

Auto-Eroticism as Modern Social Disease:
deviant sexuality transcending the body in an age obsessed by machines or a growing tendency to destroy rather than reproduce?

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“Reality, as an internally coherent and limited universe, begins to haemorrhage when its limits are stretched to infinity.”

- Jean Baudrillard¹

Ballardian Anti-Utopia

Baudrillard suggests that today it is difficult if not impossible to find a form of cultural representation such as a genre of literature which can present a Utopia with any authenticity. The genre that has felt perhaps most at home in a Utopia—namely science-fiction—is not able to achieve this anymore as clearly demonstrated in the work of Ballard who stands opposed to easy conclusionism inherent in Utopian forms of representation; he must be one of the strongest proponents of an Anti-Utopian approach. In this paper we’ll be discussing the implications this has for contemporary society, which I will suggest—at least according to Ballard—has resulted in a form of modern social disease which has individuals searching for sexual satisfaction in strange and violent places in order to fulfil urges they can barely understand. In this regard, the incredible cultural noise brought about by J. G. Ballard’s significant novel *Crash* (1973) and the even noisier controversy brought about by Cronenberg’s adaptation of this particularly virulent book needs to be reappraised in terms of what is currently going on in occidental culture at the beginning of a new century. In a situation as delicate and controversial as this with issues which dig as deep as both Ballard and Cronenberg imply in their own different styles of representation, when one is telling a tale that reflects so violently upon a way of living and relating to one’s reality a great deal of care needs to be taken. Living in a dynamic and changing world where technology is playing a continually more significant role in our lives and our bodies are gradually replaced by machines, in a world dominated in a visual, aural and in many cases (especially in Taiwan) an olfactory sense by the automobile, our attitudes to the surrounding environment is in turn gradually changing. This has particular significance of these statements will become clearer in the structure of this article which will describe a social condition outlined by Ballard in his novel *Crash* (and realised recently in Cronenberg’s film) where individuals demonstrated to express their individual quest for a new type of transgressive sexuality through the hard, cold and violent anonymity of the car accident which rips through flesh like a pick-axe through typing paper.

As mentioned, Ballard’s background in science-fiction has not meant a Utopian basis to his writing style; he actually stands opposed to this form of idealism and often, particularly in works like *Crash* and the more recent *Super-Cannes*, he is highly critical of the worlds he creates and characters who live in them. Knowing a little about Ballard’s work provides one with a quick insight into why he is so alienated from his own culture, or at least why he does not accept it unquestionably. Ballard is the author of the book on which the well-known Spielberg film *Empire of the Sun* and unfortunately he really had to go through all the atrocities inflicted by the Japanese at the time. This is how he spent his childhood, so in a way he returned to contemporary England very much a stranger, making him a victim on two levels and explaining his general questioning attitude to his existence. Ballard is particularly critical to censorship of his work which he finds extremely frustrating but annoyingly typical for an England which cannot seem to distinguish between the right of society to ‘protect’ its members and the freedom of expression of individual artists. The film version of *Crash*, for example, was banned in many places in the United Kingdom. When *Crash* came out a great deal of questions were posed about how these issues should be dealt with. Should individuals have the right to choose or should society choose for them? Who can decide what is in a public’s ‘best interest’? At the time of release of *Crash* the deep fear of the social sickness behind the horror of the ‘Dunblaine massacre’ was used as an excuse to ban this film which became a warning..

¹ In: 1. *Simulcra and Science Fiction*

My argument will be that of course that in the end it is the artist who has to come out on top and that we will ultimately partake far worse of the illness in the very attempt to repress it. I still hope to demonstrate, however, that both Ballard and Cronenberg's treatment of sensitive issues like those in *Crash* have demonstrated how careful we have to be when dealing with artistic representation of contemporary forms of social disease even if they are 'metaphors' for societal distress as is clear in the case of *Crash*. As a personal victim of a number of car accidents, some more horrifying than others, the message gains a personal note of urgency; to what extent is it permissible to make a potentially violent act of destruction into a potent vehicle of sexual communication? These issues and more will be discussed in this paper.

Surgical Report

To provide the reader with a clear background the paper starts with a basic description of important elements common to both the book and the film (*Prognosis*), including the plot, major themes and characters. This is followed directly by a description of important events and writings in Ballard's life which help to explain the unusual and/or controversial concepts and ideas behind *Crash* and other recent works (Ballard, 'metarealities' and the *nouveau riche*: an environment for post-modern disease). After this *Crash* itself in the form composed by Ballard becomes the object of analysis. The way Ballard provides his readers with a unique insight into a particular type of social illness which reflects a frightening tendency in contemporary culture, one involving a new type of sexuality which avoids interpersonal contact between people unless there is the third or third and fourth party of cars mediating in the form of an accident. Ballard attempts to provide a basis for the incomprehension of this unusual behaviour.

The next subject of analysis is no longer Ballard or strictly the work *Crash*; the Canadian film director Cronenberg and many of his films which deal with similar thematic areas to *Crash* are explored (Cronenberg: the body, its mutations and its others). Three particular thematic areas are concentrated upon: the potentially 'normal' experiencing the *Other*, the potentially normal and the concept of 'mutation', both of which ultimately relate to the central concept of 'social disease', the third thematic area which is central to this article. This is followed by a division covering his filmic realisation of *Crash* is brought into focus, which of course leads to a commentary upon *Otherness, Mutation and Disease* (Cronenberg's Vision for *Crash*).

This leads to a discussion of illness and the way they become 'inscribed' in the body; this refers to forms of representation used by Ballard and Cronenberg, but also the means for illness to inscribe itself into the bodies of its victims who suffer within the work. Ultimately contrasting forms of textual inscription that relate the works discussed in this article are considered (*The Illness Inscribed on the Text, the Screen and the Body*).

This is followed by a diagnosis, concluding the work by summing up the major points made within the article and drawing some conclusions based on this information. Hopefully by this time the reader will have shared an interesting and stimulating journey along the lines of theory where textual inscription about literature can take place both on paper and human flesh.

Prognosis

The messages that are given off this complex set of literary signifiers connected to Ballard's narrative are concerned with the fact that in contemporary occidental culture, the automobile, which has proved itself to be a lethal instrument of death, has become infused with a vital, intrinsically human form of eroticism; it is quickly pointed out by *Crash* enthusiasts how strong cars are as erotic symbols in contemporary society, and as well how many children are begot in their wake. Dr Helen Remington, for example, only considers sex in terms of the automobile: "...as if the presence of the car mediated an element which alone made sense of the sexual act... only in the car could she reach her orgasm" (Ballard, 120). The perversity of Ballard's anti-message is that we have made the fatal mistake of equating the destructive power of these powerful social tools with sexuality, and this is the unpleasant sense of disease one has in reading the book or watching the film.

Ballard's *Crash* has a relatively simple plot. It is repetitive and has sequences of extreme violence relating to car accidents contrasted with sexual imagery that then become combined; because of the continuous repetition of similar terminology and the constant contrast between the hardness of steel and the vulnerability of flesh, one quickly gets used to the imagery and it quickly loses its shock value. The writing undoubtedly functions to bring biology to the machine and at the same time to bring machinality to biology. It succeeds in doing this in a large number of ways, but it uses as its basis the basic Freudian desire for sexual satisfaction which Ballard suggests is influenced by the environment, hence connection between machines and flesh. Perhaps the most striking function of the way the reader is forced to lose any sense of shock at the potentially shocking incidents is in order to create an Anti-Utopian reality. Ballard points out, in any case, the way our society has forced us to accept extreme violence, particularly in the form of car accidents; he demonstrates that a reality where the members of a society are at one with the idea of death on the road and even murder as an everyday past-time is not just part of the fantasy of *Fahrenheit 451* proportions. His particular example is the frighteningly real and recognisable way the violence is shared among parents and children who scramble to view the bloody victims of car accidents as demonstrated in the following fragment. This is surprisingly evocative of the past-time of children in *Fahrenheit 451* (actively encouraged by parents) to chase around innocent pedestrians and run them down:

“A considerable number of children were present, many lifted on their parents’ shoulders to give them a better view... None of the spectators showed any signs of alarm. They looked down at the scene with the calm and studied interest of intelligent buyers at a leading bloodstock sale... Pushing amiably between Catherine and myself on the embankment was a thirteen-year-old boy in a cowboy suit. He chewed steadily on a piece of gum, watching the last of the taxi passengers being lifted on to a stretcher” (Ballard, 155)

The narrative concerns ‘Ballard’ (the narrator of the story) and his wife Catherine. They are bored with their sexual life together search for satisfaction with a variety of other partners. Coming together (no pun intended) they enjoy discussing their infidelities together; it reduces the boredom of their otherwise safe and secure lives. Catherine has an interest in planes, learning to fly (and screwing her teachers). They begin to realise their shared obsession with automobiles, wounds and technology when Ballard has a horrific car accident which results in him running in a head-on collision with the Remingtons, the male couple of which dies on impact by being hurled symbolically, ‘impregnating’ Ballard’s car; Dr Helen Remington his wife and Ballard sit staring at each other, and they end up being treated in the same hospital. Through this incident—the sexual connection between Helen and Ballard that develop because of the accident and Catherine’s involvement in the affair—we are introduced to the subject of the novel: his and her growing obsession with automobiles, car accidents and the horrifyingly ‘sexy’ damage done to human flesh by technological mishaps, the ultimate expression being their own death (an unpleasant and frightening prospect). Difficult to believe? The success of Ballard and Cronenberg in making their argument agreeable and/or acceptable is to be questioned, but as will be discussed in this article the whole subject has stirred up a wide range of important issues which can’t be ignored today in a world which represents more than ever the Anti-Utopia suggested by Ballard in 1973.

Vaughan is the centre around which the other characters felt drawn towards in order to express a new type of sexuality which is not offered so much by Vaughan himself but the middle-class social environment in which they become dissatisfied with existing sexual options. Smelling like a not unpleasant blend of “semen and engine coolant” (Ballard, 102) Vaughan is perhaps the ideal representative of Ballard’s Anti-Utopia. He should not be viewed, however, as a ‘negative’ character in so many words functioning to ‘bring the others down’ as I have heard commented. Without Vaughan I don’t believe that Ballard or Cronenberg intended to show that their characters would have remained ‘healthy’; rather Vaughan actually helps them to focus and fulfil their true desires, which according to the authors are representative of flaws inherent in a society obsessed with individual fulfilment and technology. Vaughn’s collection of bizarre and violent photos, for example, provide Ballard with “the codes of a new marriage of sensation and possibility” (Ballard, 106) which allow him to achieve new levels of his sexuality.

Gabrielle, the greatest ‘victim’ of car accident violence and therefore the most paralysed (but paradoxically also the most sexually liberated of the entire group) is also an important character, representing a new type

of sexuality brought about thanks to a set of artificial sexual orifices made possible by scarring from a serious car accident. Like Vaughan, she becomes the means for Ballard to achieve new levels of sexual experience that transcend traditional forms of sexual contact: “Three months later, sitting beside her physiotherapy instructor in her new invalid car, she held the chromium treads in her strong fingers as if they were extensions of her clitoris... the crushed body of the sports car had turned her into a creature of free and perverse sexuality, releasing within its twisted bulkheads and leaking engine coolant all the deviant possibilities of her sex” (Ballard, 99).

There are other characters, such as Seagrave, around which the series of sexual encounters that make up the narrative are strung, but the characters mentioned above—Ballard, his wife Catherine, Dr Helen Remington, Vaughan and Gabrielle—provide the strongest set of contrasts as far as each of the characters are set up to realise the same goal. The plot revolves around the death of Vaughan. The death of Vaughan is a planned suicide but the reader realises through the book that this death is actually arguably the realisation of the ultimate sexual fantasy as much as it is an attempt at an ‘escape’ from a fragmented and fragmenting society. The extent to which Ballard and Cronenberg intend us to experience the death of Vaughan, and of the ultimate fantasies built around the same construction the other major characters share, is part of the ambiguous message the participants are left to deal with, and it is some of these complex issues I hope to discuss in this work..

Ballard, ‘hyperrealities’ and the *nouveau riche*: an environment for post-modern disease

Ballard’s fiction has witnessed an unusual development. His early fiction is usually grouped under the heading of science fiction, although he can never be accused of creating ‘Utopian’ realities in the sense of traditional science fiction in the sense of Asimov or Dick, even though many of his short stories are included in collections which included the writing of such SF traditionalists. The early ‘metarealities’ created by Ballard functioned more as metaphors for what is problematic in existing reality, rather than providing an image of a future, even if it is a critical one. In other words, even his early work was more of a rarified metaphoric commentary on the contemporary condition; experiments with reality which have also been referred to as ‘hyperrealities’. *Crash* itself is viewed by many as a contribution to this new genre of science fiction; in 1973 when it was written it was definitely viewed in a world of the future, even though it may seem to be set in a typical reality of today.

Ballard’s alienation from traditional forms of reality can be read back in biographical works such as the well-known *Empire of the Sun* which was made into the well-known film by Spielberg. He spent a great deal of his youth separated from his parents and witnessed horrific things unimaginable to many of us. Being repatriated to England into a world of middle-class ‘normal’ existence’ made him feel eternally the ‘Other’ to English culture. His strong feeling of being ‘different’, reacting against a staid and conservative middle-class environment is particularly strongly represented in later work like his novels *Crash* and his more recent *Super-Cannes* which shows decadence and murder set in a super-suburban paradise. The way the British react to the work of Ballard demonstrates a similar feeling of insecurity and alienation; the banning of the filmed version of *Crash* is a particular good example of this which was angered Ballard and demonstrated even more his ‘otherness’ and the inability of the British culture to allow freedom of expression. Rather than just commenting upon the conservative ‘British’ culture he is alienated from, however—as demonstrated particularly in *Super-Cannes* which is set in France—Ballard comments rather negatively on the boredom of the middle-class and the upper middle-class and the way they attempt to provide their lives with meaning in a world in which they are basically provided with everything they need and more. This seems particularly true for the characters of *Crash*, represented particularly well by the glib remarks of Dr Helen Remington who seems to speak a lot without actually saying anything which has any meaning.

Comparable to the similarly prophetic *Memoirs of a Survivor* by Lessing, *Crash* is confessed to be ‘semi-autobiographical’; but at the same time both works are surreal to the point of being ridiculous and therefore in this sense must be experienced as being metaphorical. Personal correspondence from Lessing describes this element of her work: “One of the things I was trying to do was to describe my life in metaphor”

(Lessing, 1983: 1). One can sense that Ballard also in *Crash* attempts to represent metaphorically his own personal dissatisfaction with his middle-class existence; even the hero 'Ballard' shares the same name as the author. Both of these works are also metaphors on the ills of contemporary society. For Lessing, an individual watches from her apartment as people gradually leave their homes and move onto the streets in a fragmenting world. In *Crash*, the narrator becomes obsessed with a new type of sexuality which ends up involving his own death; he is more actively involved in the social disease which the narrator in Lessing's work seems to transcend by making other personal developments which set her apart from her co-inhabitants. Lessing demonstrates that images of the outside world such as the gangs of children on the street are reflections of "the violent movements of our times," metaphors "to reflect reality" (Lessing 1983: 2). The intention in this work is to discuss to what degree the social disease inherent in Ballard's work is representative of metaphor of current possibilities present in society in the sense used by Lessing, or an expression of his own personal subconscious in the sense of 'autobiography', both suggested as possibilities in Lessing's comparable work. This leads us to a more direct discussion of Ballard's work.

Ballard's vision in *Crash*: 'auto'-eroticism

Baudrillard comments on the fact that in terms of the classical (and the cybernetic) viewpoint, technology is an extension of the body. Ballard suggests symbolically in his work in a foreboding sense that technology actually functions to 'deconstruct' the body—both physically in the sense of bodily mutilation and dismemberment and intellectually in the sense of textual inscription; by inscribing itself into our conscious and subconscious minds, as clearly demonstrated by Ballard, it is changing the sorts of things we expect or desire from the world; Ballard's example is one of the strongest forces in occidental culture, namely sexuality. Because technology is changing the way we relate to our bodies it is changing the cultural processes that involve our bodies as well, as will be discussed in more detail further on.

To begin, however, a background to the underlying thematic source of the book is important: the automobile and the way it has influenced and continues to influence society. Thematically, Ballard seems to be primarily on one level reacting against the illusion created by American culture towards the car; it is obviously a potentially dangerous tool of death and destruction, but it is unfortunately construction by the industry and the media which supports it giving the illusion of safety, very often subscribing to myths connecting cars and sex; the 'auto'-eroticism played upon by Ballard within the work *Crash*. The character of Dr Helen Remington is the perfect example of this sexual attitude to cars; she is only able to achieve orgasm by having sex inside cars. Early on in the novel Ballard describes 'typical' experiences of young men and their primordial sexual experiences:

"Young men alone behind the wheels of their first cars, near-wrecks picked up in scrap-yard, masturbate as they move on worn tires to aimless destinations. After a near collision at a traffic intersection semen jolts across a cracked speedometer dial. Later, the dried residues of the that same semen are brushed by the lacquered hair of the first young woman who lies across his lap with her mouth over his penis, one hand on the wheel hurtling the car through the darkness towards a multi-level interchange, the swerving brakes drawing the semen from him as he grazes the tailgate of an articulated truck loaded with colour television sets, his left hand vibrating the clitoris towards orgasm as the headlamps of the truck flare warning in his rear-view mirror. Later still, he watches as a friend takes a teenage girl in the rear seat." (Ballard, 17)

Ballard takes this literary analogy further by making people look, smell, sound and behave like machines in many ways. In both book and film, the image of smoking (i.e. 'emitting smoke like a machine') is a particularly strong metaphor. Even Dr Helen Remington smokes: "I started to smoke at Ashford – it's rather stupid of me" (Ballard, 73). Descriptions of some of the characters also compare them to machines, such as the following description of Gabrielle: "Her strong face with its unmatching planes seemed to mimic the deformed panels of the car, almost as if she consciously realized that these twisted instrument binnacles provided a readily accessible anthology of depraved acts" (Ballard, 100). Finally, the sexual act itself is compared to the workings of a machine in more ways than simple repetitive motions, although in the following description the repetitive sexual motions form an important part of the metaphor:

“His left hand took the girl’s breast, his ring- and fore-fingers propping up the nipple like a miniature crutch... Braced on his left elbow, he continued to work himself against the girl’s hand, as if taking part in a dance of severely stylized postures that celebrated the design and electronics, speed and direction of an advanced kind of automobile.”
(Ballard, 142)

Further, however, it is demonstrated that the mechanics of sex doesn’t really involve so much the reaching of orgasm, rather ‘getting from A to B’ in the motional sense; sexual climax is simply the ‘accident’ (or result) of the journey brought about by the energy produced by the constant driving motion of humping hips. This is an expression of a new type of ‘transgressive’ sexuality which doesn’t involve physicality in the sense it is traditionally understood; it is the *Other* incarnate, everything that stands against traditional male/female gender approaches to how sexuality should work, one brought about by a world which is making considerably less sense, or rather one in which this type of sexuality makes sense to people who exist in that reality but seems absurd and or horrific to most people who read the book.

Ballard’s notion of ‘auto-eroticism’ is also a play on the notion of ‘auto-asphyxiation’. For those that don’t know it, auto-asphyxiation is a type of sexuality where people achieve orgasm by strangling themselves to the point of death, or having themselves strangled. Unlike the notion of will towards death in Crash however, auto-asphyxiation is a real and in fact popular form of sexual-play. It is in fact the bringing to life of the French notion of ‘a little death’ achieved whenever one reaches a sexual climax. For Ballard, even though the sexuality firstly seem to be connected between cars, then car accidents, we soon realise that the ultimate sexual realization is when death is achieved by being mutated physically and totally, transfigured in a almost transcendental sense by the penetrating nature of steel machinery pushing and ripping into human flesh. Even early on in the book Ballard considers his own death (Ballard, 15). Later, with love, he considers killing his wife Catherine (Ballard, 181). One wonders if Ballard was influenced by the well-known story of the Mexican-painter who was scarred for life in a serious car accident on a bus that literally stole her virginity by penetrating her genitalia during the accident. Like Gabrielle she was also seriously paralysed but that didn’t stop her from having a fulfilling sexual existence (with influential figures such as Trotsky).

In order for the characters to discover their transgressive new ‘sexuality’ which completely transcends human flesh and involves a unique connection with the automobile, a complex sexual journey of sorts has to be taken that covers all different types of existing recognised ‘perversions’, almost as if Ballard is deliberately attempting to shock us by presenting continually more violent and/or perverse types of sexual fulfilment from sadism through forms of incest to cannibalism. Sadism is a form of sexual behaviour we may not have all participated in, but we are most certainly aware of; it crosses over into the field of traditional sexuality in both a hetero and homosexual sense, leading ultimately to “a new sexuality born from a perverse technology” (Ballard, 13). Ballard probably starts his journey into presenting his transgressive sexuality because sadism is a representation of pain as the realisation of what media tries to tame. It is understandable in the sense that violence is something everyone enjoys at least viewing from a distance, watching films, television, and as Ballard demonstrates scrambling to witness mutilated bodies fresh from car accidents. Ballard describes this as “...extensions of that real world of violence calmed and tamed within our television programmes and the pages of new magazines” (Ballard, 37). Other means towards the transgressive new sexuality which I believe is ultimately the disease in contemporary society proposed by Ballard include incest, cannibalism and paedophilia. To show some examples from the text where these forms of sexuality are explored:

Incest is introduced in a number of forms, connecting mother and son and in the following example brother and sister:

“He dreamed of alienated brothers and sisters, by chance meeting each other on collision courses on the access roads of petrochemical plants, their unconscious incest made explicit in this colliding metal, in the haemorrhages of their brain tissue flowering beneath the aluminised compression chambers and reaction vessels.”

(Ballard, 13)

In the following example Vaughan takes a step closer towards his transgressive sexuality and ultimately his own death by using cannibalism as tool to reach sexual satisfaction:

“He drew from his pocket a grimy square of silk scarf. He spread it carefully on the seat between us. Lying in the centre was a triangle of bloodstained grey leather, the drying blood still bright carmine. Experimentally, Vaughan touched the blood with his fingertips, brought it up to his mouth and tasted the tacky fragments. He had cut the piece from the front seat of the Mercedes, where the blood from the woman’s abdominal wounds had flowed between her legs.”

(Ballard, 187)

In the following example Seagrave seems to abuse his son sexually without the apparent objection or commentary of the others who evidently consider this behaviour to be normal in terms of their new sexuality:

“...Seagrave unbuttoned his shirt and placed the child’s mouth on his nipple, squeezing the hard skin into the parody of a breast.”

(Ballard, 104).

Another taboo-breaking form of sexual ‘perversion’ involves Ballard’s sexual encounter with Gabrielle. In Gabrielle’s case, her whole body becomes a metaphor for artificial ‘orification’: “Her body, with its angular contours, its unexpected junctions of mucous membrane and hairline, destructor muscle and erectile tissue, was a ripening anthology of perverse possibilities” (Ballard, 175-176). “As I unshackled the left leg brace and ran my fingers along the deep buckle groove, the corrugated skin felt hot and tender, more exciting than the membrane of a vagina” (Ballard, 177).

At the end of the book, even Remington and Gabrielle get together in a series of lesbian encounters inside cars as a sort of symbol of respect to the recently dead Vaughan. Ballard is “glad that Helen Remington was becoming ever more perverse, finding her happiness in Gabrielle’s scars and injuries” (Ballard 223-224). One wonders if the author is intending his audience to find the lesbianism itself or Remington’s exploration of Gabrielle’s scars ‘perverse’. Baudrillard reminds us that the behaviour of the characters is not actually meant to be ‘perverse’ in so many words, rather a transgressive mode of behaviour that includes the perspective of death without being negatively influenced by it (Baudrillard, 2).

Whatever means the characters use to achieve this new transgressive sexual state, Ballard is clear that this ‘new sexuality’ is only meaningful in terms of the automobile: “Detached from his automobile, particularly his own emblem-filled highway cruiser, Vaughan ceased to hold any interest” (Ballard, 117). He also suggests that this sexuality is in a way completely emotion-free; the sexual act becomes an act for the acts sake and nothing more, a sort of idealism that can ultimately only be realised in death—which ultimately and horrifyingly (particularly clearly in the film) becomes the primary goal of the main characters. The automobile is obviously a metaphor for the non-emotional, machine-like state that Ballard evidently senses we are developing towards are we increasingly ‘become’ the machines that continuously more influence our lives.

Ballard invents words like *invagination* to represent his desire to extend the whole notion of sex beyond the sexual organs that produce orgasm and seeds; sex is as much in the mind as it is part of the body, which is an important part of Ballard’s message. “This depraved orifice, the invagination of a sexual organ still in the embryonic stages of its evolution, reminded me of the small wounds on my own body, which still carried the contours of the instrument panel and controls” (Ballard, 177). Gabrielle herself represents many of the main themes taken up particularly by Cronenberg in filming of Ballard’s book. Firstly and foremostly, the ‘depraved orifices’ produced by surgical and artificial human processes of ‘invagination’ represent the sense of social disease aimed towards both by Ballard and Cronenberg. Secondly, the artificial scarring and prosthetics that envelop her body become the forms of ‘mutation’ that both restrict and liberate her in unique ways. Finally, her bodily transformation which have resulted in a set of unique and mutated sexual organs create a unique type of *Otherness* which set her apart from other characters in the book. In the film, despite her disabilities, Arquette’s interpretation of Gabrielle is undoubtedly the most sexual.

Cronenberg: the body, its mutations and its others

Cronenberg, the notorious Canadian director of what have become 'cult' films, have largely existed on the fringe of accepted cinema; some of his works that don't transgress too far into the boundaries of the abnormal or fit into accepted genres (such as *The Dead Zone* or *The Fly*) have brought him general success. His ultimate aim, however, has been the exploration of themes which connect his work strongly with that of Ballard, particularly in *Crash*. One of his early films, about a mutant alien beast which enters people through their sexual organs and turns them into sex maniacs, prefigured AIDS and involves very much the concept of sexually-oriented disease; the sexuality induced by these 'mutations' (very much metaphorical for human constructions) bring about all different types of sexuality, including homosexuality. *Rabid*, another early Cronenberg classic, has a horrific disease being spread by a character played by Marilyn Chambers (porn actress) who infects people with a strange type of 'penis' embedded in her shoulder. Here disease and mutation combine to present a world hopelessly in the grip of a sexual menace (displaced bodily). Mutation is again related to a specific nature of the human body, in this case misformed in some way. *Crash* evidently involves 'mutation' or perhaps as suggested firstly Ballard himself, an evolution or even a transgressive improvement on the traditional human form. As mentioned, earlier films of Cronenberg, explored the concept of mutation, such as *Rabid* (1977) which explores mutant sex organs, *Scanners* (1981) which explores the 'mutant' ability of individuals to use their psychic powers to blow people up ('mutate' them in an ultimate fashion) and of course *The Fly* where an individual becomes mutated into an insect. His frightening *Dead Ringers* (1988) made disquieting use of a set of fetishistic gynaecological instruments for operating on mutant women. Many of his films also explore the notion of *Otherness*. Although *Scanners* and *The Fly* may involve the problematic area of being different in some specific way, some quality that makes one entirely different, sexual *Otherness* is of particular importance with relation to *Crash*. As mentioned, *Shivers* and *Rabid* both involve sexual *Otherness* in a particularly Ballardian 'hyperreal' or metaphorical fashion. Even the more traditional 'science-fiction' film *Existenz* involves *Otherness* to some extent; anal sex, a form of penetration so important to both film and book of *Crash*, is strongly alluded to by a device inserted into the spine so that a biologically constructed computer-system can put an individual into a meta-reality. These themes of disease, mutation and otherness, factors which unite the work of Ballard and Cronenberg, made *Crash* for the film-maker an important if not essential project, even though he brought his own particular perspective no matter how 'transparent' he may have attempted to be.

Cronenberg's vision for *Crash*

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- Cronenberg presents a pastiche; what is so typical of filmic realisation is that a narrative is sacrificed to a turnstile of sexual acts shared by the various characters, presented in a remarkably unpornographic way. Cronenberg's film lacks two qualities making it become, as noted, more of a documentary than either on the one hand a piece of pornography (celebration/inundation) or camp (sexual pastiche and or humour).

- Like Ballard's constant allusion to the metaphor of people as machines, Cronenberg does so by representing people constantly smoking and through the costumes, particularly the chrome like bra worn by Catherine.

- Stronger feeling of disease in the film largely because of the clinical rather than the descriptive gaze upon the action.

[8] The Illness Inscribed on the Text, the Screen and the Body

- Refer to the illness as one which is inscribed in many different ways in contemporary culture.

- Concentrate on the idea of the movie illness, a sort of sickness which can only be undergone by fictional people on the motion picture screen. In reality, *Crash* presents such an illness. Movie illnesses, especially Hollywood ones, never disfigure in the past. *Crash* breaks these rules in the very idea of the illness being that the victim becomes disfigured (and eventually dies in an orgy of violence). In *Crash* the illness disfigures both physically and mentally; Ballard and Vaughan and their strange friends seem to be clearly insane; they view this differently (as achieving some type of sexual perfection which transcends the messiness of physical male/female sexuality). This is a true movie illness in that it could never really take

place, but the affect it has on its victims is truly horrific. It is fascinating for an audience because we could never conceive of people actually being like that, i.e. being turned on by car accidents, and therefore in a strange paradox the impossible seems strangely possible.

- Only comparable illness in cinema and literature is that in King's supernatural demon-car *Christine* which follows all the rules broken by *Crash*, even though the two films have some things in common.

- This 'illness', both in terms of the cinematic one and the literary/descriptive one, death and sex as similar acts are read directly from the body as they have been *inscribed* there. This contrasts to other forms of textual representation; here the body becomes the 'locus for textual inscription' through its wounds or other sources of bodily inscription. Refer to ritual scarring as a practice; in this sense it is not a 'disease' but a natural and only perhaps conceivable today expression of bodily textuality through the process of scarification in the car accident. Other forms of textual representation like drawing in sand. Taking step further; not *by* the body but instead *into* and *through* it.

- Aborigines knew how to use their entire bodies toward this end through tattooing, torture, and initiatory rites: sexuality was only one of the many possible metaphors of its symbolic exchange, and neither the most meaningful nor the most prestigious (as it has become for us, in its realist and obsessional referentiality, because of our organic and functional treatment of it, including orgasms).

[9] Diagnosis [Conclusion]

- The book seems to accept the narrator's reality as the 'sane' one, whereas the film has the tendency to leave its viewers with a strong feeling of incredulity as to how anyone could consider that type of behaviour sexually emotive. The common reaction from the uncritical, incredulous gaze of the viewer who does not view the film with an agenda is of either abject horror at the sexual violence suggested or the utter shock as to how Cronenberg could get the nerve to suggest that sexuality is a real motive for the violence inherent in abject social horrors such as car accidents. This suggests a possible difference in primary agenda; Cronenberg is commenting upon the experience as *disease* while Ballard seems on certain levels in a perverse sort of way to be celebrating the joy of this kind of unity connecting human sexuality and technology. Following example from the text demonstrates the eroticisation of literary gaze which the film seems to lack:

"...the shape and moisture of her anus as I stroked it with my ring finger, were each overlaid by the inventories of a benevolent technology – the moulded binnacle of the instrument dials, the jutting carapace of the steering column shroud, the extravagant pistol grip of the handbrake. I felt the warm vinyl of the seat beside me, and then stroked the damp aisle of Helen's perineum. Her hand pressed against my right testicle. The plastic laminated around me, the colour of washed anthracite, were the same tones as her pubic hairs parted at the vestibule of her vulva. The passenger compartment enclosed us like a machine generating from our sexual act an homunculus of blood, semen and engine coolant. My finger moved into Helen's rectum, feeling the shaft of my penis within her vagina. These slender membranes, like the mucous septum of her nose which I touched with my tongue, were reflected in the glass dials of the instrument panel, the unbroken curve of the windshield."

(Ballard, 80-81)

- Fact that the 'otherness' implicit in the type of sexuality associated with deviant sexual behaviour is reduced in significance to different degrees by both the book and the film; it fails its audience of homosexuals by offering homosexuality as a valid choice to anyone either bored, rich or perverse enough to wish to participate; as long as it is violent, involves bloodletting and will ultimately lead to death then it is a sexual item or motive for all parties involved. He presents homosexuality as the point where individuals demonstrate that traditional forms of sexuality are no longer fulfilling their image of reality: e.g. Catherine's lesbian tendencies represent "...the beginnings of a new sexuality divorced from any possible physical expression" (Ballard, 35). The whole problematic of 'penetration' or 'being penetrated' is transcended (apart from the opening where Helen's dead husband 'penetrates' Ballard's car) in a bizarre way by being made irrelevant in a sexuality involved with an accent on an entirely different set of parameters. Another example is the way Ballard describes his homosexual tendencies: "Perhaps some

latent homo-erotic element had been brought to the surface of my mind by his photographs of violence and sexuality” (Ballard, 102). Here the homosexual act becomes connected with violence either latent or potent. The homosexual act itself, when Ballard finally gets around to it, is also stylised in an unusual way to such an extent that one gets the impression that the act itself doesn’t actually need to take place at all; it is based on another set of parameters: “The placing of my penis in his rectum as we lay together in the rear seat of his car would be an event as stylized and abstracted as those recorded in Vaughan’s photographs” (Ballard, 103). The homosexual act, then, becomes on the one hand a move towards a transgressive sexual act by subverting many of the emotions and actions traditionally associated with the sexual act, but at the same time represents an expression of the ‘social disease’ bored, middle-class individuals have the tendency to get themselves involved in.

- [Discuss reference to drugs; Remington’s need for sedatives because of the increasing terror of traffic; the growing sense of stress brought about by powerlessness and dissociation because of machination and the population explosion]: “Look at all this traffic - need every sedative I can lay my hands on” (Ballard, 73) – strong sense of alienation from society present in both the book and the film. “Around me, down the entire length of Western Avenue, along both ramps of the flyover, stretched an immense congestion of traffic held up by the accident. Standing at the centre of this paralysed hurricane, I felt completely at ease, as if my obsessions with the endlessly multiplying vehicles had at last been relieved.” (Ballard, 156)

- Constant descriptions of violent acts as if they are of a sexual nature. They end up getting boring which is frightening because of their horrific violence. Include the following: “...and above all by the wounds to her genitalia, her uterus pierced by heraldic beak of the manufacturer’s medallion, his semen emptying across the luminescent dials that registered for ever the last temperature and fuel level of the engine” (Ballard, 8). “...the lungs of elderly men punctured by door handles, the chests of young women impaled by steering-columns, the cheeks of handsome youths pierced by the chromium latches of quarter-lights” (Ballard, 13). “...the retired prostitute crashing into a concrete motorway parapet, her overweight body propelled through the fractured windshield, menopausal loins torn on the chromium bonnet mascot” (Ballard, 14). “...of sadistic charge nurses decapitated in inverted crashes on complex interchanges; of lesbian supermarket manageresses burning to death in the collapsed frames of their midget cars before the stoical eyes of middle-aged firemen; of autistic children crushed in rear-end collisions, their eyes less wounded in death; of buses filled with mental defectives drowning together stoically on roadside industrial canals” (Ballard, 15). “...the breasts of teenage girls deformed by instrument binnacles, the partial mammoplasties of elderly housewives carried out by the chromium louvers of windshield assemblies, nipples sectioned by manufacturers’ dashboard medallions; injuries to male and female genitalia caused by steering wheel shrouds, windshields during ejection, crushed door pillars, seat springs and handbrake units, cassette player instrument toggles” (Ballard, 134).

- Perhaps no coincidence that takes place in ‘Western’ Avenue – representative of western culture - in place which could be any airport city anywhere in the world, as demonstrated in the filming. Discuss the appropriateness of both locations.

- Ballard’s point is that contemporary society has become so obsessed with technology that male/female sexual distinctions no longer have any relevance; the softness of human flesh pales in comparison to the sexiness of the potential of the power inherent in the car; this is the disturbing illness inherent in contemporary society Ballard proposes within his controversial work. The disquieting nature of the destructive nature or the impermanence of human flesh. Sick and sad representation of what we are willing to accept. Is it any ‘more’ violent than a Bruce Willis orgy? No, it just has more compelling and disturbing implications.

- Rekindling of horrific memories – all the more potent warning about the danger of celebrating violence sexually especially when it involves innocent parties, and for it to be a disease inherent to contemporary society.

- Ballard views the ending of the film as a romantic one. I view it personally as a disturbing message of great foreboding, a truly frightening one. [Describe here what actually happens at the end.] That it is a horror and perhaps not a celebration, recognition that in partaking in this violent world we are admitting

that what many of us ultimately long for is death. And that the tools of our death should be eroticised symbols of our fragmented contemporary society in which sexual satisfaction and the act of eroticism is becoming painfully fragmented from our bodies and crashed back into pieces of fragmented flesh after a second of utter violence. Achieving orgasm and becoming at one with metal become part of the same sexual journey, which seems to me a frightening image of sexuality.

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