

Applying Applied Ballardianism



The norm in matters of the human psyche is the vindication and use of freedom, as power of revision and of institution of norms, an assumption that implies, normally, the risk of madness.

(G. Canguilhem)

HELLTHREADS

Among all the obsessions of modern thought, the relationship between politics, rationality and art is certainly one of the most die-hard problems. From the cathedral of Kantian reason, erected on his first two Critiques and burnt to ashes by the third, the moment when the philosopher of Königsberg started wondering how art could be inserted in the machineries of reason, to the Marxist debates on the role of art in the revolution, the history of modernity and rationality is the history of a perennial aesthetic insomnia which won't let philosophers finally go to bed.

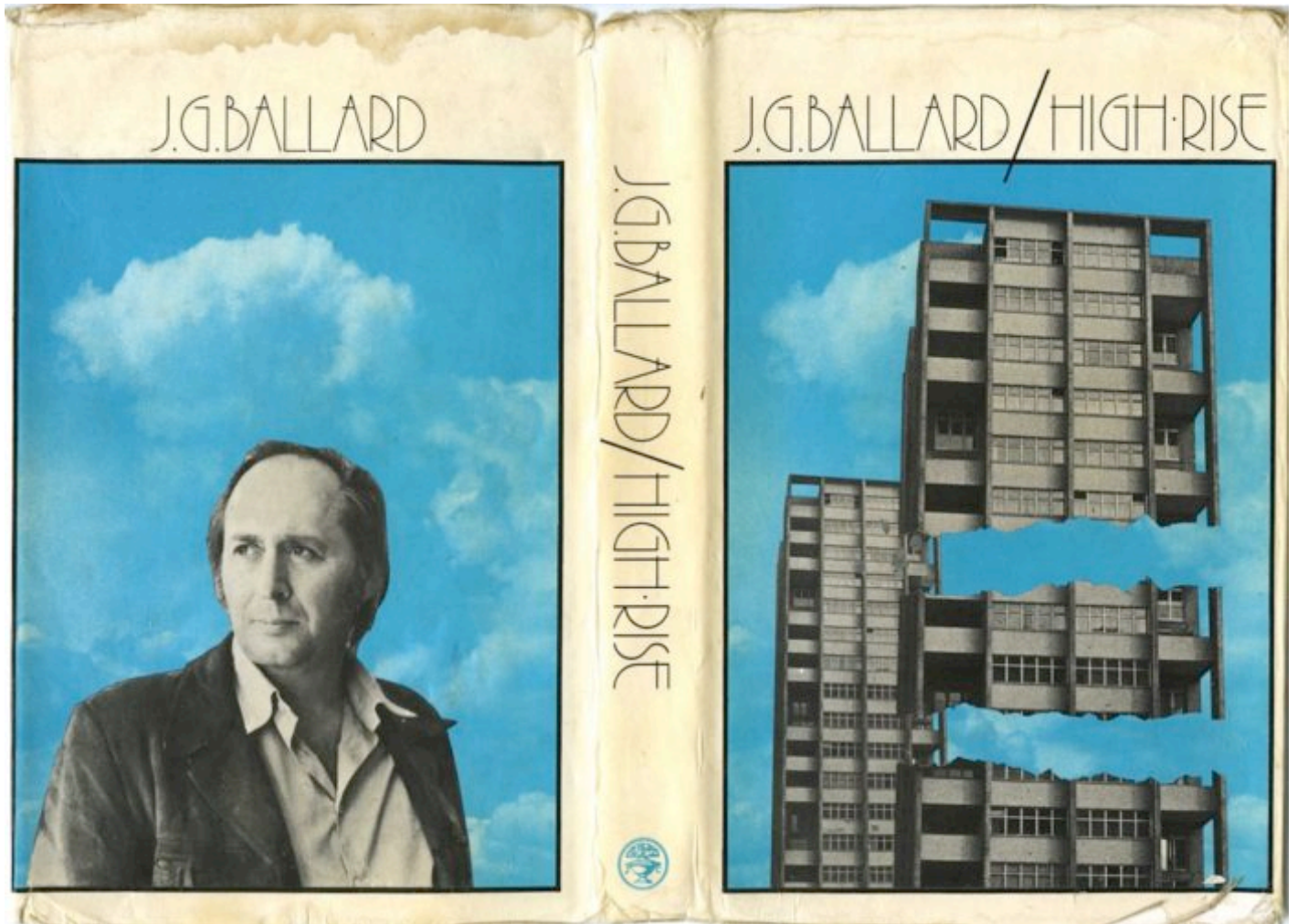
An excellent reassessment of the reasons for these sleepless nights is a recent and lively exchange of tweets involving Alex Williams, one of the authors of [Inventing the Future](#), Robin Mckay, founder of [Urbanomic](#), and the blogger Xenogothic, who, besides having taken part to the [hellthread](#), has also written a [detailed account](#) of what happened. The bone of this thread's contention is the political role of art and the social and ethical responsibilities that an artist must take upon themselves. In particular, the discussion verged on what is the “political task,” the social role and the ethical purpose of a work recently published by Urbanomic, [Applied Ballardianism](#) by Simon Sellars.

The dominant arguments in the discussion are essentially two: on the one hand, Williams supports the [“hard distinction”](#) between art and politics. Politics are the field of [“responsibility”](#) and of the rational management of resources, infrastructures and people. Art, on the contrary, [“can be many more things.”](#) In other words, art can do what politics should not: for example, transgress the logic of the rational management of the world. Even though Williams argues that [politics could potentially](#)

[use art for propaganda's sake](#), the two spheres must never coincide, unless one wants to fall back onto the worst forms of [warmongering irrationalism](#). Politics is [“a complex process of manipulation and re-engineering of dynamic tendencies, vectors of emergence and organisation, and navigation within strategic spaces.”](#) Art, on the other hand, can afford to let every sort of romanticism and irrationality loose. [“The aesthetisation of politics = fascism.”](#) [have you even read Benjamin?](#)

On the other hand, McKay and Xenogothic argue that this division is not only unnecessary, but that it's detrimental to those who want to rethink the present. If “irrationalism” can be harmful to the managerialist vision proposed by Williams' politics, the same may not hold true if we changed the [“scale”](#) taken into consideration, redefining the very object of politics. McKay, for example, argues that, if we take into account [“post-68 micro-politics”](#) and the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, the CCRU and the more acid forms of Mark Fisher's thought, Williams' dreaded romanticism could be [rigorized](#) and become a tool to analyse and transform our daily life in alien ways. Leaving behind the idea that politics are a game of *Age of Empires*, we could reduce the scale taken into consideration, turning our attention to the reconstruction of our daily life, and redefine it as a renewal that must also occur through art, fashion and architecture. Furthermore, reiterating this argument, Xenogothic adds that art can force politics into considering movements that exceed the interests of infrastructure and population engineering. Art can disclose [planetary, inhuman and eerie movements](#), pushing politics towards overcoming themselves and taking into consideration what is not immediately present or what cannot be controlled, at least in this historical moment, by human beings. Putting it briefly, according to McKay and Xenogothic, the art-and-politics hybrid can produce a better image of the politics to-come, both on a personal and planetary level.

Behind this para-academic tearroom looms an imposing black cloud. Simon Sellars, the author of the work guilty of having generated this thread, responds to these two arguments by stating that both of them are essentially incapable of describing the political scope of his work. Both theses distort the relationship between *Applied Ballardianism* and the political and ethical sphere. Even the strangest and most hip categories produced by philosophy can't seem to domesticate the substance of his novel, for which, as Sellars easily concedes, it is difficult to talk about a defined [“political agenda”](#) or of an affiliation to some school of contemporary thought. If they'll want to discuss his work further, they'd better begin to accept his [“anti-intellectual shtick”](#) and stop trying to find shortcuts, which surely sound intellectually respectable, but are to be considered, also and more importantly, obvious and insufficient. Moreover, if they ever wanted to turn this exchange into a seminar or debate of sorts in which they could resolve the dispute they'd better make sure there is [“a séance under the Westway, and a ritual evocation of sky anomalies”](#) before discussing any theory whatsoever. More occult, less acceleration.



BALLARDIANISM

In light of *Applied Ballardianism*, these caustic tweets are not surprising at all. This book, in addition to being a masterpiece of [goth hauteur-couture](#) and an extraordinary example of theory-fiction, is the first-person account of a PhD, which takes place in a parallel universe very similar to ours, whose project aim is to clearly elucidate the essential propositions of Ballardianism, the philosophical theory which implicitly guides the works of J.G. Ballard. The result of this research is, however, disastrous. The study of this imaginary discipline forces the protagonist to unveil an occult reality populated by conspiracies, UFOs, alien fetishes, hyper-invasive neuroscientific experiments and telepathic old men and pushes him to a sort of extreme gnosis: Ballard has really interpreted [the “next five minutes” of the human species](#), but no theory can coherently enclose this manifestation.

The only possible Ballardianism is a lucid apocalyptic paranoia, theoretically incomprehensible and

logically unsustainable, but capable of dissecting in detail a reality that becomes increasingly complex and beyond the reach of human cognitive abilities. [Nothing human makes it out of the near-future](#) and, paraphrasing Burroughs, who believed that Ballard touched the [“nonsexual roots of sexuality.”](#) Ballardianism shows us the essentially non-human roots of humanity’s so-called progress and future. “I imagined myself propelled to my death by forces I could not fathom, just like the victim in *Crash* who smashes into the narrator’s car and is hurled through the windscreen, striking the bonnet.”

Therefore, the protagonist of the novel abandons any hope of philosophical consistency or basic comprehension of the thought that drives Ballardian science fiction and decides to take upon himself the profound consequences of an applied Ballardianism, beginning a rigorous auto-analysis through which he will be transformed into a seismograph, capable of tracing the outlines of this inhuman mutation. Ballardianism is, therefore, not a theory, but it’s, at least apparently, a bare description of the alien alteration of the psycho-social sphere produced by the technocapitalist acceleration. [“As for ‘Ballardianism,’ no one should look to that as a conceptual tool for making sense of the world, unless they’re tired of living. \[...\] Applied Ballardianism almost kills him. That’s the point.”](#)

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Clearly, this brief exposition of Ballardianism has two main effects: it explicitly shows us the superficial motivations behind Sellars' tweets, but it generously lends itself to Williams' criticism. After all, on one hand, Ballardianism is a sort of blatantly anti-political apophantic thought. What’s the point in trying to capture it in a defined political and philosophical framework? However, on the other hand, Ballardianism could be easily attacked. After all, a theory that presents itself as a mere description of what is going on around us and it’s staunchly based on the impossibility of being conceptualized, is an emblematic example of the same romantic irrationalism against which Williams has fired his shots. Ballardianism could very easily be an example of what Reza Negarestani recently called [zero-claims theories](#), a theory that claims to be totally neutral and descriptive, thus justifying the lack of any explicit critical engagement.

And yet, beneath the surface, something still moves and makes this criticism ineffective and superficial. The events found in *Applied Ballardianism* suggest that this first analysis is insufficient. Page after page the techno-mysticism proposed by Sellars silently outlines an implicit method and a political philosophy that seems to be more or less voluntarily encrypted and esoteric in the literal sense of the term. Far from being a theory without content, Ballardianism builds on its apocalypticism, which remains, nonetheless, the real throbbing heart of this work, a theory of political action and of the overcoming of the present that puts a lot of strain on Williams’ rationalism and on Mckay’s and Xenogothic’s DeleuzoGuattarian accelerationism. Beneath the

explicit theorization of the non-principles of Ballardianism, and the description of a reality which is rapidly collapsing under the weight of the constant acceleration of technocapitalism, the book conceals a secret doctrine, a doctrine which seems to be unfolding itself without the protagonist's and, to a certain extent, as Sellars himself candidly confirmed in a private conversation, the author's of the novel itself knowledge or consent. Just like the forest described by Ballard in *The Crystal World*, an implicit political theory spontaneously crystallizes itself within and underneath *Applied Ballardianism*'s pages.

However, given the esoteric nature of this theory, I will not take upon myself the task of completely unraveling this secret. Sellars has spent so much energy in throwing off, discouraging and diverting any form of explanation of any possible political content of his book that it would seem at least indelicate to frustrate his efforts by revealing what, in my opinion, he has unknowingly hid within *Applied Ballardianism*. Moreover, the novel itself rejects any kind of exegetical authority and would never accept my words as the ultimate analysis of its content; given the elusive and apocalyptic nature of the text, any theory of mine would leave something essential behind and would be inevitably condemned to be tremendously incomplete.

Therefore, I will not try to outline any conceptual guide or scholarly explanation of the content of the novel, I will just draw some sort of treasure map, consisting of three clues which should guide you towards the conceptual core of *Applied Ballardianism*. You have already discovered the first clue and it is, banally enough, the term *Ballardianism*. The other two will be two concepts coming from the most turbid and disturbing forms of contemporary accelerationism, that accelerationism which has recently gathered around the hashtag [#cavetwitter](#). The two terms are *templexity* and *anti-praxis*. My goal is to create a field-guide to establish a first contact with the deep logic of Ballardianism. I will not spoil the thrill of initiation for you; I will limit myself to giving you a helping hand to facilitate your descent.



TEMPLEXITY

Western culture has proposed, essentially, two images of time: a circular one and a linear one. Time has been conceptualized, in the great majority of cases, either as an eternal return, bound to the cyclical nature of seasons, generational change or the regular repetitions of economic and social crises, or as a straight line which describes the march of History, walking towards his own

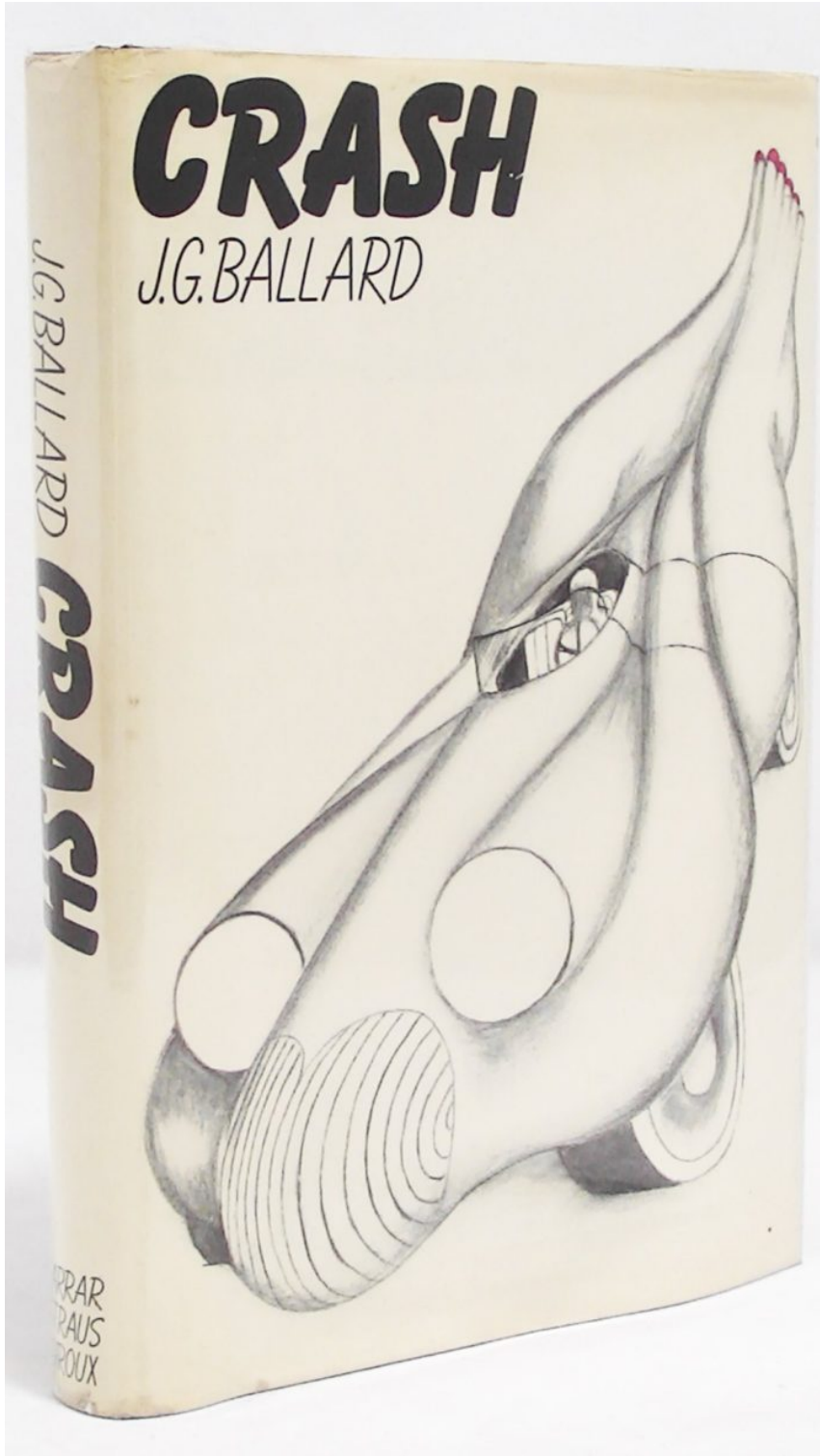
fulfillment. These models, according to Anna Greenspan and Nick Land, are now obsolete. In order to describe the temporality in which we are trapped we must assume a less naïve theoretical position and imagine more complex geometries. Modernity, according to Greenspan and Land, has a counterintuitive temporality in which the past, the present and the future have not only collapsed on one another in the cultural sphere, forming, as Jameson would have it, a postmodern and meaningless pastiche, but they have also triggered a bizarre material productive process in which they shape one another.

Drawing inspiration from [Timothy Morton's ecology](#) and distorting Greenspan's and Land's accelerationism slightly and deliberately, we could illustrate this conceptual revision stating that, to understand our temporality, we have to understand how archaic remains of organic material have been revived in the form of oil and have become the lifeblood of the current machinic system which, in turn, causes the warming of the global climate engendering a future that comes back to haunt us, informing, in the best case scenario, our current global, national and personal environmental policies. In other words, we can say that the long shadow of modernity in which we are immersed shows us how the clear division between past, present and future is, probably since the dawn of time, but certainly in this historical moment, an elaborate hoax: the three temporal dimensions coexist in the form of alchemical mixtures of anonymous materials, chasing each other as if they were a loop, and causing reactions in a weird and non-linear manner. "[As temporal modernization advances, it reaches back.](#)" In order to understand, therefore, the technocapitalist acceleration in which we find ourselves into we must be able to trace the convulsions of this strange temporal serpent that tries to eat its own tail incessantly. "To accelerate beyond lightspeed is to reverse the direction of time. Eventually, in science fiction, modernity completes its process of theological revisionism, by re-discovering eschatological culmination in the time-loop. *Judgment Day*. The end comes when the future reaches back, to seize us. [...] Modernity only linearizes in order to delinearize more thoroughly."

This temporality, which takes the shape, depending on the author in question, of [a spiral](#) or of [an impossibly straight labyrinth](#), is defined *templicity*. These paradoxical geometric figures are one of the crucial elements of Ballardianism's political imagery. In Sellars' novel, in fact, Ballard's writings are explicitly treated as the time-travelling machines, capable of transporting the protagonist in templicity's spires' most remote and inaccessible areas and accelerating the actualization of worlds that do not yet exist or that have existed in an Antiquity-without-Tradition. Ballard's science fiction does not have plots, but possesses what Sellars calls, quoting *The Empire of the Sun*, [deep assignments](#), abyssal tasks which come from the remote past or the near future, which undermine the current reality and divert the course of the present. Ballardianism's temporality is made up of improbable and by no means cyclical returns, communications with "things" coming from an era in which no human has ever set foot in and long paranoid disquisitions about the ontological value of the [Mandela Effect](#).

In conclusion, we can say that against the claustrophobia of the eternal returns and the linearity of the *There is no alternative* of Thaxterian fame, Ballardianism proposes a radical time in which the

future retroacts on the present causing disturbing and unpredictable mutations and the past can't remain in its grave, insisting on the present and rewriting itself every time. The world, taken in this time spiral, is full of alternative pasts, presents and futures; the Ballardianist just has to decide to pay the price of following the direction of these schismatic feedback loops and resistances in order to overcome the closed horizon of the present. It might be easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, ["but we have long stopped romanticizing about the end of our world. Our sole interest is now the fate of counterfactual universes."](#)



ANTI-PRAXIS

This vision of the world, in which the acceleration of technocapitalism has reached an inhuman level of complexity and time loses its canonical structures, turning into an uncontrollable spiral out of which emerge a multiplicity of worlds, confronts us with the most complex and, in a sense, nagging question: what now? What are we supposed to do?

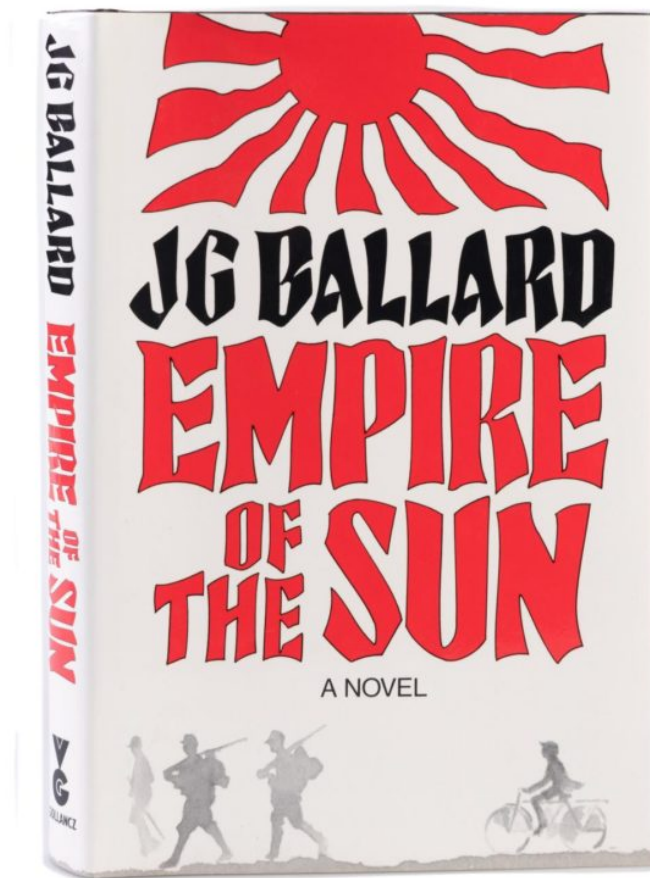
After all, as mentioned previously, Ballardianism, taken as a simple method of apophantic auto-analysis and as a description of the current catastrophe, should collapse before the weight of actual political commitment, failing to translate into a coherent theory of political action and having to finally show its true colors, revealing itself for the nihilist and fatalist irrationalism it actually is. This, however, does not happen. Ballardianism, in fact, finds a solid political ally among the theories recently emerged in the accelerationist blogosphere, the true heir of the [grunge accelerationism](#) of the CCRU and nineties *cyberculture*. In particular, Ballardianism seems able to thrive in perfect harmony with a concept formalized by Edmund Berger and Vincent Garton: *anti-praxis*.

Of course, a concept called “anti-praxis” will make some of you smile or raise a disdainful eyebrow: have we perhaps come to the point of criticizing praxis altogether and proposing the complete abandonment of all forms of political action? Are we supposed to quit trying and wait for the end of the world? But, as everyone can easily imagine, anti-praxis is, clearly, not the complete rejection of praxis and it does not demand us to totally abandon our political activities, whatever they may be.

Anti-praxis consists of two basic principles: making political action as impersonal as possible and intensifying the actually existing processes of liberation and emancipation, without situating our actions within/against capitalism, but following those political vectors which point directly towards a possible exit.

The first principle is easily understood: if, as Ballardianism states, the economic system in which we live has reached levels of inhuman complexity and a totally de-personalized and de-personalizing structure, politics cannot do anything against this creature as long as it remains confined in its humanist and subjectivist tropes. As long as anti-capitalist politics will be caged in the false dichotomy of either anarchist spontaneism, in which the subject or the collectivity-without-authority that exert their criticism of the present remain the focal point of political action, or the conquest of cultural hegemony through the formation of a party, the only true subject and enlightened leader of every conflict, there will be no hope of denting capitalist realism, not even slightly. The only winning strategy is to fight the monster on a mutually-shared battleground, to root politics in the impersonal materiality of, quoting Eugene Thacker, the *world-without-us*, to reach the speed of technocapitalist acceleration and to disperse all forms of anthropocentrism and subjectivism, tracing, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s jargon, lines of flight from both the system in which we are enclosed and the identities that bind us to the system itself. Anti-praxis, therefore, far from proposing no praxis at all, proposes the most demanding path: learning to create scorched earth in ourselves and around us in order to create schisms within the depressive fog which has

kept us hostage for so long. Accelerate, disperse, encrypt, inhumanize. Anti-praxis [“is not at the bottom a political theory; it is one of mobilizing materialism.”](#)



From this first principle descends the second: we must reach levels of emancipation and liberation that are ever greater and less and less human and subjective. Anti-praxis, especially in [the version proposed by Vincent Garton](#), is a politics of ruthless freedom and coincides seamlessly with the struggle to make this same freedom increasingly unlimited and pervasive. Rather than trying to mold and shape matter (because, as it's easy to guess, we are still not talking about people, subjects and parties, but the anonymous materials of the world) as if we were its enlightened engineers, the goal of anti-praxis is to free all its expressive power. Avoiding both the obsession with [negative freedom of contemporary libertarians](#) and the rationalist delusions of total control that have been so prominent in modernity, anti-praxis proposes a constant effort towards an essentially non-human freedom, in which our species is a part of the whole but it's absolutely not its center. Therefore, [as Garton himself notes](#), this freedom has nothing to do with the ridiculous arguments proposed by anarcho-capitalism, but references directly the key principle of contemporary

occultism, proposed and formalized by Aleister Crowley, Austin Osman Spare and Jack Parsons, becoming a continuation of a long tradition of experiments in existential and political liberation: *Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law*.

In this light, Ballardianism completely changes its skin: its apocalypticism becomes an attempt to subject us to the painful and disquieting disappearance of our identities and the reality which surrounds us. Furthermore, the practice of auto-analysis becomes a parrhesiastic agony through which the narrator exercises anti-praxis' corrosive freedom in its most radical form. Ballard's atrocities are, therefore, an integral part of an austere and rigorous xenopolitics. Nonetheless, as *Applied Ballardianism*'s ending clearly shows, we haven't seen anything yet.