Crash and its thematic cousins

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BALLARD'S *CRASH* AND ITS THEMATIC COUSINS

Introduction: *Crash*

Ballard's 1973 novel *Crash* is one of the most controversial pieces of fiction ever to appear in post-war Europe. Sometimes regarded as part of a loose trilogy of novels (along with *Concrete Island* [1974] and *High-Rise* [1975]), *Crash* depicts modern urbanized life, bound with its technological repercussions, to an extreme extent. After having written novels which explore the topics of climate disasters and planetary transformations, Ballard turned his attention to modern-day society and its near-future (the "next five minutes," as he called it), doing away with the usual science-fiction tropes. Early on, Ballard rejected quite vocally the kind of SF solely engaged with the commonplaces of outer space, with "rocket ships and ray guns" (Ballard 1996: 195), at the detriment of psychological nuance. He considered these topics childish, dismissing them in favor of a fictional exploration of "inner space" – a domain which would mainly deal with the effects of technology on the human psyche. In his work, this relationship would often find itself expressed by means of bizarre, surreal landscapes, bodies and minds undergoing fragmentation, relations between objects and persons expressed in technical terms, and so on, all of which would become the mainstays of his opus. Interested in "the only truly alien planet … Earth" (197), as he put it, Ballard sought to reexamine the possibilities of SF and exploit its dormant potential, a genre which he saw as the most important of the twentieth century, one which could address, and be informed by, the mass mediated and technologically driven life in the modern age.

It is debatable whether *Crash* truly fits into the mold of the science fiction genre or not. According to James Sey it partly does, because the novel is defined by the presence of the *cyborg* – i.e. a man-machine hybrid – placing it squarely in the area of SF: "In SF, the cyborg is the culmination of a thematic

lineage at least as old as the genre – that of the robot" (1996: 109). By granting the automobile human attributes, while simultaneously dehumanizing its characters, often portraying them like pure objects in space defined by a new interplay between mathematics and eros, *Crash* presents a world completely imbued with technology. It fixes its attention on one of the twentieth century's most salient technological symbols – the automobile – so as to indicate its overlooked and often violent significance, while also absorbed in "the new psychological possibilities of the machine landscape … which might enable human beings to reconnect with the alienating surfaces of their high-tech environment" (Francis 2011: 108). The fast lanes, London motorways, flyovers, airport terminals, parking lots and the other concrete, steel, and aluminum constructions constitute the setting of *Crash*, underscoring the artificiality which the characters inhabit.

Ballard's continual concern is the impact of urban culture and architecture on the modern subject's psyche. *Crash* takes this concern to the extreme in its unflagging focus on the myriad ways in which sex can occur, magnifying to an often unbearable degree every orifice real or imaginary, the novel's language constantly seeking new connections (often abstract and mathematical) in order to enlarge the number of sexual "mode[s] of entry" (Ballard 2014: 166), so to speak. At first, *Crash* seems pornographic and superficial, much too satisfied with its own compulsive indulgence in countless sex acts, all graphically portrayed. But beyond these sex acts there lurks an impression that these protagonists dream of something else other than sexual pleasure, namely to become one with the machine: "I wanted to adjust the contours of her breasts and hips to the roofline of the car, celebrating in this sexual act the marriage of their bodies with this benign technology" (Ballard 1995: 162). This ambivalence of merging is precisely the preoccupation of science fiction. At the same time, the novel's premise and setting sharply displaces it from the domain of SF, considering it "contains few of the generic markers usually associated with SF, except for a central concern with technology" (Sey 1996: 106).

And while Ballard's *Concrete Island* portrays vagrants, and *High-Rise* presents us with class struggle devolving into anarchy, *Crash*'s cast is comprised mostly of workers in technical fields – doctors, TV "scientists", airport personnel, police engineers, stunt actors, and so on – occupations which, though different by class-affiliation and in kind, share the same denominator, this being the omnipresent road system linking them all together. The obligatory traversals to and from airports, hospitals, and studios represent a major aspect of interaction between the characters and their world. *Crash* implies, by constant recourse to these locations, that there is no escaping them; the road may congest during rush-hour traffic (Ballard 1995: 53) or lead to the silence of the car-park (61), but the action of the novel necessarily takes place on these roads or near them. *Crash* considers all its junctions, roads, flyovers, and motorways as the most significant locations of the modern city, here depicted as abstract and "metallized," filled with an "endless landscape of concrete and structural steel" which stretches "from the motorways to the south of the airport, across its vast runways to the new apartment systems" (48). The notion of the city as having a renaissance-like center where people may gather and socialize is completely absent from the novel. There are no cafés (only airport cafés), no parks (only car-parks) in *Crash*. There is hardly any portrayal of vegetation, which appears overtly for the first time only in chapter 22 (205), making for a stark contrast to Ballard's novels from the '60s, which present lush worlds brought to a drastic end, either due to a cataclysmic event (*The Crystal World*) or the slow washing away of climate change (*The Drowned World*).

Crash's narrator and protagonist is James Ballard, a producer of TV commercials who discovers the "real excitements of the car-crash" (Ballard 1995: 19) through his relationship with Vaughan, the novel's antagonist and driving force. James characterizes Vaughan as a "renegade" scientist (a "TV" scientist at that) whose novelty was to apply "computerized techniques to the control of all international traffic systems" (63). Furthermore, Vaughan projects an image of "the scientist as hoodlum, driving about from laboratory to

television centre on a high-powered motorcycle … [possessing a] strange vision of the automobile and its real role in our lives" (63). Vaughan is obsessed with the potentialities of the car-crash, and his obsession awakens in others a thrill at witnessing and experiencing wounds and fatalities of the road, along with "all the deviant possibilities of … sex" (99), which promise to free these characters from twentieth century paralysis, effected by the mass media and global communication systems.

Appropriately enough, *Crash* begins with James' announcement that Vaughan has died in a car-crash. This, as James puts it, was Vaughan's "only true accident" (7), differentiating between the collisions brought about endlessly in the novel and this fatal crash, which was an abortive attempt to die alongside the actress Elizabeth Taylor. Vaughan's months-long planning of an "optimal" and deadly collision with the famed Taylor is thus a failure, an analepsis which starts the novel, along with its unabating obsession with the significance and ecstasy of the car-crash, around which the protagonists' psyches revolve, to the exclusion of nearly everything else. *Crash*'s characters relentlessly pursue this kind of "nightmare logic" (23) of a technologically suffused world, transgressing its sexual taboos in order to unearth "the true significance of the automobile crash, … the ecstasies of head-on collisions" (10), finding irresistible pleasure in the act, all the while unleashing their own repressed desires. This creates a vicious cycle of addiction which grows ever more erratic and insatiable as the novel progresses.

Yet during the course of the novel it becomes steadily clearer that what these characters desire alongside ecstasy are the many possibilities opened up by technology as they perceive it. The merging of the physical and the technological, often to an extreme extent, occurs incessantly in *Crash*, and James spends his time, while not actually involved in these sex-and-crash scenarios, musing over the many variations of this "marriage of sex and technology" (142). His narration, deadpan and lucid, never far from the next depiction of a bloody impact between sex and machinery, sometimes glides into

a reverie on the brutal beauty of this technological way of life: “The lights along Western Avenue illuminated the speeding cars, moving together towards their celebration of wounds” (18). Or else, sitting in his wrecked car at the car pound sometime after his first crash, he nostalgically recalls “visiting the Imperial War Museum with a close friend, and the pathos that surrounded the cockpit segment of a World War II Japanese Zero fighter aircraft” (68). Vaughan’s sexuality and function has meaning only inside the framework of the car: “Detached from his automobile, particularly his own emblem-filled highway cruiser, Vaughan ceased to hold any interest” (117).

The protagonists’ desire for freedom connects with the novel’s main obsession, namely that sex comes in very many forms, and that the myriad possibilities of intercourse may unlock a radically new kind of existence: “These twisted instrument binnacles provided a readily accessible anthology of depraved acts, the keys to an alternative sexuality” (Ballard 1995: 100). This means that “the technology of the automobile is the creator of a radically altered sexual body” (Sey 1996: 107), and in the book “we are presented … with the possibility of the body having an alternately-zoned sexuality, with libidinal investment no longer centred on the genitals” (107). These post-Freudian explorations of sexuality form a central aspect of *Crash*.

Repetition

This is most noticeably expressed by the sheer abundance of explicit sexual activities depicted herein. Even a perfunctory glance at the text makes apparent the numerous references to sexual organs that spring up incessantly, forming the obsessive poetics of the work. In *Crash*, fluids and secretions of all sorts are let loose, stimulating the characters into an ecstasy of eroticism. As Jean Baudrillard, in his famous essay on *Crash*, writes, in the novel “everything becomes a hole to offer itself to the discharge reflex” (1994: 112), bodies are constantly “confused with technology in its violating and violent dimension” (111), while “the non-meaning… of this mixture of the body and of technology

is immanent… and from this results a sexuality without precedent" (112). We shall return to Baudrillard's reading of *Crash* later on.

The novel is, at its core, repetitive. Critics have previously pointed out that repetition serves as a key method in the novel's construction; thus, the adjective "metallized" is frequently used to describe nature along with various phenomena: "metallized sky"; "immense metallized landscape"; "the metallized air"; "metallized excitements"; "metallized death" (Ballard 1995: 18, 65, 77, 41, 36). Many terms, indicating the networks of the urbanized environment or the technical landscape, occur repeatedly throughout the novel. Wounds crop up everywhere (the term itself appears a total of 90 times): "a celebration of wounds" (18); "The world was beginning to flower into wounds" (146). And of course, descriptions of sexual activities are highly repetitive. James replaces his old, wrecked car with another of the same model and make, while Vaughan drives around in the same Lincoln in which Kennedy was assassinated, thereby repeating a historical "trauma." (The assassination of Kennedy was televised, as well, which would be of concern to Vaughan, a TV scientist single-minded about road disasters.) Some of these repetitions suggest that the inexorable progress of technology in our age has somehow augmented the possibility for eroticizing areas of our lives previously unimaginable, opening up hidden vistas for exploration. On the other hand, as the characters transgress the encoded boundaries of sexual and social roles, they attain the erotic freedom and bliss offered by pornography, and *Crash*, while arguably not a pornographic novel at all, features characters who indulge in pornographic stimulation. However, doing so opens "a vortex of the pornographic logic's perpetual demand to transgress repeatedly, to an absurd degree, resulting in numbness of *repetition* instead of pleasure" (Vanhanen 2019: 64; emphasis mine). In other words, these repetitions imply not so much a push towards psychosexual freedom, but rather, more sinisterly, a Freudian compulsion to reenact trauma: "James' attempts to bind the excitation of his traumatic crash initiate a morbidly compulsive repetition of the ecstatic moment of impact" (Francis 2011: 112). This is why

James' "repeated returns to the site of his first car crash and his replacement of his wrecked car with another of the same exact model instantiate Freud's 'compulsion to repeat'" (112). Therefore, it is arguable that the novel's characters do not really reach – and can never reach – any sort of salvation, because this erotic-transgressive repetition makes it "perpetually unattainable, namely because of the pornographic logic's constant supply of ever new combinations of desire" (Vanhanen 2019: 64), but also, as Vanhanen himself concedes, the "obsessive repetition displayed by the novel's characters, the book's structure and its language seems to call for a psychoanalytical interpretation, where the compulsion to repeat would denote an indication of the Freudian death drive" (67). Seen from that standpoint, the book ends in a dystopia of never-ending desire and collision.

The Atrocity Exhibition

Some of the themes found in *Crash* are prefigured in *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), variously described as a series of "condensed novels" (by the author) or simply as a short story collection (though linked with recurring characters), given the fact that many of its sections had previously appeared in the form of standalone stories. Conceptualized as a sequence of nonlinear narratives, *Atrocity* tells of the protagonist's mental breakdown, whose identity and even name change chapter-by-chapter. Each chapter is in turn subsectioned with labels heading each paragraph; this dispensing with novelistic convention makes *Atrocity* difficult to categorize. Such stylistic choices reflect the subject matter, one that is, again, concerned with the overbearing technological landscapes besieging the psyche of the modern subject. The protagonist is trying to produce meaning out of this modern fragmentation by restaging traumatic contemporary events (deaths of Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe, the Vietnam War, etc.) in his crumbling imagination. (One of the most famous stories from *Atrocity* is precisely "The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race", which, as Pedro Groppo remarks, is an imitation of

Alfred Jarry's "The Crucifixion Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race" (2017: 177).)

"Crash!", one of *Atrocity*'s sections, provides the title for the later novel and articulates the significance of the car-crash in Freudian terms for the first time in Ballard's opus (along with such stories as "The University of Death," which forms chapter 2 in *Atrocity*), in which the psychiatrist examining the protagonist, Dr Nathan, states very clearly that

> [a]part from its manifest function, redefining the elements of space and time in terms of our most potent consumer durable, the car crash may be perceived unconsciously as a fertilizing rather than a destructive event – a liberation of sexual energy – mediating the sexuality of those who have died with an intensity impossible in any other form. (Ballard 2014: 26–27)

Here we have laid out in front of us, in their embryonic form, all the ideas concerning the relationship between space, time, collision, sex, and technology, which were to burgeon in *Crash* and form its essence. Throughout *Atrocity* various landscapes and the human body twist and intersect – evoking a kind of geometrical horror – while simultaneously shadowed by mass-media images, footage of trauma and pornography. Dr Nathan, for instance, at one point sees initially "a hundred-foot-long panel that appeared to represent a section of a sand-dune" while it is, in fact, "an immensely magnified portion of the skin over the iliac crest" (11). In this way, the narrative inverts what might have been made to appear erotic by presenting us with an immensely precise image of a section of the human body. This relentlessly microscopic gaze is a hallmark of both *Atrocity* and *Crash*.

"In the 1960s Ballard signalled publicly in his non-fiction writing a belief in psychoanalysis as a science" (Francis 2019: 6). Starting with *The Atrocity Exhibition* and culminating with *Crash*, Ballard sought to delve ever more deeply into the modern subject's psychopathology, "hybridising psychoanalysis with [geometry] as a means of exploring the 'inner space' of the late

twentieth-century contemporary" (7). His middle-period style attempted to reflect this hybridization. Therefore, in *Atrocity* this relationship is expressed as a "deformed marriage of Freud and Euclid" (Ballard 2014: 118). Once we arrive at *Crash*, however, the analogous description is much harsher and more direct: "a euclid of eroticism and fantasy that would be revealed for the first time within the car-crash" (Ballard 1995: 99). These "marriages," variously formed throughout the two novels, turn out to be highly unstable, because they link two seemingly disparate things – Freud and Euclid, car-crash and sexuality, sensation and possibility – and the text does not dismiss this tension. Instead, the protagonists try to take advantage of these marriages for their own ends. But the implication lingers on that these linkages were "deformed" from the start. As Francis states, in *Atrocity*,

> Ballard's "marriage of Freud and Euclid" implies an epistemological and ontological project on the part of his protean and seemingly insane protagonist … of attempting to isolate a valid reality or meaning amid the disorienting contemporary mediascape. (2019: 8)

But it's doubtful whether his project succeeds at all. This is best articulated by the geometrical relationships made in the minds of these protagonists. The narrative resorts to similar application of mathematical terminology so as to arrive at some meaning in a reality which is perceived as perplexing and lost: "This cool-limbed young woman was a modulus; by multiplying her into the space and time of the apartment he would obtain a valid unit of existence" (Ballard 2014: 57). And the term "conjunction" is often used by Ballard to devise a quasi-mathematical relationship between objects (and objectified subjects), thus revealing a previously unknown (erotic) link in a surreal manner: "the conjunction of aluminized gutter trim with the volumes of her thighs" (96), which is framed as an element in an orgasm. In addition, we are treated, time and again, to descriptions of this kind: "the jutting balconies of the Hilton Hotel have become identified with the lost gill-slits of the dying film

actress, Elizabeth Taylor" (Ballard 2014: 9), once more casting Taylor in the role of female victim of fanaticism, in geometrical terms. Francis again:

> Geometry forms part of an irrational, violent logic in the protagonist's mind; it is part of the dehumanising abstraction of sexuality which is explored across *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*. … Many of the stories composing the collection end with the violent ritualised death of a female figure. (2019: 9)

This last point is not only true of Elizabeth Taylor but of the protagonist's wife in *Atrocity*, who is by turns killed and almost miraculously resurrected over and over again – making up another disastrous "marriage". This bizarre ritualization is neatly conveyed by Dr Nathan when he says that "in the eucharist of the simulated auto-disaster we see the transliterated pudenda of Ralph Nader, our nearest image of the blood and body of Christ" (Ballard 2014: 27). The deaths of these women are part of the search for lost meaning. Similarly, the protagonists of *Crash* seek the same significance though by different means: most of the action of *Atrocity* takes place in the protagonist's mind, while we take the violent collisions of *Crash* to be factual, though this is done "with the deliberate ambivalence characteristic both of *Atrocity* and *Crash*" (Francis 2019: 11).

And while *The Atrocity Exhibition* offers a reading experience more in line with the great avant-garde pieces, most notably William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, *Crash* is formally much more steady and "logical" (notwithstanding its own perverse, nightmare logic), its narrative easier to make sense of at first glance. The narrative chronology is not dislocated in any way, except for an analepsis which starts the novel off. And though the clinical coldness and detachment of *The Atrocity Exhibition* lingers on in *Crash*, the latter's themes are expressed much more viscerally. One way Ballard does this is on the sentence level. His style draws on the technical and scientific lexicon of the day, which finds itself out of place in a novel teeming with machinistic erotica. Such a style, more appropriate for a scientific magazine than an erotic

novel, describes sexual perversions and grotesque scenarios with a sort of ironic calm: “He sat back with her legs across his hips, slapping her with one hand as the other forced his flaccid penis into her vagina. … As his penis jerked emptily into her bruised vulva, Vaughan sank back against the seat” (Ballard 1995: 163–64). The metaphors employed in the novel are commonly utilitarian, characterized by imagery stemming from the physical sciences, particularly medicine: “The crushed bodies of package tourists, like a haemorrhage of the sun, still lay across the vinyl seats” (7).

Baudrillard’s Perspective

Many critics approached the two novels through the lens of psychoanalysis. By contrast, Baudrillard’s reading of *Crash* is non-psychoanalytic, but rather focused on his own concept of simulation. Baudrillard famously called *Crash* “the first great novel of the universe of simulation” (1994: 119). Simulation denotes “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (1), while a simulacrum is a copy without an original. As Stephen Baker explains:

> Simulation, crucially, is not illusory or false; it does not produce images which distort some underlying reality. Instead, simulation works in opposition to representation; in simulation, the image “bears no relation to any reality whatever”. It is the reality principle itself which is negated in simulation. (2000: 80)

The world of *Crash* renders a simulated actuality (to an extent), and James feels that the car-crash is “the only real experience [he has] been through for years” (Ballard 1995: 39). The car-crash here signifies a collision with the real, with the non-simulational, if only for a brief moment, because James’ life after his crash once again returns to the hypersimulated environments of his job, his daily routine (stuck in traffic or studios), and his love affairs, as he frequently makes love against the backdrop of televised images of violence: “television newsreels of ward and student riots, natural disasters and police brutality which we

vaguely watched on the colour TV set in our bedroom as we masturbated each other" (37). Throughout the book James repeatedly notices that his experience of the world is either being preempted by systems of mass media, or is always mediated; he concedes that "This violence experienced at so many removes had become intimately associated with our sex acts" (37). At one point he attends a public reenactment of a road accident, and as soon as the experiment falls through, the bored crowd of spectators is stirred into excitement (86) – meaning that once again the real has, fleetingly, broken through the hardened shell of this mediated world. In it, the realm of mass media and everyday reality constantly intersect; as James notes, the mass media are "extensions of that real world of violence calmed and tamed within our television programmes and the pages of news magazines" (37). Even the landscape falls prey to hypersimulation:

> As I leaned against the concrete balcony I became aware that an immense silence hung over the landscape around me. … The entire zone which defined the landscape of my life was now bounded by a continuous artificial horizon, formed by raised parapets and embankments of the motorways. (53)

We may compare this with Baudrillard's remark that by virtue of the human body's technological burgeoning, "the immense geographical landscape [becomes] a vast, barren body whose very expanse is unnecessary (even off the highway it is boring to cross)" (1988: 18–19).

Of course, the highway is one of the premier settings across which the drama of *Crash* fatally unfolds. It is there that the characters feel the full energy of automotive adrenaline and its eroticism. In addition, since the city is a network of traffic and machine landscape, this means that "each of the character's occupations is imbricated in communications networks" (Gillie 2018: 2–3). Vaughan is employed "at the interstice of several communications networks. He is both computer specialist and TV scientist" (3), while the narrator works as a producer of commercials. His wife works for an airline company "and takes flying lessons at the weekend: a life immersed in air travel"

(3). Helen Remington works as a doctor at the airport hospital.

While the novel retains the conventional roles assigned to these jobs, their backdrop gets morbidly transformed by the protagonists' fixation on manifold collisions of technology and sex. In other words, the rationality underpinning these bourgeois occupations is upended in favor of an alternate perspective, because sex now joins up with rationality into a new equation. The novel's psychopathology can be seen as a sinister force; but it can also be seen as a counterforce to customary systems of power, power which is "so much in tune with ideological discourses … [which] are discourses of truth – always good for countering the mortal blows of simulation, even and especially if they are revolutionary" (Baudrillard 1994: 27).

Whether or not Baudrillard's reading of *Crash* is a serious misreading or not is, of course, up for debate. Some critics (see e.g. Francis 2011: 107–8) take issue with Baudrillard's supposed overlaying of *Crash* with his own credo, as a means of justifying his concepts. Nicholas Ruddick, for instance, argues that in Ballard's disaster fiction, *Crash* included,

> the real has not been nor is it in the process of being abolished. … The catastrophe, whatever form it takes, actually signifies the liberation of a 'deep' real (associated with the unconscious), that has been until then latent in a 'shallow' manifest reality (held in place by mechanisms of repression). (1992)

The psychoanalytic hallmark of Ballard's work goes firmly against Baudrillard's notion of *Crash*, in which he sees the definitive showcase of a society undergoing complete simulation, a sort of hymn of the hyperreal. Or, as Groppo writes,

> a careful reading of the novel and knowledge of other works by Ballard point that the hyperreality … has not "abolished" fiction nor reality; it is there in a desperate attempt to break through this illusion (thus the text's insistent concerns about transcendence, Vaughan's messianic tendencies, and motifs of flight). (2017: 175)

Death of the Affect: Language and Morality

Another way in which the artificial landscape intrudes in the novel is by way of the narration itself, which – as seen in *Atrocity* – repeatedly describes people and objects in the language of geometry, especially Vaughan and his sexual acts: "His hand was raised at right-angles to his forearm, measuring out the geometry of the chromium roof sill" (Ballard 1995: 141); "the forcing geometry of Vaughan's powerful physique" (166); "the bloody geometry of his face" (9). "The perverse sexuality of *Crash* is mental and cerebral, its geometrical aspect part of its mathematical abstraction from the world of embodied human physicality and the associated affective world of the emotions" (Francis 2019: 10). After all, it is James who observes, while listening to his wife's sexual fantasizing, that "these descriptions seemed to be a *language in search of objects*, or even, perhaps, the beginnings of a new sexuality divorced from any possible physical expression" (Ballard 1995: 35; emphasis mine).

The use of such language ushers in the death of the affect: "The destruction of this motor-car and its occupants seemed, in turn, to sanction the sexual penetration of Vaughan's body; both were conceptualized acts abstracted from all feeling" (Ballard 1995: 129). Meanwhile, for Vaughan, "human and car bodies are alike foci of geometrical fascination … an abstraction of sexuality which flattens out affect and drains human significance from the erotic encounter" (Francis 2019: 10).

Thus, we are presented with a violent, amoral world in a straight-faced, lucid style, so much so that it is near-impossible to determine whether its tone and aim are ironic or serious. Robert Caserio states this well:

> The deadpan earnestness with which Ballard and "Ballard" present Crash makes it impossible for the reader to determine if the novel is, after all, a joke. … The wavering between seriousness and play cannot be resolved, and so the case for the total ambiguity – and for

> the postmodernism – of Ballard's text is a strong one. (1988: 303)

It is also the case that profanity is conspicuously absent in a book filled with intercourse. Baudrillard points out that "here, all the erotic terms are technical. No ass, no dick, no cunt but: the anus, the rectum, the vulva, the penis, coitus. No slang … only functional language" (1994: 115–16), because in such a closed-off, artificial world inhabited by *Crash*'s characters there is no place for profanity (or idiom for that matter). *Crash*'s style, therefore, captures a tone of lucid hellishness. Ballard employs a clear, non-idiomatic style of sentence composition, so that his usage results in a language quite close to "standard" English, were it not for the intrusion of technical jargon.

Conversely, to take a historical example, Marquis de Sade's erotic writings serve to stimulate the reader in an almost nonchalant manner, running through an abundance of sexual organs and scenarios. Ballard's approach is a completely opposite one. As Kavanagh argues, Sade's assemblage of sexual details

> communicate to the reader that this is pornography, taking place in a pornographic ontology, and that it is meant, therefore, to arouse. Sade's intention is thereby quite clear to the reader. Crash is (differently) troubling because Ballard's intention is not. (2019: 463–64)

So the "moral" of *Crash*, whatever it may entail, seems ambiguous. Does the novel celebrate or condemn the possibilities of sexual refashioning via technology? Baudrillard argues that, "contrary to the author [i.e. Ballard] himself, who speaks in the introduction of a new perverse logic, one must resist the *moral* temptation of reading *Crash* as perversion" (1994: 113; emphasis in the original). Baudrillard's point that "nowhere does [the author's] moral gaze surface" (119) is pertinent here. What may seem disconcerting to the reader is that the ceaseless sexualization occuring in the book is extolled as an act of rebirth, even in the face of death. As James says of the woman whose husband he had inadvertently killed in a crash:

> The collision of our two cars, and the death of her husband, had become the key to a new sexuality. During the first months after his death she moved through a series of rapidly consumed affairs, as if taking the genitalia of all these men into her hands and her vagina would in some way bring her husband back to life, and that all this semen mixed within her womb would quicken the fading image of the dead man within her mind. (Ballard 1995: 119)

Later on, James seemingly reverses his customary reaction towards crash injuries: "My horror and disgust at the sight of these appalling injuries had given way to a lucid acceptance that the translation of these injuries in terms of our fantasies and sexual behavior was the only means of re-invigorating these wounded and dying victims" (190). This critical moment "coincides with James wholly accepting Vaughan's logic, and a reversal in their relationship as James begins to be the dominant one" (Groppo 2017: 170). As Noël Carroll writes, disgust is the "emotion that has been adapted to guard the intimate borders of the human body – mouths, nasal passages, genitals, and so forth" (2013: 98). But disgust is absent from the perspectives of these characters, because the human body is being technologically extended, and its borders are collapsing.

High-Rise

Instead of adopting the near-future setting of *Crash*, *High-Rise* posits a well-to-do society living in residential towers which embody a hierarchy. It is interesting that while the society of *Crash* was not so transparently stratified (and was mostly filled with middle-class characters), here we are met with a structure segregated into classes along historical lines – upper, middle, and lower. Some of the professions featured in *Crash* make their return here:

> The lower nine floors, with their 'proletariat' of film technicians, air-hostesses and the like … [while the] central two-thirds of the apartment building formed its middle class, made up of self-centred but basically docile members of the professions – the doctors and

> lawyers, accountants and tax specialists who worked, not for themselves, but for medical institutes and large corporations. (Ballard 1993: 69–70)

Finally, the top tier is made up of a "discreet oligarchy of minor tycoons and entrepreneurs, television actresses and careerist academics, with their high-speed elevators and superior services" (70). Oligarchs are conspicuously missing from *Crash*, their profiles perhaps not matching the "new" world of eroticized brutality presented therein, whereas *High-Rise* posits a society living in apartment complexes which have sprung from the ground of old-world hierarchy. More precisely, *High-Rise* implies that spatial configuration influences somehow the psyche of its residents, that the verticality of the novel's setting is directly correlated with its stratification, appealing to a "symbolic gesture that is frequently grounded in the metaphor of spatial geometry" (Hewitt & Graham 2015: 929).

This stratified "vertical city" soon degenerates into violence and anarchy. However, this chaos does not so much signify an atavistic reversal, but rather a looping back into the *id* of childhood. As one of the insurgents says to Doctor Laing, "For the first time since we were three years old what we do makes absolutely no difference" (Ballard 1993: 51). And, earlier, the narrator notes that "In many ways, the high-rise was a model of all that technology had done to make possible the expression of a truly 'free' psychopathology" (45). These statements markedly parallel the main concepts and preoccupations of the earlier novels.

Whereas *Crash* is mostly set in a horizontal landscape, *High-Rise* literally inverts this landscape, turning it into a claustrophobic nightmare compared to the sprawling (yet often static) "metallized" vistas of London. *Concrete Island*, on the other hand, presents us with a split and derelict piece of land that's infernally set below the city's domineering overpasses – a kind of inversion of both *Crash*'s "endless landscape of concrete and structural steel" (Ballard 1995: 48), and *High-Rise*'s vertical hierarchy "as rigid and as formalized as an

anthill's" (Ballard 1993: 96). "*Crash* and *High-Rise* each describe different approaches to the changing … 1970s London; the retreat in *High-Rise* finds its opposite in *Crash*" (Gillie 2018: 4). While the first sentences of the novel engage in world-building and exposition, at the same time we are treated to foreshadowing of bloodshed and turmoil:

> With its forty floors and thousand apartments, its supermarket and swimming-pools, bank and junior school – all in effect abandoned in the sky – the high-rise offered more than enough opportunities for violence and confrontation. (Ballard 1993: 1)

This makes the connection right off between spatial configuration and primordial violence. The towers' architect, named Royal, lives an insular life on the topmost floor. The famous opening line, "As he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr. Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous three months" (Ballard 1993: 1), the dog in question being Royal's, is an analepsis (similar to the one in *Crash*) which points to the novel's ending in the crumbling of this vertical society under the weight of its own psychopathology, which the towers' architect has facilitated with his design. In *Crash* we had seen an ever lessening obstruction to (sexual) fluidity as the novel progressed (by contrast to the artificially enclosing landscape), whereas in *High-Rise* this society is locked in its own non-fluidity, i.e. its rigid social order, which corresponds with the physical solidity of the towers, and this is its downfall, causing "the building and its architect to self-destruct" (Stoner 2013: 180). In the earlier novel, cars keep changing their form through endless collisions and this is their invigorating force, however perverse, but here any solidity signifies repression. Closeness had earlier indicated a wished-for union, yet here it's a claustrophobic impetus towards aggression. The towers turn into sites of brutal and atomized enclaves. Ultimately, *High-Rise* is a "negative caricature of a visionary, utopian urbanism that began with … Le Corbusier's design[s] for … tall towers surrounded by green space [which] held the promise of social equality, and even of universal

happiness" (180). As a response to this caricature, the towers' residents seek their own de-evolution; early on we are informed that "Laing made less and less effort to leave the building" (Ballard 1993: 4). These characters surrender themselves – often voluntarily – to the isolation and regression of their localities. *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* both portray a hero who finds himself in a restrictive world about to undergo some form of disaster, that he grows to prefer to the external, larger world.

Concrete Island

It has been mentioned that *Crash*'s depiction of reality is almost totally devoid of vegetative life, which suddenly surfaces only in the final chapters, when James sees "the weed-grown entrance of the breaker's yard" (Ballard 1995: 205) near an overpass. This flora, in turn, features prominently in *Concrete Island*, whose setting is a disused piece of land, a traffic "island" formed by the intersection of overpasses, among which lies an abandoned breaker's yard lush with vegetation, and it's as if the novel starts off where *Crash* might have ended.

Concrete Island shares *Crash*'s dread of, and fascination with, urban, metallic structures and layouts. In *Crash* we witness "the flyovers overlaid one another like copulating giants" (Ballard 1995: 76). Here, in *Concrete Island*, this "copulation" is complete, and has given birth to an urban castaway, a modern Robinson Crusoe named Robert Maitland, isolated beneath a bustling highway. He is unable to leave the surreal entrapment of the island because of his wounds (and later his unwillingness). At the same time the traffic shows a complete indifference towards him:

> The rush-hour was in full swing. As Maitland stood weakly by the roadside, waving with a feeble hand, it seemed to him that every vehicle in London had passed and re-passed him a dozen times, the drivers and passengers deliberately ignoring him in a vast spontaneous conspiracy. He was well aware that no one would stop

for him. (Ballard 1985: 19)

Soon afterward he starts giving in to the deeper logic of his surroundings: "As he crossed the island the grass weaved and turned behind him, moving in endless waves. Its corridors opened and closed as if admitting a large and watchful creature to its green preserve" (42). He conjectures that "he had almost wilfully devised the crash, perhaps as some bizarre kind of rationalization" (9). Patterns observed in previously discussed novels reestablish themselves when we note that this novel, like *Crash*, starts off with a car accident. There is again a recurrence of obsession with bodily trauma and the body is marked with crash injuries: "It was now little more than twenty-four hours since his accident, but the skin of his arms and chest had blossomed into a garden of bruises, vividly coloured weals and markings" (48). Many of the leitmotifs remain the same: rush-hour traffic, urban landscape, the alienating effects of artificiality. Maitland occupies a middle-class role of architect (having this in common with Royal from *High-Rise*) and he shares "the alienated responses of the protagonists of *Atrocity* [and] *Crash*" (Francis 2011: 120). He begins identifying with the island in declarations straight out of *Atrocity*: "More and more, the island was becoming an exact model of his head" (Ballard 1985: 69), and it's not long afterwards that he concludes: "I am the island" (71). As in the other novels, there exists a compulsion in Maitland's unwillingness to leave, and also a sense of discovery and domination: "Already he felt no real need to leave the island, and this alone confirmed that he had established dominion over it" (176).

This brings us to the mythological aspects of the novel. Francis notes that Maitland "mentally negates the entire world outside his own enclosure" (2011: 123), and "there are parallels here … with regression as Jung conceives it," citing the instance in which Maitland plunges into an air-raid shelter and his "subsequent mothering by Jane in a windowless underground room or womb … implies a process of rebirth" (124). Maitland and a Caliban-like character, the outcast Proctor, fashion an altar of "metal objects stripped from [Maitland's] car, ... laid out like an elaborate altarpiece on which would one day repose the

bones of a revered saint" (Ballard 1985: 160). These religious motifs – Maitland's sacrificial ritual of becoming one with his surroundings, his wounded body consecrated to the island – recall the figure of Christ, especially when he reflects,

> These places of pain and ordeal were now confused with pieces of his body. He gestured towards them, trying to make a circuit of the island so that he could leave these sections of himself where they belonged. He would leave his right leg at the point of his crash, his bruised hands impaled upon the steel fence. He would place his chest where he had sat against the concrete wall. At each point a small ritual would signify the transfer of obligation from himself to the island. (71)

The whole complex of imagery, particularly the phrase "transfer of obligation," points to Christian expiation. As Groppo observes, "Ballard's Christian motifs are not deployed in a systematic way, but Ballard seems to be interested in the metaphor of Christ, of his cultural-mythical power … in the form of a celebration" (2017: 178).

We may compare this treatment with *Crash*. For James, Vaughan projects an image of a modern messiah, as when he sees Vaughan's dead body and kneels over it in an almost ritualized gesture, while Elizabeth Taylor "place[s] a gloved hand to her throat" (Ballard 1995: 7), as if in a Renaissance painting. Likewise, James and Vaughan in their sex acts "seek to reinvigorate 'wounded and dying victims', in a way shepherd them to a new mode of existence" (Groppo 2017: 172), which points to the appearance of angels during one of James' LSD trips, "and Vaughan's death, far from being a dead-end, becomes a ritual self-sacrifice by his disciples … His car becomes a sacred object, and James' semen is purposefully spread over [it]" (172). This harkens back to an earlier point in the novel, where James sees Vaughan having sex and ponders: "As I looked at the evening sky it seemed as if Vaughan's semen bathed the entire landscape, powering these thousands of engines, electric circuits and

private destinies, irrigating the smallest gestures of our lives" (Ballard 1995: 191). This points towards the finale of the book, whose final lines read, "The aircraft rise from the runways of the airport, carrying the remnants of Vaughan's semen to the instrument panels and radiator grilles of a thousand crashing cars, the leg stances of a million passengers" (224), completing the arc of Vaughan's apotheosis, begun in chapter 1, where his exaltation is equalled with his death: "Now that Vaughan has died, we will leave with the others who gathered around him" (17), meaning his worshippers, who have united to witness his myth-like ascension.

"The transcendent, utopian discourse of connection attendant upon the development of the road network is repurposed in … the neologism 'autogeddon' [which] implies a Judaeo-Christian eschatological perspective" (Gillian: 6). The employing of this kind of religious symbolism indicates the transcendent nature of the car-crash. Or, as Dr Nathan in *The Atrocity Exhibition* puts it, "In twentieth century terms the crucifixion, for example, would be re-enacted as a conceptual auto-disaster" (Ballard 2014: 33).

Conclusion

Crash and its related novels, on the whole, attempt to show seductive microcosms in which the affect has died out and virtualization taken place. Finding themselves in a world marked by technological supremacy and atavistic desire, the characters enact the making of a new and perverse logic as a response to their predicament, often to an extreme degree. These novels explore what it means for modern man to come face to face with the technology he has inadvertently produced, and which now, in turn, produces (and reproduces) him. In all of this the author himself suspends judgment, and it is no wonder that many contemporary readers of *Crash* responded to its unnerving and morally ambivalent depictions of eroticism and psychopathology with outright disgust. Arguably those readers did not have the benefit of hindsight, as today Ballard's novels are venerated, academically established works of art, some of them

complemented with acclaimed Hollywood adaptations to boot. The contemporary reader was faced with a novel fully isolated from critical praise.

Finally, the four major novels hitherto explored all imply, in their different approaches, that violence and atavism are always lurking just under the skin of humankind. The subject, colliding headlong with technology, experiences a shock of ambiguous consequences, which the author does not moralize in any obvious way. Ballard himself might assert, as he does in his Introduction to *Crash*, that the novel is a "cautionary tale," but we of course need not take him at his word; the reading of his novels certainly doesn't afford such a round answer to many of their significant moral and philosophical dilemmas.

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