



DOCUMENT

UFD033  Simon Sellars, Robin Mackay

So Many Unrealities

In this extended and enhanced edit of the online Ballardian Breakfast Briefing/Midnight Séance, Simon Sellars, author of Applied Ballardianism, and Urbanomic director Robin Mackay chat about JG Ballard, unreality, writing, synchronicity, theory-fiction and K-Pulp, UFOs, micronations, and being an outsider

URBANOMIC / DOCUMENTS



ROBIN MACKAY: Good evening. What's happening in Melbourne?

SIMON SELLARS: Good morning. It's very cold here. Cement trucks are whirring in the industrial hinterland and hoons are tearing up and down our street. I have our Ballardian Séance playlist on the stereo and it's giving me more chills than the weather.

RM: Ah, hoons. OK, let's start with Australian car culture. That's a very local flavour in *Applied Ballardianism*. Does the book provide a particularly Aussie take on Ballardianism?

SS: No, not at all. Ballardianism is placeless. It's just that many of the conditions for it to take root can be found here: endless suburbia, dangerous consumer-driven psychopathologies, mindless devotion to sport. Australia has it all.

RM: Nevertheless, it seems to be the story of your discovery in that locale, and then later on in your travels around the world, a series of tendencies that are global in nature—and learning that they go by the name 'Ballard'.

SS: In a way. For me, it was process of learning, through Ballard, some hard truths about myself and my own inner tendencies, and how they have been shaped by my environment.

RM: Yes. One of the things that appealed to me about the book right from the start was its painful honesty and confessional aspect, and how that is combined with a kind of dense encryption—a bewildering folding of texts, subtexts, and supertexts.

SS: The folding in of multiple texts derives from the insanity of academic interpretation and the rabbit holes you can lose yourself in if you're not careful, or at least if your mind is as undisciplined as mine was. In some ways, Ballard teaches this: take a set of seemingly unconnected 'reality materials' and use them as a kit to assemble an entirely new reality. But that presupposes that you know how to find your way home again. Which I didn't. That explains the confessional aspect, because I did feel as though I'd lost my mind.

RM: And yet there is also a kind of enjoyment in losing it, or at least in recounting the collapse.

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There was something I wanted to articulate about the struggle to find clarity of thought in a world where clear thought has been drowned out by constant noise, static, unrealities

SS: Well, I am nothing if not a masochist.

RM: Yes, I sense an underlying masochism, not only thematised in the book, but also in the act of writing itself.

SS: I find writing extremely hard work. And this book was a nightmare because it was so personal and technically difficult to pull off. I have always felt intense disgust after writing, and especially creative writing: a sort of shame that I have had the audacity to express myself in that particular way. So, there was something I wanted to say about my struggle with all that, but I knew it had wider resonance. Because there was something I also wanted to articulate about the struggle to find clarity of thought in a world where clear thought has been drowned out by constant noise, static, unrealities.

RM: Does clarity of thought only arrive during psychotic episodes? That seems to be the case for your narrator, whose epiphanies usually coincide with moments of reckless madness.

SS: I can only speak for myself. I don't think I've had any psychotic episodes as such. Certainly, I've been in the grip of very black depression, and that has fuelled many of the scenarios in the book. I didn't feel clear-headed then. What I only realise now is that I was acting that way in order to live my life as a bleak narrative that could be written about years later. Everything feels designed to have brought me to this point.



RM: This of course is what Ballard means when he says 'Deep Assignments run through all our lives. There are no coincidences.' It certainly feels like our meeting and working on this book together was a Deep Assignment. It's been two years since I first spoke to you. Appropriately enough, we first 'met' on Facebook Messenger, where we exchanged notes on our respective experiences of 90s cyberculture, nervous breakdowns, failed PhDs and the unbearable tedium of quotidian reality. And ever since, we've been working together on bringing this book into the world. There was obviously some synchronicity, and that feeling only grew as we collaborated on the book. There were all sorts of coincidences and they keep on coming. Our sons even have the same name!

SS: Yes. I do see it as a true collaboration. It needed your shared perspective to make it real.

RM: I feel the book is also an important moment for Urbanomic, in that it responds to a lot of questions that were torturing me at that time. I was struggling with how to keep Urbanomic moving in multiple directions and wondering how I could continue to feel I was bringing something worthwhile and new into the world, not just feeding an infernal culture machine with new theoretical brands to be spliced into PhD proposals and art gallery blurbs. *Applied Ballardianism's* despair at the tedium of academic 'theorising', and the responses it supplies, were comforting and inspiring to me at that time.

SS: Do you mean the narrator's responses to his situation? I'm not sure that's a healthy lifestyle for anyone to follow.

RM: Well, the narrator's heightened, brutal, dangerous, self-destructive response is one aspect, but there was also your response as an author: pushing on in the wilderness with an apparently doomed project that involves experiment, risk and self-exposure. It was a project I was 110% behind on a very personal level from the start. And I also knew that,

Pushing on in the wilderness with an apparently doomed project that involves experiment, risk and self-exposure

for both of us, if others were to read and appreciate it, that would represent a kind of vindication.

SS: Yes, it was a vindication in that sense, but also a self-fulfilling prophecy. Going back to the synchronicities, I used to listen to the *Kata Jungle/Death Garage* EP, which CCRU put out in 1999. It was the soundtrack to my post-PhD breakdown, which I describe in the book. But I didn't know it was a CCRU project until recently. And of course, Mark Fisher originally commissioned *Applied Ballardianism* for Zero Books and you subsequently picked it up for Urbanomic. Mark was a member of CCRU, but I didn't know you were until after we'd met. When I joined all the dots, it really did seem like I was being programmed by all of you, like some kind of Manchurian Candidate—or Melburnian Candidate.

RM: Yeah, that's how Lemurian Time-War is conducted. I can see how your work would have appealed to Mark, who wrote about Ballard in his own PhD, and whose passage through the PhD process was just as accursedly frustrating and dispiriting as the one your narrator describes. I think Ballard was a constant theoretical presence for him and for CCRU. And I think, even more so, he would have been delighted to see it finally surface in its final format as a fiction. When trying to conceptualise what kind of book *Applied Ballardianism* would be, and what kind of object, Mark was constantly in my thoughts, in terms of melding pulp sensibility to challenging theoretical density in a form that would propagate itself, while remaining unapologetic to either side.

SS: I actually wrote a chapter, which I never showed you, based on my real-life encounter with Mark at a Ballard conference in Norwich in 2007. It didn't feel right so I dropped it, but essentially it was another self-pitying vignette about the narrator feeling inadequate in the presence of a superior intellect. I do retain the description of the conference, however, which kind of precipitates the narrator's final descent into irreversible madness, a warped version of Ballard's fabled notion of inner space.

RM: Yes, that's what your protagonist's travels reveal to us: the interpenetration and parallelism between the terrestrial environment and inner space. One thing that struck me about *Applied Ballardianism* was how successfully it takes up that strand of

Ballard's work, which is present right from the beginning—in *The Drowned World*. Perhaps Ballard inherits this from the romantic *Bildungsroman*: the sense that in moving through various different spaces, the narrator also undertakes an inner journey. There is a correlation between outer space and inner space, almost as if the protagonist's identity is stretched out over the global map with intense points of emotion corresponding to locations. Identity is scattered across these different 'Ballardian' locations, 'unevenly distributed' like the Gibsonian future. The emotions and memories induced by certain locations act as 'triggers' bringing subterranean, maybe not even human, aspects of the personality to the surface. The twist here, of course, is that the 'self' your narrator discovers through this Ballardian odyssey of inner space is one already shaped and fictionalised by his prior reading of Ballard.

Through occult ritual, the assignments reveal themselves

SS: Through occult ritual, the assignments reveal themselves. Actually, I think the occult in Ballard is an untapped field of enquiry. I await the perspicacious academic who will write a thesis on this.

RM: In the book, the turn to the occult follows—I assume, steering quite closely to your own experience—a disaffection with academia and an irresistible pull toward the esoteric. In fact, *Applied Ballardianism* also does quite a good job of suggesting how one can be a gateway drug to the other. I like how the repeated attempts to 'properly' do theory, knowledge, and academia always slide back into a thirst for occult ritual and mystical experience.

SS: Occult ritual is just a way for the protagonist to force himself into a state of meditation to relieve his diseased mind.



RM: But maybe theory and philosophy can never entirely succeed in becoming completely exoteric, because they can never manage to extirpate an esoteric and occult undertow that is inherent in the desire to know. And somehow, what happens in *Applied Ballardianism* over and over is that the impatient desire to know overflows the bounds of sober theoretical reflection. Even a mystic stupor is better than having to write up another chapter.

SS: It's all about wanting to know more, but not quite having the intellectual tools, so you invent your own.

RM: That resonates with me. As a failed scholar I always felt *Collapse*, although it featured many a tenured academic, was partly about discovering a kind of *philosophie brut*, and in this sense it is a failed experiment as it ended up feeding the academic humanities. I think many of us long for a 'wild theory' that isn't hidebound by the endless guilt and responsibility of history, and so on, that comes particularly with the study of philosophy.

SS: But then the danger lies in going completely off the reservation, which is what happens to my narrator. There are no breadcrumbs to lead him back to safety.

RM: Is there an epistemological angle? Is *Applied Ballardianism*, as Brendan Gillott suggested in his review in *Minor Literatures*, about knowledge, coherency and its limits?

SS: I suppose so. In the book, the narrator says that asking him to write his thesis in the accepted academic format is like asking a mouse to tile a roof. It can never happen. It's the wrong species.

RM: I don't know how long you'd been working on the book before I came into the picture, but I got the feeling you were already a haunted man. How long was it under development?

SS: Let's say twenty-five years.

RM: Seriously? You mean that over that period you wrote it and then reviewed and altered it? Or has it slowly developed over that time?

SS: OK, that's not quite right. I first started my PhD on Ballard in 1996, and there are sentences from that very early draft that have survived into the book as it exists today. For example, some of the narrator's theoretical ramblings about *The Atrocity Exhibition* date back to that time. But I worked on the book itself—as a book, not a PhD—for nine years. When Mark commissioned it for Zero in 2009, it was going to be a translation of my PhD into a quasi-academic text, but more in the style of what I'd been writing for Ballardian.com, which sort of had a proto-theory-fiction tone.

But I couldn't do it. I couldn't look at my PhD again because I was so sick of academia. It took three years to write one chapter, and in the end the Zero contract expired because I didn't deliver the manuscript on time. I couldn't stop thinking about how much academia had driven me crazy and that's when the next phase began: trying to articulate that experience in a fictionalised format. Enter Urbanomic.

RM: So the actual book, as it exists now, was born from the impossibility of writing it another way? When I first read *Applied Ballardianism*, for some time I had been absorbed in Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, which itself had arrived in my life as a respite from reading philosophy and a kind of life-raft during a period of intense depression. They are very different in style and intent, but I felt there were similarities between the two: in writing about how one failed miserably to rise to the challenge of creating The Great Work, one ends up writing it.

SS: I've only just started reading him. I can see why you would say that. But he wasn't an influence. I remember reading Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* and being struck by the way Sebald blends historical narrative with autobiographical fiction. I remember thinking that purely on a technical level, what he was doing was corroborating the way I was thinking about writing the book, because my inner turmoil was contaminating any clarity of thought I was attempting to muster. The worlds of external rationality and inner imagination were blurring into one. But then of course my narrator rejects Sebald at an early point in *Applied Ballardianism*, complaining that he can't extract any further meaning from the work. It's just another text that has been cherry-picked at a very superficial level.

When you're arguing that our bodies are dissolving into the virtual realm, the slippage of form that theory-fiction embodies is the only authentic way to explore that breakdown

RM: That's the really interesting part for me: how *Applied Ballardianism* became this weird hybrid of theoretical treatise, travelogue, confessional—what we've ended up calling 'theory-fiction'. But it presents an extremely good case for inventing a new label: what you have to say can't be contained in either theory or fiction. Often the way you employ theoretical concepts within the fiction is actually more enlightening than a theoretical exposition might be, although in the book you in fact supply both.

SS: Everyone is bored with straight theory now. There are so many Kant/Heidegger/Hegel memes, produced at a much greater rate than academic papers on any of them. I am very much influenced by Baudrillard and Virilio for the way they wrote a kind of theory fiction, or theory-science-fiction. It's intoxicating, and in many ways illustrates the point with far more immediacy and visceral impact than theory could ever do. When you're arguing that our bodies are dissolving into the virtual realm, as Baudrillard and Virilio do, and which my book does to an extent, then the slippage of form that theory-fiction embodies is the only authentic way to explore that breakdown.

RM: A lot of those circa-68 writers are extremely experimental with form, but Ballard himself comes at theory fiction from the other direction. Immediately in *The Drowned World*, you have the fictional theory of 'neuronics' playing a really important role. You have to buy into that theoretical position to be compelled by the story. This is what theory fiction means to me. It's not a genre but more a question, or even a problem: in what different ways can the two cross over, and in what ways do they need each other?

Having said that, in fact I already regret using the term, since 'theory-fiction' seems to be something people grab a hold of before even considering the book on its own terms, then they tend to either get



overexcited about the term or complain vociferously about it.

SS: Well, for me it was the only way I could write the thing, the only way I could be true to what was happening to me. I had no idea there was any theory-fiction 'movement' afoot.

RM: Did you not think about it though? You must have wondered whether including quite dense passages of theoretical exposition would stall the narrative.

SS: Yes, I did think about it and what you describe did happen. It was torture to pull off that particular trick. But I just kept rewriting and rewriting until it became organic. That hybrid form seemed the only truthful mode, because in the end my book is really an extended meditation on a particular Ballard quote, which is this: 'The most prudent and effective method of dealing with the world around us is to assume that it is a complete fiction. Conversely, the one small node of reality left to us is inside our own heads.' Don't you think that's a succinct summation of theory-fiction? There are so many unrealities that we have to create a new reality.

RM: As a kind of experimental model?

SS: No, as reality itself. Each unique to ourselves in the absence of objective truth. You know, I realise I'm describing autofiction rather than theory-fiction.

RM: I only recently heard this term autofiction, again in relation to Knausgaard. Is it the suggestion that literature is tending toward self-examination and personal narratives again?

There are so many unrealities that we have to create a new reality

SS: Yes, that's what I was getting at with the Ballard quote. Today, there are so many external forces trying to gaslight us into thinking we didn't see something or say something or witness something. Consensus reality has ceased to exist. All we can trust is our imagination and the way it interprets the world on our behalf. We're all projecting our lives onto external screens and trying to suck small parts of the world into our orbit. Isn't autofiction just a hyper-extended 'hot take', such as the kind you find every second of every day posted by millions of atomised deadbeats yelling into the void on social media?

RM: So that, in the Ballardian sense, all external reality can do is to act as a kind of photographic developer, revealing to us the only reality left: our inner drives and complexes? But those drives and complexes are worked over so heavily by globalised forces that they are hardly even 'personal' or 'individual'. It seems that this is how Ballard also sees landscape and architecture working, but I would say they also shape inner life rather than just revealing it. It's not introspective as such.

SS: I'm not saying it's introspective. I'm saying it's a survival mechanism—a response to a totalitarian system of control.

RM: But then, for Ballard, going 'further inward' becomes a way of revealing the vast virtualities that run beneath our entire culture, like geological fault lines. The shocking honesty of the narrators of *Crash* or *The Unlimited Dream Company* about their innermost desires is simultaneously a candid, penetrating analysis of the collective reality of Western culture.

SS: At some level, it's a quasi-Jungian take. Certainly, in *Applied Ballardianism*, the extended meditation on UFOs is partly an attempt to excavate shared—false—memories, to understand why so many people all over the world claim to see these objects. My book alludes to Jung's book *A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, which essentially ascribes the phenomenon of UFOs to a shared hallucination that fills the void created by the death of God. Fast-forward to today, and what do we have? The Mandela Effect.



Micronationalism creates a gated community of the mind

RM: Did you really see UFOs?

SS: Yes. On three occasions, myself and several other people saw bizarre objects in the sky that could not be unidentified. I make no claim as to their origin. They simply couldn't be identified and those incidents are recorded quite faithfully in the book.

RM: You mentioned Jung. Wasn't Ballard committed in one way or another—and probably through his engagement with surrealism—to a conception of a collective unconscious?

SS: I think that probably applies to the early works. But in *Applied Ballardianism* I draw connections between Ballard and the phenomenon of micronations, because in essence micronationalism creates a gated community of the mind. And that's a very Ballardian affliction dominating his final brace of novels: fatal inversion, a tendency to withdraw into the mind, into conspiracy and paranoid fantasy, into atomised individual lives prioritised over any notion of community or the social contract. It's the dark flipside of his 'one small node of reality inside our own heads' equation, and my narrator constantly teeters at the hinge point when liberation turns to extreme danger.

RM: You co-wrote a travel book on micronations. Is it still available?

SS: No, it's out of print. It was pretty jokey, done in the style of a Lonely Planet guidebook but with travel options for real-life micronations like Sealand and the Hutt River Province, which of course most people would never be able to visit. Weirdly, Jack

Black and his production company bought the title from Lonely Planet and intended to make some kind of comedy about, I think, a man trying to form his own micronation. I haven't heard anything more about this.

RM: A number of episodes in *Applied Ballardianism* owe something to your stint as a travel writer. The narrator of the book doesn't enjoy the job much. Did you?

SS: I suppose I did at the start. It was superficially thrilling to be paid to travel to Japan and the North Pacific and write about it. But like my narrator, I got really bored with writing in the house style. I cringe when I look back at my Lonely Planet writing but it was a product of the times.

RM: I feel like I should also ask whether, ultimately, this is a book about Ballard at all. I do think you can learn a lot about Ballard's work from it, but is it more importantly about the folly of trying to embody or live out theoretical ideas?

SS: It is a book about obsession. About chasing ghosts. About obsessions as ghosts. About Ballard as a ghost. About ghosts in the paranormal sense.

RM: Has publishing the book exorcised any of them, finally? I must say that I did get a sense of resistance throughout the editing and publishing process. There were moments when I thought you wouldn't let go of it!

SS: I couldn't let it go! The act of writing it came to define me: *This is my project, and it always will be*. I thought I would self-publish it when I was 80 and the story would've continued up until then, because I kept living bits of it and then writing about those bits. All that stuff about stalking the edgelands in the latter part of the book: I did actually perform those long walks around bleak industrial terrain, but only in 2016 and 2017, right before I submitted the final manuscript. I felt I still had to live more of my life and write about it before I could finally let it go.

RM: And yet it all seems to happen within quite a contained period of time, so I guess there is a lot of manipulation and retiming of events. To be honest, I still have very little idea how much of this is

autobiographical, and in what way—or what that might even mean.

SS: There is a lot of tweaking of the timeline, but ostensibly it describes my life roughly from 1996 to 2008. Most chapters have a basis in my life, and things I've experienced or been a part of. Exaggerated sometimes, other times recorded as is.

RM: I recently met via email someone portrayed as quite an important character in the book, and he told me he had only ever talked to you once!

SS: I see. Was that a problem for him?

RM: No, not at all. It was just an interesting example of how you've managed to create something that has a sense of being born of authentic first-person experience, but is so scrambled and convoluted that the relation to you as a person is not straightforward at all.

Autobiographies and memoirs that claim to be the unvarnished truth are obviously nothing of the sort

SS: Autobiographies and memoirs that claim to be the unvarnished truth are obviously nothing of the sort. No one can remember everything they did from years ago with crystal-clear recall. Memories are overlaid with lies all the time, whether we're aware of it or not. My book tries to be true to that process and to how the way we embellish our memories is the only authentic reality.

RM: *Applied Ballardianism* discusses this in relation to Ballard's own biography, or rather biographies plural, since, apart from those books of his that are ostensibly biographical, like *Empire of the Sun*, he also calls *Crash* his true autobiography.

SS: Indeed. My narrator is obsessed with that assertion of Ballard's. When Ballard's wife died unexpectedly in the 60s, he went through a dark period. His work became very experimental, not only in form but subject matter. *The Atrocity Exhibition* was one product of those years but so was *Crash*. When Ballard said *Crash* was his true autobiography, he wasn't saying 'I really do crash cars for sexual thrills'.

I am a classic victim of Information Fatigue Syndrome and a short attention span. I don't read many books at all. I read Twitter

He was saying that it was an authentic representation of his inner life, of the pain and confusion he felt after losing his wife and the dark corners that his mind entered as a result.

When my narrator analyses this, he's revealing the mechanism by which *Applied Ballardianism* functions. He's letting us know that the book is true to its subtitle, that it is in fact a 'memoir from a parallel universe': a work steeped in the hurt and anger I felt about losing my partner, my career, my mind, and the apocalyptic worldview that subsequently enveloped me. It's a memoir about the inner life that I lived, which in its all-consuming vividness became my only true reality.

RM: What do you read?

SS: Like my narrator, I am a classic victim of Information Fatigue Syndrome and a short attention span. I have about ten books currently on the go and I can't finish any. I start novels but abandon them in favour of music biographies. I've just finished David Shepphard's Eno biography and I'm starting on Rob Young's Can biography. One novel I have finished recently is Tim Maughan's *Infinite Detail*. It's fantastic—about the breakdown of the world following the destruction of the internet. I don't read many books at all. I read Twitter and I am always reading online, but my literary touchstones were established years ago and have never wavered: Ballard and Dick in my 20s, and then DeLillo and Houellebecq later on.

RM: Excellent author quote: 'I don't read books. I read Twitter.'

SS: Put it on my gravestone. It's sad but true. I wish I could break my Twitter habit. It's just become mindless scrolling, a reflex mechanism that leaves me empty and dry. In some ways, Tim's book is about the dire consequences of that and the need to blow it all up, so I probably should pay more attention to his message. And I always remember Mark talking about the zombie mechanism that is always-on social media stalking.



RM: One of the things I love about *Applied Ballardianism* is its lack of any literary affectation or the genre tics of 'contemporary literature'. As I think should already be evident from what we've said about our collaboration, your book not only fits into the concept of K-Pulp, it really helped crystallize the concept and made it possible to launch the series.

SS: OK, let me put this back on you, now, because I think you should explain the K-Pulp imprint and what you hope to achieve. Given my book is the first in the series, it's a question I get asked: 'What is K-Pulp? What is theory-fiction?'

RM: The concept of K-Pulp is more important to me than theory-fiction actually. It involves broader questions about culture; the two are connected in the sense that one was a way into the other. The original idea was to publish works in which fiction and theory intermix in different ways, or require each other for different reasons. So that already implied that the books in the series could be very different from each other. But with K-Pulp, importantly, it's also a matter of paying non-ironic, non-condescending homage to, and hopefully continuing, the aesthetic and conceptual legacy of modern pulp media as opposed to fine art and the high traditions of modernism.

Of course in the background of this is Fisher's 'pulp modernism'. And many of Mark's examples here concern the role that cheap distributive media can play in spreading radical concepts, attitudes, ways of seeing the world. This is something that's always been important to me with Urbanomic: that it's about mass production and distribution of paperback books, not making precious untouchable coffee-table art-object books. That's a deeply held conviction that I am prepared to pursue to the extent of perversity and financial ruin!

But as well as that question of cultural forms and processes, as in much of Mark's work it is also about a way of standing one's ground and expressing one's love for a certain seam of culture which, if it is acknowledged at all, is usually fated, when addressed by academia or art, to be either objectified and dissected or ironically appropriated.

The problem with the term 'theory-fiction' is maybe that it still risks invoking either condescension—theorising about fiction, taking it as an object that needs justifying—or a straightforward denigration of theory—theory needs fiction to make it more racy, to appeal to a cognitively weak or lazy audience. It could easily be a cover story for a theorist who can't quite cut it, or a novelist looking for theoretical kudos. Of course, the self-doubting narrator of *Applied Ballardianism* courts both of those potential pitfalls, but the book itself turns them around and becomes a positive affirmation and proof that theory and fiction already contain ingredients of each other, and can intensify each other. The CCRU thing, as Mark says somewhere, was precisely about theorising *with* and not *about* pop culture (for him that was a matter of escaping cultural studies); and about understanding theory, too, as an integral part of cultural production (which for me is about escaping philosophy).

There are a number of other K-Pulp projects, both books and other objects, that are in effect applied research projects exploring and refining this concept—for instance, the Toy Model AGI Playset, and Keith Tilford and Reza Negarestani's *Chronosis* comic. The challenge is to create cultural objects, preferably mass-producible, that are densely conceptually worked without being erudite and scholarly like academic tomes, or immaculate and untouchable like art objects. And which are hooked into circuits of imagination, commerce, hyperstition and consummated pleasure.

SS: That sounds appealing, and I think my narrator would like that, as he is hopelessly trapped within such a circuit. In a way, he is forever toying with the downloading of hyperstitional concepts into the everyday.

RM: I also think that for people of our generation, there is a distinct memory of a certain species of objects.

These are mass-produced and distributed media objects, and yet they enter one's everyday life like the intrusion of the icy shards of another space-time continuum

These are mass-produced and distributed media objects, and yet they enter one's everyday life like the intrusion of the icy shards of another space-time continuum. They're imbued with the ambience of unknown concept-spaces and aesthetics. But they're not unique, untouchable objects to be worshipped behind glass: other people have the exact same object, bought from the same shop. On the other hand, they were used, carried in our pockets. They became part of our life. They got ripped, rubbed and scuffed, and moulded themselves to our persons at the same time as they entered us and altered us.

Remember the otherworldly transport of reading the sleeve notes of a record on the bus on the way home? That might all seem nostalgic, but one thing Mark does very well in his writing is to insist—I'm thinking particularly of the 'Introduction to Acid Communism'—that, firstly, there are indeed special periods, 'golden years'. But secondly, that these are entirely the product of historical and technological contingencies. And thirdly, that we shouldn't be cowed, by guilt or accusations of nostalgia, into limiting our explorations of what makes for cultural production that is at once democratic, ambitious, experientially intense...and even fun at the same time!

To a certain extent, that K-Pulp experience I described is impossible now, because we know too much. We live effectively in one common space-time, one common information space, where we can immediately look up who's in the band, where they came from, what their influences are, and so on. But maybe there are aspects of what made those kinds of objects hyperstitionally charged that are worth pursuing and harnessing. That would be part of the K-Pulp research agenda too. I can't really say it better than Mark:

Need it be reiterated that hyperstition is to be located, not in the deliberately inaccessible

territory of hermetic pondering, but in pulp? Far from being reducible to the popular, or worse still, the populist, pulp is essentially propagative. It lurks and spreads in the paradoxical spaces—dark but lurid, mass marketed but intensely intellectual—beyond the gaze of the media big Other and its ruthlessly imposed pop-ontology of ‘commonsense’. Such spaces are rare to the point of near extinction in the hyperbright, hypervisible malls of contemporary postmodern entertainment culture, where everything is not only known but knowing.¹

A blancmanged present with all cultural inputs treated equally, destroying the past and obliterating the future

SS: That’s interesting, because of course my narrator becomes unstuck when he falls victim to atemporal-ity. He is driven mad by the thought that everything, in pop-cult terms, exists entirely at once, a blancmanged present with all cultural inputs treated equally, destroying the past and obliterating the future.

RM: Yes, there is that connection with the narrator’s condition, which is one I think a lot of us share. But your book was essential in another way, because until *Applied Ballardianism* came along, K-Pulp—as an imprint of Urbanomic—was only a vague thought or desire. I’d been clinging on to the idea of a possible escape route from my fear of Urbanomic entering a calcified form—‘speculative realist publisher’ or whatever—and thinking about how to extend the idea of a *philosophie brut* or, as Deleuze and Guattari said, ‘pop philosophy’.

Mark’s death gave this idea more urgency because I was thinking about what was unique, what was lost, about conversations I’d had with him that I could only have had with him, about some of our ambitions for what CCRU could have been or done, about lost opportunities. Suddenly *Applied Ballardianism* made the idea of K-Pulp seem like a realistic prospect, because it presents one possible solution to the complex equation I’ve just tried to set out. And in our collaboration, as you’ll remember, I was constantly pushing this agenda and thinking about *what kind*

of object this would be. I simply can’t, or won’t, see that question as entirely separate from the ‘content’, and it’s part of what excited me about working on *Applied Ballardianism*. I still hope one day to be walking jetlagged through an airport retail zone and to see this book on the shelf.

SS: Well, that could only happen in a parallel universe. In any case, I’m honoured to have launched a series, but also to have partly solved that equation. Some people—even reviewers and interviewers—have said to me that the book has completely baffled them, that they find it mysterious and impenetrable, but that somehow the book has infected them in a way that can’t be defined. This for me is the perfect reaction because I think it speaks to what you’ve just been saying: to the book’s existence as an object that is constantly straining at the edges of three-dimensional space to be something else, something memorable yet intangible. Of course, Ballard’s work originally infected me in precisely that way.



RM: Do you read Ballard anymore?

SS: Occasionally. I read *Crash* every year and it still thrills me. *High-Rise*, too. These are singular works.

RM: *Crash* is an extraordinary entity. It really altered my mind and split my life in two in the same kind of way you describe in the book.

SS: It’s quite an achievement, and I always loved how Ballard himself was so repulsed by what he had created.

RM: But he was obviously going through some major trauma and put it to good use. I think that’s also true of *The Unlimited Dream Company*.

SS: The process of him suffering personal tragedy and channelling that into his work resonates

1. Mark Fisher, ‘Megalithic Astropunk’, <<https://egressac.wordpress.com/2005/02/06/megalithic-astropunk-hyperstition/>>.

I too have experienced the therapeutic benefits of channelling the dark arts

with me, with how I wrote *Applied Ballardianism*. Not that I have suffered what he has suffered, just that I too have experienced the therapeutic benefits of channelling the dark arts.

RM: Even so, I found your book very funny. It's just hilarious, especially if one identifies somewhat with the hapless protagonist. It's somewhat 'English', in the sense that you have a very self-deprecating sense of humour.

SS: I guess the humour comes from how ridiculous I found myself spouting all that theoretical nonsense. But it's also outsider humour. There's a strong theme in the book of feeling uncomfortable in one's own skin and it manifests in all kinds of ways: being on the fringes of academia, being unsure of one's sexuality and masculinity, being Australian and on the edge of the world—geographically and culturally. It's why the narrator consistently feels as though he's floating outside of his body.

It's even manifest in how the book has been received here in Melbourne. No bookshop will stock it. No writers' festivals have asked me to speak about it. By contrast, in the months since the book has been published, I've received invitations to speak at festivals in England and Poland, plus numerous interview and review requests from anywhere but Melbourne. No one wants it here. I will never be part of the Melbourne literary scene. And that's OK. Like Groucho Marx, I wouldn't join any club that would have me as a member!

RM: That's a credo we share.
