2006), 7.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 King James Bible, Genesis 11: 4–9.
- 12 Ballard, 8.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid., 9.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., 10. See also p. 25 and 68 for similar analogies.
- 18 Ibid., 34.
- 19 Ibid., 10; my emphasis.
- 20 Ibid., 53.
- 21 Ibid., 19.
- 22 Ibid., 22.
- 23 Ibid., 48–9.
- 24 Ibid., 25.
- 25 Ibid., 67.
- 26 Ibid., 48.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid., 81.
- 29 Michel Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 3.
- 30 Ibid., 167.
- 31 Ibid., 28.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 In an interview on France Culture, Houellebecq explains: "For Jed Martin it is the ideal point between aestheticism and fidelity of the representation." Adeline Journet, « La carte et le territoire, un titre inspiré », *L'Express*, February 21, 2011 (consulted on August 8, 2016): http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/la-carte-et-le-territoire-un-titre-inspire_964066.html; my translation.
- 34 Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, 35.
- 35 Ibid., 47.
- 36 Ibid., 63–4.
- 37 His quest was universal harmony based on a theory of passionate attraction inspired by Newton's law of universal attraction. Richard H. Roberts. *Religion and the Transformations of Capitalism: Comparative Approaches*. Routledge, 1995; 90.
- 38 Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, 138.
- 39 Ibid., 4.
- 40 Ibid., 81.
- 41 Ibid., 82.
- 42 Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author," in *Art and Interpretation: An Anthology of Readings in Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art*. Ed. Eric Dayton. Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1998, p. 385.
- 43 Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, 264–66.
- 44 From the German *Freikörperkultur*, FKK is "a German movement whose name translates to Free Body Culture. It endorses a naturist approach to sports and community living." While today "there are only a few restrictions on public nudity in Germany [...] in response to an influx of German FKK enthusiasts crossing the Alps, the Swiss [...] created laws making nude hiking illegal in 2009." [<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freikörperkultur>], consulted on August 11, 2016.

- 45 Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, 237.
46 Ibid., 255–6.
47 Ibid., 256.
48 Ibid., 256–7.
49 Ballard, 80.
50 Ibid., 80–1.
51 Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, Pantheon Books 2000, 8.
52 Ibid., 21.
53 Ibid., xx.
54 Ibid., 3.
55 Ibid., 29. “In Appendix II–A, Mr Truant provides a sketch of this floor plan on an envelope.” p. 571.
56 Danielewski, *House of Leaves* 30.
57 Ibid., 55.
58 Ibid., 4.
59 This is the case for Daisy, Will’s five-year-old daughter, who eventually associates it to a game. Danielewski, 73.
60 Ibid., 75.
61 Ibid., 64.
62 Ibid., 86.
63 Ibid., 87.
64 Ibid., 85.
65 Ibid., 115.
66 Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, 158.
67 In his latest book in which he probes the interconnectivity between language and architectural meaning, Alberto Pérez-Gómez uses the latest findings of neuroscience to demonstrate that “our behaviour is both affected by the environment and affects it,” a point that literature makes abundantly clear. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement, Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science*, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2016, 175.
68 Quoted by Pérez-Gomez, 166.
69 Ibid., 146.

References

- Ballard, J.G. *High-Rise*, New York: Harper, 2006.
Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author,” in *Art and Interpretation: An Anthology of Readings in Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art*, ed. Eric Dayton. Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1998.
Bloom, Harold. *The Book of J*, tr. D. Rosenberg, New York: Vintage Books, 1991.
Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2000.
Godwin, Jocelyn. *Athanasius Kircher: A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1979.
Houellebecq, Michel. *The Map and the Territory*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.
Journet, Adeline. “La carte et le territoire, un titre inspiré,” *L’Express*, February 21, 2011.
Kafka, Franz. “The Great Wall of China,” in *The Complete Stories and Parables*, tr. W. and E. Muir, ed. N.N. Glatzer, New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1983.
Pelletier, Louise. “The Building of a Horizon,” in *Chora 1, Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*, ed. A. Pérez-Gómez and S. Parcell, Montreal: McGill & Queen’s University Press, 1994.
Pelletier, Louise. *Downfall, the Architecture of Excess*, Montreal: RightAngle International Publishing, 2014.
Pérez-Gómez, Alberto. *Attunement, Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016.
Roberts, Richard H. *Religion and the Transformations of Capitalism: Comparative Approaches*, London: Routledge, 1995.
Scolari, Massimo. “Form and Representation of the Tower of Babel,” *Rassegna* 16(1983): 4–7.