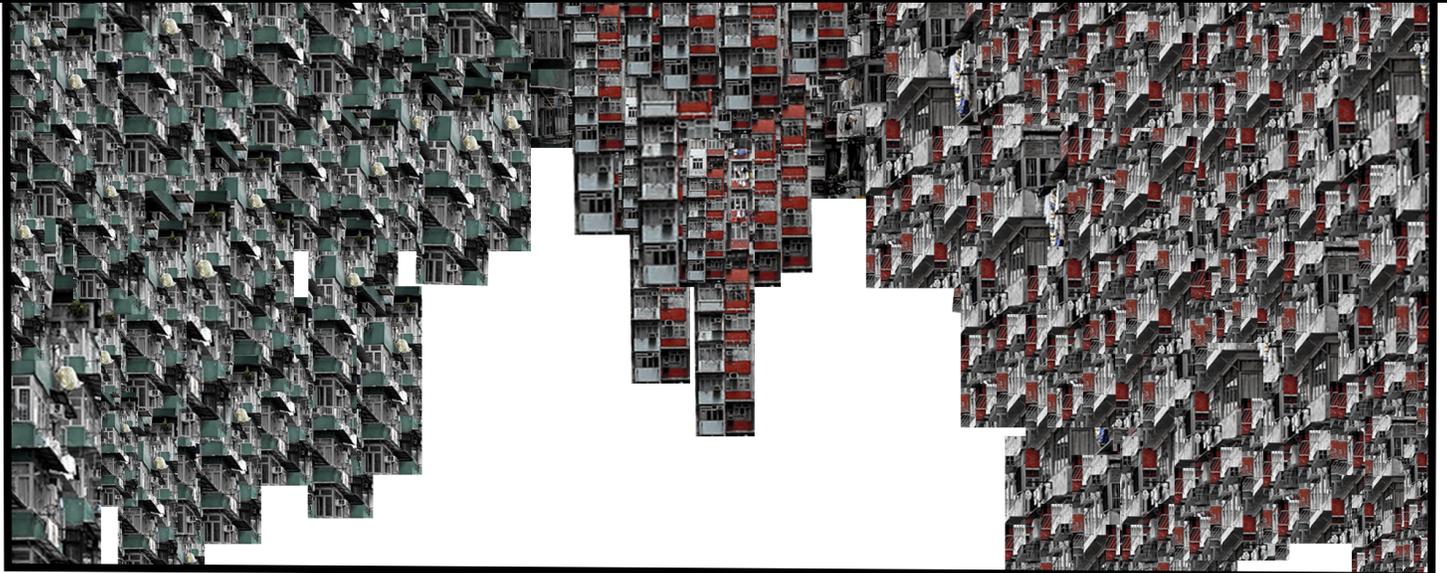




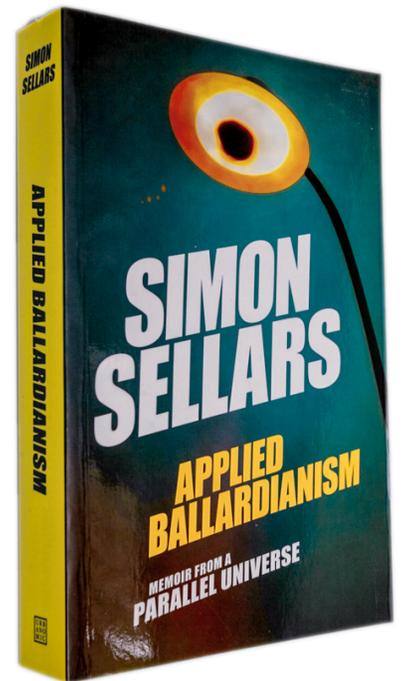
Simon Sellars on APPLIED BALLARDIANISM

INTERVIEW BY TADAS VINOKUR



Applied Ballardianism
Memoir from a Parallel Universe
by **Simon Sellars**
Published 2018 by [Urbanomic](#)

An existential odyssey weaving together lived experience and theoretical insight, this startling autobiographical hyperfiction surveys and dissects a world where everything connects and global technological delirium is the norm.



Tadas Vinokur: In *Applied Ballardianism*, the storyteller asks: 'Why did I always shove aside the positive implications of Ballard's work, the message of resistance it carried, in favor of the dark desires that had driven his characters to reach that point?' Can you please elaborate on the positive and negative implications of Ballard's work? In what way are these different implications important to you?

Simon Sellars: The positive is that Ballard teaches how to make order from chaos: how to embrace the catastrophe, even stoke it, and start again from the ruins. Accelerationism, if you like. The negative is that this programme of change frequently tips over into psychosis. In Ballard's *Crash*, a mythic text for my narrator, the character Vaughan is a full-blown psychopath and would-be serial killer. Yet he believes he is at the vanguard of a new social order, one that can only be brought about by pouring fuel onto the fire, so to speak. In a minor key, that's precisely the duality my narrator embraces. He's constantly at the hinge point when, to paraphrase Ballard, white becomes black.

TV: When we accept the future of science fiction, what do we gain or lose in turn?

SS: That all depends on whether you view science fiction as pure escapism or as an accurate commentary on the present. In terms of prophecy, I don't believe in 'science fiction' per se. It's a meaningless category and an ill-chosen term causing more harm than good. Ballard's work, for example, is not about science and it's not simply fiction. It's certainly not about the future. It's a theory of the present, seen from an oblique angle.

TV: The storyteller asks: is there a kind of 'liberation in the embracing of dystopian states'? In what way can liberation come about when a person begins to embrace dystopian states?

SS: Again, it's making order from chaos – or pushing a situation to its logical extreme. I think for my narrator it's a way to energize his dulled senses and his depleted physicality. After all, he lives an android life, in severe need of reprogramming.

TV: Considering that Ballard understands the future as a better guide to the present than the past, what concrete political agendas may follow from the emphasis on the future?

SS: It's a mistake to read a political agenda into Ballard – or *Applied Ballardianism*. I don't advise it.

TV: Considering the fact that Ballard himself didn't like aesthetic elitism or the idea of high culture, would you perceive him as a person that promoted people's ability to participate in the fictionalized future? Or is it simply a fiction of technological singularity devoid of subject-creation?

SS: I'm the wrong person to ask. In *Applied Ballardianism*, I spend 400 pages stating that the only valid reading of Ballard's work is that there is no reading. Yes, I suppose you could interpret some of his fiction as stories about 'participation', but then again he's written stories that are the complete antithesis, in which people who embrace communal values are brutally slaughtered. He always finds a way to confound you.

TV: The storyteller says: 'I would visit virtual lesbian bondage clubs and score cheap virtual "sex", wondering if the women I "made love" to in the pixel S&M dungeons were also men behind their computer screens. There was something inherently Ballardian about the scenario...' Does sex – in the Ballardian sense – imply that there's no natural predisposition, no physical intimacy? Does it mean that libido can only be expressed by mediation, by technological fetishization?

SS: The sexual imagination is always contaminated by external forces, simply because we consume so much media. We live in an augmented reality, whether we like it or not. There is no outside.

TV: The storyteller says: 'I thought of Virilio, who once proposed to build a "museum of accidents" but then decided that the museum already exists—it is television.' In precise terms, what does Virilio's idea of the 'museum of accidents' have to do with Ballardian storytelling?

SS: Let me answer with another quote from Virilio: 'When you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck; when you invent the plane you also invent the plane crash; and when you invent electricity, you invent electrocution. Every technology carries its own negativity, which

is invented at the same time as technical progress.' That's essentially the central message of *Crash*. It radiates a techno-fetishism, mediated via car culture, that oscillates between repulsion and fascination.

TV: The storyteller describes a billboard that advertises Hummer's vehicles, 'the suburban armored war machine popular with plastic rappers, low-class politicians and trashy wedding parties'. He says that the billboard was a 'chaos agent' and that 'every time I passed the billboard I was palsied with fear'. Do you think fear is often employed in public relations as a way to instill desire in people's mind? Why is fear attractive? What can Ballard teach us about fear?

SS: Fear drives the consumerist engine: the fear of missing out, of exclusion, of being an inferior being. Fear sells. I always remember that guy from the show *Lost* doing an ad for some kind of men's beauty regime. He rubbed this type of greasy cream into his face, turned to the camera and said: 'I'll never allow myself to look tired.' How insulting to working parents, for whom tiredness is the default mode of being, or to people who scrimp and save working two jobs to stay alive. This plastic freak was a sort of ideal replicant paraded before us to shame us into tucking our beer bellies in, into staying perky and peppy no matter what. I despise him.

TV: The storyteller quotes Ballard: 'Violence is seductive in that it has a logic of its own; one almost misses it when it's gone.' Could you perhaps tie this idea to Baudrillard's dictum, namely that we can no longer separate the simulated from the real -- that there's no purely real or purely simulated violence?

SS: Sure, if you like. My narrator tries to do exactly that but gets 'corrected' with some vicious street justice. Even then he can't separate what is happening to him from the simulation. I anticipate he will go on this way until some street hoodlum puts him into a coma and then he really will be in a parallel universe.

TV: The storyteller quotes Ballard, who describes the future as 'a casualty of Hiroshima... devoured by the all-voracious present'. Here, what does Ballard precisely say about our ability to construct the future? What are the political implications of building something out of a casualty?

SS: Ballard was a seer of the current wave of atemporality that we find ourselves lost within. In that quote, he's saying that there is no future -- that the future has been devoured by the cataclysmic present in all its complexity and chaos, both environmental and technological. In other words, we can't conceive the future given the urgency of the present. What's more, we are constantly being swamped by the past rising to engulf us via instantaneous technology, which makes any and every era immediately accessible via the high-powered miniature computers we carry in our pockets. Time has ceased to exist, swallowed whole by the eternal present.

TV: The storyteller quotes Baudrillard, who said that “the desire to be a clone is the ultimate fantasy expression of the society of simulation”. Would you agree with Lyotard’s idea that the deracinating affect of capitalism is also a source of jouissance, a mobilization of desire?

SS: I agree with my narrator, a clone of myself, who agrees with Baudrillard, who says that we are all clones of ourselves. Social media has seen to that.

TV: Should we leave Marxist politics based on the emancipation of the subject in the dustbin of history?

SS: I think you should ask a Marxist that question.

TV: The storyteller claims that Ballard was a time traveler – that he ‘incrementally shift[ed] the background scenery, erasing forever the demarcation between fiction and reality’. Here, let’s talk about the social perspectives towards literature and art. Does Ballard advocate a kind of (hyper)realism, which manifests the world hic et nunc?

SS: He doesn’t advocate anything. He records exactly what’s happening today, but when the film is exposed, it’s more a Kirilian photo than a documentary snapshot.

TV: Could this approach to literature be perceived as political in that it may mobilize people who can no longer tell the difference between reality and fiction?

SS: I severely doubt whether literature of any kind could mobilize anything these days.

TV: Do you think that an artist should choose what kind of accelerationism he or she is describing? Namely, whether it’s positive or negative, whether it’s based on technological singularity or social emancipation? Do you make choices like that? Does Ballard?

SS: Artists should have all the freedom they deserve. Do I make choices like that? Yes. After all, the narrator of my book is me, to some extent. And my narrator, so people online continually tell me, is an accelerationist. I’ll take their word for it. They seem to know what they’re talking about, but then again I’ve always been a very gullible man.

TV: When writing a book, do you think about the hermeneutics of the text? Do you think about the hermeneutic circle of the Author and the Reader? In what way – do you think – the creative horizon of yours should negotiate the meaning of the book with the interpretive horizon of the reader?

SS: I don't think about it. I just think of how I can extricate myself from the process of writing as quickly as possible, because I hate the process of writing books, or maybe I just hated the process of writing *Applied Ballardianism* because it was so technically difficult to realise, being a hybrid of theory and fiction. At that point of self-flagellation, the reader is just a vague blur somewhere in my peripheral vision.

Admittedly, I secretly desired to write a book as baffling and as open-ended as Ballard's work. The extreme ambiguity and ambivalence of Ballard's best writing, and its refusal to pick sides, is what immediately attracted me to him in the first place. It left room for the reader to complete the text and that is a very powerful effect. Not only does it imprint itself upon the mind, revealing the onrushing void behind the unfinished text, it also, in its simultaneous holding of contradictory positions, comments upon a world in which consensus reality has effectively ceased to exist, a world pinballing between multiple realities.

I wanted people to have extreme reactions to my book, and so they have. Some people love it and have said that it mirrors their own lives in ways they can't quite describe. Others have wished me dead. One fellow, a longstanding acquaintance of mine, unfriended me on Facebook because he couldn't connect with what I was writing about. I admire the courage of his convictions, I must say. Then there's this guy in England, a senior lecturer in creative writing, who, in his review of the book, said that he wished the thugs that stalk my narrator had finished me off for real. A senior lecturer in creative writing – can you believe it! Thanks, mate. Perhaps he's training up a new breed of assassins in his classroom/dojo.

TV: How do you fit into the canon of literature? How did Ballard?

SS: I don't fit into the canon of literature, as that reviewer/assassin made clear. He has a point. I published an experiment that has sold a few copies. The experiment was this: how to regain sanity after academia had driven me mad. What right do I have to foist this crap upon the world? It's so self-indulgent.

TV: What are some of the other authors – literary figures – that influenced your writing when you were growing up?

SS: When I was growing up? I did nothing but listen to music and watch films when I was growing up. As an adult, writers that have influenced me include Dick, DeLillo and Houellebecq.

TV: How can one apply Ballardianism to other forms of art such as music, performance, theatre, film?

SS: One can't. '*Applied Ballardianism*' is a demented framework dreamed up by my narrator to make sense of the world. It's not a political program. It's the ramblings of a madman.

TV: The book claims that Ballard's characters 'prefer to remain within their "dystopia" rather than react against it'. Interestingly, this does not imply a dystopic or nihilistic attitude. Instead, it implies the characters' need to change the world for the better. What does it mean to embrace the disaster? What are the chances that become available?

SS: You make Ballard's characters sound like idealists. Which they are. But only sometimes. And then they're not. Look, here's the thing. For my narrator, there is only one way out, only one chance available, and that's spelled out in the last chapter of the book, which I don't want to give away here. That last chapter is pure science fiction. And that's because the narrator lived and breathed dystopian science fiction all his adult life. He read it and studied it and could only interpret the world through its lens, but then he rejected it. But it was too late. He was already deep into the rabbit hole and couldn't find his way out.

And I think he's lost for good, now. Good riddance, actually. I'm better off without him. We all are.

Simon Sellars is a writer and editor. He is the custodian of ballardian.com, and the co-editor of *Extreme Metaphors: Interviews with J.G. Ballard 1967–2008* (Fourth Estate, 2012).

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