

Death and the Machine: J. G. Ballard's *Crash*

Morte e a Máquina: Crash de J. G. Ballard

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Abstract: J. G. Ballard's novel *Crash* represents one of the author's most sustained efforts to explore a delusion centered on trauma and the possibility of acceptance of death. *Crash's* uncompromising vision that embraces transgression and taboo allows for a rich exploration of issues seldom discussed in literary studies. In this paper, I provide a reading of Ballard's novel under the perspective of death in life, situating it within the context of Ballard's other work, mainly *The Atrocity Exhibition*, *Concrete Island* and the Harley Cokliss's film of *Crash!* that predated the novel.

Keywords: J. G. Ballard; trauma; science fiction; avant-garde.

Resumo: O romance *Crash*, de J. G. Ballard, explora uma ilusão centrada no trauma e na possibilidade de aceitação da morte. A firme visão de Ballard, que abraça a transgressão e o tabu permite-nos explorar questões raramente discutidas nos estudos literários. Neste artigo, proponho uma leitura do romance de Ballard sob a ótica da morte em vida, situando-o no contexto da obra de Ballard, dialogando principalmente com *The Atrocity Exhibition*, *Concrete Island* e o filme *Crash!*, de Harley Cokliss, que antecedeu o romance.

Palavras-chave: J. G. Ballard; trauma; ficção científica; avant-garde.

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Crash (1973) remains J. G. Ballard's most notable and disturbing book, as it is able to reach a wider audience than the experimental *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) simply because of its concessions to "straightforward" narratives and characters, and because of a critically successful film adaptation in 1996. It is also, in many ways, as Ballard himself said, his most autobiographical novel:

Not literally, but in the mind, of course. I chose to call the narrator in my novel *Crash* by my own name simply because these were my fantasies. I was writing the book in the first person and I thought, why invent a character who's working his way through this extraordinary landscape when I can simply use my own name and give this novel what I think is a degree of honesty that would be absent otherwise?¹

This commentary of course does not explain the extraordinary claim of autobiography, but to adopt the name "James Ballard" seems the logical progression after the unstable identity of Traven in *Atrocity*,² where the practice was alienating to the reader; in *Crash*, it is perhaps too close to comfort. The simple act of naming the character James Ballard has, of course, prompted many reviewers to take the book too seriously, and dismiss both the project and the author as insane (or "beyond psychiatric help" as the story goes), but this is precisely the intended effect: a blurring of the boundaries between the author and his creations. Moreover, it speaks volumes about Ballard's fictional practices because what he probably means by "autobiographical" is this "degree of honesty" "in the mind", not whether the narrative has any basis in fact.

Similarly, Ballard's introduction to the French edition of *Crash* can be seen as a manifesto for his late 1960s and 1970s output, in the same way the earlier "Which Way to Inner Space?"³ was for the first part of his career. Later, Ballard came to regret two of its most often-quoted sections, one that claims that *Crash* is a cautionary tale, "Of course it isn't anything of the sort.... *Crash* is what it appears to be. It is a psychopathic hymn. But it is a psychopathic hymn which has a point";

¹ BALLARD. *Extreme Metaphors*: Selected Interviews with J. G. Ballard, 1967-2008, p. 389.

² BALLARD. *The Atrocity Exhibition*.

³ BALLARD. Which Way to Inner Space?

and “all [the] talk about science fiction. Of course *Crash* is not science fiction.”⁴ Ballard seems to go back and forth about this, as he would try to soften the radicalism of *Crash* every now and then by adding these distancing frames, which would ultimately defeat the purpose of giving the “degree of honesty” he so intended.⁵ David Cronenberg, who wrote and directed the 1996 film adaptation, admitted that the name of the protagonist in his version should have been David Cronenberg, and not James Ballard, an idea Ballard approved.⁶

Ballard’s semi-autobiographical texts have in common the notion of coping with trauma. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience*, raises the question whether trauma is an event experienced as it occurs or an experience grasped only afterwards. “The fact of latency”, she writes, “consist[s] not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself [...] fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time”.⁷ *Crash* does not locate the source of trauma in World War II as *Atrocity* does, but it is of course a narrative that develops from a traumatic incident, one that destabilizes the protagonist’s identity and world-view, and not at all different from *Atrocity* in that regard.⁸ A motif from Cronenberg’s films can be very illustrative in describing the process in which trauma dominates the logic of the narrative in Ballard: his films should be seen from the point of view of the disease. One example would be *Videodrome* (1983), in which a pirate TV signal induces paranoia and a mediatized brain disease that causes bizarre hallucinations, illustrated in an iconic scene in which James Woods makes love to a TV set: the point of view is expressionistic, unflinchingly from the “diseased” brain, a view that contaminates reality. The psychic trauma restructures the world around itself, and the way *Crash* shows this at work is particularly fascinating.

⁴ BALLARD. *Extreme Metaphors: Selected Interviews with J. G. Ballard, 1967-2008*, p. 347.

⁵ This is probably because Ballard felt that British culture was not ready for it, and he may have been right: as of 2013, Cronenberg’s adaptation of *Crash* is still banned in Westminster.

⁶ RODLEY. David Cronenberg Talks about His New Film *Crash* Based on J.G. Ballard’s Disturbing Techno-sex Novel, p. 8.

⁷ CARUTH. *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 57.

⁸ In fact, Vaughan first appeared in “Tolerances of the Human Face” and there is a chapter in *Atrocity* titled “Crash!”

In this paper, I analyze *Crash* as one of Ballard's most sustained efforts to explore a delusion centered on trauma and the possibility of acceptance of death.

To Become a Machine

In chapter 2 of *Crash*, we have James Ballard's (heretofore known as James to avoid confusion) first car accident, the one that sets off the narrative. He has a heads-on collision with an incoming car, and in a long passage, James observes attempts to rescue the passengers of the other car, Helen Remington and her husband. Already there is a sense of the virtual intruding and the setting of a complex scene:

For a moment I felt that we were the principal actors at the climax of some grim drama in an unrehearsed theatre of technology, involving these crushed machines, the dead man destroyed in their collision, and the hundreds of drivers waiting beside the stage with their headlamps blazing.⁹

Sex is introduced in a characteristically cold and clinical language, as James looks at Helen:

[...] all I could see was the unusual junction of her thighs, opened towards me in this deformed way. It was not the sexuality of the posture that stayed in my mind, but the stylization of the terrible events that had involved us, the extremes of pain and violence ritualized in this gesture of her legs.¹⁰

Sex is conveyed in an extremely stylized way (to echo Ballard's words), an extreme aestheticization that can only come with a complete dissociation of feeling. That seems consonant to Marshall McLuhan when he writes, "It could well be that the successive mechanizations of the various physical organs [...] have made too violent and superstimulated a social experience for the central nervous system to endure."¹¹ The pleasures in *Crash* are not really sexual, but aesthetic. When a fireman is

⁹ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 22.

¹⁰ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 22.

¹¹ MCLUHAN. *Understanding Media*, p. 43.

able finally to rescue James, the narration goes: “If one of [the firemen] had unbuttoned his coarse serge trousers to reveal his genitalia, and pressed his penis into the bloody crotch of my armpit, even this bizarre act would have been acceptable in terms of the stylization of violence and rescue.”¹² In a way, James is here imagining the most extreme act he can think of, since the scene is so strongly unreal that even the intrusion of unmotivated, bestial sex would not be out of place. The dimension of sexual desire is also one that permeates the world, but it is often hidden, even with the myriad of codes in the media that point to it. Along with that other repressed, violence, when finally brought to the surface, sexual desire can be overpowering.

The idea of sex keeps contaminating the prose for the next paragraph, which is worth quoting at length:

By this same nightmare logic the firemen racing towards the burning wrecks of crashed airliners might trace obscene or humorous slogans on the scalding concrete with their carbon dioxide sprays, executioners could dress their victims in grotesque costumes. In return, the victims would stylize the entrances to their deaths with ironic gestures, solemnly kissing their executioners’ gun-butts, desecrating imaginary flags. Surgeons would cut themselves carelessly before making their first incisions, wives casually murmur the names of their lovers at the moment of their husbands’ orgasms, the whore mouthing her customer’s penis might without offence bite a small circle of tissue from the upper curvature of his glans. That same painful bite which I once received from a tired prostitute irritated by my hesitant erection reminds me of the stylized gestures of ambulance attendants and filling station personnel, each with their repertory of private movements.¹³

Not only does the language keep coming back to sex, but we can also see Ballard’s incendiary rhetoric, concerned with stirring up and destabilizing moral boundaries. The passage recalls *Atrocity* in its collage-like feel of random images. The underlying logic of the first part seems one of divesting acts of killing and death of meaning, setting

¹² BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 23.

¹³ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 23, 24.

them into a stylized scene. The second part appears to be doing the exact opposite, in which some harm is actually done, mostly to the body, possibly to ground whatever mundane act into the reality of the body, of some feeling. This speaks to the notion that the world of the novel has become so virtualized that it is necessary to “test” reality through pain. It is a practice of affirmation amid a sense of emptiness of existence. Ballard takes this a little further in his “Introduction”, “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.”¹⁴

Ballard expands this logic and has his characters learn how to “feel” the world again, how to sensualize it, and invest it with some kind of meaning. Thus, *Crash* continues *Atrocity*’s project of remaking the world. “This obsession with the sexual possibilities of everything around me had been jerked loose from my mind by the crash”,¹⁵ James observes. That “small node of reality left to us” speaks to a different world that exists alongside this one that needs to come back to light, through the defamiliarization and recontextualization of the body. Hence the obsession in *Crash* with anatomy and bodily functions: “For the first time I was in physical confrontation with my own body, an inexhaustible encyclopedia of pains and discharges.”¹⁶ The crash and the advent of Vaughan reawaken him, making him aware of the sexual possibilities around him. He reveals his inclination, two months before, to touch a strange woman’s buttocks in an airport for the sheer excitement caused by the “conjunction of [her] skirt on the escalator in front of me and the distant fuselages of the aircraft, each inclined like a silver penis towards her natal cleft.”¹⁷ Even before James suffers his first car crash, he is already vulnerable to the peculiar aestheticization of reality – effected by the media – and the crash only organizes his incipient desire for the conjunction of body and machine, as it allows him to bring it all to the surface. This helps us to set the narrative of *Crash* in a world that is separate from our own, in which sexuality is repressed and replaced by its virtualized counterpart. The body is reawakened and sexuality begins

¹⁴ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 96.

¹⁵ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 29.

¹⁶ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 39.

¹⁷ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 41.

to dominate the narrative, but in an estranging way, as if reconfigured. So in Ballard there is no return to the body or return of the real, but the emergence of a new cycle.

After being released from the hospital, James returns to his tenth-story apartment near Heathrow airport and observes: “I realized that the human inhabitants of this technological landscape no longer provided its sharpest pointers, its keys to the borderzones of identity.”¹⁸ His mind is unreeling and the pointers shifting to what Aidan Day calls “the principle of artifice dramatized and symbolized by the car and its roads.”¹⁹ Later, from the top of a car-park: “I realized that the entire zone which defined the landscape of my life was now bounded by a continuous artificial horizon, formed by the raised parapets and embankments of the motorways and their access roads and interchanges.”²⁰ Thus, when Vaughan, the central figure of the group of car crash victims, appears, he does so almost as if conjured by James’s psyche, a double if there ever was one. James is “continually aware of Vaughan’s presence”, who “seemed to hover like an invigilator in the margins of my life, for ever monitoring my head”,²¹ and toward the end of the novel, he is convinced that Vaughan is a “projection of [his] own fantasies and obsessions.”²² He is an answer of the real for his spiritual awakening, a guru, or “nightmare angel of the expressways”²³ who guides his obsessions, as dependent on James as he is on him, and seeks, in the words of Scott Bukatman, “a joyful synthesis with precisely those objects that distance the subjects, the very objects that reinforce the discontinuous experience of being.”²⁴ A “TV scientist”,²⁵ he is associated with photographs and the media, always taking photographs of car crash victims, and his apartment is filled with photographs of himself as well: “Vaughan was self-consciously absorbed in these fading images, straightening their curling corners as if frightened that when they finally vanished his own identity would also cease to

¹⁸ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 48-49.

¹⁹ DAY. Ballard and Baudrillard: Close Reading *Crash*, p. 280.

²⁰ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 53.

²¹ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 65.

²² BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 220.

²³ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 85.

²⁴ BUKATMAN. *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, p. 292.

²⁵ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 63.

matter.”²⁶ Vaughan is, in a sense, James completely filtered through the photographs he takes of crashes, a version of himself who has been through the looking glass, who dies by pursuing his obsessions to the very end – in his case, by crashing into Elizabeth Taylor’s limousine.

In a consciousness completely filtered through the media, there is no ground for real feeling. In *Crash*, when the real intrudes in the form of the car crash, it is such a powerful event, that it is the only thing able to pierce through this desensitized reality. They do not realize that the real intrudes but James’s reality is not really remade but reconstituted around itself, the signs shifted from one thing to the other. As in *Concrete Island*, in which the protagonist tries to rebuild his identity as a technological Crusoe, but as Gasiorek writes, “both the terrain on which he tries to achieve his self-exorcism and the identity he seeks to re-establish have been made out of the materials he proposes to discard.”²⁷ In *Crash* those materials are sex and violence, excesses that are not properly contained and just keep being displaced, perpetuating a cycle in a system that is already in place from the first sentence of the novel.

Cinecity: *Crash!*

In 1971, the filmmaker Harley Cokliss directed a short film about *The Atrocity Exhibition*, titled simply *Crash!*, starring Ballard himself and Gabrielle Drake. In this film, which predates the writing of the novel *Crash*, Ballard is, most of all, an actor with a remarkable presence. *Crash!* runs for about seventeen minutes and shows Ballard driving – in an American car – around airport flyovers, a car showroom with Pontiac’s and Cadillac’s, stopping at a car wash and a junkyard. All were to become settings in the novel, and a character was to be named Gabrielle after Drake. There is some narration out from “You and Me and the Continuum” (from *Atrocity*) as some crash footage is shown, as well as an original text read by Ballard himself, in a voice that, for Iain Sinclair, sounds like a “schizophrenic buzz.”²⁸ Apart from a brief section of associative montage (in which car parts are paralleled with female body parts), Drake is a haunting apparition, materializing only briefly,

²⁶ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 167.

²⁷ GASIOREK. *J. G. Ballard*, p. 119.

²⁸ SINCLAIR. *Crash*, p. 30.

an intrusion of a certain erotic charge, but also that of a gaze. Strangely, Ballard and Drake are here rehearsing the narrative of the novel, Cokliss's film being a dress rehearsal for *Crash*.

There is some added gravitas for the presence of Ballard on the screen, and this probably inspired his decision to lend his name to the protagonist in the novel. Based on Chris Petit's assertion that Cokliss was unlikely to have a strong authorial voice, Simon Sellars claims that the invisible guiding hand on this project was Ballard himself: "It's very much his film and he knows it. His voice takes command. His body language dominates. Here Ballard was testing riffs (or 'routines', as Sinclair calls them, after Burroughs) that would, in time, become familiar."²⁹ Indeed, there are a number of familiar echoes of fragments of Ballardian ideas here and there. For instance, in his "Introduction" he comments on the latent and manifest content of dreams as proposed by Freud, but it is already sketched in *Crash!*:

It seems to me that we have to regard everything in the world around us as fiction, as if we were living in an enormous novel, and that the kind of distinction that Freud made about the inner world of the mind, between, say, what dreams appeared to be and what they really meant, now has to be applied to the outer world of reality.³⁰

Ballard takes on an estranging perspective toward the motorways and multi-story car parks ("one of the most mysterious buildings ever built"), as if seen by an alien, as well as to the car itself: "If every member of the human race were to vanish overnight, I think it would be possible to reconstitute almost every element of human psychology from the design of a vehicle like this." Ballard conceives of the car crash as a major trauma:

If the man in the motor car is the key image of the twentieth century, then the automobile crash is the most significant trauma. The car crash is the most dramatic event in most people's lives, apart from their own deaths, and in many cases the two will coincide. [...] It's always struck me that people's attitudes towards the car crash are very confused,

²⁹ SELLARS. *Crash!* Full-tilt Autogeddon.

³⁰ BALLARD. "Introduction to *Crash*", p. 97.

that they assume an attitude that in fact is very different from their real response. If we really feared the car crash, none of us would ever be able to drive a car.³¹

Here Ballard comes close to defining the death of affect, not just a numbing effect prompted by the media landscape, but a psychological safety net of sorts, hardwired into our brains. He proposes that there is something insidious about the way we just carry on after a trauma like that, the real of the car crash being repressed. The logic of *Crash* – which echoes the logic of the Freudian death drive – can be summed up with the questions: what if we do not *fear* the car crash, but actually *desire* it? And if so, what would we find on the other side?

Autogeddon

Late in *Crash*, James has a chance to find out. After the death of Seagrave in a reenactment of Jayne Mansfield's car crash, Vaughan is troubled and aware that his grip on James's imagination has begun to wane. This coincides with James wholly accepting Vaughan's logic,³² and a reversal in their relationship as James begins to be the dominant one. This is described as a shift in James's reactions toward the injuries of car crash victims: "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."³³ Vaughan conducts James to a junkyard, and they take LSD on the way, inducing a Blakean hallucination that uncannily resembles the first drive home from the hospital after his crash, "as if my wounds had flowered into these paradisaical creatures, celebrating the unity of my crash and this metallized Elysium."³⁴ The creatures are probably the cars themselves, "their metal bodies [...] held together by the force of my own vision"³⁵ or even the "armada of angelic creatures" that moments later lands on the motorway,

³¹ BALLARD. *Crash!* Voiceover Transcription!.

³² BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 190.

³³ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 190.

³⁴ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 198.

³⁵ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 197.

in turn built by them “unknowingly for their reception.”³⁶ Structurally, the callback to that previous moment in the novel sets up this acid trip as a moment of heightened perception and realization, which involves an extreme depersonalization, and a turning point. When they reach the junkyard, they engage in sexual intercourse in the most vividly realized sex act in the novel and one of its most delirious moments.

Chapter 22, the chapter that follows, is one of the novel’s true turning points, and one of its most overlooked moments. Still under the influence of LSD, James wakes up to see Vaughan looking at him, covered in flies, waiting “for the rancid liquors distilled from the body of a corpse.”³⁷ In a way, he is already one, James having already *absorbed* him – he no longer represents this life after death, only death. *Crash* is one of Ballard’s most hermetic novels, as it takes place in a world that is fully urbanized, filled with concrete and metal, but in this chapter, we find a respite, as James walks into “an abandoned world” with some vegetation (“the weed-grown entrance of the breaker’s yard”), just some feet away from an overpass.³⁸ The brief appearance of the natural world,³⁹ of the vegetation that was so abundant in *The Drowned World*,⁴⁰ is striking, as if there is a lifting of the veil – the veil of Vaughan, who dominates the entire narrative and world-view from its very first line: “Vaughan died yesterday in his last car crash.”⁴¹ As the effects of LSD wear off, a car appears and tries to run James down, but he manages to save himself. James becomes rather a dominant, active figure in these last chapters (he sodomizes Vaughan and not the other way around; and Vaughan’s final crash seems out of despair that he is unable to crash into Catherine’s car). Here the reality of his body, of survival kicks in, as it

³⁶ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 199.

³⁷ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 205.

³⁸ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 205.

³⁹ This is the world of *Concrete Island*, Ballard’s next novel, one that can be read as a tangent of *Crash*. In it, an architect crashes (perhaps deliberately) his car on a traffic island, and finding himself unable (or unwilling) to escape, he sets out to rebuild his world, Crusoe-like, in this deject space. This involves a movement toward dissociation (as in *Atrocity* and *Crash*) to then remake his own identity from the scraps, but the architect only manages to rebuild that self out of the very things he tried to dissociate himself from, a world remade by technology that exists in a self-perpetuating cycle that spun out of control to service that technology.

⁴⁰ BALLARD, J. D. *The Drowned World*.

⁴¹ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 7.

did even during his hallucinations, when driving: “As Vaughan urged me again to crash the car into the vehicles approaching us, I was tempted to obey him, making no effort to answer the teasing pressure of his hand.”⁴² But at the last minute, he is able to attain control.

What are we to make of this odd scene? After this episode, Vaughan barely appears again, engaged in bizarre attempts to kill Catherine before he finally crashes into Elizabeth Taylor’s limousine. Vaughan should be seen less as a character and more as an embodiment of an idea, or a catalyst for James’s own repression. As James himself says in chapter 24, “Increasingly I was convinced that Vaughan was a projection of my own fantasies and obsessions, and that in some ways I had let him down.”⁴³ He might have, but he also managed to survive – it is one thing to accept Vaughan’s logic, and another to let himself be consumed by him, by the vortex of death. By the end of the novel, Vaughan survives in an abstract way, carrying out *Crash*’s messianic theme. During his recovery, James fantasizes:

The wounds on my knees and chest were beacons tuned to a series of beckoning transmitters, carrying the signals, unknown to myself, which would unlock the immense stasis and free these drivers for the real destinations set for their vehicles, the paradises of the electric highway.⁴⁴

Compare with the ending of chapter 21 and the climax of James and Vaughan’s sex act: “In our wounds we celebrated the re-birth of traffic-slain dead, the deaths and injuries of those we had seen dying by the roadside and the imaginary wounds and postures of the millions yet to die.”⁴⁵ James and Vaughan seek to reinvigorate “wounded and dying victims”,⁴⁶ in a way shepherd them to a new mode of existence (thus the appearance of the armada of angels during James’s LSD trip), and Vaughan’s death, far from being a dead-end, becomes a ritual self-sacrifice by his disciples (James, Helen, Gabrielle). His car becomes a sacred object, and James’s semen is purposefully spread over his car,

⁴² BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 198.

⁴³ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 220.

⁴⁴ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 53.

⁴⁵ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 203.

⁴⁶ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 190.

recalling an earlier scene when Vaughan has sex with a prostitute, and James observes: “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.”⁴⁷ This literal dissemination reoccurs in the closing line of the book: “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.”⁴⁸ Vaughan, like Traven in *Atrocity*,⁴⁹ becomes by the end a complete abstraction, and a myth of the near future.

What appears to be pornography, or an empty aesthetic of sex, in *Crash*, is in fact closer to reproduction, the biological underpinning of sex. The novel literalizes Andy Warhol’s wish to “become a machine”, and Ballard’s own pronouncement that science fiction is the “body’s dream of becoming a machine.”⁵⁰ In that sense, *Crash* is science fiction, in that it describes how seductive the world of the death of affect and of virtualization can be, and what would mean to *fully* embrace its logic, and this is what Ballard means that it was necessary to give his name to the protagonist to get an extra degree of honesty. *Crash* explores the powerful instinct that fuels desire, that sensation of being *driven* by a strange compulsion, a sensation of otherness. In the throes of annihilation, the body turns itself to the instinctual life force, to sex and reproduction. In the world of virtualization, it means to become a machine, that which reproduces mechanically, without affect. Paradoxically, that also means death, but death is fine for the characters in *Crash*: as long as it has a point, as long as it makes sense, and as long as it is the goal of life, in another literalization, this time of the Freudian death drive. *Crash* is, ultimately, like *Atrocity* and most of Ballard’s work, about the delusion of the acceptance of death.

⁴⁷ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 191.

⁴⁸ BALLARD. *Crash*, p. 224.

⁴⁹ The second coming of Christ, of course, is featured in “You and Me and the Continuum”, chapter 9 of *Atrocity*, which closes with the line “As his own identity faded, its last fragments glimmered across the darkening landscape, lost integers in a hundred computer codes, sand-grains on a thousand beaches, fillings in a million mouths” (p. 138), probably referring to Traven.

⁵⁰ BALLARD. *Project for a Glossary of the Twentieth Century*, p. 279.

Hyperreality

The prevalence of tests, reenactments, and rehearsals in *Crash* (Vaughan is likened to a film director) – both in the novel as in its composition history – seem to speak to the nature of simulation, as Jean Baudrillard has argued in his 1991 essay on the novel, published on *Science Fiction Studies* and received with hostility by critics and even Ballard himself. Baudrillard reads *Crash* as an illustration of his own theory of simulation, a novel within which distinctions between reality and fiction have been supplanted by a hyperreality. For Baudrillard, simulation is not representation, because that implies the existence of an original – in the contemporary world, the simulacrum or image bears “no relation to any reality whatsoever”.⁵¹ Reality in the simulation is abolished: “Simulation is [...] the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal [...] It is all of metaphysics that is lost. No more mirror of being”.⁵² His solution to the moral quandaries of *Crash* is that the text is outside ethical and moral boundaries altogether.

In *Crash*, there is neither fiction nor reality – a kind of hyper-reality has abolished both. Even critical regression is no longer possible. This mutating and commutating world of simulation and death, this violently sexualized world totally lacking in desire, full of violent and violated bodies but curiously neutered, this chromatic and intensely metallic world empty of the sensorial, a world of hyper-technology without finality – is it good or bad? We can't say. It is simply fascinating, without this fascination implying any kind of value judgment whatsoever. And this is the miracle of *Crash*. The moral gaze – the critical judgmentalism that is still a part of the old world's functionality – cannot touch it. *Crash* is hypercritical, in the sense of being beyond the critical.⁵³

Baudrillard's essay is a brilliant piece of writing in its own right, but he focuses mainly on the surface of the novel. The signs begin to embody, rather than point to, the referent. Vaughan's contact with reality

⁵¹ BAUDRILLARD. *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 6.

⁵² BAUDRILLARD. *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 12.

⁵³ BAUDRILLARD. Ballard's “*Crash*”.

is wholly mediated by systems of reproduction: TV screens, photographs, and even the “screen” of his car’s windshield (or *windscreen*); he is deluded to the point he believes to be a messiah. Baudrillard is right in observing that the world of *Crash* has hyperreal elements, but a careful reading of the novel and knowledge of other works by Ballard point that the hyperreality (or third-order simulation) 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). The characters in *Crash* have, in some way, forgotten how to properly decode the world, but their problem is not one that the text itself shares, as it is a novel that is very much concerned with the decoding of the logics that drives this preference for the image over the real. Baudrillard seems to be in an analogous mental conundrum as the characters in *Crash*, unable (or unwilling) to make a distinction between the ideas expressed by the characters and the articulation of those ideas in the novel.

In her response to Baudrillard’s essay in *Science Fiction Studies*, Katherine Hayles touches on a central question of the book:

The borders separating simulations from reality are important because they remind us of the limits that make dreams of technological transcendence dangerous fantasies. Hyperreality does not erase these limits, for they exist whether we recognize them or not; it only erases them from our consciousness.⁵⁴

For articulating those concerns, *Crash* became a touchstone in imaginative writing that prefigured the cyberpunk movement in the early 1980s, in which virtuality and technological transcendence were seen as ultimately seductive, and very dangerously so. For Hayles, *Crash*’s erotic transformations are expressions of a drive toward transcendence, one that “culminates in flight, a flight of death.”⁵⁵ Furthermore, Gasiorek suggests that there is a sort of “counter-narrative” that conceives the trauma, or wound as source of redemption, and imagines how out of the disaster the wound might be recreated: “For if the wound is troped as a vent that opens the way to a vision of hell, then it is also figured as a

⁵⁴ HAYLES. In Response to Jean Baudrillard.

⁵⁵ HAYLES. In Response to Jean Baudrillard.

beacon signposting the path to paradise [...] as if the writer is searching for some means technology can offer reparation for all this pain”.⁵⁶ We see what happens when this delusion of technological transcendence is carried through: it either ends in death, jumping off a flyover and colliding with a limousine (in the case of Vaughan), or the reality of the body suddenly returns, through instinct, in the case of James (when Vaughan tries to run him over). Thus, the ending of *Crash* can be read allegorically: Vaughan, standing in for the dangerous, deathly pull of technological transcendence (which Baudrillard’s text sympathizes with) is finally reconfigured not as an active presence, but as a memory and a metaphor, the only form that it can do some good.

“If Christ came again, he would be killed in a car crash”

Cokliss’s film *Crash!* and the ICA exhibition were not the only rehearsals for the novel: in May 1968, Ballard planned, along with Eduardo Paolozzi and Christopher Evans (reportedly his inspiration for Vaughan) a play in the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London titled *Crash*. The narrative would involve a man buying his first car, his death in a crash, and a transformation into a Christ figure. A report in the *Sunday Mirror* describes the project:⁵⁷

All the horror and realism of an actual road smash will be played out in front of the audience. The young driver, in blood-covered track suit, will lie beside the mangled car. His girl friend will kneel beside him, caressing him. Dummies will mouth words about the beautiful and desirable features of the motor car. Behind them, film of cars crashing will make up the stark and terrible accompaniment.⁵⁸

More importantly, however, is how Ballard conceived of *Crash* in this early stage, from the same report:

⁵⁶ GASIOREK. *J. G. Ballard*, p. 91.

⁵⁷ These would later be incorporated into Ballard’s own handout for the “Crashed Cars” exhibition.

⁵⁸ ROSE. *If Christ Came Again He Would Be Killed in a Car Crash*, p. 17.

Crash victims like Jayne Mansfield, James Dean, Aly Khan, Jim Clark and President Kennedy (the first man to be murdered in a motorcade) act out the Crucifixion for us. Their deaths heighten our vitality in a blinding flash. The death of Kennedy was a sacrificial murder, connived at the millions of people who watched it endlessly recapitulated on television. If Christ came again, he would be killed in a car crash.⁵⁹

This sensationalistic line about Christ – even used as the title of the report in the *Sunday Mirror* – reveals something about Ballard’s probable intentions for *Crash*, and how Vaughan was initially conceived. One of the most famous stories from *Atrocity* is precisely “The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race”, modeled after Alfred Jarry’s “The Crucifixion Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race”, in which he seeks to provide “a more satisfactory explanation” than the Warren Report.⁶⁰ Jarry’s piece ends with the line “We know that [Jesus] continued the race airborne”, a possible influence in Ballard’s conception of the afterlives of Vaughan and Traven, an image that Dali was also obsessed with during the 1950s.

As a motif, it persisted after *Crash* – there are remnants of Christian rituals in *Concrete Island*, such as the scene in which Maitland, troubled by the pain of his own traumatized body, identifies himself with the island he is marooned in. He reflects on the places he suffered physical pain:

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.⁶¹

⁵⁹ ROSE. *If Christ Came Again He Would Be Killed in a Car Crash*, p. 17.

⁶⁰ BALLARD. *The Atrocity Exhibition*, p. 123.

⁶¹ BALLARD. *Concrete Island*, p. 71.

Concrete Island is Ballard's most direct treatment of physical trauma and deprivation and its effects on the mind – many hallucinatory and feverish passages anticipate Jim's walk back to Shanghai in *Empire of the Sun*. Maitland then speaks aloud, "a priest officiating at the eucharist of his own body": "I am the island".⁶² Later, Maitland and the island's tramp, Proctor, set up 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."⁶³ In these passages, we see the same kind of displacement that happens in *Crash*, but here Ballard gives a clue about what they are all about: a "transfer of obligation" from the self to something else. 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 and the transcendence from the body and redemption for the sins and deaths of others (as in *Crash*), in the form of a celebration. In *Concrete Island* we see how important it is to get *away* from that body, it being too burdensome, limiting, and too earthbound. By an enormous act of the imagination, it seems to be possible to "free" oneself.

There are parallels with Vaughan's death in *Crash*, and Ballard seems to be saying that this deluded sacrifice is not really coming to terms with death at all, or maybe that is just an attempt to give meaning to the inscrutable void that is death. What we see in Ballard, notably in characters such as Vaughan, are precisely intellectualized, aestheticized, and more importantly, deluded attempts to rob the *other* of death of its inscrutability, and thus injecting it with narcissistic meaning. The mystery of death is indissociable from the mystery of the body and its finitude.

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⁶² BALLARD. *Concrete Island*, p. 71.

⁶³ BALLARD. *Concrete Island*, p. 160.

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