

MAGAZINE
SECONDS

SECONDS #40, 1996 • interview by George Petros

J. G. Ballard



Within the fact-packed pages of his speculative fiction, JAMES GRAHAM BALLARD (“J. G. Ballard” to you) killed more people and caused more damage than anyone. His dystopian dramas employ catastrophe as a catalyst for the evolution of character. Ultimately, his victims adapt, learning to groove with it, whatever it may be — however deadly, however devious.

Other writers have obliterated most of the human race, but silver linings exist around their dark clouds of destruction — otherwise, what vantage point would they assume? Ballard doesn’t have that problem — he’s out of the picture. From where he stands, the future looks more like the graveyard of ideas described by Burgess and Orwell and less like the extrapolation of energies envisioned by Huxley and Harlan Ellison.

*In Ballard’s most beloved work, *Crash* (1973), he describes a guy sexually stimulated by car crashes who intentionally causes them, becoming both daredevil and victim. An homage to those who’d use the automobile as the ultimate vehicle of autoerotic annihilation, *Crash* came to life courtesy of David Cronenberg.*

Out of his writing lab Ballard emerges to discuss death with the living. The mythology momentarily suspends; he condescends to answer questions, the chilly breath of twilight bites as the tape rolls on.

“Nothing is real until you can put it into the VCR.”

SECONDS: *How did you come to use imagery of catastrophes and disasters?*

BALLARD: I started off writing so-called disaster novels. My heroes, rather than running for the hills when the dam broke, they all embraced the catastrophe. The disaster novel is a very British form. It reflects British pessimism and the loss of Empire and that sort of thing. People used to say, “Ballard is deeply pessimistic,” but I always said, “Wait a minute. The early novels of mine are tales of psychological fulfillment.” They’re the opposite of being pessimistic. They’re stories of characters mythologizing goals. That’s what happiness is by any definition. When people ask, “Why all these British disaster stories?” I think it is a way of remaking the world.

SECONDS: *You said that as soon as humans were aware of the fact they were separate from their planet, they figured out ways to destroy it.*

BALLARD: Yes. That’s a way of remaking it. We’re far from being a passive and acted-upon creature. It’s interesting that the Americans have started to produce disaster yarns like *Twister*. Maybe it says something about a seismic shift in the American psyche. Maybe Americans, for the first time, are not satisfied with the world they’ve created and they need to destroy it.

SECONDS: *Are they looking for destruction or just drastic change?*

BALLARD: Both. Not destruction for its own sake in the Hitlerian sense of *Götterdämmerung*. What they’re looking for is to clear the decks and get back to square one.

SECONDS: *What do you see as the future for the Space Program?*

BALLARD: Well, it doesn’t seem to be going anywhere, does it? In 1957, I heard the radio beacon of Sputnik 1 transmitted over the radio news and it sounded like the harbinger of the world after tomorrow. Most people felt at the time this was a vindication of the

age-old dream of Science Fiction and also that a new world had been born — the Space Age had arrived and Space Travel would expand exponentially in the same way aviation expanded from the days of the Wright Brothers’ first flight. That didn’t happen. You could say the Space Age lasted fifteen years, from Gagarin’s first flight to 1975 and the first Apollo splashdown that

was not shown live on television. The American networks realized that the public was bored. Until then, all the Apollo splashdowns had been shown live. The one in 1975 was not shown live and I think the Space Age ended then. The Challenger disaster was the final nail in the coffin. There were remarkable achievements but they haven’t borne fruit. It’s too difficult using present-day technology to get into Space. I think they probably always knew it was going to be very difficult, but they thought they could get the unit

cost of the launchers down to a point where it would enable a higher level of Space activity. In fact, the cost has not gone down that much.

SECONDS: *And the propulsion systems have not advanced that much.*

BALLARD: Yes, they’re Nineteenth Century brute-force ballistic propulsion systems, and that’s why people aren’t interested in Space Flight. They instinctively know that these huge Saturn rockets and their Russian counterparts belong to the age of the Nineteenth Century, along with the huge steam engines. It’s brute-force ballistic technology that has nothing to do with what people recognize as the characteristic technology of this century: micro-processors, microwave data links, everything that goes in the world at the speed of an electron. The world is ruled by vast commercial empires who shift gigantic cash balances from one side of the globe to the other at the speed of light. This governs the planet, not some hydrogen peroxide mixture on a launch



J. G. BALLARD

pad in Florida. Science Fiction's prediction of unlimited Space Travel has been proven wrong. That great dream, which was taken out of magazines and books into the cinema thanks to people like Lucas and Spielberg, has died. That prophecy proved wrong.

SECONDS: *On the other hand, it doesn't seem as if we devote much attention to research in the area of propulsion and gravitational manipulation.*

BALLARD: The present technologies are too clumsy. I think there may well be a Space Age when some radical new technology is discovered, a real breakthrough that will enable Space Flight. Also, there's a point that, aside from the scientific interest, Space may be of no interest. It's an alien landscape as alien as the deep sea bed. We could, if you wanted, construct vast underwater cities on the beds of the great ocean, but what's the point?

SECONDS: *But if population pressure changes —*

BALLARD: It's hard to believe the planet will be so overcrowded that we'll want to live on the beds of the ocean. The same applies to Space Travel. This Arthur C. Clarke dream of colonizing the solar system died.

SECONDS: *What about the idea of mining the Moon and asteroids?*

BALLARD: That might take place, but we could do it by remote control vehicles. It's the idea of manned Space Travel which lies at the heart of traditional Science Fiction.

SECONDS: *Why not do it just because it fulfills an archetypal pioneering ideal?*

BALLARD: I'm not sure that it does. It may be possible that the human central nervous system doesn't have a designed capacity to explore Outer Space. Zero gravity perhaps recapitulates on the unconscious level various archaic fears in the human mind — falling off the branch into the jaws of the predator below. There's all sorts of psychological reasons why we may not be suited as a species for Space Travel. The

highly controlled, limited environment, the time distortion, the intense subjectivity; it's an asexual and antisocial environment. All these together may make Space Travel

not a dream of the future, but a half-remembered nightmare from the past. To get beyond the solar system means a commitment to a one-way trip. Not many people are prepared to spend their lives in a Spaceship that will never return.

SECONDS: *What about the idea that life is an anti-entropic force with an imperative to animate the universe?*

BALLARD: That may well be true. I have no doubt that in the coming centuries, huge numbers of interstellar probes will leave this planet and voyage across the universe

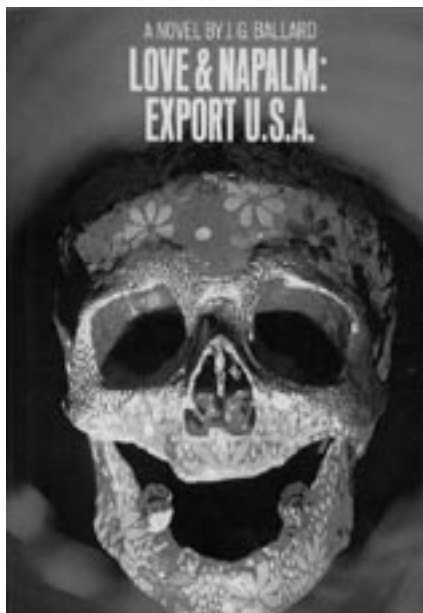
— but they won't contain human beings, that's the point. We've already given notice of our existence and steadily expanded the electromagnetic shell made up of the planet's radio and TV transmissions. All those *I Love Lucys* have reached Alpha Centauri and they're moving on. Maybe we're going to colonize the universe with our sitcoms and our late-night chat shows.

SECONDS: *Would you go into Space?*

BALLARD: I definitely wouldn't, just as I wouldn't spend a year in the Sahara Desert.

SECONDS: *Getting back to the psychological ramifications of the Space Age, has it left an alienated generation? They promised us the Space Age and we didn't get it. Are people disappointed?*

BALLARD: Outside the ranks of Science Fiction enthusiasts, I'm sorry to say I don't think they are disappointed. That's the most mysterious thing about the Space Age. I can remember an intense interest in all the scientific record-breaking attempts that were made in the 1930s. Advances in aviation, high-speed trains, rocketry — there was an intense interest in scientific advance, particularly in aviation. It was a source of enormous marvel. Planes would soon fly faster than sound; it seemed unbelievable.



“A huge inward migration is taking place — people are retreating from the outside world into the inner world.”

This had a huge spinoff in architecture. Everything was streamlined in those days — teapots, refrigerators and, later, cars. It affected fashion, interior decoration, and consumer design. If you look through collections of books from the Thirties devoted to fashion, you can see the influence laid out. Now, the Space Program had no spinoff. Its effects on architecture, furnishing, and fashion were absolutely nil. That’s extraordinary when you think of it.

SECONDS: *No coffee cups shaped like the Apollo capsules?*

BALLARD: It’s quite mysterious.

SECONDS: *Did things reach a utilitarian stage where design was no longer necessary?*

BALLARD: The iconic power of Armstrong and his fellow astronauts bouncing around on the Moon was enormous. These people were the closest you could get to the future. When Lindbergh landed in Paris, there were a million people there. The pioneers of aviation were some of the most celebrated people on the planet. The dream of flight entered everybody’s mind. With the Apollo program and its Russian counterpart, there was no dream of Space Flight.

SECONDS: *Would we have had the film *Star Wars* without the Apollo program?*

BALLARD: Yes, we would. Half of the great Hollywood blockbusters over the last twenty years have been Science Fiction films with nothing to do with the real Space Program. I was terribly disappointed with Stanley Kubrick’s *2001*. I saw it when it came out in 1968. The next year, Armstrong walked on the Moon. *Dr. Strangelove*, made a few years beforehand, leapt from our nightmare of nuclear armageddon. With *2001*, it seemed Kubrick turned his back on the real Space program at Cape Kennedy. *Star Wars* and the imitators all move back into the security of fantasy.

SECONDS: *What film from that era would come close to expressing the collective will of*

that moment? Barbarella?

BALLARD: *Barbarella* treated the dream of Space Travel as a camp joke. It had nothing to do with reality. There is something faintly

comic about the real Space Program. It does look vaguely adolescent, which the pioneering aviation flights never did. There was nothing adolescent about Lindbergh flying the Atlantic with just a package of sandwiches and his own determination.

SECONDS: *What was adolescent about the Space Program?*

BALLARD: I don’t know what it is. To some extent, it’s the way NASA operated. They left the poetry out of Space. NASA spokesman denied all along that the astronauts dreamed in space. It would have been fascinating to know what

their dreams were — they might have told us something about the human race. NASA said, “Astronauts aren’t the type of guys who dream.” One astronaut denied he ever dreamed at all, even on the ground! It’s quite clear the Apollo astronauts encountered enormous psychological pressure during the Space Flights. They’re a heroic group of men but if you look at the subsequent histories of them — Armstrong went to work as a professor of engineering at a provincial American university and refused to be interviewed. Others just lapsed into alcoholism, others into mysticism. It wasn’t fame they had trouble coping with; they’d suffered a primordial terror that had torn out their central nervous system.

SECONDS: *Mysticism is an interesting route for an astronaut.*

BALLARD: I think so. It seemed to be these were all stress reactions. You’re riding a rocket, you know? The fear of death never leaves you.

SECONDS: *So, what films from that era accurately represented the Space Program?*

BALLARD: I don’t think any film did.

SECONDS: *How about anything since then?*

BALLARD: There may have been, but if you



J. G. BALLARD

think back to the Science Fiction films of the 1950s, they were much closer to reality, even though the Space Program hadn't begun.

SECONDS: *You've said that Science Fiction had a preoccupation with the mechanism of getting into Space, and became an analogy for everyday life on Earth.*

BALLARD: That's what happened. Science Fiction is an enormously popular genre, there's no question about that.

SECONDS: *Because of H.G. Wells or in spite of him?*

BALLARD: Insofar as he helped to create the genre of Science Fiction, I think his influence was negative. Science Fiction has seized a monopoly of imaginative responses to science and technology and has exploited science and technology for entertainment purposes — nothing wrong with that. It just means that science is completely absent from most serious fiction produced. That's a shame. Science Fiction has allowed mainstream novelists to ignore Science for the last fifty years. Most of them draw their inspiration from a literary culture that only survives in a few universities. This greatly handicaps them because most of them completely lack the vocabulary of ideas and sensitivity towards the new that makes for a successful novelist. If you take *Brave New World* and *1984*, those are Science Fiction novels but not genre Science Fiction. You get an inkling of what could've come to pass had mainstream novelists been encouraged to write about science.

SECONDS: *How close are sex and violence?*

BALLARD: They're very close and even closer in the imagination, which is just as real. When a young man driving his car is overtaken by an attractive young woman who deliberately sprays her exhaust on his windshield and he slams his foot down on the gas pedal to catch up to her, we can assume there's a partial sexual component in there. We don't feel the same excitement

about plane crashes. Famous people who've died in car crashes —

SECONDS: — *are romanticized.*

BALLARD: Yes, they are. The deaths of people like James Dean, Jayne Mansfield, and Albert Camus have resonances that the deaths of famous people in hotel fires — plane crashes even — don't have. Think of Kennedy's death, which is an extreme kind of car accident. Had

Kennedy been shot by a sniper walking on the White House lawn, tragic as his death would have been, it would have never had the iconic significance. Those endless replays of the Zapruder footage — in that open Continental sitting besides his wife — surrounded by all that chrome and Detroit steel. His death was enormously amplified by the fact that it took place in a car at the head of a motorcade.

SECONDS: *Cars don't seem as animated as they were in the Sixties.*

BALLARD: I always thought American automobile design was a wonderfully accurate

barometer of the American psyche. If you look at American car design of the Eisenhower years, that was a phase of all these vehicles with their rocket engine motifs and air intake scoops —

SECONDS: *They could almost fly.*

BALLARD: Yes. Then came the Kennedy assassination, the Vietnam War, and Nixon. American car design suddenly shrank. The cars didn't shrink physically but the design elements — the frivolity, the dream elements — all vanished, and you got these somber vehicles. I don't think Americans are that aware of car design. I've always suspected they didn't notice the difference between the design of a Buick and an Oldsmobile. They just took it for granted. American cars, on the whole, have always been substantially larger than anybody else's.

SECONDS: *Why is that?*

BALLARD: Well, the country is richer. Americans are bigger physically, and their imaginative expectations are larger.



“Humans have a terrible temptation to imagine a happier past.”

Nowadays the car is an extension of the home. Everybody wants a bigger house, so they want a bigger car.

SECONDS: *What is the future of the automobile one hundred years from now?*

BALLARD: You have to ask yourself: will people want to travel around a hundred years from now the way they do now? If everybody's content to sit in their living room surrounded by an electronically-generated version of reality where when you go shopping you don't actually pick up your handbag and drive to the local supermarket but instead push a button that produces a virtual super-market where you select the goods you want without ever leaving your living room — you're not going to need a car. If people do want to still drive around in a hundred years, I assume cars will still exist.

SECONDS: *Will the technology be that of levitation and self-contained environments?*

BALLARD: It's impossible to anticipate a radically different technology, just as people who listened to Marconi's first radio transmission across the Atlantic couldn't have visualized today's television broadcasts to any point of the world.

SECONDS: *What's the worst-case scenario for the future of cars?*

BALLARD: What would frighten me would be a car that became an instrument of total nostalgia, if the motorways and highways of the future were filled with vehicles being exercised by their owners as antiques. Human beings have a terrible temptation to imagine a happier past.

SECONDS: *Didn't the car make the Sexual Revolution possible?*

BALLARD: I think it did. A whole generation of people in the Fifties conducted all the major emotional transactions of their lives in a car. They first petted their wives, and conceived their children, in cars.

SECONDS: *The car's mobility allowed there to be a greater variety of potential lovers.*

BALLARD: Absolutely. The car has transformed life on this planet.

SECONDS: *What kind of car do you have?*

BALLARD: I have a European Ford.

SECONDS: *Do you drive too fast for comfort?*

BALLARD: Not at my age. Nor do I have sex in cars anymore, sadly. I think you drive about one mile an hour slower for each year

you age. You peak in your twenties as far as sex and cars is concerned and then you taper off. I'm an observer now.

SECONDS: *Are some cars better as a homicidal weapon than others?*

BALLARD: I think cars mimic Medieval armor. Some armor was incredibly extravagant and baroque. Jewelers and goldsmiths worked on the ceremonial armor of kings and princes. If you look at British car design, the Rolls Royce or the Bentley, it's very obsessed with class. The Rolls Royce is a country house on wheels.

SECONDS: *How about an MG?*

BALLARD: The classic was like a classic biplane without the wings. Open cockpit, scarf billowing in the slipstream —

SECONDS: *Will we ever have personalized aircraft like we do cars?*

BALLARD: No, not beyond millionaires.

SECONDS: *Wasn't that part of the Thirties and Forties Science Fiction vision?*

BALLARD: Yes, but not just in Science Fiction. The vision was that just as every citizen was moving towards having a car, in the future every citizen would have his own personal helicopter.

SECONDS: *We're just going to have wait for the anti-gravity revolution.*

BALLARD: I don't think that world will ever come about. The human race will move on to other things. A huge inward migration is taking place at the moment; people are retreating from the outside world into the inner world. When virtual reality arrives, it won't be necessary to go anywhere.

SECONDS: *People's memories will be composed of third-hand TV images.*

BALLARD: Yes, they will. What we think of as first-hand experience will occur less and less.

SECONDS: *There will only be the pioneers who go into the real world and record experiences for everyone else.*

BALLARD: Exactly. I went to a wedding not so long ago where five cameras were working. We had a bizarre case in England a couple of years ago where a father had an incredibly lavish wedding for his daughter and hired a professional crew to record it, only to find out later there was something wrong with the film. He then, with the agreement of the hundreds of guests and the clergyman, restaged the entire thing right